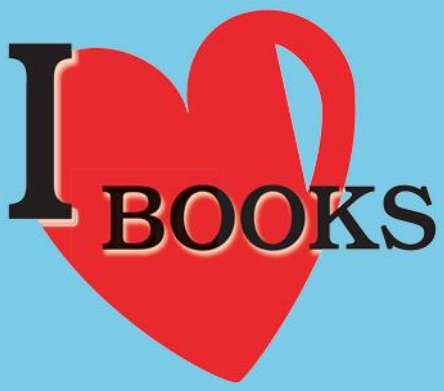


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THE GREEN SEAGULL

A green dragon flew low across the sea. Like a giant, infinitely annoying seagull, the dragon was following a beautiful blue-and-gold ship named the *Tristan*. Despite all manner of missiles hurled at him from the ship – including a large quantity of **Darke ThunderFlashes** – the dragon had not once lost sight of his quarry.

After long weeks at sea, the *Tristan* arrived at a small port on the edge of a vast desert. The dragon – much to the dismay of the Harbour Master – swooped in and landed on the roof of the tallest house on the quayside. Despite yet more missiles thrown at him (this time by the Harbour Master), the dragon did not move. He perched on the roof of the Harbour Master's house and continued to observe the *Tristan* with great interest.

"What's it watching for?" the Harbour Master asked anyone who was brave enough to come near. No one knew. Later, when someone told him that if you called a dragon by its name it would do whatever you desired, the Harbour Master asked, "What d'you think its name is?" No one knew that, either.

The dragon's name was Spit Fyre and he was watching for an Orm Egg. The final egg of the now extinct Great Orm, this was no ordinary egg. It was big enough to need carrying in both arms like a baby, it was heavy enough to make even the

strongest arms ache and it was covered in a leathery skin infused with brilliant blue lapis lazuli. Inside was an Orm embryo, the last of its race, stolen from its resting place in the Eastern SnowPlains by the sorcerer Oraton-Marr. Spit Fyre knew the Orm Egg was on board the *Tristan* and he was determined that wherever the egg went, he would go too.

The Orm Egg now rested on a soft blue cushion in the best cabin of the *Tristan*. Under Spit Fyre's relentless gaze, Oraton-Marr – a small man with short iron-grey hair – paced the deck above. He was accompanied by his sister, a large woman swathed in shining blue silk who was known to all as "the Lady". The Lady was an imposing figure. Despite her bulk, she moved smoothly along the deck, as though on little wheels. Her hair was bound in a blue cloth wrapped many times around her head, and on her hand perched a small, terrified bird, its leg tied to a wisp of silver chain that the Lady wore around her wrist. Behind the Lady, like a gloomy shadow, a square, flat-footed woman with the gait of an overweight duck followed. Her name was Mitza Draddenmora Draa; she kept a respectful distance but her narrowed eyes did not miss a thing.

The Lady was, to her brother's disgust, taller than he was. Usually the sorcerer wore spring blades upon his feet, which allowed him to tower over his sister, but after some undignified falls he had been forced to give them up on board the ship. The shorter version of Oraton-Marr and the Lady were discussing how to get the Orm Egg off the ship without Spit Fyre snatching it. The Lady had lapsed into bossy mode – which she always did when her brother was his natural height – but that afternoon the sorcerer was having none of it. He narrowed his dark green eyes and stared up at the dragon that had haunted

them like a shadow through raging storms, blazing sun and starlit nights. "I shall set a trap," he said. "That dragon won't know what's hit him."

The next morning just before sunrise, Oraton-Marr dispatched half a dozen deckhands to hide on the quay in the shadows beneath the ship. All were brandishing nets and **FireStix**: long **Darke** spears with barbed ends of dull red metal – a weapon that the sorcerer had perfected during his time on board the *Tristan*. The barbs of **FireStix** were razor-sharp, designed to cut through dragon skin like a hot knife through butter, and then – Oraton-Marr was particularly proud of this – their sticky black tips were **Primed** to ignite on contact with dragon blood. The sorcerer looked up at Spit Fyre and smiled. The dragon would burst into flames, set alight from within. He was looking forward to that.

As the *Tristan* lay gleaming in the morning sun, from the top of the Harbour Master's roof – which was now sagging alarmingly – Spit Fyre eyed a shining lapis blue egg shape resting proudly on a soft blue cushion being escorted up on deck by two sailors in dress uniform. Spit Fyre's keen dragon eye also saw a movement in the shadows beneath the ship and the dull red glint of something sharp. He tilted his head to one side and considered the matter, watching as the cushion and its passenger were paraded down the gangplank. Spit Fyre gave a snort of contempt and turned his gaze back to the *Tristan*. He had no interest in an empty egg made from papier-mâché.

Despite the parading of the "egg" around the quay three times, Spit Fyre did not move. When Oraton-Marr realised his plan had not worked, he had a screaming fit and had to be calmed down by his sister. The "egg" and its cushion were

abandoned in the middle of the quay and by evening had become a popular roost for gulls.

At the dark of the moon a few days later, Oraton-Marr tried another tactic. In the dead of the night, a rolled-up sail was taken down the gangplank by three deckhands. From his perch Spit Fyre watched with interest – he knew the Egg was nearby. The dragon gave a little jump of excitement and the Harbour Master's roof finally caved in. The three deckhands were so shocked by the snapping of timbers and the rain of falling roof tiles that they dropped the sail. Out rolled exactly what Spit Fyre had suspected: the true Egg of the Orm.

To the great dismay of the Customs Officer, Spit Fyre took up a new perch on the Customs House roof.

Oraton-Marr decided against a second screaming fit. Dragon or no dragon, he was not going to be thwarted a moment longer. He sent for a camel. Just before sunrise the next morning, the sorcerer shoved the Orm Egg unceremoniously into a sack and slung it into a bag on one side of the camel. Into the bag on the other side of the camel he put Subhan-Subhan, the cabin boy. Then, accompanied by his servant, Drone, and three deckhands armed with FireStix, he waved goodbye to his sister and her duck-footed companion, and climbed on to the camel.

To the relief of the Customs Officer, Spit Fyre took off from his roof.

Oraton-Marr headed out of the port. He ignored the long, straight road that led to the distant Red City just visible on the horizon, and set off into the wilderness of the vast desert of the Singing Sands. His navigator set a course for a small oasis and a star-strewn tent where an Apothecary and her two young daughters lived.

Spit Fyre followed, flying high enough to stay out of reach of the **FireStix**, but low enough to annoy.

When Oraton-Marr, bedraggled and sore, arrived at the star-strewn tent late that night, he never wanted to see a dragon or a camel again. Or a whingeing cabin boy or an egg. Or the three moaning deckhands. Or the craven Drone. But there was work to be done. Ruthlessly efficient, he took the Apothecary's baby daughter hostage and instructed the Apothecary on what to do if she wished to see the child again. He left before sunrise without the Egg, the cabin boy, the deckhands and, to his relief, the dragon. But he was stuck with Drone and a screaming toddler. And the camel.

Spit Fyre settled on a long sand dune above the star-strewn tent and the small encampment that had sprung up around it. As soon as Oraton-Marr was out of sight, the dragon attacked. He swooped down on to the tents and as the **FireStix** flew up towards him, he met fire with **Fyre** and destroyed them. But getting the Egg was not so easy. Subhan-Subhan was loyal to his Master and threw himself across the Egg as a shield so that Spit Fyre could not snatch his prize without injuring the boy.

Spit Fyre retired to the top of the dune to wait.

That evening as the sun set, the Apothecary climbed the dune and begged the dragon not to take the Egg. She told him that in twelve weeks the sorcerer would return, and if the Egg did not hatch – or there was no Egg to hatch – her baby daughter would die.

Spit Fyre bowed his head in defeat. But he did not leave his post. His time would come.

THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS

Oraton-Marr staggered up the gangplank of the *Tristan* with Drone trailing behind carrying an exhausted toddler. The sorcerer instructed Drone to hand the hostage to his sister and went below to his cabin. He settled into his captain's chair, got up to fetch a cushion, sat down once more and took a mother-of-pearl box from a drawer in his desk. Inside the box was an assortment of origami shapes: birds, animals, ships and stars, all in pale blue. He picked out a paper flower, unfolded it, flattened it on his desk and smiled.

On one of his many walks around the quay trying to find a way to get rid of the dragon, Oraton-Marr had seen a flurry of pale blue papers blowing across the cobbles. He had picked them up because they were the perfect weight for his hobby of origami, and good paper was not easy to find. He had been very pleased with the quality of his beautiful blue paper, but was even more delighted when he had read the words upon it.

Once more, Oraton-Marr's mouth moved slowly across the words, savouring each one:

THE MAGYKAL MANUSCRIPTORIUM
AND SPELL CHECKERS INCORPORATED
NUMBER THIRTEEN WIZARD WAY, THE CASTLE.

AS PREMIER ADVISORS TO THE FABLED WIZARD TOWER,
WE ARE PROUD TO OFFER A NEW GLOBAL SERVICE.
WE HAVE MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS' EXPERIENCE.
WE CAN SOURCE MOST REQUIREMENTS.
WE HAVE AN EXTENSIVE STOCK OF
CHARMS, RUNES AND SPELL BOOKS
OR WE CAN REFURBISH YOUR OWN.
CONVENIENTLY SITUATED ON
THE ANCIENT WAY SYSTEM FOR
EASY ACCESS FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.

A smile spread across Oraton-Marr's thin lips as he thought about the "fabled Wizard Tower". The sorcerer took down his almanac, turned to the map section at the back and traced his long, pointy finger along the Ways that led to the Wizard Tower. Oraton-Marr was a great believer in signs and was convinced this perfect blue paper was the sign he had been waiting for – the Wizard Tower was his destiny. But the sorcerer was not a patient man. Drumming his fingers on his desk, he decided to get things moving as soon as he could. What he needed, he thought, was an Apprentice from the Wizard Tower. A senior one who knew all its secrets and fiddly little passwords would be ideal. Oraton-Marr smiled. There were twelve long weeks until the Orm Egg hatched, but he would spend his time well. He'd take a little trip to the Castle and get hold of an Apprentice so that when he was ready to take over, everything would go smoothly. Oraton-Marr sighed. He had had quite enough trouble already. He wanted to walk into the Wizard Tower with as little aggravation as possible.

The sorcerer closed his eyes and a strange name came to

him – ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He sat up, suddenly wide awake. *That was it*. That was the name of the top wizard in the Castle. He smiled. It suited him, there was no doubt about that: Oraton-Marr, ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He liked that. His face relaxed into a sickly, satisfied smile.

If it hadn't been for the Lady – annoyed by the crying of their tiny hostage – coming to tell him it was nearly midnight, Oraton-Marr would have missed the **Magykal** hour. Cursing, he rushed up on deck and sent a signal rocket burning brilliant green up into the sky.

★ ★ ★

Far away on his dune, Spit Fyre saw a green light on the horizon arc up over the sea. Also on the dune – at what he hoped was a safe distance from the dragon – was Subhan-Subhan, the cabin boy. Spit Fyre regarded the green sky-trail impassively, but the boy leaped to his feet and hurtled down to the encampment in a shower of sand. At the foot of the dune Subhan-Subhan threw the Egg of the Orm into a roaring fire to kick-start its incubation. As the Egg lay untouched within the flames, he took a small gold box from his pocket and from it he removed a tiny gold **Egg Timer**, of which one half was filled with minute grains of silver. Subhan-Subhan pressed his thumb on to the top of the timer and watched the first speck of silver fall through.

On board the *Tristan*, Oraton-Marr set his own identical **Egg Timer** running. The countdown had begun.