

on the doors in Spain

"There was a time," begins the Contessa, "when Spanish doors fit as snugly into their frames as any others - better, in fact, than most, since the talents of Spanish door-makers had been honed by centuries of competitive whittling and carving. Late in the last century, however, a gap at the bottom of doorways became necessary. For the lobsters, you understand.

"Ah, you did not know about the lobsters? You are familiar, of course, with the climate of southern Spain? In the normal course, it is hot and dry. It will not rain for months, and when it does, only a few drops of rain may fall. Upon rare occasions, though (not more than once in a century), there is a deluge, with rain falling for days without relent. Previously unsuspected rivers fill with water and their floodplains are flooded for many miles around. This state - I am told - can last for many months.

"I do not know what people did upon such occasions in centuries past. Perhaps, before the recent population surge, few had bothered to build on ancient floodways. But the last time it happened, many towns and villages throughout southern Spain were flooded. My people overcame the immediate problems with good heart, setting up networks of flying foxes to get about above the water, rather than fussing with boats. As the flood wore on, though, other problems presented themselves. From the waters of the rivers came a plague of clams. Their larvae seeped into the houses through even the smallest cracks and once inside, discovered a haven, free from predators. They settled themselves on the walls and furniture of every house and multiplied until they were quite out of control. At first, they were not unwelcome, but after a time, the people grew sick of clam-bakes and the numbers grew every higher, threatening to take over the houses entirely. At last, a candle-maker in one of the worst-affected villages hit upon an idea: let the lobsters in. Lobsters eat clams, so this solution worked admirably. Lobsters, however, make the most demanding pets - constantly scratching at the door to be let in or out at every hour of the day and night. It was easier to cut off the bottom of the door entirely and let them make their own way through.

"Eventually, the flood subsided, but the gaps at the bottom of the doors remain. It has become something of a tradition, even in newer doors, as a precaution lest the floods and clam-plagues return. But it does leave the potential for draughtiness.

"My people use various unusual approaches to keep out the draughts in winter. Many wealthy families, keep a small flock of wyverns, which (if well fed and contented) will sit comfortably by the doors and breath fire when necessary to warm any wayward wafts of wind. Others gargoyles to scare the draughts away - it works quite well if the draught is small enough to be easily frightened and the gargoyle fierce enough. A popular approach among the peasantry is to keep the temperature inside the house as close as possible to the temperature outside. That way, there is no driving force behind the draughts and they can be of no concern at all."

The Contessa passes a small silver coin to Miss Thimblebelly. "But I have digressed long enough: what happened next in your story?"

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