

THE SOILED KNIGHT

The night was unseasonably cool, even for autumn. A brisk wet wind was swirling down the alleys, stirring up the day's dust. *A north wind, and full of chill.* Ser Arys Oakheart pulled up his hood to cover his face. It would not do for him to be recognized. A fortnight past, a trader had been butchered in the shadow city, a harmless man who'd come to Dorne for fruit and found death instead of dates. His only crime was being from King's Landing.

The mob would find a sterner foe in me. He would almost have welcomed an attack. His hand drifted down to brush lightly over the hilt on the longsword that hung half-hidden amongst the folds of his layered linen robes, the outer with its turquoise stripes and rows of golden suns, and the lighter orange one beneath. The Dornish garb was comfortable, but his father would have been aghast had he lived to see his son so dressed. He was a man of the Reach, and the Dornish were his ancient foes, as the tapestries at Old Oak bore witness. Arys only had to close his eyes to see them still. Lord Edgerran the Open-Handed, seated in splendor with the heads of a hundred Dornishmen piled round his feet. The Three Leaves in the Prince's Pass, pierced by Dornish spears, Alester sounding his warhorn with his last breath. Ser Olyvar the Green Oak all in white, dying at the side of the Young Dragon. *Dorne is no fit place for any Oakheart.*

Even before Prince Oberyn had died, the knight had been ill at ease whenever he left the grounds of Sunspear to walk the alleys of the shadow city. He could feel eyes upon him everywhere he went, small black Dornish eyes regarding him with thinly veiled hostility. The shopkeepers did their best to cheat him at every turn, and sometimes he wondered whether the taverners were spitting in his drinks. Once a group of ragged boys began pelting him with stones, until he drew his sword and ran them off. The Red Viper's death had inflamed the Dornish even more, though the streets had quieted a bit since Prince Doran had confined the Sand Snakes to a tower. Even so, to wear his white cloak openly in the shadow city would be asking for attack. He had brought three with him: two of wool, one light and one

heavy, the third of fine white silk. He felt naked without one hanging from his shoulders.

Better naked than dead, he told himself. *I am a Kingsguard still, even uncloaked. She must respect that. I must make her understand.* He should never have let himself be drawn into this, but the singer said that love can make a fool of any man.

Sunspear's shadow city oft seemed deserted in the heat of the day, when only buzzing flies moved down the dusty streets, but once evening fell the same streets came to life. Ser Arys heard faint music drifting through louvered windows as he passed below, and somewhere finger drums were beating out the quick rhythm of a spear dance, giving the night a pulse. Where three alleys met beneath the second of the Winding Walls, a pillow girl called down from a balcony. She was dressed in jewels and oil. He took a look at her, hunched his shoulders, and pushed on, into the teeth of the wind. *We men are so weak. Our bodies betray even the noblest of us.* He thought of King Baelor the Blessed, who would fast to the point of fainting to tame the lusts that shamed him. Must he do the same?

A short man stood in an arched doorway grilling chunks of snake over a brazier, turning them with wooden tongs as they crisped. The pungent smell of his sauces brought tears to the knight's eyes. The best snake sauce had a drop of venom in it, he had heard, along with mustard seeds and dragon peppers. Myrcella had taken to Dornish food as quick as she had to her Dornish prince, and from time to time Ser Arys would try a dish or two to please her. The food seared his mouth and made him gasp for wine, and burned even worse coming out than it did going in. His little princess loved it, though.

He had left her in her chambers, bent over a gaming table opposite Prince Trystane, pushing ornate pieces across squares of jade and carnelian and lapis lazuli. Myrcella's full lips had been slightly parted, her green eyes narrowed with concentration. *Cyvasse*, the game was called. It had come to the Planky Town on a trading galley from Volantis, and the orphans had spread it up and down the Greenblood. The Dornish court was mad for it.

Ser Arys just found it maddening. There were ten different pieces, each with its own attributes and powers, and the board would change from game to game, depending on how the players arrayed their home squares. Prince Trystane had taken to the game at once, and Myrcella had learned it so she could play with him. She was not quite one-and-ten, her betrothed three-and-ten; even so, she had been winning more oft than not of late. Trystane did not seem to mind. The two children could not have looked more different, him with his olive skin and straight black hair, her pale as milk with a mop of golden curls; light and dark, like Queen Cersei and King Robert. He prayed Myrcella would find more joy in her Dornish boy than her mother had found with her storm lord.

It made him feel uneasy to leave her, though she should be safe enough within the castle. There were only two doors that gave access to Myrcella's chambers in the Tower of the Sun, and Ser Arys kept two men on each; Lannister household guards, men who had come with them from King's Landing, battle-tested, tough, and loyal to the bone. Myrcella had her maids and Septa Eglantine as well, and Prince Trystane was attended by his sworn shield, Ser Gascoyne of the Greenblood. *No one will trouble her*, he told himself, *and in a fortnight we shall be safely away*.

Prince Doran had promised as much. Though Arys had been shocked to see how aged and infirm the Dornish prince appeared, he did not doubt the prince's word. "I am sorry I could not see you until now, or meet Princess Myrcella," Martell had said when Arys was admitted to his solar, "but I trust that my daughter Arianne has made you welcome here in Dorne, ser."

"She has, my prince," he'd answered, and prayed that no blush would dare betray him.

"Ours is a harsh land, and poor, yet not without its beauties. It grieves us that you have seen no more of Dorne than Sunspear, but I fear that neither you nor your princess would be safe beyond these walls. We Dornish are a hot-blooded people, quick to anger and slow to forgive. It would gladden my heart if I could assure you that the Sand Snakes were alone in wanting war, but I will not tell you lies, ser. You have heard my

smallfolk in the streets, crying out for me to call my spears. Half my lords agree with them, I fear.”

“And you, my prince?” the knight had dared to ask.

“My mother taught me long ago that only madmen fight wars they cannot win.” If the bluntness of the question had offended him, Prince Doran hid it well. “Yet this peace is fragile... as fragile as your princess.”

“Only a beast would harm a little girl.”

“My sister Elia had a little girl as well. Her name was Rhaenys. She was a princess too.” The prince sighed. “Those who would plunge a knife into Princess Myrcella do not bear her any malice, no more than Ser Amory Lorch did when he killed Rhaenys, if indeed he did. They seek only to force my hand. For if Myrcella should be slain in Dorne whilst under my protection, who would believe my denials?”

“No one shall ever harm Myrcella whilst I live.”

“A noble vow,” said Doran Martell with a faint smile, “but you are only one man, ser. I had hoped that imprisoning my headstrong nieces would help to calm the waters, but all we’ve done is drive the roaches back beneath the rushes. Every night I hear them whispering and sharpening their knives.”

He is afraid, Ser Arys realized then. Look, his hand is shaking. The Prince of Dorne is terrified. Words failed him.

“My apologies, ser,” Prince Doran said. “I am frail and failing, and sometimes... Sunspear wearies me, with its noise and dirt and smells. As soon as my duty allows, I mean to return to the Water Gardens. When I do I shall take Princess Myrcella with me.” Before the knight could protest, the prince raised a hand, its knuckles red and swollen. “You shall go as well. And her septa, her maids, her guards. Sunspear’s walls are strong, but beneath them is the shadow city. Even within the castle hundreds come and go each day. The Gardens are my haven. Prince Maron raised them as a gift for his Targaryen bride, to mark Dorne’s marriage to the Iron Throne. Autumn is a lovely season there... hot days, cool nights, the salt breeze off the sea, the fountains and the pools. And there are other children, boys and

girls of high and gentle birth. Myrcella will have friends of her own age to play with. She will not be lonely.”

“As you say.” The prince’s words pounded in his head. *She will be safe there.* Only why had Doran Martell urged him not to write King’s Landing about the move? *Myrcella will be safest if no one knows just where she is.* Ser Arys had agreed, but what choice did he have? He was a knight of the Kingsguard, but only one man for all that, just as the prince had said.

The alley opened suddenly onto a moonlit courtyard. *Past the candlemaker’s shop, she wrote, a gate and a short flight of exterior steps.* He pushed through the gate and climbed the worn steps to an unmarked door. *Should I knock?* He pushed the door open instead, and found himself in a large, dim room with a low ceiling, lit by a pair of scented candles that flickered in niches cut from the thick earthen walls. He saw patterned Myrish carpets underneath his sandals, a tapestry upon one wall, a bed. “My lady?” he called. “Where are you?”

“Here.” She stepped out from the shadow behind the door.

An ornate snake coiled around her right forearm, its copper and gold scales glimmering when she moved. It was all she wore.

No, he meant to tell her, *I only came to tell you I must go*, but when he saw her shining in the candlelight he seemed to lose the power of speech. His throat felt as dry as the Dornish sands. Silent he stood, drinking in the glories of her body, the hollow of her throat, the round ripe breasts with their huge dark nipples, the lush curves at waist and hip. And then somehow he was holding her, and she was pulling off his robes. When she reached his undertunic she seized it by the shoulders and ripped the silk down to his navel, but Arys was past caring. Her skin was smooth beneath his fingers, as warm to the touch as sand baked by the Dornish sun. He raised her head and found her lips. Her mouth opened under his, and her breasts filled his hands. He felt her nipples stiffen as his thumbs brushed over them. Her hair was black and thick and smelled of orchids, a dark and earthy smell that made him so hard it almost hurt.

“Touch me, ser,” the woman whispered in his ear. His hand slipped down her rounded belly to find the sweet wet place beneath the thicket of

black hair. "Yes, there," she murmured as he slipped a finger up inside her. She made a whimpering sound, drew him to the bed, and pushed him down. "More, oh more, yes, sweet, my knight, my knight, my sweet white knight, yes you, you, I want you." Her hands guided him inside her, then slipped around his back to pull him closer. "Deeper," she whispered. "Yes, oh." When she wrapped her legs around him, they felt as strong as steel. Her nails raked his back as he drove into her, again and again and again, until she screamed and arched her back beneath him. As she did, her fingers found his nipples, pinching till he spent his seed within her. *I could die now, happy*, the knight thought, and for a dozen heartbeats at least he was at peace.

He did not die.

His desire was as deep and boundless as the sea, but when the tide receded, the rocks of shame and guilt thrust up as sharp as ever. Sometimes the waves would cover them, but they remained beneath the waters, hard and black and slimy. *What am I doing?* he asked himself. *I am a knight of the Kingsguard.* He rolled off of her to sprawl staring at the ceiling. A great crack ran across it, from one wall to the other. He had not noticed that before, no more than he had noticed the picture on the tapestry, a scene of Nymeria and her ten thousand ships. *I see only her. A dragon might have been peering in the window, and I would never have seen anything but her breasts, her face, her smile.*

"There is wine," she murmured against his neck. She slid a hand across his chest. "Are you thirsty?"

"No." He rolled away, and sat on the edge of the bed. The room was hot, and yet he shivered.

"You bleed," she said. "I scratched too hard."

When she touched his back, he flinched as if her fingers were afire. "Don't." Naked, he stood. "No more."

"I have balm. For the scratches."

But none for my shame. "The scratches are nothing. Forgive me, my lady, I must go..."

“So soon?” She had a husky voice, a wide mouth made for whispers, full lips ripe for kissing. Her hair tumbled down across her bare shoulders to the tops of her full breasts, black and thick. It curled in big soft lazy ringlets. Even the hair upon her mound was soft and curly. “Stay with me tonight, ser. I still have much to teach you.”

“I have learned too much from you already.”

“You seemed glad enough for the lessons at the time, ser. Are you certain you are not off to some other bed, some other woman? Tell me who she is. I will fight her for you, bare-breasted, knife to knife.” She smiled. “Unless she is a Sand Snake. If so, we can share you. I love my cousins well.”

“You know I have no other woman. Only... duty.”

She rolled onto one elbow to look up at him, her big black eyes shining in the candlelight. “That poxy bitch? I know her. Dry as dust between the legs, and her kisses leave you bleeding. Let duty sleep alone for once, and stay with me tonight.”

“My place is at the palace.”

She sighed. “With your other princess. You will make me jealous. I think you love her more than me. The maid is much too young for you. You need a woman, not a little girl, but I can play the innocent if that excites you.”

“You should not say such things.” *Remember, she is Dornish.* In the Reach men said it was the food that made Dornishmen so hot-tempered and their women so wild and wanton. *Fiery peppers and strange spices heat the blood, she cannot help herself.* “I love Myrcella as a daughter.” He could never have a daughter of his own, no more than he could have a wife. He had a fine white cloak instead. “We are going to the Water Gardens.”

“Eventually,” she agreed, “though with my father, everything takes four times as long as it should. If he says he means to leave upon the morrow, you will certainly set out within a fortnight. You will be lonely in the Gardens, I promise you. And where is the brave young gallant who said he wished to spend the rest of his life in my arms?”

“I was drunk when I said that.”

“You’d had three cups of watered wine.”

“I was drunk on you. It had been ten years since... I never touched a woman until you, not since I took the white. I never knew what love could be, yet now... I am afraid.”

“What would frighten my white knight?”

“I fear for my honor,” he said, “and for yours.”

“I can tend to my own honor.” She touched a finger to her breast, drawing it slowly round her nipple. “And to my own pleasures, if need be. I am a woman grown.”

She was that, beyond a doubt. Seeing her there upon the featherbed, smiling that wicked smile, toying with her breast... was there ever a woman with nipples so large or so responsive? He could hardly look at them without wanting to grab them, to suckle them until they were hard and wet and shiny...

He looked away. His smallclothes were strewn on the carpets. The knight bent to pick them up.

“Your hands are shaking,” she pointed out. “They would sooner be caressing me, I think. Must you be in such haste to don your clothes, ser? I prefer you as you are. Abed, unclad, we are our truest selves, a man and a woman, lovers, one flesh, as close as two can be. Our clothes make us different people. I would sooner be flesh and blood than silks and jewels, and you... you are not your white cloak, ser.”

“I am,” Ser Arys said. “I *am* my cloak. And this must end, for your sake as well as mine. If we should be discovered...”

“Men will think you fortunate.”

“Men will think me an oathbreaker. What if someone were to go to your father and tell him how I’d dishonored you?”

“My father is many things, but no one has ever said he was a fool. The Bastard of Godsgrace had my maidenhead when we were both fourteen. Do you know what my father did when he learned of it?” She gathered the bedclothes in her fist and pulled them up under her chin, to hide her

nakedness. “Nothing. My father is very good at doing nothing. He calls it *thinking*. Tell me true, ser, is it my dishonor that concerns you, or your own?”

“Both.” Her accusation stung. “That is why this must be our last time.”

“So you have said before.”

I did, and meant it too. But I am weak, else I would not be here now. He could not tell her that; she was the sort of woman who despised weakness, he could sense that. *She has more of her uncle in her than her father.* He turned away and found his striped silk undertunic on a chair. She had ripped the fabric to the navel when she pulled it down over his arms. “This is ruined,” he complained. “How can I wear it now?”

“Backwards,” she suggested. “Once you don your robes, no one will see the tear. Perhaps your little princess will sew it up for you. Or shall I send a new one to the Water Gardens?”

“Send me no gifts.” That would only draw attention. He shook out the undertunic and pulled it over his head, backwards. The silk felt cool against his skin, though it clung to his back where she’d scratched him. It would serve to get him back to the palace, at the least. “All I want is to end this... this...”

“Is that gallant, ser? You hurt me. I begin to think that all your words of love were lies.”

I could never lie to you. Ser Arys felt as if she’d slapped him. “Why else would I have forsaken all my honor, but for love? When I am with you I... I can scarcely think, you are all I ever dreamt of, but...”

“Words are wind. If you love me, do not leave me.”

“I swore a *vow*...”

“...not to wed or father children. Well, I have drunk my moon tea, and you know I cannot marry you.” She smiled. “Though I might be persuaded to keep you for my paramour.”

“Now you mock me.”

“Perhaps a little. Do you think you are the only Kingsguard who ever loved a woman?”

“There have always been men who found it easier to speak vows than to keep them,” he admitted. Ser Boros Blount was no stranger to the Street of Silk, and Ser Preston Greenfield used to call at a certain draper’s house whenever the draper was away, but Arys would not shame his Sworn Brothers by speaking of their failings. “Ser Terrence Toyne was found abed with his king’s mistress,” he said instead. “’Twas love, he swore, but it cost his life and hers, and brought about the downfall of his House and the death of the noblest knight who ever lived.”

“Yes, and what of Lucamore the Lusty, with his three wives and sixteen children? The song always makes me laugh.”

“The truth is not so funny. He was never called Lucamore the Lusty whilst he lived. His name was Ser Lucamore Strong, and his whole life was a lie. When his deceit was discovered, his own Sworn Brothers gelded him, and the Old King sent him to the Wall. Those sixteen children were left weeping. He was no true knight, no more than Terrence Toyne...”

“And the Dragonknight?” She flung the bedclothes aside and swung her legs to the floor. “The noblest knight who ever lived, you said, and he took his queen to bed and got her with child.”

“I will not believe that,” he said, offended. “The tale of Prince Aemon’s treason with Queen Naerys was only that, a tale, a lie his brother told when he wished to set his trueborn son aside in favor of his bastard. Aegon was not called the Unworthy without cause.” He found his swordbelt and buckled it around his waist. Though it looked queer against the silken Dornish undertunic, the familiar weight of longsword and dagger reminded him of who and what he was. “I will not be remembered as Ser Arys the Unworthy,” he declared. “I will not soil my cloak.”

“Yes,” she said, “that fine white cloak. You forget, my great-uncle wore the same cloak. He died when I was little, yet I still remember him. He was as tall as a tower and used to tickle me until I could not breathe for laughing.”

“I never had the honor to know Prince Lewyn,” Ser Arys said, “but all agree that he was a great knight.”

“A great knight with a paramour. She is an old woman now, but she was a rare beauty in her youth, men say.”

Prince Lewyn? That tale Ser Arys had not heard. It shocked him. Terrence Toyne’s treason and the deceits of Lucamore the Lusty were recorded in the White Book, but there was no hint of a woman on Prince Lewyn’s page.

“My uncle always said that it was the sword in a man’s hand that determined his worth, not the one between his legs,” she went on, “so spare me all your pious talk of soiled cloaks. It is not our love that has dishonored you, it is the monsters you have served and the brutes you’ve called your brothers.”

That cut too close to the bone. “Robert was no monster.”

“He climbed onto his throne over the corpses of children,” she said, “though I will grant you he was no Joffrey.”

Joffrey. He had been a handsome lad, tall and strong for his age, but that was all the good that could be said of him. It still shamed Ser Arys to remember all the times he’d struck that poor Stark girl at the boy’s command. When Tyrion had chosen him to go with Myrcella to Dorne, he lit a candle to the Warrior in thanks. “Joffrey is dead, poisoned by the Imp.” He would never have thought the dwarf capable of such enormity. “Tommen is king now, and he is not his brother.”

“Nor is he his sister.”

It was true. Tommen was a good-hearted little man who always tried his best, but the last time Ser Arys saw him he had been weeping on the quay. Myrcella never shed a tear, though it was she who was leaving hearth and home to seal an alliance with her maidenhood. The truth was, the princess was braver than her brother, and brighter and more confident as well. Her wits were quicker, her courtesies more polished. Nothing ever daunted her, not even Joffrey. *The women are the strong ones, truly.* He was thinking not only of Myrcella, but of her mother and his own, of the Queen of Thorns, of the Red Viper’s pretty, deadly Sand Snakes. And of Princess Arianne Martell, her most of all. “I will not say that you are wrong.” His voice was hoarse.

“Will not? *Cannot!* Myrcella is more fit for rule...”

“A son comes before a daughter.”

“*Why?* What god has made it so? I am my father’s heir. Should I give up my rights to my brothers?”

“You twist my words. I never said... Dorne is different. The Seven Kingdoms have never had a ruling queen.”

“The first Viserys intended his daughter Rhaenyra to follow him, do you deny it? But as the king lay dying the Lord Commander of his Kingsguard decided that it should be otherwise.”

Ser Criston Cole. Criston the Kingmaker had set brother against sister and divided the Kingsguard against itself, bringing on the terrible war the singers named the Dance of the Dragons. Some claimed he acted from ambition, for Prince Aegon was more tractable than his willful older sister. Others allowed him nobler motives, and argued that he was defending ancient Andal custom. A few whispered that Ser Criston had been Princess Rhaenyra’s lover before he took the white and wanted vengeance on the woman who had spurned him. “The Kingmaker wrought grave harm,” Ser Arys said, “and gravely did he pay for it, but...”

“...but perhaps the Seven sent you here so that one white knight might make right what another set awry. You do know that when my father returns to the Water Gardens he plans to take Myrcella with him?”

“To keep her safe from those who would do her harm.”

“No. To keep her away from those who’d seek to *crown* her. Prince Oberyn Viper would have placed the crown upon her head himself if he had lived, but my father lacks the courage.” She got to her feet. “You say you love the girl as you would a daughter of your own blood. Would you let your daughter be despoiled of her rights and locked away in prison?”

“The Water Gardens are no prison,” he protested feebly.

“A prison does not have fountains and fig trees, is that what you think? Yet once the girl is there, she will not be allowed to leave. No more than you will. Hotah will see to that. You do not know him as I do. He is terrible when aroused.”

Ser Arys frowned. The big Norvoshi captain with the scarred face had always made him feel profoundly uneasy. *They say he sleeps with that great axe beside him.* “What would you have me do?”

“No more than you have sworn. Protect Myrcella with your life. Defend her... *and* her rights. Set a crown upon her head.”

“I swore an *oath!*”

“To Joffrey, not to Tommen.”

“Aye, but Tommen is a good-hearted boy. He will be a better king than Joffrey.”

“But not better than Myrcella. She loves the boy as well. I know she will not let him come to any harm. Storm’s End is his by rights, since Lord Renly left no heir and Lord Stannis is attainted. In time, Casterly Rock will pass to the boy as well, through his lady mother. He will be as great a lord as any in the realm... but Myrcella by rights should sit the Iron Throne.”

“The law... I do not know...”

“I do.” When she stood, the long black tangle of her hair fell down to the small of her back. “Aegon the Dragon made the Kingsguard and its vows, but what one king does another can undo, or change. Formerly the Kingsguard served for life, yet Joffrey dismissed Ser Barristan so his dog could have a cloak. Myrcella would want you to be happy, and she is fond of me as well. She will give us leave to marry if we ask.” Arianne put her arms around him and laid her face against his chest. The top of her head came to just beneath his chin. “You can have me and your white cloak both, if that is what you want.”

She is tearing me apart. “You know I do, but...”

“I am a princess of Dorne,” she said in her husky voice, “and it is not meet that you should make me beg.”

Ser Arys could smell the perfume in her hair and feel her heart beating as she pressed against him. His body was responding to her closeness, and he did not doubt that she could feel it too. When he put his arms upon her shoulders, he realized she was trembling. “Arianne? My princess? What is it, my love?”

“Must I say it, ser? I am afraid. You call me *love*, yet you refuse me, when I have most desperate need of you. Is it so wrong of me to want a knight to keep me safe?”

He had never heard her sound so vulnerable. “No,” he said, “but you have your father’s guards to keep you safe, why—”

“It is my father’s guards I fear.” For a moment she sounded younger than Myrcella. “It was my father’s guards who dragged my sweet cousins off in chains.”

“Not in chains. I have heard that they have every comfort.”

She gave a bitter laugh. “Have you seen them? He will not permit me to see them, did you know that?”

“They were speaking treason, fomenting war...”

“Loreza is six, Dorea eight. What wars could they foment? Yet my father has imprisoned them with their sisters. You have seen him. Fear makes even strong men do things they might never do otherwise, and my father was never strong. Arys, my heart, hear me for the love you say you bear me. I have never been as fearless as my cousins, for I was made with weaker seed, but Tyene and I are of an age and have been close as sisters since we were little girls. We have no secrets between us. If she can be imprisoned, so can I, and for the same cause... this of Myrcella.”

“Your father would never do that.”

“You do not know my father. I have been disappointing him since I first arrived in this world without a cock. Half a dozen times he has tried to marry me to toothless greybeards, each more contemptible than the last. He never *commanded* me to wed them, I grant you, but the offers alone prove how little he regards me.”

“Even so, you are his heir.”

“Am I?”

“He left you to rule in Sunspear when he took himself off to his Water Gardens, did he not?”

“To *rule*? No. He left his cousin Ser Manfrey as castellan, old blind Ricasso as seneschal, his bailiffs to collect duties and taxes for his treasurer

Alyse Ladybright to count, his shariffs to police the shadow city, his justiciars to sit in judgment, and Maester Myles to deal with any letters not requiring the prince's own attention. Above them all he placed the Red Viper. My charge was feasts and frolics, and the entertainment of distinguished guests. Oberyne would visit the Water Gardens twice a fortnight. Me, he summoned twice a year. I am not the heir my father wants, he has made that plain. Our laws constrain him, but he would sooner have my brother follow him, I know it."

"Your brother?" Ser Arys put his hand beneath her chin and raised her head, the better to look her in the eyes. "You cannot mean Trystane, he is just a boy."

"Not Trys. Quentyn." Her eyes were bold and black as sin, unflinching. "I have known the truth since I was four-and-ten, since the day that I went to my father's solar to give him a good night kiss, and found him gone. My mother had sent for him, I learned later. He'd left a candle burning. When I went to blow it out, I found a letter lying incomplete beside it, a letter to my brother Quentyn, off at Yronwood. My father told Quentyn that he must do all that his maester and his master-at-arms required of him, because '*one day you will sit where I sit and rule all Dorne, and a ruler must be strong of mind and body.*'" A tear crept down Arianne's soft cheek. "My father's words, written in his own hand. They burned themselves into my memory. I cried myself to sleep that night, and many nights thereafter."

Ser Arys had yet to meet Quentyn Martell. The prince had been fostered by Lord Yronwood from a tender age, had served him as a page, then a squire, had even taken knighthood at his hands in preference to the Red Viper's. *If I were a father, I would want my son to follow me as well*, he thought, but he could hear the hurt in her voice, and he knew that if he said what he was thinking, he would lose her. "Perhaps you misunderstood," he said. "You were only a child. Perhaps the prince was only saying that to encourage your brother to be more diligent."

"You think so? Then tell me, where is Quentyn now?"

"The prince is with Lord Yronwood's host in the Boneway," Ser Arys said cautiously. That was what Sunspear's ancient castellan had told him,

when first he came to Dorne. The maester with the silky beard said the same.

Arianne demurred. “So my father wishes us to believe, but I have friends who tell me otherwise. My brother has crossed the narrow sea in secret, posing as a common merchant. Why?”

“How would I know? There could be a hundred reasons.”

“Or one. Are you aware that the Golden Company has broken its contract with Myr?”

“Sellswords break their contracts all the time.”

“Not the Golden Company. *Our word is good as gold* has been their boast since the days of Bittersteel. Myr is on the point of war with Lys and Tyrosh. Why break a contract that offered them the prospect of good wages and good plunder?”

“Perhaps Lys offered them better wages. Or Tyrosh.”

“No,” she said. “I would believe it of any of the other free companies, yes. Most of them would change sides for half a groat. The Golden Company is different. A brotherhood of exiles and the sons of exiles, united by the dream of Bittersteel. It’s home they want, as much as gold. Lord Yronwood knows that as well as I do. His forebears rode with Bittersteel during three of the Blackfyre Rebellions.” She took Ser Arys by the hand, and wove her fingers through his own. “Have you ever seen the arms of House Toland of Ghost Hill?”

He had to think a moment. “A dragon eating its own tail?”

“The dragon is time. It has no beginning and no ending, so all things come round again. Anders Yronwood is Criston Cole reborn. He whispers in my brother’s ear that *he* should rule after my father, that it is not right for men to kneel to women... that Arianne especially is unfit to rule, being the willful wanton that she is.” She tossed her hair defiantly. “So your two princesses share a common cause, ser... and they share as well a knight who claims to love them both, but will not fight for them.”

“I will.” Ser Arys sank to one knee. “Myrcella *is* the elder, and better suited to the crown. Who will defend her rights if not her Kingsguard? My

sword, my life, my honor, all belong to her... and to you, my heart's delight. I swear, no man will steal your birthright whilst I still have the strength to lift a sword. I am yours. What would you have of me?"

"All." She knelt to kiss his lips. "*All*, my love, my true love, my sweet love, and forever. But first..."

"Ask, and it is yours."

"...Myrcella."