

THE MERCHANT'S MAN

Adventure stank.

She boasted sixty oars, a single sail, and a long lean hull that promised speed. *Small, but she might serve*, Quentyn thought when he saw her, but that was before he went aboard and got a good whiff of her. *Pigs*, was his first thought, but after a second sniff he changed his mind. Pigs had a cleaner smell. This stink was piss and rotting meat and night-soil, this was the reek of corpse flesh and weeping sores and wounds gone bad, so strong that it overwhelmed the salt air and fish smell of the harbor.

“I want to retch,” he said to Gerris Drinkwater. They were waiting for the ship’s master to appear, sweltering in the heat as the stench wafted up from the deck beneath them.

“If the captain smells anything like his ship, he may mistake your vomit for perfume,” Gerris replied.

Quentyn was about to suggest that they try another ship when the master finally made his appearance, with two vile-looking crewmen at his side. Gerris greeted him with a smile. Though he did not speak the Volantene tongue as well as Quentyn, their ruse required that he speak for them. Back in the Planky Town Quentyn had played the wineseller, but the mummery had chafed at him, so when the Dornishmen changed ships at Lys they had changed roles as well. Aboard the *Meadowlark*, Cletus Yronwood became the merchant, Quentyn the servant; in Volantis, with Cletus slain, Gerris had assumed the master’s role.

Tall and fair, with blue-green eyes, sandy hair streaked by the sun, and a lean and comely body, Gerris Drinkwater had a swagger to him, a confidence bordering on arrogance. He never seemed ill at ease, and even when he did not speak the language, he had ways of making himself understood. Quentyn cut a poor figure by comparison— short-legged and stocky, thickly built, with hair the brown of new-turned earth. His forehead

was too high, his jaw too square, his nose too broad. *A good honest face*, a girl had called it once, *but you should smile more*.

Smiles had never come easily for Quentyn Martell, any more than they did for his lord father.

“How swift is your *Adventure*?” Gerris said, in a halting approximation of High Valyrian.

The *Adventure*’s master recognized the accent and responded in the Common Tongue of Westeros. “There is none swifter, honored lord. *Adventure* can run down the wind itself. Tell me where you wish to sail, and swiftly I shall bring you there.”

“I seek passage to Meereen for myself and two servants.”

That gave the captain pause. “I am no stranger to Meereen. I could find the city again, aye ... but why? There are no slaves to be had in Meereen, no profit to be found there. The silver queen has put an end to that. She has even closed the fighting pits, so a poor sailor cannot even amuse himself as he waits to fill his holds. Tell me, my Westerosi friend, what is there in Meereen that you should want to go there?”

The most beautiful woman in the world, thought Quentyn. *My bride-to-be, if the gods are good*. Sometimes at night he lay awake imagining her face and form, and wondering why such a woman would ever want to marry him, of all the princes in the world. *I am Dorne*, he told himself. *She will want Dorne*.

Gerris answered with the tale they had concocted. “Wine is our family trade. My father owns extensive vineyards back in Dorne, and wishes me to find new markets. It is hoped that the good folk of Meereen will welcome what I sell.”

“Wine? *Dornish* wine?” The captain was not convinced. “The slave cities are at war. Can it be you do not know this?”

“The fighting is between Yunkai and Astapor, we had heard. Meereen is not involved.”

“Not as yet. But soon. An envoy from the Yellow City is in Volantis even now, hiring swords. The Long Lances have already taken ship for Yunkai, and the Windblown and the Company of the Cat will follow once they have finished filling out their ranks. The Golden Company marches east as well. All this is known.”

“If you say so. I deal in wine, not wars. Ghiscari wine is poor stuff, all agree. The Meereenese will pay a good price for my fine Dornish vintages.”

“Dead men do not care what kind of wine they drink.” The master of *Adventure* fingered his beard. “I am not the first captain you have approached, I think. Nor the tenth.”

“No,” Gerris admitted.

“How many, then? A hundred?”

Close enough, thought Quentyn. The Volantenes were fond of boasting that the hundred isles of Braavos could be dropped into their deep harbor and drowned. Quentyn had never seen Braavos, but he could believe it. Rich and ripe and rotted, Volantis covered the mouth of the Rhoyme like a warm wet kiss, stretching across hill and marsh on both sides of the river. Ships were everywhere, coming down the river or headed out to sea, crowding the wharves and piers, taking on cargo or off-loading it: warships and whalers and trading galleys, carracks and skiffs, cogs, great cogs, long-ships, swan ships, ships from Lys and Tyrosh and Pentos, Qartheen spicers big as palaces, ships from Tolos and Yunkai and the Basilisks. So many that Quentyn, seeing the port for the first time from the deck of the *Meadowlark*, had told his friends that they would only linger here three days.

Yet twenty days had passed, and here they remained, still shipless. The captains of the *Melantine*, the *Triarch's Daughter*, and the *Mermaid's Kiss* had all refused them. A mate on the *Bold Voyager* had laughed in their faces. The master of the *Dolphin* berated them for wasting his time, and the

owner of the *Seventh Son* accused them of being pirates. All on the first day.

Only the captain of the *Fawn* had given them reasons for his refusal. “It is true that I am sailing east,” he told them, over watered wine. “South around Valyria and thence into the sunrise. We will take on water and provisions at New Ghis, then bend all oars toward Qarth and the Jade Gates. Every voyage has perils, long ones more than most. Why should I seek out more danger by turning into Slaver’s Bay? The *Fawn* is my livelihood. I will not risk her to take three mad Dornishmen into the middle of a war.”

Quentyn had begun to think that they might have done better to buy their own ship in the Planky Town. That would have drawn unwanted attention, however. The Spider had informers everywhere, even in the halls of Sunspear. “Dorne will bleed if your purpose is discovered,” his father had warned him, as they watched the children frolic in the pools and fountains of the Water Gardens. “What we do is treason, make no mistake. Trust only your companions, and do your best to avoid attracting notice.”

So Gerris Drinkwater gave the captain of *Adventure* his most disarming smile. “Truth be told, I have not kept count of all the cowards who refused us, but at the Merchant’s House I heard it said that you were a bolder sort of man, the sort who might risk anything for sufficient gold.”

A smuggler, Quentyn thought. That was how the other traders styled *Adventure*’s master, back at the Merchant’s House. “He is a smuggler and a slaver, half pirate and half pander, but it may be that he is your best hope,” the innkeep had told them.

The captain rubbed thumb and forefinger together. “And how much gold would you deem sufficient for such a voyage?”

“Thrice your usual fee for passage to Slaver’s Bay.”

“For each of you?” The captain showed his teeth in something that might have been intended as a smile though it gave his narrow face a feral look. “Perhaps. It is true, I am a bolder man than most. How soon will you wish to leave?”

“The morrow would not be too soon.”

“Done. Return an hour before first light, with your friends and your wines. Best to be under way whilst Volantis sleeps, so no one will ask us inconvenient questions about our destination.”

“As you say. An hour before first light.”

The captain’s smile widened. “I am pleased that I can help you. We will have a happy voyage, yes?”

“I am certain of it,” said Gerris. The captain called for ale then, and the two of them drank a toast to their venture.

“A sweet man,” Gerris said afterward, as he and Quentyn made their way down to the foot of the pier where their hired *hathay* waited. The air hung hot and heavy, and the sun was so bright that both of them were squinting.

“This is a sweet city,” Quentyn agreed. *Sweet enough to rot your teeth.* Sweet beets were grown in profusion hereabouts, and were served with almost every meal. The Volantenes made a cold soup of them, as thick and rich as purple honey. Their wines were sweet as well. “I fear our happy voyage will be short, however. That sweet man does not mean to take us to Meereen. He was too quick to accept your offer. He’ll take thrice the usual fee, no doubt, and once he has us aboard and out of sight of land, he’ll slit our throats and take the rest of our gold as well.”

“Or chain us to an oar, beside those wretches we were smelling. We need to find a better class of smuggler, I think.”

Their driver awaited them beside his *hathay*. In Westeros, it might have been called an oxcart, though it was a deal more ornate than any cart that Quentyn had ever seen in Dorne, and lacked an ox. The *hathay* was pulled by a dwarf elephant, her hide the color of dirty snow. The streets of Old Volantis were full of such.

Quentyn would have preferred to walk, but they were miles from their inn. Besides, the innkeep at the Merchant’s House had warned him that traveling

afoot would taint them in the eyes of foreign captains and the native-born Volantenes alike. Persons of quality traveled by palanquin, or in the back of a *hathay* ... and as it happened the innkeep had a cousin who owned several such contrivances and would be pleased to serve them in this matter.

Their driver was one of the cousin's slaves, a small man with a wheel tattooed upon one cheek, naked but for a breechclout and a pair of sandals. His skin was the color of teak, his eyes chips of flint. After he had helped them up onto the cushioned bench between the cart's two huge wooden wheels, he clambered onto the elephant's back. "The Merchant's House," Quentyn told him, "but go along the wharves." Beyond the waterfront and its breezes, the streets and alleys of Volantis were hot enough to drown a man in his own sweat, at least on this side of the river.

The driver shouted something at his elephant in the local tongue. The beast began to move, trunk swaying from side to side. The cart lurched along behind her, the driver hooting at sailors and slaves alike to clear the way. It was easy enough to tell one from the other. The slaves were all tattooed: a mask of blue feathers, a lightning bolt that ran from jaw to brow, a coin upon the cheek, a leopard's spots, a skull, a jug. Maester Kedry said there were five slaves for every free man in Volantis though he had not lived long enough to verify his estimate. He had perished on the morning the corsairs swarmed aboard the *Meadowlark*.

Quentyn lost two other friends that same day—Willam Wells with his freckles and his crooked teeth, fearless with a lance, and Cletus Yron-wood, handsome despite his lazy eye, always randy, always laughing. Cletus had been Quentyn's dearest friend for half his life, a brother in all but blood. "Give your bride a kiss for me," Cletus had whispered to him, just before he died.

The corsairs had come aboard in the darkness before the dawn, as the *Meadowlark* was anchored off the coast of the Disputed Lands. The crew had beaten them off, at the cost of twelve lives. Afterward the sailors stripped the dead corsairs of boots and belts and weapons, divvied up their purses, and yanked gemstones from their ears and rings from their fingers. One of the corpses was so fat that the ship's cook had to cut his fingers off with a meat cleaver to claim his rings. It took three Meadowlarks to roll the

body into the sea. The other pirates were chucked in after him, without a word of prayer or ceremony.

Their own dead received more tender treatment. The sailors sewed their bodies up in canvas, weighed down with ballast stones so they might sink more quickly. The captain of the *Meadowlark* led his crew in a prayer for the souls of their slain shipmates. Then he turned to his Dornish passengers, the three who still remained of the six who had come aboard at the Planky Town. Even the big man had emerged, pale and greensick and unsteady on his feet, struggling up from the depths of the ship's hold to pay his last respects. "One of you should say some words for your dead, before we give them to the sea," the captain said. Gerris had obliged, lying with every other word, since he dare not tell the truth of who they'd been or why they'd come.

It was not supposed to end like that for them. "This will be a tale to tell our grandchildren," Cletus had declared the day they set out from his father's castle. Will made a face at that, and said, "A tale to tell tavern wenches, you mean, in hopes they'll lift their skirts." Cletus had slapped him on the back. "For grandchildren, you need children. For children, you need to lift some skirts." Later, in the Planky Town, the Dornishmen had toasted Quentyn's future bride, made ribald japes about his wedding night to come, and talked about the things they'd see, the deeds they'd do, the glory they would win. *All they won was a sailcloth sack filled with ballast stones.*

As much as he mourned Will and Cletus, it was the maester's loss that Quentyn felt most keenly. Kedry had been fluent in the tongues of all of the Free Cities, and even the mongrel Ghiscari that men spoke along the shores of Slaver's Bay. "Maester Kedry will accompany you," his father said the night they parted. "Heed his counsel. He has devoted half his life to the study of the Nine Free Cities." Quentyn wondered if things might not have gone a deal easier if only he were here to guide them.

"I would sell my mother for a bit of breeze," said Gerris, as they rolled through the dockside throngs. "It's moist as the Maiden's cunt, and still shy of noon. I hate this city."

Quentyn shared the feeling. The sullen wet heat of Volantis sapped his strength and left him feeling dirty. The worst part was knowing that nightfall would bring no relief. Up in the high meadows north of Lord Yronwood's estates, the air was always crisp and cool after dark, no matter how hot the day had been. Not here. In Volantis, the nights were almost as hot as the days.

"The *Goddess* sails for New Ghis on the morrow," Gerris reminded him. "That at least would bring us closer."

"New Ghis is an island, and a much smaller port than this. We would be closer, yes, but we could find ourselves stranded. And New Ghis has allied with the Yunkai'i." That news had not come as a surprise to Quentyn. New Ghis and Yunkai were both Ghiscari cities. "If Volantis should ally with them as well—"

"We need to find a ship from Westeros," suggested Gerris, "some trader out of Lannisport or Oldtown."

"Few come this far, and those who do fill their holds with silk and spice from the Jade Sea, then bend their oars for home."

"Perhaps a Braavosi ship? One hears of purple sails as far away as Asshai and the islands of the Jade Sea."

"The Braavosi are descended from escaped slaves. They do not trade in Slaver's Bay."

"Do we have enough gold to *buy* a ship?"

"And who will sail her? You? Me?" Dornishmen had never been seafarers, not since Nymeria burned her ten thousand ships. "The seas around Valyria are perilous, and thick with corsairs."

"I have had enough of corsairs. Let's not buy a ship."

This is still just a game to him, Quentyn realized, no different than the time he led six of us up into the mountains to find the old lair of the Vulture King.

It was not in Gerris Drinkwater's nature to imagine they might fail, let alone that they might die. Even the deaths of three friends had not served to chasten him, it would seem. *He leaves that to me. He knows my nature is as cautious as his is bold.*

"Perhaps the big man is right," Ser Gerris said. "Piss on the sea, we can finish the journey overland."

"You know why he says that," Quentyn said. "He'd rather die than set foot on another ship." The big man had been greensick every day of their voyage. In Lys, it had taken him four days to recover his strength. They'd had to take rooms in an inn so Maester Kedry could tuck him into a feather bed and feed him broths and potions until some pink returned to his cheeks.

It was possible to go overland to Meereen, that much was true. The old Valyrian roads would take them there. *Dragon roads*, men called the great stone roadways of the Freehold, but the one that ran eastward from Volantis to Meereen had earned a more sinister name: *the demon road*.

"The demon road is dangerous, and too *slow*," Quentyn said. "Tywin Lannister will send his own men after the queen once word of her reaches King's Landing." His father had been certain of that. "His will come with knives. If they reach her first—"

"Let's hope her dragons will sniff them out and eat them," said Gerris. "Well, if we cannot find a ship, and you will not let us ride, we had as well book passage back to Dorne."

Crawl back to Sunspear defeated, with my tail between my legs? His father's disappointment would be more than Quentyn could bear, and the scorn of the Sand Snakes would be withering. Doran Martell had put the fate of Dorne into his hands, he could not fail him, not whilst life remained.

Heat shimmers rose off the street as the *hathay* rattled and jounced along on its iron-rimmed wheels, giving a dreamlike quality to their surroundings. In amongst the warehouses and the wharves, shops and stalls of many sorts crowded the waterfront. Here fresh oysters could be bought, here iron chains and manacles, here *cyvasse* pieces carved of ivory and jade. Here

were temples too, where sailors came to sacrifice to foreign gods, cheek by jowl with pillow houses where women called down from balconies to men below. “Have a look at that one,” Gerris urged, as they passed one pillow house. “I think she’s in love with you.”

And how much does a whore’s love cost? Truth be told, girls made Quentyn anxious, especially the pretty ones.

When first he’d come to Yronwood, he had been smitten with Ynys, the eldest of Lord Yronwood’s daughters. Though he never said a word about his feelings, he nursed his dreams for years ... until the day she was dispatched to wed Ser Ryon Allynion, the heir to Godsgrace. The last time he had seen her, she’d had one boy at her breast and another clinging to her skirts.

After Ynys had come the Drinkwater twins, a pair of tawny young maidens who loved hawking, hunting, climbing rocks, and making Quentyn blush. One of them had given him his first kiss, though he never knew which one. As daughters of a landed knight, the twins were too lowborn to marry, but Cletus did not think that was any reason to stop kissing them. “After you’re wed you can take one of them for a paramour. Or both, why not?” But Quentyn thought of several reasons why not, so he had done his best to avoid the twins thereafter, and there had been no second kiss.

More recently, the youngest of Lord Yronwood’s daughters had taken to following him about the castle. Gwyneth was but twelve, a small, scrawny girl whose dark eyes and brown hair set her apart in that house of blue-eyed blondes. She was clever, though, as quick with words as with her hands, and fond of telling Quentyn that he had to wait for her to flower, so she could marry him.

That was before Prince Doran had summoned him to the Water Gardens. And now the most beautiful woman in the world was waiting in Meereen, and he meant to do his duty and claim her for his bride. *She will not refuse me. She will honor the agreement.* Daenerys Targaryen would need Dorne to win the Seven Kingdoms, and that meant that she would need him. *It does not mean that she will love me, though. She may not even like me.*

The street curved where the river met the sea, and there along the bend a number of animal sellers were clustered together, offering jeweled lizards, giant banded snakes, and agile little monkeys with striped tails and clever pink hands. “Perhaps your silver queen would like a monkey,” said Gerris.

Quentyn had no idea what Daenerys Targaryen might like. He had promised his father that he would bring her back to Dorne, but more and more he wondered if he was equal to the task.

I never asked for this, he thought.

Across the wide blue expanse of the Rhoyme, he could see the Black Wall that had been raised by the Valyrians when Volantis was no more than an outpost of their empire: a great oval of fused stone two hundred feet high and so thick that six four-horse chariots could race around its top abreast, as they did each year to celebrate the founding of the city. Outlanders, foreigners, and freedmen were not allowed inside the Black Wall save at the invitation of those who dwelt within, scions of the Old Blood who could trace their ancestry back to Valyria itself.

The traffic was thicker here. They were near the western end of the Long Bridge, which linked the two halves of the city. Wayns and carts and *hathays* crowded the streets, all of them coming from the bridge or making for it. Slaves were everywhere, as numerous as roaches, scurrying about their masters’ business.

Not far from Fishermonger’s Square and the Merchant’s House, shouts erupted from a cross street, and a dozen Unsullied spearmen in ornate armor and tiger-skin cloaks appeared as if from nowhere, waving everyone aside so the triarch could pass through atop his elephant. The triarch’s elephant was a grey-skinned behemoth clad in elaborate enameled armor that clattered softly as he moved, the castle on its back so tall that it scraped the top of the ornamental stone arch he was passing underneath. “The triarchs are considered so elevated that their feet are not allowed to touch the ground during their year of service,” Quentyn informed his companion. “They ride everywhere on elephants.”

“Blocking up the streets and leaving heaps of dung for the likes of us to contend with,” said Gerris. “Why Volantis needs three princes when Dorne makes do with one, I will never know.”

“The triarchs are neither kings nor princes. Volantis is a freehold, like Valyria of old. All freeborn landholders share the rule. Even women are allowed to vote, provided they own land. The three triarchs are chosen from amongst those noble families who can prove unbroken descent from old Valyria, to serve until the first day of the new year. And you would know all this if you had troubled to read the book that Maester Kedry gave you.”

“It had no pictures.”

“There were maps.”

“Maps do not count. If he had told me it was about tigers and elephants, I might have given it a try. It looked suspiciously like a history.”

When their *hathay* reached the edge of the Fishermonger’s Square, their elephant lifted her trunk and made a honking noise like some huge white goose, reluctant to plunge into the tangle of wayns, palanquins, and foot traffic ahead. Their driver prodded her with his heel and kept her moving.

The fishmongers were out in strength, crying the morning catch. Quentyn understood one word in two at best, but he did not need to know the words to know the fish. He saw cod and sailfish and sardines, barrels of mussels and clams. Eels hung along the front of one stall. Another displayed a gigantic turtle, strung up by its legs on iron chains, heavy as a horse. Crabs scabbled inside casks of brine and seaweed. Several of the vendors were frying chunks of fish with onions and beets, or selling peppery fish stew out of small iron kettles.

In the center of the square, under the cracked and headless statue of a dead triarch, a crowd had begun to gather about some dwarfs putting on a show. The little men were done up in wooden armor, miniature knights preparing for a joust. Quentyn saw one mount a dog, as the other hopped onto a pig ... only to slide right off again, to a smattering of laughter.

“They look amusing,” Gerris said. “Shall we stop and watch them fight? A laugh might serve you well, Quent. You look like an old man who has not moved his bowels in half a year.”

I am eight-and-ten, six years younger than you, Quentyn thought. *I am no old man.* Instead he said, “I have no need for comic dwarfs. Unless they have a ship.”

“A small one, I would think.”

Four stories tall, the Merchant’s House dominated the docks and wharves and storehouses that surrounded it. Here traders from Oldtown and King’s Landing mingled with their counterparts from Braavos and Pentos and Myr, with hairy Ibbenese, pale-skinned voyagers from Qarth, coal-black Summer Islanders in feathered cloaks, even masked shadow-binders from Asshai by the Shadow.

The paving stones felt warm beneath his feet when Quentyn climbed down from the *hathay*, even through the leather of his boots. Outside the Merchant’s House a trestle table had been set up in the shade and decorated with striped blue-and-white pennons that fluttered at every breath of air. Four hard-eyed sellswords lounged around the table, calling out to every passing man and boy. *Windblown*, Quentyn knew. The serjeants were looking for fresh meat to fill their ranks before they sailed for Slaver’s Bay. *And every man who signs with them is another sword for Yunkai, another blade meant to drink the blood of my bride-to-be.*

One of the Windblown shouted at them. “I do not speak your tongue,” Quentyn answered. Though he could read and write High Valyrian, he had little practice speaking it. And the Volantene apple had rolled a fair distance from the Valyrian tree.

“Westerosi?” the man answered, in the Common Tongue. “Dornishmen. My master is a wineseller.”

“Master? Fuck that. Are you a slave? Come with us and be your own master. Do you want to die abed? We’ll teach you sword and spear. You’ll ride to battle with the Tattered Prince and come home richer than a lord.

Boys, girls, gold, whatever you want, if you're man enough to take it. We're the Windblown, and we fuck the goddess slaughter up her arse."

Two of the sellswords began to sing, bellowing out the words to some marching song. Quentyn understood enough to get the gist. *We are the Windblown*, they sang. *Blow us east to Slaver's Bay, we'll kill the butcher king and fuck the dragon queen.*

"If Cletus and Will were still with us, we could come back with the big man and kill the lot of them," said Gerris.

Cletus and Will are dead. "Pay them no mind," Quentyn said. The sellswords threw taunts at their backs as they pushed through the doors of the Merchant's House, mocking them as bloodless cravens and frightened girls.

The big man was waiting in their rooms on the second floor. Though the inn had come well recommended by the master of the *Meadowlark*, that did not mean Quentyn was willing to leave their goods and gold unguarded. Every port had thieves, rats, and whores, and Volantis had more than most.

"I was about to go out looking for you," Ser Archibald Yronwood said as he slid the bar back to admit them. It was his cousin Cletus who had started calling him *the big man*, but the name was well deserved. Arch was six-and-a-half-feet tall, broad of shoulder, huge of belly, with legs like tree trunks, hands the size of hams, and no neck to speak of. Some childhood malady had made all his hair fall out. His bald head reminded Quentyn of a smooth pink boulder. "So," he demanded, "what did the smuggler say? Do we have a boat?"

"A ship," corrected Quentyn. "Aye, he'll take us, but only as far as the nearest hell."

Gerris sat upon a sagging bed and pulled off his boots. "Dorne is sounding more attractive every moment."

The big man said, "I still say we would do better to ride the demon road. Might be it's not as perilous as men say. And if it is, that only means more

glory for those who dare it. Who would dare molest us? Drink with his sword, me with my hammer, that's more than any demon could digest."

"And if Daenerys is dead before we reach her?" Quentyn said. "We must have a ship. Even if it is *Adventure*."

Gerris laughed. "You must be more desperate for Daenerys than I knew if you'd endure that stench for months on end. After three days, I'd be begging them to murder me. No, my prince, I pray you, not *Adventure*."

"Do you have a better way?" Quentyn asked him. "I do. It's just now come to me. It has its risks, and it is not what you would call honorable, I grant you ... but it will get you to your queen quicker than the demon road."

"Tell me," said Quentyn Martell.