

# THE SPURNED SUITOR

The hour of ghosts was almost upon them when Ser Gerris Drinkwater returned to the pyramid to report that he had found Beans, Books, and Old Bill Bone in one of Meereen's less savory cellars, drinking yellow wine and watching naked slaves kill one another with bare hands and filed teeth.

"Beans pulled a blade and proposed a wager to determine if deserters had bellies full of yellow slime," Ser Gerris reported, "so I tossed him a dragon and asked if yellow gold would do. He bit the coin and asked what I meant to buy. When I told him he slipped the knife away and asked if I was drunk or mad."

"Let him think what he wants, so long as he delivers the message," said Quentyn.

"He'll do that much. I'll wager you get your meeting too, if only so Rags can have Pretty Meris cut your liver out and fry it up with onions. We should be heeding Selmy. When Barristan the Bold tells you to run, a wise man laces up his boots. We should find a ship for Volantis whilst the port is still open."

Just the mention turned Ser Archibald's cheeks green. "No more ships. I'd sooner hop back to Volantis on one foot."

*Volantis, Quentyn thought. Then Lys, then home. Back the way I came, empty-handed. Three brave men dead, for what?*

It would be sweet to see the Greenblood again, to visit Sunspear and the Water Gardens and breathe the clean sweet mountain air of Yronwood in place of the hot, wet, filthy humors of Slaver's Bay. His father would speak no word of rebuke, Quentyn knew, but the disappointment would be there in his eyes. His sister would be scornful, the Sand Snakes would mock him with smiles sharp as swords, and Lord Yronwood, his second father, who had sent his own son along to keep him safe ...

“I will not keep you here,” Quentyn told his friends. “My father laid this task on me, not you. Go home, if that is what you want. By whatever means you like. I am staying.”

The big man shrugged. “Then Drink and me are staying too.”

The next night, Denzo D’han turned up at Prince Quentyn’s door to talk terms. “He will meet with you on the morrow, by the spice market. Look for a door marked with a purple lotus. Knock twice and call for freedom.”

“Agreed,” said Quentyn. “Arch and Gerris will be with me. He can bring two men as well. No more.”

“If it please my prince.” The words were polite enough, but Denzo’s tone was edged with malice, and the eyes of the warrior poet gleamed bright with mockery. “Come at sunset. And see that you are not followed.”

The Dornishmen left the Great Pyramid an hour shy of sunset in case they took a wrong turn or had difficulty finding the purple lotus. Quentyn and Gerris wore their sword belts. The big man had his warhammer slung across his broad back.

“It is still not too late to abandon this folly,” Gerris said, as they made their way down a foetid alley toward the old spice market. The smell of piss was in the air, and they could hear the rumble of a corpse cart’s iron-rimmed wheels off ahead. “Old Bill Bone used to say that Pretty Maris could stretch out a man’s dying for a moon’s turn. We *lied* to them, Quent. Used them to get us here, then went over to the Stormcrows.”

“As we were commanded.”

“Tatters never meant for us to do it for real, though,” put in the big man. “His other boys, Ser Orson and Dick Straw, Hungerford, Will of the Woods, that lot, they’re still down in some dungeon thanks to us. Old Rags can’t have liked that much.”

“No,” Prince Quentyn said, “but he likes gold.”

Gerris laughed. “A pity we have none. Do you trust this peace, Quent? I don’t. Half the city is calling the dragonslayer a hero, and the other half spits blood at the mention of his name.”

“Harzoo,” the big man said.

Quentyn frowned. “His name was Harghaz.”

“Hizdahr, Humzum, Hagnag, what does it matter? I call them all Harzoo. He was no dragonslayer. All he did was get his arse roasted black and crispy.”

“He was brave.” *Would I have the courage to face that monster with nothing but a spear?*

“He died bravely, is what you mean.”

“He died screaming,” said Arch.

Gerris put a hand on Quentyn’s shoulder. “Even if the queen returns, she’ll still be married.”

“Not if I give King Harzoo a little smack with my hammer,” suggested the big man.

“Hizdahr,” said Quentyn. “His name is Hizdahr.”

“One kiss from my hammer and no one will care what his name was,” said Arch.

*They do not see.* His friends had lost sight of his true purpose here. *The road leads through her, not to her. Daenerys is the means to the prize, not the prize itself.* ” ‘The dragon has three heads,’ she said to me. ‘My marriage need not be the end of all your hopes,’ she said. ‘I know why you are here. For fire and blood.’ I have Targaryen blood in me, you know that. I can trace my lineage back—”

“Fuck your lineage,” said Gerris. “The dragons won’t care about your blood, except maybe how it tastes. You cannot tame a dragon with a history

lesson. They're monsters, not maesters. Quent, is this truly what you want to do?"

"This is what I have to do. For Dorne. For my father. For Cletus and Will and Maester Kedry."

"They're dead," said Gerris. "They won't care."

"All dead," Quentyn agreed. "For what? To bring me here, so I might wed the dragon queen. A grand adventure, Cletus called it. Demon roads and stormy seas, and at the end of it the most beautiful woman in the world. A tale to tell our grandchildren. But Cletus will never father a child, unless he left a bastard in the belly of that tavern wench he liked. Will will never have his wedding. Their deaths should have some meaning."

Gerris pointed to where a corpse slumped against a brick wall, attended by a cloud of glistening green flies. "Did his death have meaning?"

Quentyn looked at the body with distaste. "He died of the flux. Stay well away from him." The pale mare was inside the city walls. Small wonder that the streets seemed so empty. "The Unsullied will send a corpse cart for him."

"No doubt. But that was not my question. Men's lives have meaning, not their deaths. I loved Will and Cletus too, but this will not bring them back to us. This is a mistake, Quent. You cannot trust in sellswords."

"They are men like any other men. They want gold, glory, power. That's all I am trusting in." *That, and my own destiny. I am a prince of Dorne, and the blood of dragons is in my veins.*

The sun had sunk below the city wall by the time they found the purple lotus, painted on the weathered wooden door of a low brick hovel squatting amidst a row of similar hovels in the shadow of the great yellow-and-green pyramid of Rhazdar. Quentyn knocked twice, as instructed. A gruff voice answered through the door, growling something unintelligible in the mongrel tongue of Slaver's Bay, an ugly blend of Old Ghiscari and High Valyrian. The prince answered in the same tongue. "Freedom."

The door opened. Gerris entered first, for caution's sake, with Quentyn close behind him and the big man bringing up the rear. Within, the air was hazy with bluish smoke, whose sweet smell could not quite cover up the deeper stinks of piss and sour wine and rotting meat. The space was much larger than it had seemed from without, stretching off to right and left into the adjoining hovels. What had appeared to be a dozen structures from the street turned into one long hall inside.

At this hour the house was less than half full. A few of the patrons favored the Dornishmen with looks bored or hostile or curious. The rest were crowded around the pit at the far end of the room, where a pair of naked men were slashing at each other with knives whilst the watchers cheered them on.

Quentyn saw no sign of the men they had come to meet. Then a door he had not seen before swung open, and an old woman emerged, a shriveled thing in a dark red *tokar* fringed with tiny golden skulls. Her skin was white as mare's milk, her hair so thin that he could see the scalp beneath. "Dorne," she said, "I be Zahrina. Purple Lotus. Go down here, you find them." She held the door and gestured them through.

Beyond was a flight of wooden steps, steep and twisting. This time the big man led the way and Gerris was the rear guard, with the prince between them. *An undercellar*. It was a long way down, and so dark that Quentyn had to feel his way to keep from slipping. Near the bottom Ser Archibald pulled his dagger.

They emerged in a brick vault thrice the size of the winesink above. Huge wooden vats lined the walls as far as the prince could see. A red lantern hung on a hook just inside the door, and a greasy black candle flickered on an overturned barrel serving as a table. That was the only light.

Caggo Corpsekiller was pacing by the wine vats, his black *arakh* hanging at his hip. Pretty Meris stood cradling a crossbow, her eyes as cold and dead as two grey stones. Denzo D'han barred the door once the Dornish-men were inside, then took up a position in front of it, arms crossed against his chest.

*One too many*, Quentyn thought.

The Tattered Prince himself was seated at the table, nursing a cup of wine. In the yellow candlelight his silver-grey hair seemed almost golden, though the pouches underneath his eyes were etched as large as saddlebags. He wore a brown wool traveler's cloak, with silvery chain mail glimmering underneath. Did that betoken treachery or simple prudence? *An old sellsword is a cautious sellsword*. Quentyn approached his table. "My lord. You look different without your cloak."

"My ragged raiment?" The Pentoshi gave a shrug. "A poor thing ... yet those tatters fill my foes with fear, and on the battlefield the sight of my rags blowing in the wind emboldens my men more than any banner. And if I want to move unseen, I need only slip it off to become plain and unremarkable." He gestured at the bench across from him. "Sit. I understand you are a prince. Would that I had known. Will you drink? Zahrina offers food as well. Her bread is stale and her stew is unspeakable. Grease and salt, with a morsel or two of meat. Dog, she says, but I think rat is more likely. It will not kill you, though. I have found that it is only when the food is tempting that one must beware. Poisoners invariably choose the choicest dishes."

"You brought three men," Ser Gerris pointed out, with an edge in his voice. "We agreed on two apiece."

"Meris is no man. Meris, sweet, undo your shirt, show him."

"That will not be necessary," said Quentyn. If the talk he had heard was true, beneath that shirt Pretty Meris had only the scars left by the men who'd cut her breasts off. "Meris is a woman, I agree. You've still twisted the terms."

"Tattered and twisty, what a rogue I am. Three to two is not much of an advantage, it must be admitted, but it counts for something. In this world, a man must learn to seize whatever gifts the gods chose to send him. That was a lesson I learned at some cost. I offer it to you as a sign of my good faith." He gestured at the chair again. "Sit, and say what you came to say. I

promise not to have you killed until I have heard you out. That is the least I can do for a fellow prince. Quentyn, is it?"

"Quentyn of House Martell."

"Frog suits you better. It is not my custom to drink with liars and deserters, but you've made me curious."

Quentyn sat. *One wrong word, and this could turn to blood in half a heartbeat.* "I ask your pardon for our deception. The only ships sailing for Slaver's Bay were those that had been hired to bring you to the wars."

The Tattered Prince gave a shrug. "Every turncloak has his tale. You are not the first to swear me your swords, take my coin, and run. All of them have *reasons*. 'My little son is sick,' or 'My wife is putting horns on me,' or 'The other men all make me suck their cocks.' Such a charming boy, the last, but I did not excuse his desertion. Another fellow told me our food was so wretched that he had to flee before it made him sick, so I had his foot cut off, roasted it up, and fed it to him. Then I made him our camp cook. Our meals improved markedly, and when his contract was fulfilled he signed another. You, though ... several of my best are locked up in the queen's dungeons thanks to that lying tongue of yours, and I doubt that you can even cook."

"I am a prince of Dorne," said Quentyn. "I had a duty to my father and my people. There was a secret marriage pact."

"So I heard. And when the silver queen saw your scrap of parchment she fell into your arms, yes?"

"No," said Pretty Meris. "No? Oh, I recall. Your bride flew off on a dragon. Well, when she returns, do be sure to invite us to your nuptials. The men of the company would love to drink to your happiness, and I do love a Westerosi wedding. The bedding part especially, only ... oh, wait ..." He turned to Denzo D'han. "Denzo, I thought you told me that the dragon queen had married some Ghiscari."

"A Meereenese nobleman. Rich."

The Tattered Prince turned back to Quentyn. “Could that be true? Surely not. What of your marriage pact?”

“She laughed at him,” said Pretty Meris.

*Daenerys never laughed.* The rest of Meereen might see him as an amusing curiosity, like the exiled Summer Islander King Robert used to keep at King’s Landing, but the queen had always spoken to him gently. “We came too late,” said Quentyn.

“A pity you did not desert me sooner.” The Tattered Prince sipped at his wine. “So ... no wedding for Prince Frog. Is that why you’ve come hopping back to me? Have my three brave Dornish lads decided to honor their contracts?”

“No.”

“How vexing.”

“Yurkhaz zo Yunzak is dead.”

“Ancient tidings. I saw him die. The poor man saw a dragon and stumbled as he tried to flee. Then a thousand of his closest friends stepped on him. No doubt the Yellow City is awash in tears. Did you ask me here to toast his memory?”

“No. Have the Yunkishmen chosen a new commander?”

“The council of masters has been unable to agree. Yezzan zo Qaggaz had the most support, but now he’s died as well. The Wise Masters are rotating the supreme command amongst themselves. Today our leader is the one your friends in the ranks dubbed the Drunken Conqueror. On the morrow, it will be Lord Wobblecheeks.”

“The Rabbit,” said Meris. “Wobblecheeks was yesterday.”

“I stand corrected, my sweetling. Our Yunkish friends were kind enough to provide us with a chart. I must strive to be more assiduous about consulting it.”



“Yurkhaz zo Yunzak was the man who hired you.”

“He signed our contract on behalf of his city. Just so.”

“Meereen and Yunkai have made peace. The siege is to be lifted, the armies disbanded. There will be no battle, no slaughter, no city to sack and plunder.”

“Life is full of disappointments.”

“How long do you think the Yunkishmen will want to continue paying wages to four free companies?”

The Tattered Prince took a sip of wine and said, “A vexing question. But this is the way of life for we men of the free companies. One war ends, another begins. Fortunately there is always someone fighting someone somewhere. Perhaps here. Even as we sit here drinking Bloodbeard is urging our Yunkish friends to present King Hizdahr with another head. Freedmen and slavers eye each other’s necks and sharpen their knives, the Sons of the Harpy plot in their pyramids, the pale mare rides down slave and lord alike, our friends from the Yellow City gaze out to sea, and somewhere in the grasslands a dragon nibbles the tender flesh of Daenerys Targaryen. Who rules Meereen tonight? Who will rule it on the morrow?” The Pentoshi gave a shrug. “One thing I am certain of. Someone will have need of our swords.”

“I have need of those swords. Dorne will hire you.”

The Tattered Prince glanced at Pretty Meris. “He does not lack for gall, this Frog. Must I remind him? My dear prince, the last contract we signed you used to wipe your pretty pink bottom.”

“I will double whatever the Yunkishmen are paying you.”

“And pay in gold upon the signing of our contract, yes?”

“I will pay you part when we reach Volantis, the rest when I am back in Sunspear. We brought gold with us when we set sail, but it would have been

hard to conceal once we joined the company, so we gave it over to the banks. I can show you papers.”

“Ah. Papers. But we will be paid *double*.”

“Twice as many papers,” said Pretty Meris. “The rest you’ll have in Dorne,” Quentyn insisted. “My father is a man of honor. If I put my seal to an agreement, he will fulfill its terms. You have my word on that.”

The Tattered Prince finished his wine, turned the cup over, and set it down between them. “So. Let me see if I understand. A proven liar and oathbreaker wishes to contract with us and pay in promises. And for what services? I wonder. Are my Windblown to smash the Yunkai’i and sack the Yellow City? Defeat a Dothraki *khalasar* in the field? Escort you home to your father? Or will you be content if we deliver Queen Daenerys to your bed wet and willing? Tell me true, Prince Frog. What would you have of me and mine?”

“I need you to help me steal a dragon.”

Caggo Corpsekiller chuckled. Pretty Meris curled her lip in a half-smile. Denzo D’han whistled.

The Tattered Prince only leaned back on his stool and said, “Double does not pay for dragons, princeling. Even a frog should know that much. Dragons come dear. And men who pay in promises should have at least the sense to promise *more*.”

“If you want me to triple—”

“What I want,” said the Tattered Prince, “is Pentos.”