

THE QUEENMAKER

Beneath the burning sun of Dorne, wealth was measured as much in water as in gold, so every well was zealously guarded. The well at Shandystone had gone dry a hundred years before, however, and its guardians had departed for some wetter place, abandoning their modest holdfast with its fluted columns and triple arches. Afterward the sands had crept back in to reclaim their own.

Arianne Martell arrived with Drey and Sylva just as the sun was going down, with the west a tapestry of gold and purple and the clouds all glowing crimson. The ruins seemed aglow as well; the fallen columns glimmered pinkly, red shadows crept across the cracked stone floors, and the sands themselves turned from gold to orange to purple as the light faded. Garin had arrived a few hours earlier, and the knight called Darkstar the day before.

“It is lovely here,” Drey observed as he was helping Garin water the horses. They had carried their own water with them. The sand steeds of Dorne were swift and tireless, and would keep going for long leagues after other horses had given out, but even such as they could not run dry. “How did you know of this place?”

“My uncle brought me here, with Tyene and Sarella.” The memory made Arianne smile. “He caught some vipers and showed Tyene the safest way to milk them for their venom. Sarella turned over rocks, brushed sand off the mosaics, and wanted to know everything there was to know about the people who had lived here.”

“And what did you do, princess?” asked Spotted Sylva.

I sat beside the well and pretended that some robber knight had brought me here to have his way with me, she thought, a tall hard man with black eyes and a widow’s peak. The memory made her uneasy. “I dreamed,” she said, “and when the sun went down I sat cross-legged at my uncle’s feet and begged him for a story.”

“Prince Oberyn was full of stories.” Garin had been with them as well that day; he was Arianne’s milk brother, and they had been inseparable since before they learned to walk. “He told about Prince Garin, I remember, the one that I was named for.”

“Garin the Great,” offered Drey, “the wonder of the Rhoyné.”

“That’s the one. He made Valyria tremble.”

“They trembled,” said Ser Gerold, “then they killed him. If I led a quarter of a million men to death, would they call me Gerold the Great?” He snorted. “I shall remain Darkstar, I think. At least it is mine own.” He unsheathed his longsword, sat upon the lip of the dry well, and began to hone the blade with an oilstone.

Arianne watched him warily. He is highborn enough to make a worthy consort, she thought. Father would question my good sense, but our children would be as beautiful as dragonlords. If there was a handsomer man in Dorne, she did not know him. Ser Gerold Dayne had an aquiline nose, high cheekbones, a strong jaw. He kept his face clean-shaven, but his thick hair fell to his collar like a silver glacier, divided by a streak of midnight black. He has a cruel mouth, though, and a crueler tongue. His eyes seemed black as he sat outlined against the dying sun, sharpening his steel, but she had looked at them from a closer vantage and she knew that they were purple. Dark purple. Dark and angry.

He must have felt her gaze upon him, for he looked up from his sword, met her eyes, and smiled. Arianne felt heat rushing to her face. *I should never have brought him. If he gives me such a look when Arys is here, we will have blood on the sand.* Whose, she could not say. By tradition the Kingsguard were the finest knights in all the Seven Kingdoms... but Darkstar was Darkstar.

The Dornish nights grow cold out upon the sands. Garin gathered wood for them, bleached white branches from trees that had withered up and died a hundred years ago. Drey built a fire, whistling as he struck sparks off his flint.

Once the kindling caught, they sat around the flames and passed a skin of summerwine from hand to hand... all but Darkstar, who preferred to

drink unsweetened lemonwater. Garin was in a lively mood and entertained them with the latest tales from the Planky Town at the mouth of the Greenblood, where the orphans of the river came to trade with the carracks, cogs, and galleys from across the narrow sea. If the sailors could be believed, the east was seething with wonders and terrors: a slave revolt in Astapor, dragons in Qarth, grey plague in Yi Ti. A new corsair king had risen in the Basilisk Isles and raided Tall Trees Town, and in Qohor followers of the red priests had rioted and tried to burn down the Black Goat. “And the Golden Company broke its contract with Myr, just as the Myrmen were about to go to war with Lys.”

“The Lyseni bought them off,” suggested Sylva.

“Clever Lyseni,” Drey said. “Clever, craven Lyseni.”

Arianne knew better. *If Quentyn has the Golden Company behind him...* “Beneath the gold the bitter steel,” was their cry. *You will need bitter steel and more, brother, if you think to set me aside.* Arianne was loved in Dorne, Quentyn little known. No company of sellswords could change that.

Ser Gerold rose. “I believe I’ll have a piss.”

“Watch where you set your feet,” Drey cautioned. “It has been a while since Prince Oberyn milked the local vipers.”

“I was weaned on venom, Dalt. Any viper takes a bite of me will rue it.” Ser Gerold vanished through a broken arch.

When he was gone, the others exchanged glances. “Forgive me, princess,” said Garin softly, “but I do not like that man.”

“A pity,” Drey said. “I believe he’s half in love with you.”

“We need him,” Arianne reminded them. “It may be that we will need his sword, and we will surely need his castle.”

“High Hermitage is not the only castle in Dorne,” Spotted Sylva pointed out, “and you have other knights who love you well. Drey is a knight.”

“I am,” he affirmed. “I have a wonderful horse and a very fine sword, and my valor is second to... well, several, actually.”

“More like several hundred, ser,” said Garin.

Arianne left them to their banter. Drey and Spotted Sylva were her dearest friends, aside from her cousin Tyene, and Garin had been teasing her since both of them were drinking from his mother's teats, but just now she was in no mood for japery. The sun was gone, and the sky was full of stars. *So many.* She leaned her back against a fluted pillar and wondered if her brother was looking at the same stars tonight, wherever he might be. *Do you see the white one, Quentyn? That is Nymeria's star, burning bright, and that milky band behind her, those are ten thousand ships. She burned as bright as any man, and so shall I. You will not rob me of my birthright!*

Quentyn had been very young when he was sent to Yronwood; too young, according to their mother. Norvoshi did not foster out their children, and Lady Mellario had never forgiven Prince Doran for taking her son away from her. "I like it no more than you do," Arianne had overheard her father say, "but there is a blood debt, and Quentyn is the only coin Lord Ormond will accept."

"Coin?" her mother had screamed. "He is your *son*. What sort of father uses his own flesh and blood to pay his debts?"

"The princely sort," Doran Martell had answered.

Prince Doran was still pretending that her brother was with Lord Yronwood, but Garin's mother had seen him at the Planky Town, posing as a merchant. One of his companions had a lazy eye, the same as Cletus Yronwood, Lord Anders's randy son. A maester traveled with them too, a maester skilled in tongues. *My brother is not as clever as he thinks. A clever man would have left from Oldtown, even if it meant a longer voyage. In Oldtown he might have gone unrecognized.* Arianne had friends amongst the orphans of the Planky Town, and some had grown curious as to why a prince and a lord's son might be traveling under false names and seeking passage across the narrow sea. One of them had crept through a window of a night, tickled the lock on Quentyn's little strongbox, and found the scrolls within.

Arianne would have given much and more to know that this secret trip across the narrow sea was Quentyn's own doing, and his alone... but

parchments he had carried had been sealed with the sun and spear of Dorne. Garin's cousin had not dared break the seal to read them, but...

"Princess." Ser Gerold Dayne stood behind her, half in starlight and half in shadow.

"How was your piss?" Arianne inquired archly.

"The sands were duly grateful." Dayne put a foot upon the head of a statue that might have been the Maiden till the sands had scoured her face away. "It occurred to me as I was pissing that this plan of yours may not yield you what you want."

"And what is it I want, ser?"

"The Sand Snakes freed. Vengeance for Oberyn and Elia. Do I know the song? You want a little taste of lion blood."

That, and my birthright. I want Sunspear, and my father's seat. I want Dorne. "I want justice."

"Call it what you will. Crowning the Lannister girl is a hollow gesture. She will never sit the Iron Throne. Nor will you get the war you want. The lion is not so easily provoked."

"The lion's dead. Who knows which cub the lioness prefers?"

"The one in her own den." Ser Gerold drew his sword. It glimmered in the starlight, sharp as lies. "This is how you start a war. Not with a crown of gold, but with a blade of steel."

I am no murderer of children. "Put that away. Myrcella is under my protection. And Ser Arys will permit no harm to come to his precious princess, you know that."

"No, my lady. What I know is that Daynes have been killing Oakhearts for several thousand years."

His arrogance took her breath away. "It seems to me that Oakhearts have been killing Daynes for just as long."

"We all have our family traditions." Darkstar sheathed his sword. "The moon is rising, and I see your paragon approaching."

His eyes were sharp. The horseman on the tall grey palfrey did indeed prove to be Ser Arys, white cloak fluttering bravely as he spurred across the sand. Princess Myrcella rode pillion behind him, swaddled in a cowled robe that hid her golden curls.

As Ser Arys helped her from the saddle, Drey went to one knee before her. "Your Grace."

"My lady liege." Spotted Sylva knelt beside him.

"My queen, I am your man." Garin dropped to both knees.

Confused, Myrcella clutched Arys Oakheart by the arm. "Why do they call me Grace?" she asked in a plaintive voice. "Ser Arys, what is this place, and who are they?"

Has he told her nought? Arianne moved forward in a swirl of silk, smiling to put the child at ease. "They are my true and loyal friends, Your Grace... and would be your friends as well."

"Princess Arianne?" The girl threw her arms around her. "Why do they call me queen? Did something bad happen to Tommen?"

"He fell in with evil men, Your Grace," Arianne said, "and I fear they have conspired with him to steal your throne."

"My throne? You mean, the *Iron* Throne?" The girl was more confused than ever. "He never stole that, Tommen is..."

"...younger than you, surely?"

"I am older by a year."

"That means the Iron Throne by rights is yours," Arianne said. "Your brother is only a little boy, you must not blame him. He has bad counselors... but *you* have friends. May I have the honor of presenting them?" She took the child by the hand. "Your Grace, I give you Ser Andrey Dalt, the heir to Lemonwood."

"My friends call me Drey," he said, "and I should be greatly honored if Your Grace would do the same."

Though Drey had an open face and an easy smile, Myrcella regarded him warily. "Until I know you I must call you *ser*."

“Whatever name Your Grace prefers, I am her man.”

Sylva cleared her throat, till Arianne said, “Might I present Lady Sylva Santagar, my queen? My dearest Spotted Sylva.”

“Why do they call you that?” Myrcella asked.

“For my freckles, Your Grace,” Sylva answered, “though they all pretend it is because I am the heir to Spottswood.”

Garin was next, a loose-limbed, swarthy, long-nosed fellow with a jade stud in one ear. “Here is gay Garin of the orphans, who makes me laugh,” said Arianne. “His mother was my wet nurse.”

“I am sorry she is dead,” Myrcella said.

“She’s not, sweet queen.” Garin flashed the golden tooth Arianne had bought him to replace the one she’d broken. “I’m of the orphans of the Greenblood, is what my lady means.”

Myrcella would have time enough to learn the history of the orphans on her voyage up the river. Arianne led her queen-to-be to the final member of her little band. “Last, but first in valor, I give you Ser Gerold Dayne, a knight of Starfall.”

Ser Gerold went to one knee. The moonlight shone in his dark eyes as he studied the child coolly.

“There was an Arthur Dayne,” Myrcella said. “He was a knight of the Kingsguard in the days of Mad King Aerys.”

“He was the Sword of the Morning. He is dead.”

“Are you the Sword of the Morning now?”

“No. Men call me Darkstar, and I am of the night.”

Arianne drew the child away. “You must be hungry. We have dates and cheese and olives, and lemonsweet to drink. You ought not eat or drink too much, though. After a little rest, we must ride. Out here on the sands it is always best to travel by night, before the sun ascends the sky. It is kinder to the horses.”

“And the riders,” Spotted Sylva said. “Come, Your Grace, warm yourself. I should be honored if you’d let me serve you.”

As she led the princess to the fire, Arianne found Ser Gerold behind her. “My House goes back ten thousand years, unto the dawn of days,” he complained. “Why is it that my cousin is the only Dayne that anyone remembers?”

“He was a great knight,” Ser Arys Oakheart put in.

“He had a great sword,” Darkstar said.

“And a great heart.” Ser Arys took Arianne by the arm. “Princess, I beg a moment’s word.”

“Come.” She led Ser Arys deeper into the ruins. Beneath his cloak, the knight wore a cloth-of-gold doublet embroidered with the three green oak leaves of his House. On his head was a light steel helm topped by a jagged spike, wound about with a yellow scarf in the Dornish fashion. He might have passed for any knight, but for the cloak. Of shimmering white silk it was, pale as moonlight and airy as a breeze. *A Kingsguard cloak beyond all doubt, the gallant fool.* “How much does the child know?”

“Little enough. Before we left King’s Landing, her uncle reminded her that I was her protector and that any commands that I might give her were meant to keep her safe. She has heard them in the streets as well, shouting out for vengeance. She knew this was no game. The girl is brave, and wise beyond her years. She did all I asked of her, and never asked a question.” The knight took her arm, glanced about, lowered his voice. “There are other tidings you should hear. Tywin Lannister is dead.”

That was a shock. “Dead?”

“Murdered by the Imp. The queen has assumed the regency.”

“Has she?” *A woman on the Iron Throne?* Arianne thought about that for a moment and decided it was all to the good. If the lords of the Seven Kingdoms grew accustomed to Queen Cersei’s rule, it would be that much easier for them to bend their knees to Queen Myrcella. And Lord Tywin had been a dangerous foe; without him, Dorne’s enemies would be much weaker. *Lannisters are killing Lannisters, how sweet.* “What became of the dwarf?”

“He’s fled,” Ser Arys said. “Cersei is offering a lordship to whosoever delivers her his head.” In a tiled inner courtyard half-buried by the drifting sands, he pushed her back against a column to kiss her, and his hand went to her breast. He kissed her long and hard and would have pushed her skirts up, but Arianne broke free of him, laughing. “I see that queenmaking excites you, ser, but we have no time for this. Later, I promise you.” She touched his cheek. “Did you meet with any problems?”

“Only Trystane. He wanted to sit beside Myrcella’s bedside and play *cyvasse* with her.”

“He had redspots when he was four, I told you. You can only get it once. You should have put out that Myrcella was suffering from greyscale, that would have kept him well away.”

“The boy perhaps, but not your father’s maester.”

“Caleotte,” she said. “Did he try to see her?”

“Not once I described the red spots on her face. He said that nothing could be done until the disease had run its course, and gave me a pot of salve to soothe her itching.”

No one under ten ever died of redspots, but it could be mortal in adults, and Maester Caleotte had never suffered it as a child. Arianne learned that when she suffered her own spots, at eight. “Good,” she said. “And the handmaid? Is she convincing?”

“From a distance. The Imp picked her for this purpose, over many girls of nobler birth. Myrcella helped her curl her hair, and painted the dots on her face herself. They are distant kin. Lannisport teems with Lannys, Lannetts, Lantells, and lesser Lannisters, and half of them have that yellow hair. Dressed in Myrcella’s bedrobe with the maester’s salve smeared across her face... she might even have fooled me, in a dim light. It was a deal harder to find a man to take my place. Dake is closest to my height, but he’s too fat, so I put Rolder in my armor and told him to keep his visor down. The man is three inches shorter than I am, but perhaps no one will notice if I’m not there to stand beside him. He’ll keep to Myrcella’s chambers in any case.”

“All we need is a few days. By that time the princess will be beyond my father’s reach.”

“Where?” He drew her close and nuzzled at her neck. “It’s time you told me the rest of the plan, don’t you think?”

She laughed, pushing him away. “No, it’s time we rode.”

The moon had crowned the Moonmaid as they set out from the dust-dry ruins of Shandystone, striking south and west. Arianne and Ser Arys took the lead, with Myrcella on a frisky mare between them. Garin followed close behind with Spotted Sylva, whilst her two Dornish knights took the rear. *We are seven*, Arianne realized as they rode. She had not thought of that before, but it seemed a good omen for their cause. *Seven riders on their way to glory. One day the singers will make all of us immortal.* Drey had wanted a larger party, but that might have attracted unwelcome attention, and every additional man doubled the risk of betrayal. *That much my father taught me, at the least.* Even when he was younger and stronger, Doran Martell had been a cautious man much given to silences and secrets. *It is time he put his burdens down, but I will suffer no slights to his honor or his person.* She would return him to his Water Gardens, to live out what years remained him surrounded by laughing children and the smell of limes and oranges. *Yes, and Quentyn can keep him company. Once I crown Myrcella and free the Sand Snakes, all Dorne will rally to my banners.* The Yronwoods might declare for Quentyn, but alone they were no threat. If they went over to Tommen and the Lannisters, she would have Darkstar destroy them root and branch.

“I am tired,” Myrcella complained, after several hours in the saddle. “Is it much farther? Where are we going?”

“Princess Arianne is taking Your Grace to a place where you’ll be safe,” Ser Arys assured her.

“It is a long journey,” Arianne said, “but it will go easier once we reach the Greenblood. Some of Garin’s people will meet us there, the orphans of the river. They live on boats, and pole them up and down the Greenblood and its vassals, fishing and picking fruit and doing whatever work needs doing.”

“Aye,” Garin called out cheerfully, “and we sing and play and dance on water, and know much and more of healing. My mother is the best midwife in Westeros, and my father can cure warts.”

“How can you be orphans if you have mothers and fathers?” the girl asked.

“They are the Rhoynar,” Arianne explained, “and their Mother was the river Rhoyme.”

Myrcella did not understand. “I thought *you* were the Rhoynar. You Dornishmen, I mean.”

“We are in part, Your Grace. Nymeria’s blood is in me, along with that of Mors Martell, the Dornish lord she married. On the day they wed, Nymeria fired her ships, so her people would understand that there could be no going back. Most were glad to see those flames, for their voyagings had been long and terrible before they came to Dorne, and many and more had been lost to storm, disease, and slavery. There were a few who mourned, however. They did not love this dry red land or its seven-faced god, so they clung to their old ways, hammered boats together from the hulks of the burned ships, and became the orphans of the Greenblood. The Mother in their songs is not *our* Mother, but Mother Rhoyme, whose waters nourished them from the dawn of days.”

“I’d heard the Rhoynar had some turtle god,” said Ser Arys.

“The Old Man of the River is a lesser god,” said Garin. “He was born from Mother River too, and fought the Crab King to win dominion over all who dwell beneath the flowing waters.”

“Oh,” said Myrcella.

“I understand you’ve fought some mighty battles too, Your Grace,” said Drey in his most cheerful voice. “It is said you show our brave Prince Trystane no mercy at the *cyvasse* table.”

“He always sets his squares up the same way, with all the mountains in the front and his elephants in the passes,” said Myrcella. “So I send my dragon through to eat his elephants.”

“Does your handmaid play the game as well?” asked Drey.

“Rosamund?” asked Myrcella. “No. I tried to teach her, but she said the rules were too hard.”

“She is a Lannister as well?” said Lady Sylva.

“A Lannister of *Lannisport*, not a Lannister of Casterly Rock. Her hair is the same color as mine, but straight instead of curly. Rosamund doesn’t truly favor me, but when she dresses up in my clothes people who don’t know us think she’s me.”

“You have done this before, then?”

“Oh, yes. We traded places on the *Seaswift*, on the way to Braavos. Septa Eglantine put brown dye in my hair. She said we were doing it as a game, but it was meant to keep me safe in case the ship was taken by my uncle Stannis.”

The girl was plainly growing tired, so Arianne called a halt. They watered the horses once again, rested for a bit, and had some cheese and fruit. Myrcella split an orange with Spotted Sylva, whilst Garin ate olives and spit the stones at Drey.

Arianne had hoped to reach the river before the sun came up, but they had started much later than she’d planned, so they were still in the saddle when the eastern sky turned red. Darkstar cantered up beside her.

“Princess,” he said, “I’d set a faster pace, unless you mean to kill the child after all. We have no tents, and by day the sands are cruel.”

“I know the sands as well as you do, ser,” she told him. All the same, she did as he suggested. It was hard on their mounts, but better she should lose six horses than one princess.

Soon enough the wind came gusting from the west, hot and dry and full of grit. Arianne drew her veil across her face. It was made of shimmering silk, pale green above and yellow below, the colors blending into one another. Small green pearls gave it weight, and rattled softly against each other as she rode.

“I know why my princess wears a veil,” Ser Arys said as she was fastening it to the temples of her copper helm. “Elsewise her beauty would outshine the sun above.”

She had to laugh. “No, your princess wears a veil to keep the glare out of her eyes and the sand out of her mouth. You should do the same, ser.” She wondered how long her white knight had been polishing his ponderous gallantry. Ser Arys was pleasant company abed, but wit and he were strangers.

Her Dornishmen covered their faces as she did, and Spotted Sylva helped veil the little princess from the sun, but Ser Arys stayed stubborn. Before long the sweat was running down his face, and his cheeks had taken on a rosy blush. *Much longer and he will cook in those heavy clothes*, she reflected. He would not be the first. In centuries past, many a host had come down from the Prince’s Pass with banners streaming, only to wither and broil on the hot red Dornish sands. “The arms of House Martell display the sun and spear, the Dornishman’s two favored weapons,” the Young Dragon had once written in his boastful *Conquest of Dorne*, “but of the two, the sun is the more deadly.”

Thankfully, they did not need to cross the deep sands but only a sliver of the drylands. When Arianne spied a hawk wheeling high above them against a cloudless sky, she knew the worst was behind them. Soon they came upon a tree. It was a gnarled and twisted thing with as many thorns as leaves, of the sort called sandbeggars, but it meant that they were not far from water.

“We’re almost there, Your Grace,” Garin told Myrcella cheerfully when they spied more sandbeggars up ahead, a thicket of them growing all around the dry bed of a stream. The sun was beating down like a fiery hammer, but it did not matter with their journey at its end. They stopped to water the horses again, drank deep from their skins and wet their veils, then mounted for the last push. Within half a league they were riding over devilgrass and past olive groves. Beyond a line of stony hills the grass grew greener and more lush, and there were lemon orchards watered by a spider’s web of old canals. Garin was the first to spy the river glimmering green. He gave a shout and raced ahead.

Arianne Martell had crossed the Mander once, when she had gone with three of the Sand Snakes to visit Tyene’s mother. Compared to that mighty

waterway, the Greenblood was scarce worthy of the name of river, yet it remained the life of Dorne. It took its name from the murky green of its sluggish waters; but as they approached, the sunlight seemed to turn those waters gold. She had seldom seen a sweeter sight. *The next part should be slow and simple, she thought, up the Greenblood and onto the Vaith, as far as a poleboat can go.* That would give her time enough to prepare Myrcella for all that was to come. Beyond Vaith the deep sands waited. They would need help from Sandstone and the Hellholt to make that crossing, but she did not doubt that it would be forthcoming. The Red Viper had been fostered at Sandstone, and Prince Oberyn's paramour Ellaria Sand was Lord Uller's natural daughter; four of the Sand Snakes were his granddaughters. *I will crown Myrcella at the Hellholt and raise my banners there.*

They found the boat half a league downstream, hidden beneath the drooping branches of a great green willow. Low of roof and wide abeam, the poleboats had hardly any draft to speak of; the Young Dragon had disparaged them as "hovels built on rafts," but that was hardly fair. All but the poorest orphan boats were wonderfully carved and painted. This one was done in shades of green, with a curved wooden tiller shaped like a mermaid, and fish faces peering through her rails. Poles and ropes and jars of olive oil cluttered her decks, and iron lanterns swung fore and aft. Arianne saw no orphans. *Where is her crew?* she wondered.

Garin reined up beneath the willow. "Wake up, you fish-eyed lagabeds," he called as he leapt down from the saddle. "Your *queen* is here, and wants her royal welcome. Come up, come out, we'll have some songs and sweetwine. My mouth is set for—"

The door on the poleboat slammed open. Out into the sunlight stepped Areo Hotah, longaxe in hand.

Garin jerked to a halt. Arianne felt as though an axe had caught her in the belly. *It was not supposed to end this way. This was not supposed to happen.* When she heard Drey say, "There's the last face I'd hoped to see," she knew she had to act. "*Away!*" she cried, vaulting back into the saddle. "Arys, protect the princess—"

Hotah thumped the butt of his longaxe upon the deck. Behind the ornate rails of the poleboat, a dozen guardsmen rose, armed with throwing spears or crossbows. Still more appeared atop the cabin. “Yield, my princess,” the captain called, “else we must slay all but the child and yourself, by your father’s word.”

Princess Myrcella sat motionless upon her mount. Garin backed slowly from the poleboat, his hands in the air. Drey unbuckled his swordbelt. “Yielding seems the wisest course,” he called to Arianne, as his sword thumped to the ground.

“No!” Ser Arys Oakheart put his horse between Arianne and the crossbows, his blade shining silver in his hand. He had unslung his shield and slipped his left arm through the straps. “You will not take her whilst I still draw breath.”

You reckless fool, was all that Arianne had time to think, what do you think you’re doing?

Darkstar’s laughter rang out. “Are you blind or stupid, Oakheart? There are too many. Put up your sword.”

“Do as he says, Ser Arys,” Drey urged.

We are taken, ser, Arianne might have called out. *Your death will not free us. If you love your princess, yield.* But when she tried to speak, the words caught in her throat.

Ser Arys Oakheart gave her one last longing look, then put his golden spurs into his horse and charged.

He rode headlong for the poleboat, his white cloak streaming behind him. Arianne Martell had never seen anything half so gallant, or half so stupid. “Noooo,” she shrieked, but she had found her tongue too late. A crossbow *thrummed*, then another. Hotah bellowed a command. At such close range, the white knight’s armor had as well been made of parchment. The first bolt punched right through his heavy oaken shield, pinning it to his shoulder. The second grazed his temple. A thrown spear took Ser Arys’s mount in the flank, yet still the horse came on, staggering as he hit the gangplank. “No,” some girl was shouting, some foolish little girl, “no,

please, this was not supposed to happen.” She could hear Myrcella shrieking too, her voice shrill with fear.

Ser Arys’s longsword slashed right and left, and two spearmen went down. His horse reared, and kicked a crossbowman in the face as he was trying to reload, but the other crossbows were firing, feathering the big courser with their quarrels. The bolts hit home so hard they knocked the horse sideways. His legs went out from under him and sent him crashing down the deck. Somehow Arys Oakheart leapt free. He even managed to keep hold of his sword. He struggled to his knees beside his dying horse...

...and found Areo Hotah standing over him.

The white knight raised his blade, too slowly. Hotah’s longaxe took his right arm off at the shoulder, spun away spraying blood, and came flashing back again in a terrible two-handed slash that removed the head of Arys Oakheart and sent it spinning through the air. It landed amongst the reeds, and the Greenblood swallowed the red with a soft splash.

Arianne did not remember climbing from her horse. Perhaps she’d fallen. She did not remember that either. Yet she found herself on her hands and feet in the sand, shaking and sobbing and retching up her supper. *No*, was all that she could think, *no, no one was to be hurt, it was all planned, I was so careful*. She heard Areo Hotah roar, “After him. He must not escape. *After him!*” Myrcella was on the ground, wailing, shaking, her pale face in her hands, blood streaming through her fingers. Arianne did not understand. Men were scrambling onto horses whilst others swarmed over her and her companions, but none of it made sense. She had fallen into a dream, some terrible red nightmare. *This cannot be real. I will wake soon, and laugh at my night terrors*.

When they sought to bind her hands behind her back, she did not resist. One of the guardsmen jerked her to her feet. He wore her father’s colors. Another bent and seized the throwing knife inside her boot, a gift from her cousin Lady Nym.

Areo Hotah took it from the man and frowned at it. “The prince said I must bring you back to Sunspear,” he announced. His cheeks and brow were freckled with the blood of Arys Oakheart. “I am sorry, little princess.”

Arianne raised a tear-streaked face. “How could he know?” she asked the captain. “I was so careful. How could he know?”

“Someone told.” Hotah shrugged. “Someone always tells.”