

## THE CAPTAIN OF GUARDS

“The blood oranges are well past ripe,” the prince observed in a weary voice, when the captain rolled him onto the terrace.

After that he did not speak again for hours.

It was true about the oranges. A few had fallen to burst open on the pale pink marble. The sharp sweet smell of them filled Hotah’s nostrils each time he took a breath. No doubt the prince could smell them too, as he sat beneath the trees in the rolling chair Maester Caleotte had made for him, with its goose-down cushions and rumbling wheels of ebony and iron.

For a long while the only sounds were the children splashing in the pools and fountains, and once a soft *plop* as another orange dropped onto the terrace to burst. Then, from the far side of the palace, the captain heard the faint drumbeat of boots on marble.

*Obara.* He knew her stride; long-legged, hasty, angry. In the stables by the gates, her horse would be lathered, and bloody from her spurs. She always rode stallions, and had been heard to boast that she could master any horse in Dorne... and any man as well. The captain could hear other footsteps as well, the quick soft scuffing of Maester Caleotte hurrying to keep up.

Obara Sand always walked too fast. *She is chasing after something she can never catch*, the prince had told his daughter once, in the captain’s hearing.

When she appeared beneath the triple arch, Areo Hotah swung his longaxe sideways to block the way. The head was on a shaft of mountain ash six feet long, so she could not go around. “My lady, no farther.” His voice was a bass grumble thick with the accents of Norvos. “The prince does not wish to be disturbed.”

Her face had been stone before he spoke; then it hardened. “You are in my way, Hotah.” Obara was the eldest Sand Snake, a big-boned woman near to thirty, with the close-set eyes and rat-brown hair of the Oldtown

whore who'd birthed her. Beneath a mottled sandsilk cloak of dun and gold, her riding clothes were old brown leather, worn and supple. They were the softest things about her. On one hip she wore a coiled whip, across her back a round shield of steel and copper. She had left her spear outside. For that, Areo Hotah gave thanks. Quick and strong as she was, the woman was no match for him, he knew... but *she* did not, and he had no wish to see her blood upon the pale pink marble.

Maester Caleotte shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Lady Obara, I tried to tell you..."

"Does he know that my father is dead?" Obara asked the captain, paying the maester no more mind than she would a fly, if any fly had been foolish enough to buzz about her head.

"He does," the captain said. "He had a bird."

Death had come to Dorne on raven wings, writ small and sealed with a blob of hard red wax. Caleotte must have sensed what was in that letter, for he'd given it Hotah to deliver. The prince thanked him, but for the longest time he would not break the seal. All afternoon he'd sat with the parchment in his lap, watching the children at their play. He watched until the sun went down and the evening air grew cool enough to drive them inside; then he watched the starlight on the water. It was moonrise before he sent Hotah to fetch a candle, so he might read his letter beneath the orange trees in the dark of night.

Obara touched her whip. "Thousands are crossing the sands afoot to climb the Boneway, so they may help Ellaria bring my father home. The septs are packed to bursting, and the red priests have lit their temple fires. In the pillow houses women are coupling with every man who comes to them, and refusing any coin. In Sunspear, on the Broken Arm, along the Greenblood, in the mountains, out in the deep sand, everywhere, *everywhere*, women tear their hair and men cry out in rage. The same question is heard on every tongue—what will Doran do? *What will his brother do to avenge our murdered prince?*" She moved closer to the captain. "And you say, *he does not wish to be disturbed!*"

"He does not wish to be disturbed," Areo Hotah said again.

The captain of guards knew the prince he guarded. Once, long ago, a callow youth had come from Norvos, a big broad-shouldered boy with a mop of dark hair. That hair was white now, and his body bore the scars of many battles... but his strength remained, and he kept his longaxe sharp, as the bearded priests had taught him. *She shall not pass*, he told himself, and said, "The prince is watching the children at their play. He is *never* to be disturbed when he is watching the children at their play."

"Hotah," said Obara Sand, "you will remove yourself from my path, else I shall take that longaxe and—"

"Captain," came the command, from behind. "Let her pass. I will speak with her." The prince's voice was hoarse.

Areo Hotah jerked his longaxe upright and stepped to one side. Obara gave him a lingering last look and strode past, the maester hurrying at her heels. Caleotte was no more than five feet tall and bald as an egg. His face was so smooth and fat that it was hard to tell his age, but he had been here before the captain, had even served the prince's mother. Despite his age and girth, he was still nimble enough, and clever as they came, but meek. *He is no match for any Sand Snake*, the captain thought.

In the shade of the orange trees, the prince sat in his chair with his gouty legs propped up before him, and heavy bags beneath his eyes... though whether it was grief or gout that kept him sleepless, Hotah could not say. Below, in the fountains and the pools, the children were still at their play. The youngest were no more than five, the oldest nine and ten. Half were girls and half were boys. Hotah could hear them splashing and shouting at each other in high, shrill voices. "It was not so long ago that you were one of the children in those pools, Obara," the prince said, when she took one knee before his rolling chair.

She snorted. "It has been twenty years, or near enough to make no matter. And I was not here long. I am the whore's whelp, or had you forgotten?" When he did not answer, she rose again and put her hands upon her hips. "My father has been murdered."

"He was slain in single combat during a trial by battle," Prince Doran said. "By law, that is no murder."

“He was your *brother*.”

“He was.”

“What do you mean to do about his death?”

The prince turned his chair laboriously to face her. Though he was but two-and-fifty, Doran Martell seemed much older. His body was soft and shapeless beneath his linen robes, and his legs were hard to look upon. The gout had swollen and reddened his joints grotesquely; his left knee was an apple, his right a melon, and his toes had turned to dark red grapes, so ripe it seemed as though a touch would burst them. Even the weight of a coverlet could make him shudder, though he bore the pain without complaint. *Silence is a prince's friend*, the captain had heard him tell his daughter once. *Words are like arrows, Arianne. Once loosed, you cannot call them back*. “I have written to Lord Tywin—”

“*Written*? If you were half the man my father was—”

“I am not your father.”

“That I knew.” Obara's voice was thick with contempt.

“You would have me go to war.”

“I know better. You need not even leave your chair. Let *me* avenge my father. You have a host in the Prince's Pass. Lord Yronwood has another in the Boneway. Grant me the one and Nym the other. Let her ride the kingsroad, whilst I turn the marcher lords out of their castles and hook round to march on Oldtown.”

“And how could you hope to hold Oldtown?”

“It will be enough to sack it. The wealth of Hightower—”

“Is it gold you want?”

“It is blood I want.”

“Lord Tywin shall deliver us the Mountain's head.”

“And who will deliver us Lord Tywin's head? The Mountain has always been his pet.”

The prince gestured toward the pools. “Obara, look at the children, if it please you.”

“It does not please me. I’d get more pleasure from driving my spear into Lord Tywin’s belly. I’ll make him sing ‘The Rains of Castamere’ as I pull his bowels out and look for gold.”

“*Look,*” the prince repeated. “I command you.”

A few of the older children lay facedown upon the smooth pink marble, browning in the sun. Others paddled in the sea beyond. Three were building a sand castle with a great spike that resembled the Spear Tower of the Old Palace. A score or more had gathered in the big pool, to watch the battles as smaller children rode through the waist-deep shallows on the shoulders of the larger and tried to shove each other into the water. Every time a pair went down, the splash was followed by a roar of laughter. They watched a nut-brown girl yank a towheaded boy off his brother’s shoulders to tumble him headfirst into the pool.

“Your father played that same game once, as I did before him,” said the prince. “We had ten years between us, so I had left the pools by the time he was old enough to play, but I would watch him when I came to visit Mother. He was so fierce, even as a boy. Quick as a water snake. I oft saw him topple boys much bigger than himself. He reminded me of that the day he left for King’s Landing. He swore that he would do it one more time, else I would never have let him go.”

“*Let him go?*” Obara laughed. “As if you could have stopped him. The Red Viper of Dorne went where he would.”

“He did. I wish I had some word of comfort to—”

“I did not come to you for *comfort*.” Her voice was full of scorn. “The day my father came to claim me, my mother did not wish for me to go. ‘She is a girl,’ she said, ‘and I do not think that she is yours. I had a thousand other men.’ He tossed his spear at my feet and gave my mother the back of his hand across the face, so she began to weep. ‘Girl or boy, we fight our battles,’ he said, ‘but the gods let us choose our weapons.’ He pointed to the spear, then to my mother’s tears, and I picked up the spear. ‘I told you she was mine,’ my father said, and took me. My mother drank herself to death within the year. They say that she was weeping as she died.” Obara edged closer to the prince in his chair. “Let me use the spear; I ask no more.”

“It is a deal to ask, Obara. I shall sleep on it.”

“You have slept too long already.”

“You may be right. I will send word to you at Sunspear.”

“So long as the word is war.” Obara turned upon her heel and strode off as angrily as she had come, back to the stables for a fresh horse and another headlong gallop down the road.

Maester Caleotte remained behind. “My prince?” the little round man asked. “Do your legs hurt?”

The prince smiled faintly. “Is the sun hot?”

“Shall I fetch a draught for the pain?”

“No. I need my wits about me.”

The maester hesitated. “My prince, is it... is it prudent to allow Lady Obara to return to Sunspear? She is certain to inflame the common people. They loved your brother well.”

“So did we all.” He pressed his fingers to his temples. “No. You are right. I must return to Sunspear as well.”

The little round man hesitated. “Is that wise?”

“Not wise, but necessary. Best send a rider to Ricasso, and have him open my apartments in the Tower of the Sun. Inform my daughter Arianne that I will be there on the morrow.”

*My little princess.* The captain had missed her sorely.

“You will be seen,” the maester warned.

The captain understood. Two years ago, when they had left Sunspear for the peace and isolation of the Water Gardens, Prince Doran’s gout had not been half so bad. In those days he had still walked, albeit slowly, leaning on a stick and grimacing with every step. The prince did not wish his enemies to know how feeble he had grown, and the Old Palace and its shadow city were full of eyes. *Eyes*, the captain thought, *and steps he cannot climb. He would need to fly to sit atop the Tower of the Sun.*

“I *must* be seen. Someone must pour oil on the waters. Dorne must be reminded that it still has a prince.” He smiled wanly. “Old and gouty though

he is.”

“If you return to Sunspear, you will need to give audience to Princess Myrcella,” Caleotte said. “Her white knight will be with her... and you *know* he sends letters to his queen.”

“I suppose he does.”

*The white knight.* The captain frowned. Ser Arys had come to Dorne to attend his own princess, as Areo Hotah had once come with his. Even their names sounded oddly alike: Areo and Arys. Yet there the likeness ended. The captain had left Norvos and its bearded priests, but Ser Arys Oakheart still served the Iron Throne. Hotah had felt a certain sadness whenever he saw the man in the long snowy cloak, the times the prince had sent him down to Sunspear. One day, he sensed, the two of them would fight; on that day Oakheart would die, with the captain’s longaxe crashing through his skull. He slid his hand along the smooth ashen shaft of his axe and wondered if that day was drawing nigh.

“The afternoon is almost done,” the prince was saying. “We will wait for morn. See that my litter is ready by first light.”

“As you command.” Caleotte bobbed a bow. The captain stood aside to let him pass, and listened to his footsteps dwindle.

“Captain?” The prince’s voice was soft.

Hotah strode forward, one hand wrapped about his longaxe. The ash felt as smooth as a woman’s skin against his palm. When he reached the rolling chair he thumped its butt down hard to announce his presence, but the prince had eyes only for the children. “Did you have brothers, captain?” he asked. “Back in Norvos, when you were young? Sisters?”

“Both,” Hotah said. “Two brothers, three sisters. I was the youngest.” *The youngest, and unwanted. Another mouth to feed, a big boy who ate too much and soon outgrew his clothes.* Small wonder they had sold him to the bearded priests.

“I was the oldest,” the prince said, “and yet I am the last. After Mors and Olyvar died in their cradles, I gave up hope of brothers. I was nine when Elia came, a squire in service at Salt Shore. When the raven arrived

with word that my mother had been brought to bed a month too soon, I was old enough to understand that meant the child would not live. Even when Lord Gargalen told me that I had a sister, I assured him that she must shortly die. Yet she lived, by the Mother's mercy. And a year later Oberynd arrived, squalling and kicking. I was a man grown when they were playing in these pools. Yet here I sit, and they are gone."

Areo Hotah did not know what to say to that. He was only a captain of guards, and still a stranger to this land and its seven-faced god, even after all these years. *Serve. Obey. Protect.* He had sworn those vows at six-and-ten, the day he wed his axe. *Simple vows for simple men*, the bearded priests had said. He had not been trained to counsel grieving princes.

He was still groping for some words to say when another orange fell with a heavy splat, no more than a foot from where the prince was seated. Doran winced at the sound, as if somehow it had hurt him. "Enough," he sighed, "it is enough. Leave me, Areo. Let me watch the children for a few more hours."

When the sun set the air grew cool and the children went inside in search of supper, still the prince remained beneath his orange trees, looking out over the still pools and the sea beyond. A serving man brought him a bowl of purple olives, with flatbread, cheese, and chickpea paste. He ate a bit of it, and drank a cup of the sweet, heavy strongwine that he loved. When it was empty, he filled it once again. Sometimes in the deep black hours of the morning sleep found him in his chair. Only then did the captain roll him down the moonlit gallery, past a row of fluted pillars and through a graceful archway, to a great bed with crisp cool linen sheets in a chamber by the sea. Doran groaned as the captain moved him, but the gods were good and he did not wake.

The captain's sleeping cell adjoined his prince's. He sat upon the narrow bed and found his whetstone and oilcloth in their niche, and set to work. *Keep your longaxe sharp*, the bearded priests had told him, the day they branded him. He always did.

As he honed the axe, Hotah thought of Norvos, the high city on the hill and the low beside the river. He could still recall the sounds of the three



bells, the way that Noom's deep peals set his very bones to shuddering, the proud strong voice of Narrah, sweet Nyel's silvery laughter. The taste of wintercake filled his mouth again, rich with ginger and pine nuts and bits of cherry, with *nahsa* to wash it down, fermented goat's milk served in an iron cup and laced with honey. He saw his mother in her dress with the squirrel collar, the one she wore but once each year, when they went to see the bears dance down the Sinner's Steps. And he smelled the stench of burning hair as the bearded priest touched the brand to the center of his chest. The pain had been so fierce that he thought his heart might stop, yet Areo Hotah had not flinched. The hair had never grown back over the axe.

Only when both edges were sharp enough to shave with did the captain lay his ash-and-iron wife down on the bed. Yawning, he pulled off his soiled clothes, tossed them on the floor, and stretched out on his straw-stuffed mattress. Thinking of the brand had made it itch, so he had to scratch himself before he closed his eyes. *I should have gathered up the oranges that fell*, he thought, and went to sleep dreaming of the tart sweet taste of them, and the sticky feel of the red juice on his fingers.

Dawn came too soon. Outside the stables the smallest of the three horse litters stood ready, the cedarwood litter with the red silk draperies. The captain chose twenty spears to accompany it, out of the thirty who were posted at the Water Gardens; the rest would stay to guard the grounds and children, some of whom were the sons and daughters of great lords and wealthy merchants.

Although the prince had spoken of departing at first light, Areo Hotah knew that he would dawdle. Whilst the maester helped Doran Martell to bathe and bandaged up his swollen joints in linen wraps soaked with soothing lotions, the captain donned a shirt of copper scales as befit his rank, and a billowing cloak of dun-and-yellow sandsilk to keep the sun off the copper. The day promised to be hot, and the captain had long ago discarded the heavy horsehair cape and studded leather tunic he had worn in Norvos, which were like to cook a man in Dorne. He had kept his iron halfhelm, with its crest of sharpened spikes, but now he wore it wrapped in orange silk, weaving the cloth in and around the spikes. Elsewise the sun

beating down on the metal would have his head pounding before they saw the palace.

The prince was still not ready to depart. He had decided to break his fast before he went, with a blood orange and a plate of gull's eggs diced with bits of ham and fiery peppers. Then nought would do but he must say farewell to several of the children who had become especial favorites: the Dalt boy and Lady Blackmont's brood and the round-faced orphan girl whose father had sold cloth and spices up and down the Greenblood. Doran kept a splendid Myrish blanket over his legs as he spoke with them, to spare the young ones the sight of his swollen, bandaged joints.

It was midday before they got under way; the prince in his litter, Maester Caleotte riding on a donkey, the rest afoot. Five spearmen walked ahead and five behind, with five more flanking the litter to either side. Areo Hotah himself took his familiar place at the left hand of the prince, resting his longaxe on a shoulder as he walked. The road from Sunspear to the Water Gardens ran beside the sea, so they had a cool fresh breeze to soothe them as they made their way across a sparse red-brown land of stone and sand and twisted stunted trees.

Halfway there, the second Sand Snake caught them.

She appeared suddenly upon a dune, mounted on a golden sand steed with a mane like fine white silk. Even ahorse, the Lady Nym looked graceful, dressed all in shimmering lilac robes and a great silk cape of cream and copper that lifted at every gust of wind, and made her look as if she might take flight. Nymeria Sand was five-and-twenty, and slender as a willow. Her straight black hair, worn in a long braid bound up with red-gold wire, made a widow's peak above her dark eyes, just as her father's had. With her high cheekbones, full lips, and milk-pale skin, she had all the beauty that her elder sister lacked... but Obara's mother had been an Oldtown whore, whilst Nym was born from the noblest blood of old Volantis. A dozen mounted spearmen tailed her, their round shields gleaming in the sun. They followed her down the dune.

The prince had tied back the curtains on his litter, the better to enjoy the breeze blowing off the sea. Lady Nym fell in beside him, slowing her pretty

golden mare to match the litter's pace. "Well met, Uncle," she sang out, as if it had been chance that brought her here. "May I ride with you to Sunspear?" The captain was on the opposite side of the litter from Lady Nym, yet he could hear every word she said.

"I would be glad of it," Prince Doran replied, though he did not *sound* glad to the captain's ears. "Gout and grief make poor companions on the road." By which the captain knew him to mean that every pebble drove a spike through his swollen joints.

"The gout I cannot help," she said, "but my father had no use for grief. Vengeance was more to his taste. Is it true that Gregor Clegane admitted slaying Elia and her children?"

"He roared out his guilt for all the court to hear," the prince admitted. "Lord Tywin has promised us his head."

"And a Lannister always pays his debts," said Lady Nym, "yet it seems to me that Lord Tywin means to pay us with our own coin. I had a bird from our sweet Ser Daemon, who swears my father tickled that monster more than once as they fought. If so, Ser Gregor is as good as dead, and no thanks to Tywin Lannister."

The prince grimaced. Whether it was from the pain of gout or his niece's words, the captain could not say. "It may be so."

"May be? I say 'tis."

"Obara would have me go to war."

Nym laughed. "Yes, she wants to set the torch to Oldtown. She hates that city as much as our little sister loves it."

"And you?"

Nym glanced over a shoulder, to where her companions rode a dozen lengths behind. "I was abed with the Fowler twins when the word reached me," the captain heard her say. "You know the Fowler words? *Let Me Soar!* That is all I ask of you. Let me soar, Uncle. I need no mighty host, only one sweet sister."

"Obara?"

“Tyene. Obara is too loud. Tyene is so sweet and gentle that no man will suspect her. Obara would make Oldtown our father’s funeral pyre, but I am not so greedy. Four lives will suffice for me. Lord Tywin’s golden twins, as payment for Elia’s children. The old lion, for Elia herself. And last of all the little king, for my father.”

“The boy has never wronged us.”

“The boy is a bastard born of treason, incest, and adultery, if Lord Stannis can be believed.” The playful tone had vanished from her voice, and the captain found himself watching her through narrowed eyes. Her sister Obara wore her whip upon her hip and carried a spear where any man could see it. Lady Nym was no less deadly, though she kept her knives well hidden. “Only royal blood can wash out my father’s murder.”

“Oberyn died during single combat, fighting in a matter that was none of his concern. I do not call that murder.”

“Call it what you will. We sent them the finest man in Dorne, and they are sending back a bag of bones.”

“He went beyond anything I asked of him. ‘Take the measure of this boy king and his council, and make note of their strengths and weaknesses,’ I told him, on the terrace. We were eating oranges. ‘Find us friends, if there are any to be found. Learn what you can of Elia’s end, but see that you do not provoke Lord Tywin unduly,’ those were my words to him. Oberyn laughed, and said, ‘When have I provoked any man... *unduly*? You would do better to warn the Lannisters against provoking me.’ He wanted justice for Elia, but he would not wait—”

“He waited ten-and-seven years,” the Lady Nym broke in. “Were it you they’d killed, my father would have led his banners north before your corpse was cold. Were it you, the spears would be falling thick as rain upon the marches now.”

“I do not doubt it.”

“No more should you doubt this, my prince—my sisters and I shall not wait ten-and-seven years for *our* vengeance.” She put her spurs into the

mare and she was off, galloping toward Sunsppear with her tail in hot pursuit.

The prince leaned back against his pillows and closed his eyes, but Hotah knew he did not sleep. *He is in pain.* For a moment he considered calling Maester Caleotte up to the litter, but if Prince Doran had wanted him, he would have called himself.

The shadows of the afternoon were long and dark and the sun was as red and swollen as the prince's joints before they glimpsed the towers of Sunsppear to the east. First the slender Spear Tower, a hundred-and-a-half feet tall and crowned with a spear of gilded steel that added another thirty feet to its height; then the mighty Tower of the Sun, with its dome of gold and leaded glass; last the dun-colored Sandship, looking like some monstrous dromond that had washed ashore and turned to stone.

Only three leagues of coast road divided Sunsppear from the Water Gardens, yet they were two different worlds. There children frolicked naked in the sun, music played in tiled courtyards, and the air was sharp with the smell of lemons and blood oranges. Here the air smelled of dust, sweat, and smoke, and the nights were alive with the babble of voices. In place of the pink marble of the Water Gardens, Sunsppear was built from mud and straw, and colored brown and dun. The ancient stronghold of House Martell stood at the easternmost end of a little jut of stone and sand, surrounded on three sides by the sea. To the west, in the shadows of Sunsppear's massive walls, mud-brick shops and windowless hovels clung to the castle like barnacles to a galley's hull. Stables and inns and winesinks and pillow houses had grown up west of those, many enclosed by walls of their own, and yet more hovels had risen beneath *those* walls. *And so and so and so, as the bearded priests would say.* Compared to Tyrosh or Myr or Great Norvos, the shadow city was no more than a town, yet it was the nearest thing to a true city that these Dornish had.

Lady Nym's arrival had preceded theirs by some hours, and no doubt she had warned the guards of their coming, for the Threefold Gate was open when they reached it. Only here were the gates lined up one behind the other to allow visitors to pass beneath all three of the Winding Walls

directly to the Old Palace, without first making their way through miles of narrow alleys, hidden courts, and noisy bazaars.

Prince Doran had closed the draperies of his litter as soon as the Spear Tower came in sight, yet still the smallfolk shouted out to him as the litter passed. *The Sand Snakes have stirred them to a boil*, the captain thought uneasily. They crossed the squalor of the outer crescent and went through the second gate. Beyond, the wind stank of tar and salt water and rotting seaweed, and the crowd grew thicker with every step. “*Make way for Prince Doran!*” Areo Hotah boomed out, thumping the butt of his longaxe on the bricks. “*Make way for the Prince of Dorne!*”

“The prince is dead!” a woman shrilled behind him.

“To spears!” a man bellowed from a balcony.

“*Doran!*” called some highborn voice. “To the spears!”

Hotah gave up looking for the speakers; the press was too thick, and a third of them were shouting. “*To spears! Vengeance for the Viper!*” By the time they reached the third gate, the guards were shoving people aside to clear a path for the prince’s litter, and the crowd was throwing things. One ragged boy darted past the spearmen with a half-rotten pomegranate in one hand, but when he saw Areo Hotah in his path, with longaxe at the ready, he let the fruit fall unthrown and beat a quick retreat. Others farther back let fly with lemons, limes, and oranges, crying “*War! War! To the spears!*” One of the guards was hit in the eye with a lemon, and the captain himself had an orange splatter off his foot.

No answer came from within the litter. Doran Martell stayed cloaked within his silken walls until the thicker walls of the castle swallowed all of them, and the portcullis came down behind them with a rattling crunch. The sounds of shouting dwindled away slowly. Princess Arianne was waiting in the outer ward to greet her father, with half the court about her: the old blind seneschal Ricasso, Ser Manfrey Martell the castellan, young Maester Myles with his grey robes and silky perfumed beard, twoscore of Dornish knights in flowing linen of half a hundred hues. Little Myrcella Baratheon stood with her septa and Ser Arys of the Kingsguard, sweltering in his white-enameled scales.

Princess Arianne strode to the litter on snakeskin sandals laced up to her thighs. Her hair was a mane of jet-black ringlets that fell to the small of her back, and around her brow was a band of copper suns. *She is still a little thing*, the captain thought. Where the Sand Snakes were tall, Arianne took after her mother, who stood but five foot two. Yet beneath her jeweled girdle and loose layers of flowing purple silk and yellow samite she had a woman's body, lush and roundly curved. "Father," she announced as the curtains opened, "Sunspear rejoices at your return."

"Yes, I heard the joy." The prince smiled wanly and cupped his daughter's cheek with a reddened, swollen hand. "You look well. Captain, be so good as to help me down from here."

Hotah slid his longaxe into its sling across his back and gathered the prince into his arms, tenderly so as not to jar his swollen joints. Even so, Doran Martell bit back a gasp of pain.

"I have commanded the cooks to prepare a feast for this evening," Arianne said, "with all your favorite dishes."

"I fear I could not do them justice." The prince glanced slowly around the yard. "I do not see Tyene."

"She begs a private word. I sent her to the throne room to await your coming."

The prince sighed. "Very well. Captain? The sooner I am done with this, the sooner I may rest."

Hotah bore him up the long stone steps of the Tower of the Sun, to the great round chamber beneath the dome, where the last light of the afternoon was slanting down through thick windows of many-colored glass to dapple the pale marble with diamonds of half a hundred colors. There the third Sand Snake awaited them.

She was sitting cross-legged on a pillow beneath the raised dais where the high seats stood, but she rose as they entered, dressed in a clinging gown of pale blue samite with sleeves of Myrish lace that made her look as innocent as the Maid herself. In one hand was a piece of embroidery she had been working on, in the other a pair of golden needles. Her hair was

gold as well, and her eyes were deep blue pools... and yet somehow they reminded the captain of her father's eyes, though Oberyn's had been as black as night. *All of Prince Oberyn's daughters have his viper eyes*, Hotah realized suddenly. *The color does not matter.*

"Uncle," said Tyene Sand, "I have been waiting for you."

"Captain, help me to the high seat."

There were two seats on the dais, near twin to one another, save that one had the Martell spear inlaid in gold upon its back, whilst the other bore the blazing Rhoynish sun that had flown from the masts of Nymeria's ships when first they came to Dorne. The captain placed the prince beneath the spear and stepped away.

"Does it hurt so much?" Lady Tyene's voice was gentle, and she looked as sweet as summer strawberries. Her mother had been a septa, and Tyene had an air of almost otherworldly innocence about her. "Is there aught that I might do to ease your pain?"

"Say what you would and let me rest. I am weary, Tyene."

"I made this for you, Uncle." Tyene unfolded the piece she'd been embroidering. It showed her father, Prince Oberyn, mounted on a sand steed and armored all in red, smiling. "When I finish, it is yours, to help you remember him."

"I am not like to forget your father."

"That is good to know. Many have wondered."

"Lord Tywin has promised us the Mountain's head."

"He is *so* kind... but a headsman's sword is no fit end for brave Ser Gregor. We have prayed so long for his death, it is only fair that he pray for it as well. I know the poison that my father used, and there is none slower or more agonizing. Soon we may hear the Mountain screaming, even here in Sunspear."

Prince Doran sighed. "Obara cries to me for war. Nym will be content with murder. And you?"

"War," said Tyene, "though not my sister's war. Dornishmen fight best at home, so I say let us hone our spears and wait. When the Lannisters and



the Tyrells come down on us, we shall bleed them in the passes and bury them beneath the blowing sands, as we have a hundred times before.”

“*If* they should come down on us.”

“Oh, but they must, or see the realm riven once more, as it was before we wed the dragons. Father told me so. He said we had the Imp to thank, for sending us Princess Myrcella. She is so pretty, don’t you think? I wish that I had curls like hers. She was made to be a queen, just like her mother.” Dimples bloomed in Tyene’s cheeks. “I would be honored to arrange the wedding, and to see to the making of the crowns as well. Trystane and Myrcella are so innocent, I thought perhaps white gold... with emeralds, to match Myrcella’s eyes. Oh, diamonds and pearls would serve as well, so long as the children are wed and crowned. Then we need only hail Myrcella as the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and lawful heir to the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, and wait for the lions to come.”

“The *lawful* heir?” The prince snorted.

“She is older than her brother,” explained Tyene, as if he were some fool. “By law the Iron Throne should pass to her.”

“By *Dornish* law.”

“When good King Daeron wed Princess Myriah and brought us into his kingdom, it was agreed that Dornish law would always rule in Dorne. And *Myrcella* is in Dorne, as it happens.”

“So she is.” His tone was grudging. “Let me think on it.”

Tyene grew cross. “You think too much, Uncle.”

“Do I?”

“Father said so.”

“Oberyn thought too little.”

“Some men *think* because they are afraid to *do*.”

“There is a difference between fear and caution.”

“Oh, I must pray that I never see you *frightened*, Uncle. You might forget to breathe.” She raised a hand...

The captain brought the butt of his longaxe down upon the marble with a thump. "My lady, you presume. Step from the dais, if it please you."

"I meant no harm, Captain. I love my uncle, as I know he loved my father." Tyene went to one knee before the prince. "I have said all I came to say, Uncle. Forgive me if I gave offense; my heart is broken all to pieces. Do I still have your love?"

"Always."

"Give me your blessing, then, and I shall go."

Doran hesitated half a heartbeat before placing his hand on his niece's head. "Be brave, child."

"Oh, how not? I am *his* daughter."

No sooner had she taken her leave than Maester Caleotte hurried to the dais. "My prince, she did not... here, let me see your hand." He examined the palm first, then gently turned it upside down to sniff at the back of the prince's fingers. "No, good. That is good. There are no scratches, so..."

The prince withdrew his hand. "Maester, could I trouble you for some milk of the poppy? A thimble cup will suffice."

"The poppy. Yes, to be sure."

"Now, I think," Doran Martell urged gently, and Caleotte scurried to the stairs.

Outside the sun had set. The light within the dome was the blue of dusk, and all the diamonds on the floor were dying. The prince sat in his high seat beneath the Martell spear, his face pale with pain. After a long silence he turned to Areo Hotah. "Captain," he said, "how loyal are my guards?"

"Loyal." The captain did not know what else to say.

"All of them? Or some?"

"They are good men. Good *Dornishmen*. They will do as I command." He thumped his longaxe on the floor. "I will bring the head of any man who would betray you."

"I want no heads. I want obedience."

“You have it.” Serve. Obey. Protect. Simple vows for a simple man.  
“How many men are needed?”

“I will leave that for you to decide. It may be that a few good men will serve us better than a score. I want this done as quickly and as quietly as possible, with no blood spilled.”

“Quick and quiet and bloodless, aye. What is your command?”

“You will find my brother’s daughters, take them into custody, and confine them in the cells atop the Spear Tower.”

“The Sand Snakes?” The captain’s throat was dry. “All... all eight, my prince? The little ones, also?”

The prince considered. “Ellaria’s girls are too young to be a danger, but there are those who might seek to use them against me. It would be best to keep them safe in hand. Yes, the little ones as well... but first secure Tyene, Nymeria, and Obara.”

“As my prince commands.” His heart was troubled. *My little princess will dislike this.* “What of Sarella? She is a woman grown, almost twenty.”

“Unless she returns to Dorne, there’s naught I can do about Sarella save pray that she shows more sense than her sisters. Leave her to her... game. Gather up the others. I shall not sleep until I know that they are safe and under guard.”

“It will be done.” The captain hesitated. “When this is known in the streets, the common folk will howl.”

“All Dorne will howl,” said Doran Martell in a tired voice. “I only pray Lord Tywin hears them in King’s Landing, so he might know what a loyal friend he has in Sunspear.”