

THE WATCHER

“Let us look upon this head,” his prince commanded.

Areo Hotah ran his hand along the smooth shaft of his longaxe, his ash-and-iron wife, all the while watching. He watched the white knight, Ser Balon Swann, and the others who had come with him. He watched the Sand Snakes, each at a different table. He watched the lords and ladies, the serving men, the old blind seneschal, and the young maester Myles, with his silky beard and servile smile. Standing half in light and half in shadow, he saw all of them. *Serve. Protect. Obey.* That was his task.

All the rest had eyes only for the chest. It was carved of ebony, with silver clasps and hinges. A fine-looking box, no doubt, but many of those assembled here in the Old Palace of Sunspear might soon be dead, depending on what was in that chest.

His slippers whispering against the floor, Maester Caleotte crossed the hall to Ser Balon Swann. The round little man looked splendid in his new robes, with their broad bands of dun and butternut and narrow stripes of red. Bowing, he took the chest from the hands of the white knight and carried it to the dais, where Doran Martell sat in his rolling chair between his daughter Arianne and his dead brother’s beloved paramour, Ellaria. A hundred scented candles perfumed the air. Gemstones glittered on the fingers of the lords and the girdles and hairnets of the ladies. Areo Hotah had polished his shirt of copper scales mirror-bright so he would blaze in the candlelight as well.

A hush had fallen across the hall. *Dorne holds its breath.* Maester Caleotte set the box on the floor beside Prince Doran’s chair. The maester’s fingers, normally so sure and deft, turned clumsy as he worked the latch and opened the lid, to reveal the skull within. Hotah heard someone clear his throat. One of the Fowler twins whispered something to the other. Ellaria Sand had closed her eyes and was murmuring a prayer.

Ser Balon Swann was taut as a drawn bow, the captain of guards observed. This new white knight was not so tall nor comely as the old one, but he was bigger across the chest, burlier, his arms thick with muscle. His snowy cloak was clasped at the throat by two swans on a silver brooch. One was ivory, the other onyx, and it seemed to Areo Hotah as if the two of them were fighting. The man who wore them looked a fighter too. *This one will not die so easy as the other. He will not charge into my axe the way Ser Arys did. He will stand behind his shield and make me come at him.* If it came to that, Hotah would be ready. His longaxe was sharp enough to shave with.

He allowed himself a brief glance at the chest. The skull rested on a bed of black felt, grinning. All skulls grinned, but this one seemed happier than most. *And bigger.* The captain of guards had never seen a larger skull. Its brow shelf was thick and heavy, its jaw massive. The bone shone in the candlelight, white as Ser Balon's cloak. "Place it on the pedestal," the prince commanded. He had tears glistening in his eyes.

The pedestal was a column of black marble three feet taller than Maester Caleotte. The fat little maester hopped up on his toes but still could not quite reach. Areo Hotah was about to go and help him, but Obara Sand moved first. Even without her whip and shield, she had an angry mannish look to her. In place of a gown, she wore men's breeches and a calf-length linen tunic, cinched at the waist with a belt of copper suns. Her brown hair was tied back in a knot. Snatching the skull from the maester's soft pink hands, she placed it up atop the marble column.

"The Mountain rides no more," the prince said, gravely. "Was his dying long and hard, Ser Balon?" asked Tyene Sand, in the tone a maiden might use to ask if her gown was pretty.

"He screamed for days, my lady," the white knight replied, though it was plain that it pleased him little to say so. "We could hear him all over the Red Keep."

"Does that trouble you, ser?" asked the Lady Nym. She wore a gown of yellow silk so sheer and fine that the candles shone right through it to reveal the spun gold and jewels beneath. So immodest was her garb that the white

knight seemed uncomfortable looking at her, but Hotah approved. Nymeria was least dangerous when nearly naked. Elsewise she was sure to have a dozen blades concealed about her person. “Ser Gregor was a bloody brute, all men agree. If ever a man deserved to suffer, it was him.”

“That is as it may be, my lady,” said Balon Swann, “but Ser Gregor was a knight, and a knight should die with sword in hand. Poison is a foul and filthy way to kill.”

Lady Tyene smiled at that. Her gown was cream and green, with long lace sleeves, so modest and so innocent that any man who looked at her might think her the most chaste of maids. Areo Hotah knew better. Her soft, pale hands were as deadly as Obara’s callused ones, if not more so. He watched her carefully, alert to every little flutter of her fingers.

Prince Doran frowned. “That is so, Ser Balon, but the Lady Nym is right. If ever a man deserved to die screaming, it was Gregor Clegane. He butchered my good sister, smashed her babe’s head against a wall. I only pray that now he is burning in some hell, and that Elia and her children are at peace. This is the justice that Dorne has hungered for. I am glad that I lived long enough to taste it. At long last the Lannisters have proved the truth of their boast and paid this old blood debt.”

The prince left it to Ricasso, his blind seneschal, to rise and propose the toast. “Lords and ladies, let us all now drink to Tommen, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Serving men had begun to move amongst the guests as the seneschal was speaking, filling cups from the flagons that they bore. The wine was Dornish strongwine, dark as blood and sweet as vengeance. The captain did not drink of it. He never drank at feasts. Nor did the prince himself partake. He had his own wine, prepared by Maester Myles and well laced with poppy juice to ease the agony in his swollen joints.

The white knight did drink, as was only courteous. His companions likewise. So did the Princess Arianne, Lady Jordayne, the Lord of Godsgate, the Knight of Lemonwood, the Lady of Ghost Hill ... even Ellaria

Sand, Prince Oberyn's beloved paramour, who had been with him in King's Landing when he died. Hotah paid more note to those who did not drink: Ser Daemon Sand, Lord Tremond Gargalen, the Fowler twins, Dagos Manwoody, the Ullers of the Hellholt, the Wyls of the Boneway. *If there is trouble, it could start with one of them.* Dorne was an angry and divided land, and Prince Doran's hold on it was not as firm as it might be. Many of his own lords thought him weak and would have welcomed open war with the Lannisters and the boy king on the Iron Throne.

Chief amongst those were the Sand Snakes, the bastard daughters of the prince's late brother Oberyn, the Red Viper, three of whom were at the feast. Doran Martell was the wisest of princes, and it was not the place of his captain of guards to question his decisions, but Areo Hotah did wonder why he had chosen to release the ladies Obara, Nymeria, and Tyene from their lonely cells in the Spear Tower.

Tyene declined Ricasso's toast with a murmur and Lady Nym with a flick of a hand. Obara let them fill her cup to the brim, then upended it to spill the red wine on the floor. When a serving girl knelt to wipe up the spilled wine, Obara left the hall. After a moment Princess Arianne excused herself and went after her. *Obara would never turn her rage on the little princess, Hotah knew. They are cousins, and she loves her well.*

The feast continued late into the night, presided over by the grinning skull on its pillar of black marble. Seven courses were served, in honor of the seven gods and the seven brothers of the Kingsguard. The soup was made with eggs and lemons, the long green peppers stuffed with cheese and onions. There were lamprey pies, capons glazed with honey, a whiskerfish from the bottom of the Greenblood that was so big it took four serving men to carry it to table. After that came a savory snake stew, chunks of seven different sorts of snake slow-simmered with dragon peppers and blood oranges and a dash of venom to give it a good bite. The stew was fiery hot, Hotah knew, though he tasted none of it. Sherbet followed, to cool the tongue. For the sweet, each guest was served a skull of spun sugar. When the crust was broken, they found sweet custard inside and bits of plum and cherry.

Princess Arianne returned in time for the stuffed peppers. *My little princess*, Hotah thought, but Arianne was a woman now. The scarlet silks she wore left no doubt of that. Of late she had changed in other ways as well. Her plot to crown Myrcella had been betrayed and smashed, her white knight had perished bloodily at Hotah's hand, and she herself had been confined to the Spear Tower, condemned to solitude and silence. All of that had chastened her. There was something else as well, though, some secret her father had confided in her before releasing her from her confinement. What that was, the captain did not know.

The prince had placed his daughter between himself and the white knight, a place of high honor. Arianne smiled as she slipped into her seat again, and murmured something in Ser Balon's ear. The knight did not choose to respond. He ate little, Hotah observed: a spoon of soup, a bite of the pepper, the leg off a capon, some fish. He shunned the lamprey pie and tried only one small spoonful of the stew. Even that made his brow break out in sweat. Hotah could sympathize. When first he came to Dorne, the fiery food would tie his bowels in knots and burn his tongue. That was years ago, however; now his hair was white, and he could eat anything a Dornishman could eat.

When the spun-sugar skulls were served, Ser Balon's mouth grew tight, and he gave the prince a lingering look to see if he was being mocked. Doran Martell took no notice, but his daughter did. "It is the cook's little jape, Ser Balon," said Arianne. "Even death is not sacred to a Dornishmen. You won't be cross with us, I pray?" She brushed the back of the white knight's hand with her fingers. "I hope you have enjoyed your time in Dorne."

"Everyone has been most hospitable, my lady."

Arianne touched the pin that clasped his cloak, with its quarreling swans. "I have always been fond of swans. No other bird is half so beautiful, this side of the Summer Isles."

"Your peacocks might dispute that," said Ser Balon. "They might," said Arianne, "but peacocks are vain, proud creatures, strutting about in all those gaudy colors. Give me a swan serene in white or beautiful in black."

Ser Balon gave a nod and sipped his wine. *This one is not so easily seduced as was his Sworn Brother*, Hotah thought. *Ser Arys was a boy, despite his years. This one is a man, and wary.* The captain had only to look at him to see that the white knight was ill at ease. *This place is strange to him, and little to his liking.* Hotah could understand that. Dorne had seemed a queer place to him as well when first he came here with his own princess, many years ago. The bearded priests had drilled him on the Common Speech of Westeros before they sent him forth, but the Dornishmen all spoke too quickly for him to understand. Dornish women were lewd, Dornish wine was sour, and Dornish food was full of queer hot spices. And the Dornish sun was hotter than the pale, wan sun of Norvos, glaring down from a blue sky day after day.

Ser Balon's journey had been shorter but troubling in its own way, the captain knew. Three knights, eight squires, twenty men-at-arms, and sundry grooms and servants had accompanied him from King's Landing, but once they crossed the mountains into Dorne their progress had been slowed by a round of feasts, hunts, and celebrations at every castle that they chanced to pass. And now that they had reached Sunspear, neither Princess Myrcella nor Ser Arys Oakheart was on hand to greet them. *The white knight knows that something is amiss*, Hotah could tell, *but it is more than that.* Perhaps the presence of the Sand Snakes unnerved him. If so, Obara's return to the hall must have been vinegar in the wound. She slipped back into her place without a word, and sat there sullen and scowling, neither smiling nor speaking.

Midnight was close at hand when Prince Doran turned to the white knight and said, "Ser Balon, I have read the letter that you brought me from our gracious queen. Might I assume that you are familiar with its contents, ser?"

Hotah saw the knight tense. "I am, my lord. Her Grace informed me that I might be called upon to escort her daughter back to King's Landing. King Tommen has been pining for his sister and would like Princess Myrcella to return to court for a short visit."

Princess Arianne made a sad face. "Oh, but we have all grown so fond of Myrcella, ser. She and my brother Trystane have become inseparable."

“Prince Trystane would be welcome in King’s Landing as well,” said Balon Swann. “King Tommen would wish to meet him, I am sure. His Grace has so few companions near his own age.”

“The bonds formed in boyhood can last a man for life,” said Prince Doran. “When Trystane and Myrcella wed, he and Tommen will be as brothers. Queen Cersei has the right of it. The boys should meet, become friends. Dorne will miss him, to be sure, but it is past time Trystane saw something of the world beyond the walls of Sunspear.”

“I know King’s Landing will welcome him most warmly.”

Why is he sweating now? the captain wondered, watching. *The hall is cool enough, and he never touched the stew.*

“As for the other matter that Queen Cersei raises,” Prince Doran was saying, “it is true, Dorne’s seat upon the small council has been vacant since my brother’s death, and it is past time that it was filled again. I am flattered that Her Grace feels my counsel might be of use to her, though I wonder if I have the strength for such a journey. Perhaps if we went by sea?”

“By ship?” Ser Balon seemed taken aback. “That ... would that be safe, my prince? Autumn is a bad season for storms, or so I’ve heard, and ... the pirates in the Stepstones, they ...”

“The pirates. To be sure. You may be right, ser. Safer to return the way you came.” Prince Doran smiled pleasantly. “Let us talk again on the morrow. When we reach the Water Gardens, we can tell Myrcella. I know how excited she will be. She misses her brother too, I do not doubt.”

“I am eager to see her once again,” said Ser Balon. “And to visit your Water Gardens. I’ve heard they are very beautiful.”

“Beautiful and peaceful,” the prince said. “Cool breezes, sparkling water, and the laughter of children. The Water Gardens are my favorite place in this world, ser. One of my ancestors had them built to please his Targaryen bride and free her from the dust and heat of Sunspear. *Daenerys* was her name. She was sister to King Daeron the Good, and it was her marriage that

made Dorne part of the Seven Kingdoms. The whole realm knew that the girl loved Daeron's bastard brother Daemon Black-fyre, and was loved by him in turn, but the king was wise enough to see that the good of thousands must come before the desires of two, even if those two were dear to him. It was Daenerys who filled the gardens with laughing children. Her own children at the start, but later the sons and daughters of lords and landed knights were brought in to be companions to the boys and girls of princely blood. And one summer's day when it was scorching hot, she took pity on the children of her grooms and cooks and serving men and invited them to use the pools and fountains too, a tradition that has endured till this day." The prince grasped the wheels of his chair and pushed himself from the table. "But now you must excuse me, ser. All this talk has wearied me, and we should leave at break of day. Obara, would you be so kind as to help me to my bed? Nymeria, Tyene, come as well, and bid your old uncle a fond good night."

So it fell to Obara Sand to roll the prince's chair from Sunspear's feast hall and down a long gallery to his solar. Areo Hotah followed with her sisters, along with Princess Arianne and Ellaria Sand. Maester Caleotte hurried behind on slippered feet, cradling the Mountain's skull as if it were a child.

"You cannot seriously intend to send Trystane and Myrcella to King's Landing," Obara said as she was pushing. Her strides were long and angry, much too fast, and the chair's big wooden wheels *clacked* noisily across rough-cut stone floors. "Do that, and we will never see the girl again, and your son will spend his life a hostage to the Iron Throne."

"Do you take me for a fool, Obara?" The prince sighed. "There is much you do not know. Things best not discussed here, where anyone can hear. If you hold your tongue, I may enlighten you." He winced. "*Slower*, for the love you bear me. That last jolt sent a knife right through my knee."

Obara slowed her pace by half. "What will you do, then?"

Her sister Tyene gave answer. "What he always does," she purred. "Delay, obscure, prevaricate. Oh, no one does that half so well as our brave uncle."

“You do him wrong,” said Princess Arianne. “Be quiet, all of you,” the prince commanded.

Not until the doors of his solar were safely closed behind them did he wheel his chair about to face the women. Even that effort left him breathless, and the Myrish blanket that covered his legs caught between two spokes as he rolled, so he had to clutch it to keep it from being torn away. Beneath the coverlet, his legs were pale, soft, ghastly. Both of his knees were red and swollen, and his toes were almost purple, twice the size they should have been. Areo Hotah had seen them a thousand times and still found them hard to look upon.

Princess Arianne came forward. “Let me help you, Father.”

The prince pulled the blanket free. “I can still master mine own blanket. That much at least.” It was little enough. His legs had been useless for three years, but there was still some strength in his hands and shoulders.

“Shall I fetch my prince a thimble cup of milk of the poppy?” Maester Caleotte asked.

“I would need a bucket, with this pain. Thank you, but no. I want my wits about me. I’ll have no more need of you tonight.”

“Very good, my prince.” Maester Caleotte bowed, Ser Gregor’s head still clutched in his soft pink hands.

“I’ll take that.” Obara Sand plucked the skull from him and held it at arm’s length. “What did the Mountain look like? How do we know that this is him? They could have dipped the head in tar. Why strip it to the bone?”

“Tar would have ruined the box,” suggested Lady Nym, as Maester Caleotte scurried off. “No one *saw* the Mountain die, and no one saw his head removed. That troubles me, I confess, but what could the bitch queen hope to accomplish by deceiving us? If Gregor Clegane is alive, soon or late the truth will out. The man was eight feet tall, there is not another like him in all of Westeros. If any such appears again, Cersei Lannister will be exposed

as a liar before all the Seven Kingdoms. She would be an utter fool to risk that. What could she hope to gain?"

"The skull is large enough, no doubt," said the prince. "And we know that Oberynd wounded Gregor grievously. Every report we have had since claims that Clegane died slowly, in great pain."

"Just as Father intended," said Tyene. "Sisters, truly, I know the poison Father used. If his spear so much as broke the Mountain's skin, Clegane is dead, I do not care how big he was. Doubt your little sister if you like, but never doubt our sire."

Obara bristled. "I never did and never shall." She gave the skull a mocking kiss. "This is a start, I'll grant."

"A *start*?" said Ellaria Sand, incredulous. "Gods forbid. I would it were a finish. Tywin Lannister is dead. So are Robert Baratheon, Amory Lorch, and now Gregor Clegane, all those who had a hand in murdering Elia and her children. Even Joffrey, who was not yet born when Elia died. I saw the boy perish with mine own eyes, clawing at his throat as he tried to draw a breath. Who else is there to kill? Do Myrcella and Tommen need to die so the shades of Rhaenys and Aegon can be at rest? Where does it end?"

"It ends in blood, as it began," said Lady Nym. "It ends when Casterly Rock is cracked open, so the sun can shine on the maggots and the worms within. It ends with the utter ruin of Tywin Lannister and all his works."

"The man died at the hand of his own son," Ellaria snapped back. "What more could you wish?"

"I could wish that he died at *my* hand." Lady Nym settled in a chair, her long black braid falling across one shoulder to her lap. She had her father's widow's peak. Beneath it her eyes were large and lustrous. Her wine-red lips curled in a silken smile. "If he had, his dying would not have been so easy."

"Ser Gregor does look lonely," said Tyene, in her sweet septa's voice. "He would like some company, I'm certain."

Ellaria's cheeks were wet with tears, her dark eyes shining. *Even weeping, she has a strength in her*, the captain thought.

“Oberyne wanted vengeance for Elia. Now the three of you want vengeance for him. I have four daughters, I remind you. Your sisters. My Elia is fourteen, almost a woman. Obella is twelve, on the brink of maiden-hood. They worship you, as Dorea and Loreza worship them. If you should die, must El and Obella seek vengeance for you, then Dorea and Loree for them? Is that how it goes, round and round forever? I ask again, *where does it end?*” Ellaria Sand laid her hand on the Mountain's head. “I saw your father die. Here is his killer. Can I take a skull to bed with me, to give me comfort in the night? Will it make me laugh, write me songs, care for me when I am old and sick?”

“What would you have us do, my lady?” asked the Lady Nym. “Shall we lay down our spears and smile, and forget all the wrongs that have been done to us?”

“War will come, whether we wish it or not,” said Obara. “A boy king sits the Iron Throne. Lord Stannis holds the Wall and is gathering northmen to his cause. The two queens are squabbling over Tommen like bitches with a juicy bone. The ironmen have taken the Shields and are raiding up the Mander, deep into the heart of the Reach, which means Highgarden will be preoccupied as well. Our enemies are in disarray. The time is ripe.”

“Ripe for what? To make more skulls?” Ellaria Sand turned to the prince. “They will not see. I can hear no more of this.”

“Go back to your girls, Ellaria,” the prince told her. “I swear to you, no harm will come to them.”

“My prince.” Ellaria kissed him on the brow and took her leave. Areo Hotah was sad to see her go. *She is a good woman.*

When she had gone, Lady Nym said, “I know she loved our father well, but it is plain she never understood him.”

The prince gave her a curious look. “She understood more than you ever will, Nymeria. And she made your father happy. In the end a gentle heart may be worth more than pride or valor. Be that as it may, there are things Ellaria does not know and should not know. This war has already begun.”

Obara laughed. “Aye, our sweet Arianne has seen to that.”

The princess flushed, and Hotah saw a spasm of anger pass across her father’s face. “What she did, she did as much for you as for herself. I would not be so quick to mock.”

“That was praise,” Obara Sand insisted. “Procrastinate, obscure, prevaricate, dissemble, and delay all you like, Uncle, Ser Balon must still come face-to-face with Myrcella at the Water Gardens, and when he does he’s like to see she’s short an ear. And when the girl tells him how your captain cut Arys Oakheart from neck to groin with that steel wife of his, well ...”

“No.” Princess Arianne unfolded from the cushion where she sat and put a hand on Hotah’s arm. “That wasn’t how it happened, Cousin. Ser Arys was slain by Gerold Dayne.”

The Sand Snakes looked at one another. “Darkstar?”

“Darkstar did it,” his little princess said. “He tried to kill Princess Myrcella too. As she will tell Ser Balon.”

Nym smiled. “That part at least is true.”

“It is all true,” said the prince, with a wince of pain. *Is it his gout that hurts him, or the lie?* “And now Ser Gerold has fled back to High Hermit-age, beyond our reach.”

“Darkstar,” Tyene murmured, with a giggle. “Why not? It is all his doing. But will Ser Balon believe it?”

“He will if he hears it from Myrcella,” Arianne insisted.

Obara snorted in disbelief. “She may lie today and lie tomorrow, but soon or late she’ll tell the truth. If Ser Balon is allowed to carry tales back to King’s Landing, drums will sound and blood will flow. He should not be allowed to leave.”

“We could kill him, to be sure,” said Tyene, “but then we would need to kill the rest of his party too, even those sweet young squires. That would be ... oh, so *messy*.”

Prince Doran shut his eyes and opened them again. Hotah could see his leg trembling underneath the blanket. “If you were not my brother’s daughters, I would send the three of you back to your cells and keep you there until your bones were grey. Instead I mean to take you with us to the Water Gardens. There are lessons there if you have the wit to see them.”

“Lessons?” said Obara. “All I’ve seen are naked children.”

“Aye,” the prince said. “I told the story to Ser Balon, but not all of it. As the children splashed in the pools, Daenerys watched from amongst the orange trees, and a realization came to her. She could not tell the high-born from the low. Naked, they were only children. All innocent, all vulnerable, all deserving of long life, love, protection. ‘*There is your realm,*’ she told her son and heir, ‘*remember them, in everything you do.*’ My own mother said those same words to me when I was old enough to leave the pools. It is an easy thing for a prince to call the spears, but in the end the children pay the price. For their sake, the wise prince will wage no war without good cause, nor any war he cannot hope to win.

“I am not blind, nor deaf. I know that you all believe me weak, frightened, feeble. Your father knew me better. Oberyne was ever the viper. Deadly, dangerous, unpredictable. No man dared tread on him. I was the grass. Pleasant, complaisant, sweet-smelling, swaying with every breeze. Who fears to walk upon the grass? But it is the grass that hides the viper from his enemies and shelters him until he strikes. Your father and I worked more closely than you know ... but now he is gone. The question is, can I trust his daughters to serve me in his place?”

Hotah studied each of them in turn. Obara, rusted nails and boiled leather, with her angry, close-set eyes and rat-brown hair. Nymeria, languid, elegant, olive-skinned, her long black braid bound up in red-gold wire. Tyene, blue-eyed and blond, a child-woman with her soft hands and little giggles.

Tyene answered for the three of them. “It is doing nothing that is hard, Uncle. Set a task for us, any task, and you shall find us as leal and obedient as any prince could hope for.”

“That is good to hear,” the prince said, “but words are wind. You are my brother’s daughters and I love you, but I have learned I cannot trust you. I want your oath. Will you swear to serve me, to do as I command?”

“If we must,” said Lady Nym. “Then swear it now, upon your father’s grave.” Obara’s face darkened. “If you were not my uncle—”

“I *am* your uncle. And your prince. Swear, or go.”

“I swear,” said Tyene. “On my father’s grave.”

“I swear,” said Lady Nym. “By Oberyn Martell, the Red Viper of Dorne, and a better man than you.”

“Aye,” said Obara. “Me as well. By Father. I swear.”

Some of the tension went out of the prince. Hotah saw him sag back into his chair. He held out his hand, and Princess Arianne moved to his side to hold it. “Tell them, Father.”

Prince Doran took a jagged breath. “Dorne still has friends at court. Friends who tell us things we were not meant to know. This invitation Cersei sent us is a ruse. Trystane is never meant to reach King’s Landing. On the road back, somewhere in the kingswood, Ser Balon’s party will be attacked by outlaws, and my son will die. I am asked to court only so that I may witness this attack with my own eyes and thereby absolve the queen of any blame. Oh, and these outlaws? They will be shouting, ‘Halfman, Halfman,’ as they

attack. Ser Balon may even catch a quick glimpse of the Imp, though no one else will.”

Areo Hotah would not have believed it possible to shock the Sand Snakes. He would have been wrong.

“Seven save us,” whispered Tyene. “*Trystane?* Why?”

“The woman must be mad,” Obara said. “He’s just a boy.”

“This is monstrous,” said Lady Nym. “I would not have believed it, not of a Kingsguard knight.”

“They are sworn to obey, just as my captain is,” the prince said. “I had my doubts as well, but you all saw how Ser Balon balked when I suggested that we go by sea. A ship would have disturbed all the queen’s arrangements.”

Obara’s face was flushed. “Give me back my spear, Uncle. Cersei sent us a head. We should send her back a bag of them.”

Prince Doran raised a hand. His knuckles were as dark as cherries and near as big. “Ser Balon is a guest beneath my roof. He has eaten of my bread and salt. I will not do him harm. No. We will travel to the Water Gardens, where he will hear Myrcella’s story and send a raven to his queen. The girl will ask him to hunt down the man who hurt her. If he is the man I judge, Swann will not be able to refuse. Obara, you will lead him to High Hermit-age to beard Darkstar in his den. The time is not yet come for Dorne to openly defy the Iron Throne, so we must needs return Myrcella to her mother, but I will not be accompanying her. That task will be yours, Nymeria. The Lannisters will not like it, no more than they liked it when I sent them Oberyn, but they dare not refuse. We need a voice in council, an ear at court. Be careful, though. King’s Landing is a pit of snakes.”

Lady Nym smiled. “Why, Uncle, I love snakes.”

“And what of me?” asked Tyene. “Your mother was a septa. Oberyn once told me that she read to you in the cradle from the *Seven-Pointed Star*. I want you in King’s Landing too, but on the other hill. The Swords and the

Stars have been re-formed, and this new High Septon is not the puppet that the others were. Try and get close to him.”

“Why not? White suits my coloring. I look so ... pure.”

“Good,” the prince said, “good.” He hesitated. “If ... if certain things should come to pass, I will send word to each of you. Things can change quickly in the game of thrones.”

“I know you will not fail us, cousins.” Arianne went to each of them in turn, took their hands, kissed them lightly on the lips. “Obara, so fierce. Nymeria, my sister. Tyene, sweetling. I love you all. The sun of Dorne goes with you.”

“*Unbowed, unbent, unbroken,*” the Sand Snakes said, together. Princess Arianne lingered when her cousins had departed. Areo Hotah remained as well, as was his place.

“They are their father’s daughters,” the prince said.

The little princess smiled. “Three Oberyns, with teats.”

Prince Doran laughed. It had been so long since Hotah last heard him laugh, he had almost forgotten what it sounded like.

“I still say it should be me who goes to King’s Landing, not Lady Nym,” Arianne said.

“It is too dangerous. You are my heir, the future of Dorne. Your place is by my side. Soon enough, you’ll have another task.”

“That last part, about the message. Have you had tidings?”

Prince Doran shared his secret smile with her. “From Lys. A great fleet has put in there to take on water. Volantene ships chiefly, carrying an army. No word as to who they are, or where they might be bound. There was talk of elephants.”

“No dragons?”

“Elephants. Easy enough to hide a young dragon in a big cog’s hold, though. Daenerys is most vulnerable at sea. If I were her, I would keep myself and my intentions hidden as long as I could, so I might take King’s Landing unawares.”

“Do you think that Quentyn will be with them?”

“He could be. Or not. We will know by where they land if Westeros is indeed their destination. Quentyn will bring her up the Greenblood if he can. But it does no good to speak of it. Kiss me. We leave for the Water Gardens at first light.”

We may depart by midday, then, Hotah thought.

Later, when Arianne had gone, he put down his longaxe and lifted Prince Doran into his bed. “Until the Mountain crushed my brother’s skull, no Dornishmen had died in this War of the Five Kings,” the prince murmured softly, as Hotah pulled a blanket over him. “Tell me, Captain, is that my shame or my glory?”

“That is not for me to say, my prince.” *Serve. Protect. Obey. Simple vows for simple men.* That was all he knew.