

ARIANNE

On the morning that she left the Water Gardens, her father rose from his chair to kiss her on both cheeks. "The fate of Dorne goes with you, daughter," he said, as he pressed the parchment into her hand. "Go swiftly, go safely, be my eyes and ears and voice … but most of all, take care."

"I will, Father." She did not shed a tear. Arianne Martell was a princess of Dorne, and Dornishmen did not waste water lightly. It was a near thing, though. It was not her father's kisses nor his hoarse words that made her eyes glisten, but the effort that brought him to his feet, his legs trembling under him, his joints swollen and inflamed with gout. Standing was an act of love. Standing was an act of faith.

He believes in me. I will not fail him.

Seven of them set out together on seven Dornish sand steeds. A small party travels more swiftly than a large one, but the heir to Dorne does not ride alone. From Godsgrace came Ser Daemon Sand, the bastard; once Prince Oberyn's squire, now Arianne's sworn shield. From Sunspear two bold young knights, Joss Hood and Garibald Shells, to lend their swords to his. From the Water Gardens seven ravens and a tall young lad to tend them. His name was Nate, but he had been working with the birds so long that no one called him anything but Feathers.

And since a princess must have some women to attend her, her company also included pretty Jayne Ladybright and wild Elia Sand, a maid of ten-and-four.

They struck out north by northwest, across drylands and parched plains and pale sands toward Ghost Hill, the stronghold of House Toland, where the ship that would take them across the Sea of Dorne awaited them. "Send a raven whenever you have news," Prince Doran told her, "but report only what you know to be true. We are lost in fog here, besieged by rumors, falsehoods, and traveler's tales. I dare not act until I know for a certainty what is happening."

War is happening, thought Arianne, *and this time Dorne will not be spared.* "Doom and death are coming," Ellaria Sand had warned them, before she took her own leave from Prince Doran. "It is time for my little snakes to scatter, the better to survive the carnage." Ellaria was returning to her father's seat at Hellholt. With her went her daughter Loreza, who had just turned seven. Dorea remained at the Water Gardens, one child amongst a hundred. Obella was to be dispatched to Sunspear, to serve as a cupbearer to the wife of the castellan, Manfrey Martell.

And Elia Sand, oldest of the four girls that Prince Oberyn had fathered on Ellaria, would cross the Sea of Dorne with Arianne. "As a lady, not a lance," her mother said firmly, but like all the Sand Snakes, Elia had her own mind.

They crossed the sands in two long days and the better part of two nights, stopping thrice to change their horses. It was a lonely time for Arianne, surrounded by so many strangers. Elia was her cousin, but half a child, and Daemon Sand … things had never been the same between her and the Bastard of Godsgrace after her father refused his offer for her hand. *He was a boy then, and bastard born, no fit consort for a princess of Dorne, he should have known better. And it was my father's will, not mine.* The rest of her companions she hardly knew at all.

Arianne missed her friends. Drey and Garin and her sweet Spotted Slyva had been a part of her since she was little, trusted confidants who had shared her dreams and secrets, cheered her when she was sad, helped her face her fears. One of them had betrayed her, but she missed them all the same. *It was my own fault.* Arianne had made them part of her plot to steal off with Myrcella Baratheon and crown her queen, an act of rebellion meant to force her father's hand, but

someone's loose tongue had undone her. The clumsy conspiracy had accomplished nothing, except to cost poor Myrcella part of her face, and Ser Arys Oakheart his life.

Arianne missed Ser Arys too, more than she ever would have thought. *He loved me madly*, she told herself, *yet I was never more than fond of him. I made use of him in my bed and in my plot, took his love and took his honor, gave him nothing but my body. In the end he could not live with what we'd done.* Why else would her white knight have charged right into Areo Hotah's longaxe, to die the way he did? *I was a foolish willful girl, playing at the game of thrones like a drunkard rolling dice.*

The cost of her folly had been dear. Drey had been sent across the world to Norvos, Garin exiled to Tyrosh for two years, her sweet silly smiling Slyva married off to Eldon Estermont, a man old enough to be her grandsire. Ser Arys had paid with his life's blood, Myrcella with an ear.

Only Ser Gerold Dayne had escaped unscathed. *Darkstar.* If Myrcella's horse had not shied at the last instant, his longsword would have opened her from chest to waist instead just taking off her ear. Dayne was her most grievous sin, the one that Arianne most regretted. With one stroke of his sword, he had changed her botched plot into something foul and bloody. If the gods were good, by now Obara Sand had treed him in his mountain fastness and put an end to him.

She said as much to Daemon Sand that first night, as they made camp. "Be careful what you pray for, princess," he replied. "Darkstar could put an end to Lady Obara just as easily."

"She has Areo Hotah with her." Prince Doran's captain of guards had dispatched Ser Arys Oakheart with a single blow, though the Kingsguard were supposed to be the finest knights in all the realm. "No man can stand against Hotah."

"Is that what Darkstar is? A man?" Ser Daemon grimaced. "A man would not have done what he did to Princess Myrcella. Ser Gerold is more a viper than your uncle ever was. Prince Oberyn could see that he was poison, he said so more than once. It's just a pity that he never got around to killing him."

Poison, thought Arianne. *Yes*. Pretty poison, though. That was how he'd fooled her. Gerold Dayne was hard and cruel, but so fair to look upon that the princess had not believed half the tales she'd heard of him. Pretty boys had ever been her weakness, particularly the ones who were dark and dangerous as well. *That was before, when I was just a girl*, she told herself. *I am a woman now, my father's daughter. I have learned that lesson*.

Come break of day, they were off again. Elia Sand led the way, her black braid flying behind her as she raced across the dry, cracked plains and up into the hills. The girl was mad for horses, which might be why she often smelled like one, to the despair of her mother. Sometimes Arianne felt sorry for Ellaria. Four girls, and every one of them her father's daughter.

The rest of the party kept a more sedate pace. The princess found herself riding beside Ser Daemon, remembering other rides when they were younger, rides that often ended in embraces. When she found herself stealing glances at him, tall and gallant in the saddle, Arianne reminded herself that she was heir to Dorne, and him no more than her shield. "Tell me what you know of this Jon Connington," she commanded.

"He's dead," said Daemon Sand. "He died in the Disputed Lands. Of drink, I've heard it said."

"So a dead drunk leads this army?"

"Perhaps this Jon Connington is a son of that one. Or just some clever sellsword who has taken on a dead man's name."

"Or he never died at all." Could Connington have been pretending to be dead for all these years? That would require patience worthy of her father. The thought made Arianne uneasy. Treating with a man that subtle could be perilous. "What was he like before he … before he died?"

"I was a boy at Godsgrace when he was sent into exile. I never knew the man."

"Then tell me what you've heard of him from others."

"As my princess commands. Connington was Lord of Griffin's Roost when Griffin's Roost was still a lordship worth the having. Prince Rhaegar's squire, or one of them. Later Prince Rhaegar's friend and companion. The Mad King named him Hand during Robert's Rebellion, but he was defeated at Stoney Sept

in the Battle of the Bells, and Robert slipped away. King Aerys was wroth, and sent Connington into exile. There he died."

"Or not." Prince Doran had told her all of that. *There must be more.* "Those are just the things he did. I know all that. What sort of man was he? Honest and honorable, venal and grasping, proud?"

"Proud, for a certainty. Even arrogant. A faithful friend to Rhaegar, but prickly with others. Robert was his liege, but I've heard it said that Connington chafed at serving such a lord. Even then, Robert was known to be fond of wine and whores."

"No whores for Lord Jon, then?"

"I could not say. Some men keep their whoring secret."

"Did he have a wife? A paramour?"

Ser Daemon shrugged. "Not that I have ever heard."

That was troubling too. Ser Arys Oakheart had broken his vows for her, but it did not sound as if Jon Connington could be similarly swayed. *Can I match such a man with words alone?*

The princess lapsed into silence, all the while pondering what she would find at journey's end. That night when they made camp, she crept into the tent she shared with Jayne Ladybright and Elia Sand and slipped the bit of parchment out of her sleeve to read the words again.

To Prince Doran of House Martell,
You will remember me, I pray. I knew your sister well,
and was a leal servant of your good-brother. I grieve
for them as you do. I did not die, no more than did
your sister's son. To save his life we kept him hidden,
but the time for hiding is done. A dragon has returned
to Westeros to claim his birthright and seek vengeance
for his father, and for the princess Elia, his mother.
In her name I turn to Dorne. Do not forsake us.

Jon Connington
Lord of Griffin's Roost
Hand of the True King

Arianne read the letter thrice, then rolled it up and tucked it back into her sleeve. *A dragon has returned to Westeros, but not the dragon my father was expecting.* Nowhere in the words was there a mention of Daenerys Stormborn … nor of Prince Quentyn, her brother, who had been sent to seek the dragon queen. The princess remembered how her father had pressed the onyx *cyvasse* piece into her palm, his voice hoarse and low as he confessed his plan. *A long and perilous voyage, with an uncertain welcome at its end,* he had said. *He has gone to bring us back our heart's desire. Vengeance. Justice. Fire and blood.*

Fire and blood was what Jon Connington (if indeed it was him) was offering as well. Or was it? "He comes with sellswords, but no dragons," Prince Doran had told her, the night the raven came. "The Golden Company is the best and largest of the free companies, but ten thousand mercenaries cannot hope to win the Seven Kingdoms. Elia's son … I would weep for joy if some part of my sister had survived, but what proof do we have that this is Aegon?" His voice broke when he said that. "Where are the dragons?" he asked. "Where is Daenerys?" and Arianne knew that he was really saying, "Where is my son?"

In the Boneway and the Prince's Pass, two Dornish hosts had massed, and there they sat, sharpening their spears, polishing their armor, dicing, drinking, quarreling, their numbers dwindling by the day, waiting, waiting, waiting for the Prince of Dorne to loose them on the enemies of House Martell. *Waiting for the dragons. For fire and blood. For me*. One word from Arianne and those armies would march … so long as that word was *dragon*. If instead the word she sent was *war*, Lord Yronwood and Lord Fowler and their armies would remain in place. The Prince of Dorne was nothing if not subtle; here *war* meant *wait*.

At mid-morning on the third day Ghost Hill loomed up before them, its chalk-white walls shining against the deep blue of the Sea of Dorne. From the square towers at the castle's corners flew the banners of House Toland; a green dragon biting its own tail, upon a golden field. The sun-and-spear of House Martell streamed atop the great central keep, gold and red and orange, defiant.

Ravens had flown ahead to warn Lady Toland of their coming, so the castle gates were open, and Nymella's eldest daughter rode forth with her steward to

meet them near the bottom of the hill. Tall and fierce, with a blaze of bright red hair tumbling about her shoulders, Valena Toland greeted Arianne with a shout of, "Come at last, have you? How slow are those horses?"

"Swift enough to outrun yours to the castle gates."

"We will see about that." Valena wheeled her big red around and put her heels into him, and the race was on, through the dusty lanes of the village at the bottom of the hill, as chickens and villagers alike scrambled out of their path. Arianne was three horse lengths behind by the time she got her mare up to a gallop, but had closed to one halfway up the slope. The two of them were side-by-side as they thundered towards the gatehouse, but five yards from the gates Elia Sand came flying from the cloud of dust behind them to rush past both of them on her black filly.

"Are you half horse, child?" Valena asked, laughing, in the yard. "Princess, did you bring a stable girl?"

"I'm Elia," the girl announced. "Lady Lance."

Whoever hung that name on her has much to answer for. Like as not it had been Prince Oberyn, though, and the Red Viper had never answered to anyone but himself.

"The girl jouster," Valena said. "Yes, I've heard of you. Since you were the first to the yard, you've won the honor of watering and bridling the horses."

"And after that find the bath house," said Princess Arianne. Elia was chalk and dust from heels to hair.

That night Arianne and her knights supped with Lady Nymella and her daughters in the great hall of the castle. Teora, the younger girl, had the same red hair as her sister, but elsewise could not have been more different. Short, plump, and so shy she might have passed for a mute, she displayed more interest in the spiced beef and honeyed duck than in the comely young knights at the table, and seemed content to let her lady mother and her sister speak for House Toland.

"We have heard the same tales here that you have heard at Sunspear," Lady Nymella told them as her serving man poured the wine. "Sellswords landing on Cape Wrath, castles under siege or being taken, crops seized or burned. Where these men come from and who they are, no one is certain."

"Pirates and adventurers, we heard at first," said Valena. "Then it was supposed to be the Golden Company. Now it's said to be Jon Connington, the Mad King's Hand, come back from the grave to reclaim his birthright. Whoever it is, Griffin's Roost has fallen to them. Rain House, Crow's Nest, Mistwood, even Greenstone on its island. All taken."

Arianne's thoughts went at once to her sweet Spotted Slyva. "Who would want Greenstone? Was there a battle?"

"Not as we have heard, but all the tales are garbled."

"Tarth has fallen too, some fisherfolk will tell you," said Valena. "These sellswords now hold most of Cape Wrath and half the Stepstones. We hear talk of elephants in the rainwood."

"Elephants?" Arianne did not know what to think of that. "Are you certain? Not dragons?"

"Elephants," Lady Nymella said firmly.

"And krakens off the Broken Arm, pulling under crippled galleys," said Valena. "The blood draws them to the surface, our maester claims. There are bodies in the water. A few have washed up on our shores. And that's not half of it. A new pirate king has set up on Torturer's Deep. The Lord of the Waters, he styles himself. This one has real warships, three-deckers, monstrous large. You were wise not to come by sea. Since the Redwyne fleet passed through the Stepstones, those waters are crawling with strange sails, all the way north to the Straights of Tarth and Shipbreaker's Bay. Myrmen, Volantenes, Lyseni, even reavers from the Iron Islands. Some have entered the Sea of Dorne to land men on the south shore of Cape Wrath. We found a good fast ship for you, as your father commanded, but even so … be careful."

It is true, then. Arianne wanted to ask after her brother, but her father had urged her to watch every word. If these ships had not brought Quentyn home again with his dragon queen, best not to mention him. Only her father and a few of his most trusted men knew about her brother's mission to Slaver's Bay. Lady Toland and her daughters were not amongst them. If it were Quentyn, he would have brought Daenerys back to Dorne, surely. Why would he risk a landing on Cape Wrath, amongst the stormlords?

"Is Dorne at risk?" Lady Nymella asked. "I confess, each time I see a strange sail my heart leaps to my throat. What if these ships turn south? The best part of the Toland strength is with Lord Yronwood in the Boneway. Who will defend Ghost Hill if these strangers land upon our shores? Should I call my men home?"

"Your men are needed where they are, my lady," Daemon Sand assured her. Arianne was quick to nod. Any other counsel could well lead to Lord Yronwood's host unravelling like an old tapestry as each man rushed home to defend his own lands against supposed enemies who might or might not ever come. "Once we know beyond a doubt whether these be friends or foes, my father will know what to do," the princess said.

It was then that pasty, pudgy Teora raised her eyes from the creamcakes on her plate. "It is dragons."

"Dragons?" said her mother. "Teora, don't be mad."

"I'm not. They're coming."

"How could you possibly know that?" her sister asked, with a note of scorn in her voice. "One of your little dreams?"

Teora gave a tiny nod, chin trembling. "They were dancing. In my dream. And everywhere the dragons danced the people died."

"Seven save us." Lady Nymella gave an exasperated sigh. "If you did not eat so many creamcakes you would not have such dreams. Rich foods are not for girls your age, when your humors are so unbalanced. Maester Toman says—"

"I *hate* Maester Toman," Teora said. Then she bolted from the table, leaving her lady mother to make apologies for her.

"Be gentle with her, my lady," Arianne said. "I remember when I was her age. My father despaired of me, I'm sure."

"I can attest to that." Ser Daemon took a sip of wine and said, "House Toland has a dragon on its banners."

"A dragon eating its own tail, aye," Valena said. "From the days of Aegon's Conquest. He did not conquer here. Elsewhere he burned his foes, him and his sisters, but here we melted away before them, leaving only stone and sand for them to burn. And round and round the dragons went, snapping at their tails for want of any other food, till they were tied in knots."

"Our forebears played their part in that," Lady Nymella said proudly. "Bold deeds were done, and brave men died. All of it was written down by the maesters who served us. We have books, if my princess would like to know more."

"Some other time, perhaps," said Arianne.

As Ghost Hill slept that night, the princess donned a hooded cloak against the chill and walked the castle battlements to clear her thoughts. Daemon Sand found her leaning on a parapet and gazing out to sea, where the moon was dancing on the water. "Princess," he said. "You ought to be abed."

"I could say the same of you." Arianne turned to gaze upon his face. A good face, she decided. *The boy I knew has become a handsome man.* His eyes were as blue as a desert sky, his hair the light brown of the sands they had just crossed. A close-cropped beard followed the thin of a strong jaw, but could not quite hide the dimples when he smiled. *I always loved his smile.*

The Bastard of Godsgrace was one of Dorne's finest swords as well, as might be expected from one who had been Prince Oberyn's squire and had received his knighthood from the Red Viper himself. Some said that he had been her uncle's lover too, though seldom to his face. Arianne did not know the truth of that. He had been *her* lover, though. At fourteen she had given him her maidenhead. Daemon had not been much older, so their couplings had been as clumsy as they were ardent. Still, it had been sweet. Arianne gave him her most seductive smile. "We might share a bed together."

Ser Daemon's face was stone. "Have you forgotten, princess? I am bastard born." He took her hand in his. "If I am unworthy of this hand, how can I be worthy of your cunt?"

She snatched her hand away. "You deserve a slap for that."

"My face is yours. Do what you will."

"What I will you will not, it seems. So be it. Talk with me instead. Could this truly be Prince Aegon?"

"Gregor Clegane ripped Aegon out of Elia's arms and smashed his head against a wall," Ser Daemon said. "If Lord Connington's prince has a crushed skull, I will believe that Aegon Targaryen has returned from the grave. Elsewise, no. This is some feigned boy, no more. A sellsword's ploy to win support."

My father fears the same. "If not, though … if this truly is Jon Connington, if the boy is Rhaegar's son …"

"Are you hoping that he is, or that he's not?"

"I … it would give great joy to my father if Elia's son were still alive. He loved his sister well."

"It was you I asked about, not your father."

So it was. "I was seven when Elia died. They say I held her daughter Rhaenys once, when I was too young to remember. Aegon will be a stranger to me, whether true or false." The princess paused. "We looked for Rhaegar's sister, not his son." Her father had confided in Ser Daemon when he chose him as his daughter's shield; with him at least she could speak freely. "I would sooner it were Quentyn who'd returned."

"Or so you say," said Daemon Sand. "Good night, princess." He bowed to her, and left her standing there.

What did he mean by that? Arianne watched him walk away. *What sort of sister would I be, if I did not want my brother back?* It was true, she had resented Quentyn for all those years that she had thought their father meant to name him as his heir in place of her, but that had turned out to be just a misunderstanding. She was the heir to Dorne, she had her father's word on that. Quentyn would have his dragon queen, Daenerys.

In Sunspear hung a portrait of the Princess Daenerys who had come to Dorne to marry one of Arianne's forebears. In her younger days Arianne had spent hours gazing at it, back when she was just a pudgy flat-chested girl on the cusp of maidenhood who prayed every night for the gods to make her pretty. *A hundred years ago, Daenerys Targaryen came to Dorne to make a peace. Now another comes to make a war, and my brother will be her king and consort. King Quentyn*. Why did that sound so silly?

Almost as silly as Quentyn riding on a dragon. Her brother was an earnest boy, well-behaved and dutiful, but dull. And plain, so plain. The gods had given Arianne the beauty she had prayed for, but Quentyn must have prayed for something else. His head was overlarge and sort of square, his hair the color of

dried mud. His shoulders slumped as well, and he was too thick about the middle. *He looks too much like Father.*

"I love my brother," said Arianne, though only the moon could hear her. Though if truth be told, she scarcely knew him. Quentyn had been fostered by Lord Anders of House Yronwood, the Bloodroyal, the son of Lord Ormond Yronwood and grandson of Lord Edgar. In his youth her uncle Oberyn had fought a duel with Edgar, had given him a wound that mortified and killed him. Afterward men called him 'the Red Viper,' and spoke of poison on his blade. The Yronwoods were an ancient house, proud and powerful. Before the coming of the Rhoynar they had been kings over half of Dorne, with domains that dwarfed those of House Martell. Blood feud and rebellion would surely have followed Lord Edgar's death, had not her father acted at once. The Red Viper went to Oldtown, thence across to the narrow sea to Lys, though none dared call it exile. And in due time, Quentyn was given to Lord Anders to foster as a sign of trust.

That helped to heal the breach between Sunspear and the Yronwoods, but it had opened new ones between Quentyn and the Sand Snakes … and Arianne had always been closer to her cousins than to her distant brother.

"We are still the same blood, though," she whispered. "Of course I want my brother home. I do." The wind off the sea was raising gooseprickles all up and down her arms. Arianne pulled her cloak about herself, and went off to seek her bed.

Their ship was called the *Peregrine*. They sailed upon the morning tide. The gods were good to them, the sea calm. Even with good winds, the crossing took a day and a night. Jayne Ladybright grew greensick and spent most of the voyage spewing, which Elia Sand seemed to find hilarious.

"Someone needs to spank that child," Joss Hood was heard to say … but Elia was amongst those who heard him say it.

"I am almost a woman grown, ser," she responded haughtily. "I'll let you spank me, though … but first you'll need to tilt with me, and knock me off my horse."

"We are on a ship, and without horses," Joss replied.

"And ladies do not joust," insisted Ser Garibald Shells, a far more serious and proper young man than his companion.

"I do. I'm Lady Lance."

Arianne had heard enough. "You may be a lance, but you are no lady. Go below and stay there till we reach land."

Elsewise the crossing was uneventful. At dusk they spied a galley in the distance, her oars rising and falling against the evening stars, but she was moving away from them, and soon dwindled and was gone. Arianne played a game of *cyvasse* with Ser Daemon, and another one with Garibald Shells, and somehow managed to lose both. Ser Garibald was kind enough to say that she played a gallant game, but Daemon mocked her. "You have other pieces beside the dragon, princess. Try moving them sometime."

"I like the dragon." She wanted to slap the smile off his face. Or kiss it off, perhaps. The man was as smug as he was comely. *Of all the knights in Dorne, why did my father chose this one to be my shield? He knows our history*. "It is just a game. Tell me of Prince Viserys."

"The Beggar King?" Ser Daemon seemed surprised.

"Everyone says that Prince Rhaegar was beautiful. Was Viserys beautiful as well?"

"I suppose. He was Targaryen. I never saw the man."

The secret pact that Prince Doran had made all those years called for Arianne to be wed to Prince Viserys, not Quentyn to Daenerys. It had all come undone on the Dothraki sea, when he was murdered. *Crowned with a pot of molten gold.* "He was killed by a Dothraki khal," said Arianne. "The dragon queen's own husband."

"So I've heard. What of it?"

"Just … why did Daenerys let it happen? Viserys was her brother. All that remained of her own blood."

"The Dothraki are a savage folk. Who can know why they kill? Perhaps Viserys wiped his arse with the wrong hand."

Perhaps, thought Arianne, *or perhaps Daenerys realized that once her brother was crowned and wed to me, she would be doomed to spend the rest of her life sleeping in a tent and smelling like a horse*. "She is the Mad King's daughter," the princess said. "How do we do know—"

"We cannot know," Ser Daemon said. "We can only hope."