

THE DISCARDED KNIGHT

“All kneel for His Magnificence Hizdahr zo Loraq, Fourteenth of That Noble Name, King of Meereen, Scion of Ghis, Octarch of the Old Empire, Master of the Skahazadhan, Consort to Dragons and Blood of the Harpy,” roared the herald. His voice echoed off the marble floor and rang amongst the pillars.

Ser Barristan Selmy slipped a hand beneath the fold of his cloak and loosened his sword in its scabbard. No blades were allowed in the presence of the king save those of his protectors. It seemed as though he still counted amongst that number despite his dismissal. No one had tried to take his sword, at least.

Daenerys Targaryen had preferred to hold court from a bench of polished ebony, smooth and simple, covered with the cushions that Ser Barristan had found to make her more comfortable. King Hizdahr had replaced the bench with two imposing thrones of gilded wood, their tall backs carved into the shape of dragons. The king seated himself in the right-hand throne with a golden crown upon his head and a jeweled sceptre in one pale hand. The second throne remained vacant.

The important throne, thought Ser Barristan. No dragon chair can replace a dragon no matter how elaborately it's carved.

To the right of the twin thrones stood Goghor the Giant, a huge hulk of a man with a brutal, scarred face. To the left was the Spotted Cat, a leopard skin flung over one shoulder. Back of them were Belaquo Bone-breaker and the cold-eyed Khrazz. *Seasoned killers all, thought Selmy, but it is one thing to face a foe in the pit when his coming is heralded by horns and drums and another to find a hidden killer before he can strike.*

The day was young and fresh, and yet he felt bone-tired, as if he'd fought all night. The older he got, the less sleep Ser Barristan seemed to need. As a squire he could sleep ten hours a night and still be yawning when he stumbled out onto the practice yard. At three-and-sixty he found that five

hours a night was more than enough. Last night, he had scarce slept at all. His bedchamber was a small cell off the queen's apartments, originally slave quarters; his furnishings consisted of a bed, a chamber pot, a wardrobe for his clothing, even a chair should he want to sit. On a bedside table he kept a beeswax candle and a small carving of the Warrior. Though he was not a pious man, the carving made him feel less alone here in this queer alien city, and it was to that he had turned in the black watches of night. *Shield me from these doubts that gnaw at me*, he had prayed, *and give me the strength to do what is right*. But neither prayer nor dawn had brought him certainty.

The hall was as crowded as the old knight had ever seen it, but it was the missing faces that Barristan Selmy noted most: Missandei, Belwas, Grey Worm, Aggo and Jhogo and Rakharo, Irri and Jhiqui, Daario Naharis. In the Shavepate's place stood a fat man in a muscled breastplate and lion's mask, his heavy legs poking out beneath a skirt of leather straps: Marghaz zo Loraq, the king's cousin, new commander of the Brazen Beasts. Selmy had already formed a healthy contempt for the man. He had known his sort in King's Landing—fawning to his superiors, harsh to his inferiors, as blind as he was boastful and too proud by half.

Skahaz could be in the hall as well, Selmy realized, *that ugly face of his concealed behind a mask*. Two score Brazen Beasts stood between the pillars, torchlight shining off the polished brass of their masks. The Shavepate could be any one of them.

The hall thrummed to the sound of a hundred low voices, echoing off the pillars and the marble floor. It made an ominous sound, angry. It reminded Selmy of the sound a hornets' nest might make an instant before hornets all came boiling out. And on the faces in the crowd he saw anger, grief, suspicion, fear.

Hardly had the king's new herald called the court to order than the ugliness began. One woman began to wail about a brother who had died at Daznak's Pit, another of the damage to her palanquin. A fat man tore off his bandages to show the court his burned arm, where the flesh was still raw and oozing. And when a man in a blue-and-gold *tokar* began to speak of Harghaz the Hero, a freedman behind him shoved him to the floor. It took six Brazen

Beasts to pull them apart and drag them from the hall. *Fox, hawk, seal, locust, lion, toad.* Selmy wondered if the masks had meaning to the men who wore them. Did the same men wear the same masks every day, or did they choose new faces every morning?

“Quiet!” Reznak mo Reznak was pleading. “Please! I will answer if you will only ...”

“Is it true?” a freedwoman shouted. “Is our mother dead?”

“No, no, no,” Reznak screeched. “Queen Daenerys will return to Meereen in her own time in all her might and majesty. Until such time, His Worship King Hizdahr shall—”

“He is no king of mine,” a freedman yelled.

Men began to shove at one another. “*The queen is not dead,*” the seneschal proclaimed. “Her bloodriders have been dispatched across the Skahazadhan to find Her Grace and return her to her loving lord and loyal subjects. Each has ten picked riders, and each man has three swift horses, so they may travel fast and far. Queen Daenerys shall be found.”

A tall Ghiscari in a brocade robe spoke next, in a voice as sonorous as it was cold. King Hizdahr shifted on his dragon throne, his face stony as he did his best to appear concerned but unperturbed. Once again his seneschal gave answer.

Ser Barristan let Reznak’s oily words wash over him. His years in the Kingsguard had taught him the trick of listening without hearing, especially useful when the speaker was intent on proving that words were truly wind. Back at the rear of the hall, he spied the Dornish princeling and his two companions. *They should not have come. Martell does not realize his danger. Daenerys was his only friend at this court, and she is gone.* He wondered how much they understood of what was being said. Even he could not always make sense of the mongrel Ghiscari tongue the slavers spoke, especially when they were speaking fast.

Prince Quentyn was listening intently, at least. *That one is his father's son.* Short and stocky, plain-faced, he seemed a decent lad, sober, sensible, dutiful ... but not the sort to make a young girl's heart beat faster. And Daenerys Targaryen, whatever else she might be, was still a young girl, as she herself would claim when it pleased her to play the innocent. Like all good queens she put her people first—else she would never have wed Hizdahr zo Loraq—but the girl in her still yearned for poetry, passion, and laughter. *She wants fire, and Dorne sent her mud.*

You could make a poultice out of mud to cool a fever. You could plant seeds in mud and grow a crop to feed your children. Mud would nourish you, where fire would only consume you, but fools and children and young girls would choose fire every time.

Behind the prince, Ser Gerris Drinkwater was whispering something to Yronwood. Ser Gerris was all his prince was not: tall and lean and comely, with a swordsman's grace and a courtier's wit. Selmy did not doubt that many a Dornish maiden had run her fingers through that sun-streaked hair and kissed that teasing smile off his lips. *If this one had been the prince, things might have gone otherwise,* he could not help but think ... but there was something a bit too pleasant about Drinkwater for his taste. *False coin,* the old knight thought. He had known such men before.

Whatever he was whispering must have been amusing, for his big bald friend gave a sudden snort of laughter, loud enough so that the king himself turned his head toward the Dornishmen. When he saw the prince, Hizdahr zo Loraq frowned.

Ser Barristan did not like that frown. And when the king beckoned his cousin Marghaz closer, leaned down, and whispered in his ear, he liked that even less.

I swore no oath to Dorne, Ser Barristan told himself. But Lewyn Martell had been his Sworn Brother, back in the days when the bonds between the Kingsguard still went deep. *I could not help Prince Lewyn on the Trident, but I can help his nephew now.* Martell was dancing in a vipers' nest, and he did not even see the snakes. His continued presence, even after Daenerys had given herself to another before the eyes of gods and men, would

provoke any husband, and Quentyn no longer had the queen to shield him from Hizdahr's wrath. *Although ...*

The thought hit him like a slap across the face. Quentyn had grown up amongst the courts of Dorne. Plots and poisons were no strangers to him. Nor was Prince Lewyn his only uncle. *He is kin to the Red Viper.* Daenerys had taken another for her consort, but if Hizdahr died, she would be free to wed again. *Could the Shavepate have been wrong? Who can say that the locusts were meant for Daenerys? It was the king's own box. What if he was meant to be the victim all along?* Hizdahr's death would have smashed the fragile peace. The Sons of the Harpy would have resumed their murders, the Yunkishmen their war. Daenerys might have had no better choice than Quentyn and his marriage pact.

Ser Barristan was still wrestling with that suspicion when he heard the sound of heavy boots ascending the steep stone steps at the back of the hall. The Yunkishmen had come. Three Wise Masters led the procession from the Yellow City, each with his own armed retinue. One slaver wore a *tokar* of maroon silk fringed with gold, one a striped *tokar* of teal and orange, the third an ornate breastplate inlaid with erotic scenes done in jet and jade and mother-of-pearl. The sellsword captain Bloodbeard accompanied them with a leathern sack slung across one massive shoulder and a look of mirth and murder on his face.

No Tattered Prince, Selmy noted. No Brown Ben Plumm. Ser Barristan eyed Bloodbeard coolly. *Give me half a reason to dance with you, and we will see who is laughing at the end.*

Reznak mo Reznak wormed his way forward. "Wise Masters, you honor us. His Radiance King Hizdahr bids welcome to his friends from Yunkai. We understand—"

"Understand this." Bloodbeard pulled a severed head from his sack and flung it at the seneschal.

Reznak gave a squeak of fright and leapt aside. The head bounced past him, leaving spots of blood on the purple marble floor as it rolled until it fetched up against the foot of King Hizdahr's dragon throne. Up and down the

length of the hall, Brazen Beasts lowered their spears. Goghor the Giant lumbered forward to place himself before the king's throne, and the Spotted Cat and Khrazz moved to either side of him to form a wall.

Bloodbeard laughed. "He's dead. He won't bite."

Gingerly, so gingerly, the seneschal approached the head, lifted it delicately by the hair. "Admiral Groleo."

Ser Barristan glanced toward the throne. He had served so many kings, he could not help but imagine how they might have reacted to this provocation. Aerys would have flinched away in horror, likely cutting himself on the barbs of the Iron Throne, then shrieked at his swordsmen to cut the Yunkishmen to pieces. Robert would have shouted for his hammer to repay Bloodbeard in kind. Even Jaehaerys, reckoned weak by many, would have ordered the arrest of Bloodbeard and the Yunkish slavers.

Hizdahr sat frozen, a man transfixed. Reznak set the head on a satin pillow at the king's feet, then scampered away, his mouth twisted up in a moue of distaste. Ser Barristan could smell the seneschal's heavy floral perfume from several yards away.

The dead man stared up reproachfully. His beard was brown with caked blood, but a trickle of red still leaked from his neck. From the look of him, it had taken more than one blow to part his head from his body. In the back of the hall, petitioners began to slip away. One of the Brazen Beasts ripped off his brass hawk's mask and began to spew up his breakfast.

Barristan Selmy was no stranger to severed heads. This one, though ... he had crossed half the world with the old seafarer, from Pentos to Qarth and back again to Astapor. *Groleo was a good man. He did not deserve this end. All he ever wanted was to go home.* The knight tensed, waiting.

"This," King Hizdahr said at last, "this is not ... we are not pleased, this ... what is the meaning of this ... this ..."

The slaver in the maroon *tokar* produced a parchment. "I have the honor to bear this message from the council of masters." He unrolled the scroll. "It is

here written, *‘Seven entered Meereen to sign the peace accords and witness the celebratory games at the Pit of Daznak. As surety for their safety, seven hostages were tendered us. The Yellow City mourns its noble son Yurkhaz zo Yunzak, who perished cruelly whilst a guest of Meereen. Blood must pay for blood.’*”

Groleo had a wife back in Pentos. Children, grandchildren. *Why him, of all the hostages?* Jhogo, Hero, and Daario Naharis all commanded fighting men, but Groleo had been an admiral without a fleet. *Did they draw straws, or did they think Groleo the least valuable to us, the least likely to provoke reprisal?* the knight asked himself ... but it was easier to pose that question than to answer it. *I have no skill at unraveling such knots.*

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan called out. “If it please you to recall, the noble Yurkhaz died by happenstance. He stumbled on the steps as he tried to flee the dragon and was crushed beneath the feet of his own slaves and companions. That, or his heart burst in terror. He was old.”

“Who is this who speaks without the king’s leave?” asked the Yunkish lord in the striped *tokar*, a small man with a receding chin and teeth too big for his mouth. He reminded Selmy of a rabbit. “Must the lords of Yunkai attend to the natterings of guards?” He shook the pearls that fringed his *tokar*.

Hizdahr zo Loraq could not seem to look away from the head. Only when Reznak whispered something in his ear did he finally bestir himself.

“Yurkhaz zo Yunzak was your supreme commander,” he said. “Which of you speaks for Yunkai now?”

“All of us,” said the rabbit. “The council of masters.”

King Hizdahr found some steel. “Then all of you bear the responsibility for this breach of our peace.”

The Yunkishman in the breastplate gave answer. “Our peace has not been breached. Blood pays for blood, a life for a life. To show our good faith, we return three of your hostages.” The iron ranks behind him parted. Three Meereenese were ushered forward, clutching at their *tokars*—two women and a man.

“Sister,” said Hizdahr zo Loraq, stiffly. “Cousins.” He gestured at the bleeding head. “Remove that from our sight.”

“The admiral was a man of the sea,” Ser Barristan reminded him. “Mayhaps Your Magnificence might ask the Yunkai’i to return his body to us, so we may bury him beneath the waves?”

The rabbit-toothed lord waved a hand. “If it please Your Radiance, this shall be done. A sign of our respect.”

Reznak mo Reznak cleared his throat noisily. “Meaning no offense, yet it seems to me that Her Worship Queen Daenerys gave you ... ah ... seven hostages. The other three ...”

“The others shall remain our guests,” announced the Yunkish lord in the breastplate, “until the dragons have been destroyed.”

A hush fell across the hall. Then came the murmurs and the mutters, whispered curses, whispered prayers, the hornets stirring in their hive. “The dragons ...” said King Hizdahr.

“... are monsters, as all men saw in Daznak’s Pit. No true peace is possible whilst they live.”

Reznak replied. “Her Magnificence Queen Daenerys is Mother of Dragons. Only she can—”

Bloodbeard’s scorn cut him off. “She is gone. Burned and devoured. Weeds grow through her broken skull.”

A roar greeted those words. Some began to shout and curse. Others stamped their feet and whistled their approval. It took the Brazen Beasts pounding the butts of their spears against the floor before the hall quieted again.

Ser Barristan never once took his eyes off Bloodbeard. *He came to sack a city, and Hizdahr’s peace has cheated him of his plunder. He will do whatever he must to start the bloodshed.*

Hizdahr zo Loraq rose slowly from his dragon throne. “I must consult my council. This court is done.”

“All kneel for His Magnificence Hizdahr zo Loraq, Fourteenth of That Ancient Name, King of Meereen, Scion of Ghis, Octarch of the Old Empire, Master of the Skahazadhan, Consort to Dragons and Blood of the Harpy,” the herald shouted. Brazen Beasts swung out amongst the pillars to form a line, then began a slow advance in lockstep, ushering the petitioners from the hall.

The Dornishmen did not have as far to go as most. As befit his rank and station, Quentyn Martell had been given quarters within the Great Pyramid, two levels down—a handsome suite of rooms with its own privy and walled terrace. Perhaps that was why he and his companions lingered, waiting until the press had lessened before beginning to make their way toward the steps.

Ser Barristan watched them, thoughtful. *What would Daenerys want?* he asked himself. He thought he knew. The old knight strode across the hall, his long white cloak rippling behind him. He caught the Dornishmen at the top of the steps. “Your father’s court was never half so lively,” he heard Drinkwater japing.

“Prince Quentyn,” Selmy called. “Might I beg a word?”

Quentyn Martell turned. “Ser Barristan. Of course. My chambers are one level down.”

No. “It is not my place to counsel you, Prince Quentyn ... but if I were you, I would not return to my chambers. You and your friends should go down the steps and leave.”

Prince Quentyn stared. “Leave the pyramid?”

“Leave the city. Return to Dorne.”

The Dornishmen exchanged a look. “Our arms and armor are back in our apartments,” said Gerris Drinkwater. “Not to mention most of the coin that we have left.”

“Swords can be replaced,” said Ser Barristan. “I can provide you with coin enough for passage back to Dorne. Prince Quentyn, the king made note of you today. He frowned.”

Gerris Drinkwater laughed. “Should we be frightened of Hizdahr zo Loraq? You saw him just now. He quailed before the Yunkishmen. They sent him a *head*, and he did nothing.”

Quentyn Martell nodded in agreement. “A prince does well to think before he acts. This king ... I do not know what to think of him. The queen warned me against him as well, true, but ...”

“She warned you?” Selmy frowned. “Why are you still here?”

Prince Quentyn flushed. “The marriage pact—”

“—was made by two dead men and contained not a word about the queen or you. It promised your sister’s hand to the queen’s brother, another dead man. It has no force. Until you turned up here, Her Grace was ignorant of its existence. Your father keeps his secrets well, Prince Quentyn. Too well, I fear. If the queen had known of this pact in Qarth, she might never have turned aside for Slaver’s Bay, but you came too late. I have no wish to salt your wounds, but Her Grace has a new husband and an old paramour, and seems to prefer the both of them to you.”

Anger flashed in the prince’s dark eyes. “This Ghiscari lordling is no fit consort for the queen of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“That is not for you to judge.” Ser Barristan paused, wondering if he had said too much already. *No. Tell him the rest of it.* “That day at Daznak’s Pit, some of the food in the royal box was poisoned. It was only chance that Strong Belwas ate it all. The Blue Graces say that only his size and freakish strength have saved him, but it was a near thing. He may yet die.”

The shock was plain on Prince Quentyn’s face. “Poison ... meant for Daenerys?”

“Her or Hizdahr. Perhaps both. The box was his, though. His Grace made all the arrangements. If the poison was his doing ... well, he will need a scapegoat. Who better than a rival from a distant land who has no friends at this court? Who better than a suitor the queen spurned?”

Quentyn Martell went pale. “*Me?* I would never ... you cannot think I had any part in any ...”

That was the truth, or he is a master mummer. “Others might,” said Ser Barristan. “The Red Viper was your uncle. And you have good reason to want King Hizdahr dead.”

“So do others,” suggested Gerris Drinkwater. “Naharis, for one. The queen’s ...”

“... paramour,” Ser Barristan finished, before the Dornish knight could say anything that might besmirch the queen’s honor. “That is what you call them down in Dorne, is it not?” He did not wait for a reply. “Prince Lewyn was my Sworn Brother. In those days there were few secrets amongst the Kingsguard. I know he kept a paramour. He did not feel there was any shame in that.”

“No,” said Quentyn, red-faced, “but ...”

“Daario would kill Hizdahr in a heartbeat if he dared,” Ser Barristan went on. “But not with poison. Never. And Daario was not there in any case. Hizdahr would be pleased to blame him for the locusts, all the same ... but the king may yet have need of the Stormcrows, and he will lose them if he appears complicit in the death of their captain. No, my prince. If His Grace needs a poisoner, he will look to you.” He had said all that he could safely say. In a few more days, if the gods smiled on them, Hizdahr zo Loraq would no longer rule Meereen ... but no good would be served by having Prince Quentyn caught up in the bloodbath that was coming. “If you must remain in Meereen, you would do well to stay away from court and hope Hizdahr forgets you,” Ser Barristan finished, “but a ship for Volantis would be wiser, my prince. Whatever course you choose, I wish you well.”

Before he had gone three steps, Quentyn Martell called out to him.
“Barristan the Bold, they call you.”

“Some do.” Selmy had won that name when he was ten years old, a new-made squire, yet so vain and proud and foolish that he got it in his head that he could joust with tried and proven knights. So he’d borrowed a warhorse and some plate from Lord Dondarrion’s armory and entered the lists at Blackhaven as a mystery knight. *Even the herald laughed. My arms were so thin that when I lowered my lance it was all I could do to keep the point from furrowing the ground.* Lord Dondarrion would have been within his rights to pull him off the horse and spank him, but the Prince of Dragonflies had taken pity on the addlepatented boy in the ill-fitting armor and accorded him the respect of taking up his challenge. One course was all that it required. Afterward Prince Duncan helped him to his feet and removed his helm. “A boy,” he had proclaimed to the crowd. “A bold boy.” *Fifty-three years ago. How many men are still alive who were there at Blackhaven?*

“What name do you think they will give me, should I return to Dorne without Daenerys?” Prince Quentyn asked. “Quentyn the Cautious? Quentyn the Craven? Quentyn the Quail?”

The Prince Who Came Too Late, the old knight thought ... but if a knight of the Kingsguard learns nothing else, he learns to guard his tongue. “Quentyn the Wise,” he suggested. And hoped that it was true.