

THE QUEENSGUARD

“You were the queen’s man,” said Reznak mo Reznak. “The king desires his own men about him when he holds court.”

I am the queen’s man still. Today, tomorrow, always, until my last breath, or hers. Barristan Selmy refused to believe that Daenerys Targaryen was dead.

Perhaps that was why he was being put aside. *One by one, Hizdahr removes us all.* Strong Belwas lingered at the door of death in the temple, under the care of the Blue Graces ... though Selmy half suspected they were finishing the job those honeyed locusts had begun. Skahaz Shavepate had been stripped of his command. The Unsullied had withdrawn to their barracks. Jhogo, Daario Naharis, Admiral Groleo, and Hero of the Unsullied remained hostages of the Yunkai’i. Aggo and Rakharo and the rest of the queen’s *khalasar* had been dispatched across the river to search for their lost queen. Even Missandei had been replaced; the king did not think it fit to use a child as his herald, and a onetime Naathi slave at that. *And now me.*

There was a time when he might have taken this dismissal as a blot upon his honor. But that was in Westeros. In the viper’s pit that was Meereen, honor seemed as silly as a fool’s motley. And this mistrust was mutual. Hizdahr zo Loraq might be his queen’s consort, but he would never be his king. “If His Grace wishes for me to remove myself from court ...”

“His Radiance,” the seneschal corrected. “No, no, no, you misunderstand me. His Worship is to receive a delegation from the Yunkai’i, to discuss the withdrawal of their armies. They may ask for ... ah ... recompense for those who lost their lives to the dragon’s wrath. A delicate situation. The king feels it will be better if they see a Meereenese king upon the throne, protected by Meereenese warriors. Surely you can understand that, ser.”

I understand more than you know. “Might I know which men His Grace has chosen to protect him?”

Reznak mo Reznak smiled his slimy smile. “Fearsome fighters, who love His Worship well. Goghor the Giant. Khrazz. The Spotted Cat. Belaquo Bonebreaker. Heroes all.”

Pit fighters all. Ser Barristan was unsurprised. Hizdahr zo Loraq sat uneasily on his new throne. It had been a thousand years since Meereen last had a king, and there were some even amongst the old blood who thought they might have made a better choice than him. Outside the city sat the Yunkai’i with their sellswords and their allies; inside were the Sons of the Harpy.

And the king’s protectors grew fewer every day. Hizdahr’s blunder with Grey Worm had cost him the Unsullied. When His Grace had tried to put them under the command of a cousin, as he had the Brazen Beasts, Grey Worm had informed the king that they were free men who took commands only from their mother. As for the Brazen Beasts, half were freed-men and the rest shavepates, whose true loyalty might still be to Skahaz mo Kandaq. The pit fighters were King Hizdahr’s only reliable support, against a sea of enemies.

“May they defend His Grace against all threats.” Ser Barristan’s tone gave no hint of his true feelings; he had learned to hide such back in King’s Landing years ago.

“His *Magnificence*,” Reznak mo Reznak stressed. “Your other duties shall remain unchanged, ser. Should this peace fail, His Radiance would still wish for you to command his forces against the enemies of our city.”

He has that much sense, at least. Belaquo Bonebreaker and Goghor the Giant might serve as Hizdahr’s shields, but the notion of either leading an army into battle was so ludicrous that the old knight almost smiled. “I am His Grace’s to command.”

“Not *Grace*,” the seneschal complained. “That style is Westerosi. His Magnificence, His Radiance, His Worship.”

His Vanity would fit better. “As you say.”

Reznak licked his lips. “Then we are done.” This time his oily smile betokened dismissal. Ser Barristan took his leave, grateful to leave the stench of the seneschal’s perfume behind him. *A man should smell of sweat, not flowers.*

The Great Pyramid of Meereen was eight hundred feet high from base to point. The seneschal’s chambers were on the second level. The queen’s apartments, and his own, occupied the highest step. *A long climb for a man my age*, Ser Barristan thought, as he started up. He had been known to make that climb five or six times a day on the queen’s business, as the aches in his knees and the small of his back could attest. *There will come a day when I can no longer face these steps*, he thought, *and that day will be here sooner than I would like*. Before it came, he must make certain that at least a few of his lads were ready to take his place at the queen’s side. *I will knight them myself when they are worthy, and give them each a horse and golden spurs.*

The royal apartments were still and silent. Hizdahr had not taken up residence there, preferring to establish his own suite of rooms deep in the heart of the Great Pyramid, where massive brick walls surrounded him on all sides. Mezzara, Miklaz, Qezza, and the rest of the queen’s young cupbearers—hostages in truth, but both Selmy and the queen had become so fond of them that it was hard for him to think of them that way—had gone with the king, whilst Irri and Jhiqui departed with the other Dothraki. Only Missandei remained, a forlorn little ghost haunting the queen’s chambers at the apex of the pyramid.

Ser Barristan walked out onto the terrace. The sky above Meereen was the color of corpse flesh, dull and white and heavy, a mass of unbroken cloud from horizon to horizon. The sun was hidden behind a wall of cloud. It would set unseen, as it had risen unseen that morning. The night would be hot, a sweaty, suffocating, sticky sort of night without a breath of air. For three days rain had threatened, but not a drop had fallen. *Rain would come as a relief. It might help wash the city clean.*

From here he could see four lesser pyramids, the city’s western walls, and the camps of the Yunkishmen by the shores of Slaver’s Bay, where a thick column of greasy smoke twisted upward like some monstrous serpent. *The Yunkishmen burning their dead*, he realized. *The pale mare is galloping*

through their siege camps. Despite all the queen had done, the sickness had spread, both within the city walls and without. Meereen's markets were closed, its streets empty. King Hizdahr had allowed the fighting pits to remain open, but the crowds were sparse. The Meereenese had even begun to shun the Temple of the Graces, reportedly.

The slavers will find some way to blame Daenerys for that as well, Ser Barristan thought bitterly. He could almost hear them whispering—Great Masters, Sons of the Harpy, Yunkai'i, all telling one another that his queen was dead. Half of the city believed it, though as yet they did not have the courage to say such words aloud. *But soon, I think.*

Ser Barristan felt very tired, very old. *Where have all the years gone?* Of late, whenever he knelt to drink from a still pool, he saw a stranger's face gazing up from the water's depths. When had those crow's-feet first appeared around his pale blue eyes? How long ago had his hair turned from sunlight into snow? *Years ago, old man. Decades.*

Yet it seemed like only yesterday that he had been raised to knighthood, after the tourney at King's Landing. He could still recall the touch of King Aegon's sword upon his shoulder, light as a maiden's kiss. His words had caught in his throat when he spoke his vows. At the feast that night he had eaten ribs of wild boar, prepared the Dornish way with dragon peppers, so hot they burned his mouth. Forty-seven years, and the taste still lingered in his memory, yet he could not have said what he had supped on ten days ago if all seven kingdoms had depended on it. *Boiled dog, most like. Or some other foul dish that tasted no better.*

Not for the first time, Selmy wondered at the strange fates that had brought him here. He was a knight of Westeros, a man of the stormlands and the Dornish marches; his place was in the Seven Kingdoms, not here upon the sweltering shores of Slaver's Bay. *I came to bring Daenerys home.* Yet he had lost her, just as he had lost her father and her brother. *Even Robert. I failed him too.*

Perhaps Hizdahr was wiser than he knew. *Ten years ago I would have sensed what Daenerys meant to do. Ten years ago I would have been quick enough to stop her.* Instead he had stood befuddled as she leapt into the pit,

shouting her name, then running uselessly after her across the scarlet sands. *I am become old and slow.* Small wonder Naharis mocked him as Ser Grandfather. *Would Daario have moved more quickly if he had been beside the queen that day?* Selmy thought he knew the answer to that, though it was not one he liked.

He had dreamed of it again last night: Belwas on his knees retching up bile and blood, Hizdahr urging on the dragonslayers, men and women fleeing in terror, fighting on the steps, climbing over one another, screaming and shouting. And Daenerys ...

Her hair was aflame. She had the whip in her hand and she was shouting, then she was on the dragon's back, flying. The sand that Drogon stirred as he took wing had stung Ser Barristan's eyes, but through a veil of tears he had watched the beast fly from the pit, his great black wings slapping at the shoulders of the bronze warriors at the gates.

The rest he learned later. Beyond the gates had been a solid press of people. Maddened by the smell of dragon, horses below reared in terror, lashing out with iron-shod hooves. Food stalls and palanquins alike were overturned, men knocked down and trampled. Spears were thrown, cross-bows were fired. Some struck home. The dragon twisted violently in the air, wounds smoking, the girl clinging to his back. Then he loosed the fire.

It had taken the rest of the day and most of the night for the Brazen Beasts to gather up the corpses. The final count was two hundred fourteen slain, three times as many burned or wounded. Drogon was gone from the city by then, last seen high over the Skahazadhan, flying north. Of Daenerys Targaryen, no trace had been found. Some swore they saw her fall. Others insisted that the dragon had carried her off to devour her. *They are wrong.*

Ser Barristan knew no more of dragons than the tales every child hears, but he knew Targaryens. Daenerys had been *riding* that dragon, as Aegon had once ridden Balerion of old.

"She might be flying home," he told himself, aloud. "No," murmured a soft voice behind him. "She would not do that, ser. She would not go home without us."

Ser Barristan turned. “Missandei. Child. How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long. This one is sorry if she has disturbed you.” She hesitated. “Skahaz mo Kandaq wishes words with you.”

“The Shavepate? You spoke with him?” That was rash, rash. The enmity ran deep between Shakaz and the king, and the girl was clever enough to know that. Skahaz had been outspoken in his opposition to the queen’s marriage, a fact Hizdahr had not forgotten. “Is he here? In the pyramid?”

“When he wishes. He comes and goes, ser.”

Yes. He would. “Who told you he wants words with me?”

“A Brazen Beast. He wore an owl mask.”

He wore an owl mask when he spoke to you. By now he could be a jackal, a tiger, a sloth. Ser Barristan had hated the masks from the start and never more than now. Honest men should never need to hide their faces. And the Shavepate ...

What could he be thinking? After Hizdahr had given command of the Brazen Beasts to his cousin Marghaz zo Loraq, Skahaz had been named Warden of the River, with charge of all the ferries, dredges, and irrigation ditches along the Skahazadhan for fifty leagues, but the Shavepate had refused that ancient and honorable office, as Hizdahr called it, preferring to retire to the modest pyramid of Kandaq. *Without the queen to protect him, he takes a great risk coming here.* And if Ser Barristan were seen speaking with him, suspicion might fall on the knight as well.

He did not like the taste of this. It smelled of deceit, of whispers and lies and plots hatched in the dark, all the things he’d hoped to leave behind with the Spider and Lord Littlefinger and their ilk. Barristan Selmy was not a bookish man, but he had often glanced through the pages of the White Book, where the deeds of his predecessors had been recorded. Some had been heroes, some weaklings, knaves, or cravens. Most were only men—quicker and stronger than most, more skilled with sword and shield, but still

prey to pride, ambition, lust, love, anger, jealousy, greed for gold, hunger for power, and all the other failings that afflicted lesser mortals. The best of them overcame their flaws, did their duty, and died with their swords in their hands. The worst ...

The worst were those who played the game of thrones. “Can you find this owl again?” he asked Missandei.

“This one can try, ser.”

“Tell him I will speak with ... with our friend ... after dark, by the stables.” The pyramid’s main doors were closed and barred at sunset. The stables would be quiet at that hour. “Make certain it is the same owl.” It would not serve to have the wrong Brazen Beast hear of this.

“This one understands.” Missandei turned as if to go, then paused a moment and said, “It is said that the Yunkai’i have ringed the city all about with scorpions, to loose iron bolts into the sky should Drogon return.”

Ser Barristan had heard that too. “It is no simple thing to slay a dragon in the sky. In Westeros, many tried to bring down Aegon and his sisters. None succeeded.”

Missandei nodded. It was hard to tell if she was reassured. “Do you think that they will find her, ser? The grasslands are so vast, and dragons leave no tracks across the sky.”

“Aggo and Rakharo are blood of her blood ... and who knows the Doth raki sea better than Dothraki?” He squeezed her shoulder. “They will find her if she can be found.” *If she still lives.* There were other khals who prowled the grass, horselords with *khalasars* whose riders numbered in the tens of thousands. But the girl did not need to hear that. “You love her well, I know. I swear, I shall keep her safe.”

The words seemed to give the girl some comfort. *Words are wind, though,* Ser Barristan thought. *How can I protect the queen when I am not with her?*

Barristan Selmy had known many kings. He had been born during the troubled reign of Aegon the Unlikely, beloved by the common folk, had received his knighthood at his hands. Aegon's son Jaehaerys had bestowed the white cloak on him when he was three-and-twenty, after he slew Maelys the Monstrous during the War of the Ninepenny Kings. In that same cloak he had stood beside the Iron Throne as madness consumed Jaehaerys's son Aerys. *Stood, and saw, and heard, and yet did nothing.*

But no. That was not fair. He did his duty. Some nights, Ser Barristan wondered if he had not done that duty too well. He had sworn his vows before the eyes of gods and men, he could not in honor go against them ... but the keeping of those vows had grown hard in the last years of King Aerys's reign. He had seen things that it pained him to recall, and more than once he wondered how much of the blood was on his own hands. If he had not gone into Duskendale to rescue Aerys from Lord Darklyn's dungeons, the king might well have died there as Tywin Lannister sacked the town. Then Prince Rhaegar would have ascended the Iron Throne, mayhaps to heal the realm. Duskendale had been his finest hour, yet the memory tasted bitter on his tongue.

It was his failures that haunted him at night, though. *Jaehaerys, Aerys, Robert. Three dead kings. Rhaegar, who would have been a finer king than any of them. Princess Elia and the children. Aegon just a babe, Rhaenys with her kitten.* Dead, every one, yet he still lived, who had sworn to protect them. And now Daenerys, his bright shining child queen. *She is not dead. I will not believe it.*

Afternoon brought Ser Barristan a brief respite from his doubts. He spent it in the training hall on the pyramid's third level, working with his boys, teaching them the art of sword and shield, horse and lance ... and chivalry, the code that made a knight more than any pit fighter. Daenerys would need protectors her own age about her after he was gone, and Ser Barristan was determined to give her such.

The lads he was instructing ranged in age from eight to twenty. He had started with more than sixty of them, but the training had proved too rigorous for many. Less than half that number now remained, but some showed great promise. *With no king to guard, I will have more time to train*

them now, he realized as he walked from pair to pair, watching them go at one another with blunted swords and spears with rounded heads. Brave boys. Baseborn, aye, but some will make good knights, and they love the queen. If not for her, all of them would have ended in the pits. King Hizdahr has his pit fighters, but Daenerys will have knights.

“Keep your shield up,” he called. “Show me your strokes. Together now. Low, high, low, low, high, low ...”

Selmy took his simple supper out onto the queen’s terrace that night and ate it as the sun went down. Through the purple twilight he watched fires waken one by one in the great stepped pyramids, as the many-colored bricks of Meereen faded to grey and then to black. Shadows gathered in the streets and alleys below, making pools and rivers. In the dusk, the city seemed a tranquil place, even beautiful. *That is pestilence, not peace*, the old knight told himself with his last sip of wine.

He did not wish to be conspicuous, so when he was finished with his supper he changed out of his court clothes, trading the white cloak of the Queensguard for a hooded brown traveler’s cloak such as any common man might wear. He kept his sword and dagger. *This could still be some trap*. He had little trust in Hizdahr and less in Reznak mo Reznak. The perfumed seneschal could well be part of this, trying to lure him into a secret meeting so he could sweep up him and Skahaz both and charge them with conspiring against the king. *If the Shavepate speaks treason, he will leave me no choice but to arrest him. Hizdahr is my queen’s consort, however little I may like it. My duty is to him, not Skahaz.*

Or was it?

The first duty of the Kingsguard was to defend the king from harm or threat. The white knights were sworn to obey the king’s commands as well, to keep his secrets, counsel him when counsel was requested and keep silent when it was not, serve his pleasure and defend his name and honor. Strictly speaking, it was purely the king’s choice whether or not to extend Kingsguard protection to others, even those of royal blood. Some kings thought it right and proper to dispatch Kingsguard to serve and defend their wives and children, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins of greater and lesser

degree, and occasionally even their lovers, mistresses, and bastards. But others preferred to use household knights and men-at-arms for those purposes, whilst keeping their seven as their own personal guard, never far from their sides.

If the queen had commanded me to protect Hizdahr, I would have had no choice but to obey. But Daenerys Targaryen had never established a proper Queensguard even for herself nor issued any commands in respect to her consort. *The world was simpler when I had a lord commander to decide such matters,* Selmy reflected. *Now I am the lord commander, and it is hard to know which path is right.*

When at last he came to the bottom of the last flight of steps, he found himself all but alone amongst the torchlit corridors inside the pyramid's massive brick walls. The great gates were closed and barred, as he had anticipated. Four Brazen Beasts stood guard outside those doors, four more within. It was those that the old knight encountered—big men, masked as boar, bear, vole, and manticore.

“All quiet, ser,” the bear told him.

“Keep it so.” It was not unknown for Ser Barristan to walk around at night, to make certain the pyramid was secure.

Deeper inside the pyramid, another four Brazen Beasts had been set to guard the iron doors outside the pit where Viserion and Rhaegal were chained. The light of the torches shimmered off their masks—ape, ram, wolf, crocodile.

“Have they been fed?” Ser Barristan asked. “Aye, ser,” replied the ape. “A sheep apiece.”

And how long will that suffice, I wonder? As the dragons grew, so did their appetites.

It was time to find the Shavepate. Ser Barristan made his way past the elephants and the queen's silver mare, to the back of the stables. An ass

nickered as he went by, and a few of the horses stirred at the light of his lantern. Elsewise all was dark and silent.

Then a shadow detached itself from inside an empty stall and became another Brazen Beast, clad in pleated black skirt, greaves, and muscled breastplate. “A cat?” said Barristan Selmy when he saw the brass beneath the hood. When the Shavepate had commanded the Brazen Beasts, he had favored a serpent’s-head mask, imperious and frightening.

“Cats go everywhere,” replied the familiar voice of Skahaz mo Kandaq. “No one ever looks at them.”

“If Hizdahr should learn that you are here ...”

“Who will tell him? Marghaz? Marghaz knows what I want him to know. The Beasts are still mine. Do not forget it.” The Shavepate’s voice was muffled by his mask, but Selmy could hear the anger in it. “I have the poisoner.”

“Who?”

“Hizdahr’s confectioner. His name would mean nothing to you. The man was just a cats paw. The Sons of the Harpy took his daughter and swore she would be returned unharmed once the queen was dead. Belwas and the dragon saved Daenerys. No one saved the girl. She was returned to her father in the black of night, in nine pieces. One for every year she lived.”

“Why?” Doubts gnawed at him. “The Sons had stopped their killing. Hizdahr’s peace—”

“—is a sham. Not at first, no. The Yunkai’i were afraid of our queen, of her Unsullied, of her dragons. This land has known dragons before. Yurkhaz zo Yunzak had read his histories, he knew. Hizdahr as well. Why not a peace? Daenerys wanted it, they could see that. Wanted it too much. She should have marched to Astapor.” Skahaz moved closer. “That was before. The pit changed all. Daenerys gone, Yurkhaz dead. In place of one old lion, a pack of jackals. Bloodbeard ... that one has no taste for peace. And there is more. Worse. Volantis has launched its fleet against us.”

“Volantis.” Selmy’s sword hand tingled. *We made a peace with Yunkai. Not with Volantis.* “You are certain?”

“Certain. The Wise Masters know. So do their friends. The Harpy, Reznak, Hizdahr. This king will open the city gates to the Volantenes when they arrive. All those Daenerys freed will be enslaved again. Even some who were never slaves will be fitted for chains. You may end your days in a fighting pit, old man. Khrazz will eat your heart.”

His head was pounding. “Daenerys must be told.”

“Find her first.” Skahaz grasped his forearm. His fingers felt like iron. “We cannot wait for her. I have spoken with the Free Brothers, the Moth-er’s Men, the Stalwart Shields. They have no trust in Loraq. We must break the Yunkai’i. But we need the Unsullied. Grey Worm will listen to you. Speak to him.”

“To what end?” *He is speaking treason. Conspiracy.* “Life.” The Shavepate’s eyes were black pools behind the brazen cat mask. “We must strike before the Volantenes arrive. Break the siege, kill the slaver lords, turn their sellswords. The Yunkai’i do not expect an attack. I have spies in their camps. There’s sickness, they say, worse every day. Discipline has gone to rot. The lords are drunk more oft than not, gorging themselves at feasts, telling each other of the riches they’ll divide when Meereen falls, squabbling over primacy. Bloodbeard and the Tattered Prince despise each other. No one expects a fight. Not now. Hizdahr’s peace has lulled us to sleep, they believe.”

“Daenerys signed that peace,” Ser Barristan said. “It is not for us to break it without her leave.”

“And if she is dead?” demanded Skahaz. “What then, ser? I say she would want us to protect her city. Her children.”

Her children were the freedmen. *Mhysa, they called her, all those whose chains she broke.* “Mother.” The Shavepate was not wrong. Daenerys would want her children protected. “What of Hizdahr? He is still her consort. Her king. Her husband.”

“Her poisoner.”

Is he? “Where is your proof?”

“The crown he wears is proof enough. The throne he sits. Open your eyes, old man. That is all he needed from Daenerys, all he ever wanted. Once he had it, why share the rule?”

Why indeed? It had been so hot down in the pit. He could still see the air shimmering above the scarlet sands, smell the blood spilling from the men who’d died for their amusement. And he could still hear Hizdahr, urging his queen to try the honeyed locusts. *Those are very tasty ... sweet and hot ... yet he never touched so much as one himself ...* Selmy rubbed his temple. *I swore no vows to Hizdahr zo Loraq. And if I had, he has cast me aside, just as Joffrey did.* “This ... this confectioner, I want to question him myself. Alone.”

“Is it that way?” The Shavepate crossed his arms against his chest. “Done, then. Question him as you like.”

“If ... if what he has to say convinces me ... if I join with you in this, this ... I would require your word that no harm would come to Hizdahr zo Loraq until ... unless ... it can be proved that he had some part in this.”

“Why do you care so much for Hizdahr, old man? If he is not the Harpy, he is the Harpy’s firstborn son.”

“All I know for certain is that he is the queen’s consort. I want your word on this, or I swear, I shall oppose you.”

Skahaz’s smile was savage. “My word, then. No harm to Hizdahr till his guilt is proved. But when we have the proof, I mean to kill him with my own hands. I want to pull his entrails out and show them to him before I let him die.”

No, the old knight thought. If Hizdahr conspired at my queen’s death, I will see to him myself, but his death will be swift and clean. The gods of Westeros were far away, yet Ser Barristan Selmy paused for a moment to

say a silent prayer, asking the Crone to light his way to wisdom. *For the children*, he told himself. *For the city. For my queen.*

“I will talk to Grey Worm,” he said.