

# THE QUEEN'S HAND

The Dornish prince was three days dying.

He took his last shuddering breath in the bleak black dawn, as cold rain hissed from a dark sky to turn the brick streets of the old city into rivers. The rain had drowned the worst of the fires, but wisps of smoke still rose from the smoldering ruin that had been the pyramid of Hazkar, and the great black pyramid of Yherizan where Rhaegal had made his lair hulked in the gloom like a fat woman bedecked with glowing orange jewels.

*Perhaps the gods are not deaf after all,* Ser Barristan Selmy reflected as he watched those distant embers. *If not for the rain, the fires might have consumed all of Meereen by now.*

He saw no sign of dragons, but he had not expected to. The dragons did not like the rain. A thin red slash marked the eastern horizon where the sun might soon appear. It reminded Selmy of the first blood welling from a wound. Often, even with a deep cut, the blood came before the pain.

He stood beside the parapets of the highest step of the Great Pyramid, searching the sky as he did every morning, knowing that the dawn must come and hoping that his queen would come with it. *She will not have abandoned us, she would never leave her people,* he was telling himself, when he heard the prince's death rattle coming from the queen's apartments.

Ser Barristan went inside. Rainwater ran down the back of his white cloak, and his boots left wet tracks on the floors and carpets. At his command, Quentyn Martell had been laid out in the queen's own bed. He had been a knight, and a prince of Dorne besides. It seemed only kind to let him die in the bed he had crossed half a world to reach. The bedding was ruined—sheets, covers, pillows, mattress, all reeked of blood and smoke, but Ser Barristan thought Daenerys would forgive him.

Missandei sat at the bedside. She had been with the prince night and day, tending to such needs as he could express, giving him water and milk of the poppy when he was strong enough to drink, listening to the few tortured words he gasped out from time to time, reading to him when he fell quiet, sleeping in her chair beside him. Ser Barristan had asked some of the queen's cupbearers to help, but the sight of the burned man was too much for even the boldest of them. And the Blue Graces had never come, though he'd sent for them four times. Perhaps the last of them had been carried off by the pale mare by now.

The tiny Naathi scribe looked up at his approach. "Honored ser. The prince is beyond pain now. His Dornish gods have taken him home. See? He smiles."

*How can you tell? He has no lips.* It would have been kinder if the dragons had devoured him. That at least would have been quick. This ... *Fire is a hideous way to die. Small wonder half the hells are made of flame.* "Cover him."

Missandei pulled the coverlet over the prince's face. "What will be done with him, ser? He is so very far from home."

"I'll see that he's returned to Dorne." *But how? As ashes?* That would require more fire, and Ser Barristan could not stomach that. *We'll need to strip the flesh from his bones. Beetles, not boiling.* The silent sisters would have seen to it at home, but this was Slaver's Bay. The nearest silent sister was ten thousand leagues away. "You should go sleep now, child. In your own bed."

"If this one may be so bold, ser, you should do the same. You do not sleep the whole night through."

*Not for many years, child. Not since the Trident.* Grand Maester Pycelle had once told him that old men do not need as much sleep as the young, but it was more than that. He had reached that age when he was loath to close his eyes, for fear that he might never open them again. Other men might wish to die in bed asleep, but that was no death for a knight of the Kingsguard.

“The nights are too long,” he told Missandei, “and there is much and more to do, always. Here, as in the Seven Kingdoms. But you have done enough for now, child. Go and rest.” *And if the gods are good, you will not dream of dragons.*

After the girl was gone, the old knight peeled back the coverlet for one last look at Quentyn Martell’s face, or what remained of it. So much of the prince’s flesh had sloughed away that he could see the skull beneath. His eyes were pools of pus. *He should have stayed in Dorne. He should have stayed a frog. Not all men are meant to dance with dragons.* As he covered the boy once more, he found himself wondering whether there would be anyone to cover his queen, or whether her own corpse would lie unmourned amongst the tall grasses of the Dothraki sea, staring blindly at the sky until her flesh fell from her bones.

“No,” he said aloud. “Daenerys is not dead. She was riding that dragon. I saw it with mine own two eyes.” He had said the same a hundred times before ... but every day that passed made it harder to believe. *Her hair was afire. I saw that too. She was burning ... and if I did not see her fall, hundreds swear they did.*

Day had crept upon the city. Though the rain still fell, a vague light suffused the eastern sky. And with the sun arrived the Shavepate. Skahaz was clad in his familiar garb of pleated black skirt, greaves, and muscled breastplate. The brazen mask beneath his arm was new—a wolf’s head with lolling tongue. “So,” he said, by way of greeting, “the fool is dead, is he?”

“Prince Quentyn died just before first light.” Selmy was not surprised that Skahaz knew. Word traveled quickly within the pyramid. “Is the council assembled?”

“They await the Hand’s pleasure below.”

*I am no Hand*, a part of him wanted to cry out. *I am only a simple knight, the queen’s protector. I never wanted this.* But with the queen gone and the king in chains, someone had to rule, and Ser Barristan did not trust the Shavepate. “Has there been any word from the Green Grace?”

“She is not yet returned to the city.” Skahaz had opposed sending the priestess. Nor had Galazza Galare herself embraced the task. She would go, she allowed, for the sake of peace, but Hizdahr zo Loraq was better suited to treat with the Wise Masters. But Ser Barristan did not yield easily, and finally the Green Grace had bowed her head and sworn to do her best.

“How stands the city?” Selmy asked the Shavepate now. “All the gates are closed and barred, as you commanded. We are hunting down any sellswords or Yunkai’i left inside the city and expelling or arresting those we catch. Most seem to have gone to ground. Inside the pyramids, beyond a doubt. The Unsullied man the walls and towers, ready for any assault. There are two hundred highborn gathered in the square, standing in the rain in their *tokars* and howling for audience. They want Hizdahr free and me dead, and they want you to slay these dragons. Someone told them knights were good at that. Men are still pulling corpses from the pyramid of Hazkar. The Great Masters of Yherizan and Uhlez have abandoned their own pyramids to the dragons.”

Ser Barristan had known all that. “And the butcher’s tally?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“Nine-and-twenty.”

“*Nine-and-twenty?*” That was far worse than he could ever have imagined. The Sons of the Harpy had resumed their shadow war two days ago. Three murders the first night, nine the second. But to go from nine to nine-and-twenty in a single night ...

“The count will pass thirty before midday. Why do you look so grey, old man? What did you expect? The Harpy wants Hizdahr free, so he has sent his sons back into the streets with knives in hand. The dead are all freed-men and shavepates, as before. One was mine, a Brazen Beast. The sign of the Harpy was left beside the bodies, chalked on the pavement or scratched into a wall. There were messages as well. ‘*Dragons must die,*’ they wrote, and ‘*Harghaz the Hero.*’ ‘*Death to Daenerys*’ was seen as well, before the rain washed out the words.”

“The blood tax ...”

“Twenty-nine hundred pieces of gold from each pyramid, aye,” Skahaz grumbled. “It will be collected ... but the loss of a few coins will never stay the Harpy’s hand. Only blood can do that.”

“So you say.” *The hostages again. He would kill them every one if I allowed it.* “I heard you the first hundred times. No.”

“Queen’s Hand,” Skahaz grumbled with disgust. “An old woman’s hand, I am thinking, wrinkled and feeble. I pray Daenerys returns to us soon.” He pulled his brazen wolf’s mask down over his face. “Your council will be growing restless.”

“They are the queen’s council, not mine.” Selmy exchanged his damp cloak for a dry one and buckled on his sword belt, then accompanied the Shavepate down the steps.

The pillared hall was empty of petitioners this morning. Though he had assumed the title of Hand, Ser Barristan would not presume to hold court in the queen’s absence, nor would he permit Skahaz mo Kandaq to do such. Hizdahr’s grotesque dragon thrones had been removed at Ser Barristan’s command, but he had not brought back the simple pillowed bench the queen had favored. Instead a large round table had been set up in the center of the hall, with tall chairs all around it where men might sit and talk as peers.

They rose when Ser Barristan came down the marble steps, Skahaz Shavepate at his side. Marselen of the Mother’s Men was present, with Symon Stripeback, commander of the Free Brothers. The Stalwart Shields had chosen a new commander, a black-skinned Summer Islander called Tal Toraq, their old captain, Mollono Yos Dob, having been carried off by the pale mare. Grey Worm was there for the Unsullied, attended by three eunuch serjeants in spiked bronze caps. The Stormcrows were represented by two seasoned sellswords, an archer named Jokin and the scarred and sour axeman known simply as the Widower. The two of them had assumed joint command of the company in the absence of Daario Naharis. Most of the queen’s *khalasar* had gone with Aggo and Rakharo to search for her on the Dothraki sea, but the squinty, bowlegged *jaqqa rhan* Rommo was there to speak for the riders who remained.

And across the table from Ser Barristan sat four of King Hizdahr's erst-while guardsmen, the pit fighters Goghor the Giant, Belaquo Bonebreaker, Camarron of the Count, and the Spotted Cat. Selmy had insisted on their presence, over the objections of Skahaz Shavepate. They had helped Daenerys Targaryen take this city once, and that should not be forgotten. Blood-soaked brutes and killers they might be, but in their own way they had been loyal ... to King Hizdahr, yes, but to the queen as well.

Last to come, Strong Belwas lumbered into the hall.

The eunuch had looked death in the face, so near he might have kissed her on the lips. It had marked him. He looked to have lost two stone of weight, and the dark brown skin that had once stretched tight across a massive chest and belly, crossed by a hundred faded scars, now hung on him in loose folds, sagging and wobbling, like a robe cut three sizes too large. His step had slowed as well, and seemed a bit uncertain.

Even so, the sight of him gladdened the old knight's heart. He had once crossed the world with Strong Belwas, and he knew he could rely on him, should all this come to swords. "Belwas. We are pleased that you could join us."

"Whitebeard." Belwas smiled. "Where is liver and onions? Strong Belwas is not so strong as before, he must eat, get big again. They made Strong Belwas sick. Someone must die."

*Someone will. Many someones, like as not.* "Sit, my friend." When Belwas sat and crossed his arms, Ser Barristan went on. "Quentyn Martell died this morning, just before the dawn."

The Widower laughed. "The dragonrider."

"Fool, I call him," said Symon Stripeback.

*No, just a boy.* Ser Barristan had not forgotten the follies of his own youth. "Speak no ill of the dead. The prince paid a ghastly price for what he did."

“And the other Dornish?” asked Tal Taraq. “Prisoners, for the nonce.”

Neither of the Dornishmen had offered any resistance. Archibald Yronwood had been cradling his prince’s scorched and smoking body when the Brazen Beasts had found him, as his burned hands could testify. He had used them to beat out the flames that had engulfed Quentyn Martell. Gerris Drinkwater was standing over them with sword in hand, but he had dropped the blade the moment the locusts had appeared. “They share a cell.”

“Let them share a gibbet,” said Symon Stripeback. “They unleashed two dragons on the city.”

“Open the pits and give them swords,” urged the Spotted Cat. “I will kill them both as all Meereen shouts out my name.”

“The fighting pits will remain closed,” said Selmy. “Blood and noise would only serve to call the dragons.”

“All three, perhaps,” suggested Marselen. “The black beast came once, why not again? This time with our queen.”

*Or without her.* Should Drogon return to Meereen without Daenerys mounted on his back, the city would erupt in blood and flame, of that Ser Barristan had no doubt. The very men sitting at this table would soon be at dagger points with one another. A young girl she might be, but Daenerys Targaryen was the only thing that held them all together.

“Her Grace will return when she returns,” said Ser Barristan. “We have herded a thousand sheep into the Daznak’s Pit, filled the Pit of Ghrazz with bullocks, and the Golden Pit with beasts that Hizdahr zo Loraq had gathered for his games.” Thus far both dragons seemed to have a taste for mutton, returning to Daznak’s whenever they grew hungry. If either one was hunting man, inside or outside the city, Ser Barristan had yet to hear of it. The only Meereenese the dragons had slain since Harghaz the Hero had been the slaves foolish enough to object when Rhaegal attempted to make his lair atop the pyramid of Hazkar. “We have more pressing matters to discuss. I have sent the Green Grace to the Yunkishmen to make arrangements for the release of our hostages. I expect her back by midday with their answer.”

“With words,” said the Widower. “The Stormcrows know the Yunkai’i. Their tongues are worms that wriggle this way or that. The Green Grace will come back with worm words, not the captain.”

“If it pleases the Queen’s Hand to recall, the Wise Masters hold our Hero too,” said Grey Worm. “Also the horselord Jhogo, the queen’s own blood rider.”

“Blood of her blood,” agreed the Dothraki Rommo. “He must be freed. The honor of the *khalasar* demands it.”

“He shall be freed,” said Ser Barristan, “but first we must needs wait and see if the Green Grace can accomplish—”

Skahaz Shavepate slammed his fist upon the table. “The Green Grace will accomplish *nothing*. She may be conspiring with the Yunkai’i even as we sit here. *Arrangements*, did you say? *Make arrangements*? What sort of *arrangements*?”

“Ransom,” said Ser Barristan. “Each man’s weight in gold.”

“The Wise Masters do not need our gold, ser,” said Marselen. “They are richer than your Westerosi lords, every one.”

“Their sellswords will want the gold, though. What are the hostages to them? If the Yunkishmen refuse, it will drive a blade between them and their hirelings.” *Or so I hope*. It had been Missandei who suggested the ploy to him. He would never have thought of such a thing himself. In King’s Landing, bribes had been Littlefinger’s domain, whilst Lord Varys had the task of fostering division amongst the crown’s enemies. His own duties had been more straightforward. *Eleven years of age, yet Missandei is as clever as half the men at this table and wiser than all of them*. “I have instructed the Green Grace to present the offer only when all of the Yunkish commanders have assembled to hear it.”

“They will refuse, even so,” insisted Symon Stripeback. “They will say they want the dragons dead, the king restored.”



“I pray that you are wrong.” *And fear that you are right.* “Your gods are far away, Ser Grandfather,” said the Widower. “I do not think they hear your prayers. And when the Yunkai’i send back the old woman to spit in your eye, what then?”

“*Fire and blood,*” said Barristan Selmy, softly, softly.

For a long moment no one spoke. Then Strong Belwas slapped his belly and said, “Better than liver and onions,” and Skahaz Shavepate stared through the eyes of his wolf’s head mask and said, “You would break King Hizdahr’s peace, old man?”

“I would shatter it.” Once, long ago, a prince had named him Barristan the Bold. A part of that boy was in him still. “We have built a beacon atop the pyramid where once the Harpy stood. Dry wood soaked with oil, covered to keep the rain off. Should the hour come, and I pray that it does not, we will light that beacon. The flames will be your signal to pour out of our gates and attack. Every man of you will have a part to play, so every man must be in readiness at all times, day or night. We will destroy our foes or be destroyed ourselves.” He raised a hand to signal to his waiting squires. “I have had some maps prepared to show the dispositions of our foes, their camps and siege lines and trebuchets. If we can break the slavers, their sellswords will abandon them. I know you will have concerns and questions. Voice them here. By the time we leave this table, all of us must be of a single mind, with a single purpose.”

“Best send down for some food and drink, then,” suggested Symon Stripeback. “This will take a while.”

It took the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon. The captains and commanders argued over the maps like fishwives over a bucket of crabs. Weak points and strong points, how to best employ their small company of archers, whether the elephants should be used to break the Yunkish lines or held in reserve, who should have the honor of leading the first advance, whether their horse cavalry was best deployed on the flanks or in the vanguard.

Ser Barristan let each man speak his mind. Tal Toraq thought that they should march on Yunkai once they had broken through the lines; the Yellow City would be almost undefended, so the Yunkai'i would have no choice but to lift the siege and follow. The Spotted Cat proposed to challenge the enemy to send forth a champion to face him in single combat. Strong Belwas liked that notion but insisted he should fight, not the Cat. Camarron of the Count put forth a scheme to seize the ships tied up along the riverfront and use the Skahazadhan to bring three hundred pit fighters around the Yunkish rear. Every man there agreed that the Unsullied were their best troops, but none agreed on how they should be deployed. The Widower wanted to use the eunuchs as an iron fist to smash through the heart of the Yunkish defenses. Marselen felt they would be better placed at either end of the main battle line, where they could beat back any attempt by the foe to turn their flanks. Symon Stripeback wanted them split into three and divided amongst the three companies of freed-men. His Free Brothers were brave and eager for the fight, he claimed, but without the Unsullied to stiffen them he feared his unblooded troops might not have the discipline to face battle-seasoned sell swords by themselves. Grey Worm said only that the Unsullied would obey, whatever might be asked of them.

And when all that had been discussed, debated, and decided, Symon Stripeback raised one final point. "As a slave in Yunkai I helped my master bargain with the free companies and saw to the payment of their wages.

I know sellswords, and I know that the Yunkai'i cannot pay them near enough to face dragonflame. So I ask you ... if the peace should fail and this battle should be joined, will the dragons come? Will they join the fight?"

*They will come, Ser Barristan might have said. The noise will bring them, the shouts and screams, the scent of blood. That will draw them to the battlefield, just as the roar from Daznak's Pit drew Drogon to the scarlet sands. But when they come, will they know one side from the other?*

Somehow he did not think so. So he said only, "The dragons will do what the dragons will do. If they do come, it may be that just the shadow of their wings will be enough to dishearten the slavers and send them fleeing." Then he thanked them and dismissed them all.

Grey Worm lingered after the others had left. “These ones will be ready when the beacon fire is lit. But the Hand must surely know that when we attack, the Yunkai’i will kill the hostages.”

“I will do all I can to prevent that, my friend. I have a ... notion. But pray excuse me. It is past time the Dornishmen heard that their prince is dead.”

Grey Worm inclined his head. “This one obeys.”

Ser Barristan took two of his new-made knights with him down into the dungeons. Grief and guilt had been known to drive good men into madness, and Archibald Yronwood and Gerris Drinkwater had both played roles in their friend’s demise. But when they reached the cell, he told Tum and the Red Lamb to wait outside whilst he went in to tell the Dornish that the prince’s agony was over.

Ser Archibald, the big bald one, had nothing to say. He sat on the edge of his pallet, staring down at his bandaged hands in their linen wrappings. Ser Gerris punched a wall. “I told him it was folly. I begged him to go home. Your bitch of a queen had no use for him, any man could see that. He crossed the world to offer her his love and fealty, and she laughed in his face.”

“She never laughed,” said Selmy. “If you knew her, you would know that.”

“She spurned him. He offered her his heart, and she threw it back at him and went off to fuck her sellsword.”

“You had best guard that tongue, ser.” Ser Barristan did not like this Gerris Drinkwater, nor would he allow him to vilify Daenerys. “Prince Quentyn’s death was his own doing, and yours.”

“*Ours*? How are we at fault, ser? Quentyn was our friend, yes. A bit of a fool, you might say, but all dreamers are fools. But first and last he was our prince. We owed him our obedience.”

Barristan Selmy could not dispute the truth of that. He had spent the best part of his own life obeying the commands of drunkards and madmen. “He

came too late.”

“He offered her his heart,” Ser Gerris said again. “She needed swords, not hearts.”

“He would have given her the spears of Dorne as well.”

“Would that he had.” No one had wanted Daenerys to look with favor on the Dornish prince more than Barristan Selmy. “He came too late, though, and this folly ... buying sellswords, loosing two dragons on the city ... that was madness and worse than madness. That was treason.”

“What he did he did for love of Queen Daenerys,” Gerris Drinkwater insisted. “To prove himself worthy of her hand.”

The old knight had heard enough. “What Prince Quentyn did he did for Dorne. Do you take me for some doting grandfather? I have spent my life around kings and queens and princes. Sunspear means to take up arms against the Iron Throne. No, do not trouble to deny it. Doran Martell is not a man to call his spears without hope of victory. Duty brought Prince Quentyn here. Duty, honor, thirst for glory ... never love. Quentyn was here for dragons, not Daenerys.”

“You did not know him, ser. He—”

“He’s dead, Drink.” Yronwood rose to his feet. “Words won’t fetch him back. Cletus and Will are dead too. So shut your bloody mouth before I stick my fist in it.” The big knight turned to Selmy. “What do you mean to do with us?”

“Skahaz Shavepate wants you hanged. You slew four of his men. Four of the *queen*’s men. Two were freedmen who had followed Her Grace since Astapor.”

Yronwood did not seem surprised. “The beast men, aye. I only killed the one, the basilisk head. The sellswords did the others. Don’t matter, though, I know that.”

“We were protecting Quentyn,” said Drinkwater. “We—”

“Be *quiet*, Drink. He knows.” To Ser Barristan the big knight said, “No need to come and talk if you meant to hang us. So it’s not that, is it?”

“No.” *This one may not be as slow-witted as he seems.* “I have more use for you alive than dead. Serve me, and afterward I will arrange a ship to take you back to Dorne and give you Prince Quentyn’s bones to return to his lord father.”

Ser Archibald grimaced. “Why is it always ships? Someone needs to take Quent home, though. What do you ask of us, ser?”

“Your swords.”

“You have thousands of swords.”

“The queen’s freedmen are as yet unblooded. The sellswords I do not trust. Unsullied are brave soldiers ... but not warriors. Not *knight*s.” He paused. “What happened when you tried to take the dragons? Tell me.”

The Dornishmen exchanged a look. Then Drinkwater said, “Quentyn told the Tattered Prince he could control them. It was in his blood, he said. He had Targaryen blood.”

“Blood of the dragon.”

“Yes. The sellswords were supposed to help us get the dragons chained up so we could get them to the docks.”

“Rags arranged for a ship,” said Yronwood. “A big one, in case we got both dragons. And Quent was going to ride one.” He looked at his bandaged hands. “The moment we got in, though, you could see none of it was going to work. The dragons were too wild. The chains ... there were bits of broken chain everywhere, *big* chains, links the size of your head mixed in with all these cracked and splintered bones. And Quent, Seven save him, he looked like he was going to shit his smallclothes. Caggo and Meris weren’t blind, they saw it too. Then one of the cross-bowmen let fly. Maybe they

meant to kill the dragons all along and were only using us to get to them. You never know with Tatters. Any way you hack it off, it weren't clever. The quarrel just made the dragons angry, and they hadn't been in such a good mood to start with. Then ... then things got bad."

"And the Windblown blew away," said Ser Gerris. "Quent was screaming, covered in flames, and they were gone. Caggo, Pretty Meris, all but the dead one."

"Ah, what did you expect, Drink? A cat will kill a mouse, a pig will wallow in shit, and a sellsword will run off when he's needed most. Can't be blamed. Just the nature of the beast."

"He's not wrong," Ser Barristan said. "What did Prince Quentyn promise the Tattered Prince in return for all this help?"

He got no answer. Ser Gerris looked at Ser Archibald. Ser Archibald looked at his hands, the floor, the door.

"Pentos," said Ser Barristan. "He promised him Pentos. Say it. No words of yours can help or harm Prince Quentyn now."

"Aye," said Ser Archibald unhappily. "It was Pentos. They made marks on a paper, the two of them."

*There is a chance here.* "We still have Windblown in the dungeons. Those feigned deserters."

"I remember," said Yronwood. "Hungerford, Straw, that lot. Some of them weren't so bad for sellswords. Others, well, might be they could stand a bit of dying. What of them?"

"I mean to send them back to the Tattered Prince. And you with them. You will be two amongst thousands. Your presence in the Yunkish camps should pass unnoticed. I want you to deliver a message to the Tattered Prince. Tell him that I sent you, that I speak with the queen's voice. Tell him that we'll pay his price if he delivers us our hostages, unharmed and whole."

Ser Archibald grimaced. “Rags and Tatters is more like to give the two of us to Pretty Meris. He won’t do it.”

“Why not? The task is simple enough.” *Compared to stealing dragons.* “I once brought the queen’s father out of Duskendale.”

“That was Westeros,” said Gerris Drinkwater. “This is Meereen.”

“Arch cannot even hold a sword with those hands.”

“He ought not need to. You will have the sellswords with you, unless I mistake my man.”

Gerris Drinkwater pushed back his mop of sun-streaked hair. “Might we have some time to discuss this amongst ourselves?”

“No,” said Selmy. “I’ll do it,” offered Ser Archibald, “just so long as there’s no bloody boats involved. Drink will do it too.” He grinned. “He don’t know it yet, but he will.”

And that was done.

*The simple part, at least,* thought Barristan Selmy, as he made the long climb back to the summit of the pyramid. The hard part he’d left in Dornish hands. His grandfather would have been aghast. The Dornishmen were knights, at least in name, though only Yronwood impressed him as having the true steel. Drinkwater had a pretty face, a glib tongue, and a fine head of hair.

By the time the old knight returned to the queen’s rooms atop the pyramid, Prince Quentyn’s corpse had been removed. Six of the young cup-bearers were playing some child’s game as he entered, sitting in a circle on the floor as they took turns spinning a dagger. When it wobbled to a stop they cut a lock of hair off whichever of them the blade was pointing at. Ser Barristan had played a similar game with his cousins when he was just a boy at Harvest Hall ... though in Westeros, as he recalled, kissing had been involved as well. “Bhakaz,” he called. “A cup of wine, if you would be so good. Grazhar, Azzak, the door is yours. I am expecting the Green Grace.

Show her in at once when she arrives. Elsewise, I do not wish to be disturbed.”

Azzak scrambled to his feet. “As you command, Lord Hand.”

Ser Barristan went out onto the terrace. The rain had stopped, though a wall of slate-grey clouds hid the setting sun as it made its descent into Slaver’s Bay. A few wisps of smoke still rose from the blackened stones of Hazdar, twisted like ribbons by the wind. Far off to the east, beyond the city walls, he saw pale wings moving above a distant line of hills. *Viserion*. Hunting, mayhaps, or flying just to fly. He wondered where Rhaegal was. Thus far the green dragon had shown himself to be more dangerous than the white.

When Bhakaz brought his wine, the old knight took one long swallow and sent the boy for water. A few cups of wine might be just the thing to help him sleep, but he would need his wits about him when Galazza Galare returned from treating with the foe. So he drank his wine well watered, as the world grew dark around him. He was very tired, and full of doubts. The Dornishmen, Hizdahr, Reznak, the attack ... was he doing the right things? Was he doing what Daenerys would have wanted? *I was not made for this*. Other Kingsguard had served as Hand before him. Not many, but a few. He had read of them in the White Book. Now he found himself wondering whether they had felt as lost and confused as he did.

“Lord Hand.” Grazhar stood in the door, a taper in his hand. “The Green Grace has come. You asked to be told.”

“Show her in. And light some candles.”

Galazza Galare was attended by four Pink Graces. An aura of wisdom and dignity seemed to surround her that Ser Barristan could not help but admire. *This is a strong woman, and she has been a faithful friend to Daenerys*.

“Lord Hand,” she said, her face hidden behind shimmering green veils.

“May I sit? These bones are old and weary.”

“Grazhar, a chair for the Green Grace.” The Pink Graces arrayed themselves behind her, with eyes lowered and hands clasped before them.

“May I offer you refreshment?” asked Ser Barristan.



“That would be most welcome, Ser Barristan. My throat is dry from talking. A juice, perhaps?”

“As you wish.” He beckoned to Kezmya and had her fetch the priestess a goblet of lemon juice, sweetened with honey. To drink it, the priestess had to remove her veil, and Selmy was reminded of just how old she was. *Twenty years my elder, or more.* “If the queen were here, I know she would join me in thanking you for all that you have done for us.”

“Her Magnificence has always been most gracious.” Galazza Galare finished her drink and fastened up her veil again. “Have there been any further tidings of our sweet queen?”

“None as yet.”

“I shall pray for her. And what of King Hizdahr, if I may be so bold? Might I be permitted to see His Radiance?”

“Soon, I hope. He is unharmed, I promise you.”

“I am pleased to hear that. The Wise Masters of Yunkai asked after him. You will not be surprised to hear that they wish the noble Hizdahr to be restored at once to his rightful place.”

“He shall be, if it can be proved that he did not try to kill our queen. Until such time, Meereen will be ruled by a council of the loyal and just. There is a place for you on that council. I know that you have much to teach us all, Your Benevolence. We need your wisdom.”

“I fear you flatter me with empty courtesies, Lord Hand,” the Green Grace said. “If you truly think me wise, heed me now. Release the noble Hizdahr and restore him to his throne.”

“Only the queen can do that.”

Beneath her veils, the Green Grace sighed. “The peace that we worked so hard to forge flutters like a leaf in an autumn wind. These are dire days. Death stalks our streets, riding the pale mare from thrice-cursed Astapor.

Dragons haunt the skies, feasting on the flesh of children. Hundreds are taking ship, sailing for Yunkai, for Tolos, for Qarth, for any refuge that will have them. The pyramid of Hazkar has collapsed into a smoking ruin, and many of that ancient line lie dead beneath its blackened stones. The pyramids of Uhlez and Yherizan have become the lairs of monsters, their masters homeless beggars. My people have lost all hope and turned against the gods themselves, giving over their nights to drunkenness and fornication.”

“And murder. The Sons of the Harpy slew thirty in the night.”

“I grieve to hear this. All the more reason to free the noble Hizdahr zo Loraq, who stopped such killings once.”

*And how did he accomplish that, unless he is himself the Harpy?* “Her Grace gave her hand to Hizdahr zo Loraq, made him her king and consort, restored the mortal art as he beseeched her. In return he gave her poisoned locusts.”

“In return he gave her peace. Do not cast it away, ser, I beg you. Peace is the pearl beyond price. Hizdahr is of Loraq. Never would he soil his hands with poison. He is innocent.”

“How can you be certain?” *Unless you know the poisoner.* “The gods of Ghis have told me.”

“My gods are the Seven, and the Seven have been silent on this matter. Your Wisdom, did you present my offer?”

“To all the lords and captains of Yunkai, as you commanded me ... yet I fear you will not like their answer.”

“They refused?”

“They did. No amount of gold will buy your people back, I was told. Only the blood of dragons may set them free again.”

It was the answer Ser Barristan had expected, if not the one that he had hoped for. His mouth tightened.

“I know these were not the words you wished to hear,” said Galazza Galare. “Yet for myself, I understand. These dragons are fell beasts. Yunkai fears them ... and with good cause, you cannot deny. Our histories speak of the dragonlords of dread Valyria and the devastation that they wrought upon the peoples of Old Ghis. Even your own young queen, fair Daenerys who called herself the Mother of Dragons ... we saw her burning, that day in the pit ... even she was not safe from the dragon’s wrath.”

“Her Grace is not ... she ...”

“... is dead. May the gods grant her sweet sleep.” Tears glistened behind her veils. “Let her dragons die as well.”

Selmy was groping for an answer when he heard the sound of heavy footsteps. The door burst inward, and Skahaz mo Kandaq stormed in with four Brazen Beasts behind him. When Grazhar tried to block his path, he slammed the boy aside.

Ser Barristan was on his feet at once. “What is it?”

“The trebuchets,” the Shavepate growled. “All six.”

Galazza Galare rose. “Thus does Yunkai make reply to your offers, ser. I warned you that you would not like their answer.”

*They choose war, then. So be it.* Ser Barristan felt oddly relieved. War he understood. “If they think they will break Meereen by throwing stones—”

“Not stones.” The old woman’s voice was full of grief, of fear. “Corpses.”