

# THE KINGBREAKER

A pale shadow and a dark, the two conspirators came together in the quiet of the armory on the Great Pyramid's second level, amongst racks of spears, sheaves of quarrels, and walls hung with trophies from forgotten battles.

"Tonight," said Skahaz mo Kandaq. The brass face of a blood bat peered out from beneath the hood of his patchwork cloak. "All my men will be in place. The word is *Groleo*."

"Groleo." *That is fitting, I suppose.* "Yes. What was done to him ... you were at court?"

"One guardsman amongst forty. All waiting for the empty tabard on the throne to speak the command so we might cut down Bloodbeard and the rest. Do you think the Yunkai'i would ever have dared present *Daenerys* with the head of her hostage?"

*No*, thought Selmy. "Hizdahr seemed distraught."

"Sham. His own kin of Loraq were returned unharmed. You saw. The Yunkai'i played us a mummer's farce, with noble Hizdahr as chief mummer. The issue was never Yurkhaz zo Yunzak. The other slavers would gladly have trampled that old fool themselves. This was to give Hizdahr a pretext to kill the dragons."

Ser Barristan chewed on that. "Would he dare?"

"He dared to kill his queen. Why not her pets? If we do not act, Hizdahr will hesitate for a time, to give proof of his reluctance and allow the Wise Masters the chance to rid him of the Stormcrow and the bloodrider. *Then* he will act. They want the dragons dead before the Volantene fleet arrives."

*Aye, they would.* It all fit. That did not mean Barristan Selmy liked it any better. "That will not happen." His queen was the Mother of Dragons; he would not allow her children to come to harm. "The hour of the wolf. The blackest part of night, when all the world's asleep." He had first heard those

words from Tywin Lannister outside the walls of Duskendale. *He gave me a day to bring out Aerys. Unless I returned with the king by dawn of the following day, he would take the town with steel and fire, he told me. It was the hour of the wolf when I went in and the hour of the wolf when we emerged.* “Grey Worm and the Unsullied will close and bar the gates at first light.”

“Better to attack at first light,” Skahaz said. “Burst from the gates and swarm across the siege lines, smash the Yunkai’i as they come stumbling from their beds.”

“No.” The two of them had argued this before. “There is a peace, signed and sealed by Her Grace the queen. We will not be the first to break it. Once we have taken Hizdahr, we will form a council to rule in his place and demand that the Yunkai’i return our hostages and withdraw their armies. Should they refuse, then and only then will we inform them that the peace is broken, and go forth to give them battle. Your way is dishonorable.”

“Your way is stupid,” the Shavepate said. “The hour is ripe. Our freed-men are ready. Hungry.”

That much was true, Selmy knew. Symon Stripeback of the Free Brothers and Mollono Yos Dob of the Stalwart Shields were both eager for battle, intent on proving themselves and washing out all the wrongs they had suffered in a tide of Yunkish blood. Only Marselen of the Mother’s Men shared Ser Barristan’s doubts. “We discussed this. You agreed it would be my way.”

“I agreed,” the Shavepate grumbled, “but that was before Groleo. The head. The slavers have no honor.”

“We do,” said Ser Barristan.

The Shavepate muttered something in Ghiscari, then said, “As you wish. Though we will rue your old man’s honor before this game is done, I think. What of Hizdahr’s guards?”

“His Grace keeps two men by him when he sleeps. One on the door of his bedchamber, a second within, in an adjoining alcove. Tonight it will be Khrazz and Steelskin.”

“Khrazz,” the Shavepate grumbled. “That I do not like.”

“It need not come to blood,” Ser Barristan told him. “I mean to talk to Hizdahr. If he understands we do not intend to kill him, he may command his guards to yield.”

“And if not? Hizdahr must not escape us.”

“He will not escape.” Selmy did not fear Khrazz, much less Steelskin. They were only pit fighters. Hizdahr’s fearsome collection of former fighting slaves made indifferent guards at best. Speed and strength and ferocity they had, and some skill at arms as well, but blood games were poor training for protecting kings. In the pits their foes were announced with horns and drums, and after the battle was done and won the victors could have their wounds bound up and quaff some milk of the poppy for the pain, knowing that the threat was past and they were free to drink and feast and whore until the next fight. But the battle was never truly done for a knight of the Kingsguard. Threats came from everywhere and nowhere, at any time of day or night. No trumpets announced the foe: vassals, servants, friends, brothers, sons, even wives, any of them might have knives concealed beneath their cloaks and murder hidden in their hearts. For every hour of fighting, a Kingsguard knight spent ten thousand hours watching, waiting, standing silent in the shadows. King Hizdahr’s pit fighters were already growing bored and restive with their new duties, and bored men were lax, slow to react.

“I shall deal with Khrazz,” said Ser Barristan. “Just make certain I do not need to deal with any Brazen Beasts as well.”

“Have no fear. We will have Marghaz in chains before he can make mischief. I told you, the Brazen Beasts are mine.”

“You say you have men amongst the Yunkishmen?”

“Sneaks and spies. Reznak has more.”

*Reznak cannot be trusted. He smells too sweet and feels too foul.* “Someone needs to free our hostages. Unless we get our people back, the Yunkai’i will use them against us.”

Skahaz snorted through the noseholes of his mask. “Easy to speak of rescue. Harder to do. Let the slavers threaten.”

“And if they do more than threaten?”

“Would you miss them so much, old man? A eunuch, a savage, and a sell sword?”

*Hero, Jhogo, and Daario.* “Jhogo is the queen’s bloodrider, blood of her blood. They came out of the Red Waste together. Hero is Grey Worm’s second-in-command. And Daario ...” *She loves Daario.* He had seen it in her eyes when she looked at him, heard it in her voice when she spoke of him. “... Daario is vain and rash, but he is dear to Her Grace. He must be rescued, before his Stormcrows decide to take matters into their own hands. It can be done. I once brought the queen’s father safely out of Duskendale, where he was being held captive by a rebel lord, but ...”

“... you could never hope to pass unnoticed amongst the Yunkai’i. Every man of them knows your face by now.”

*I could hide my face, like you,* thought Selmy, but he knew the Shavepate was right. Duskendale had been a lifetime ago. He was too old for such heroics. “Then we must needs find some other way. Some other rescuer. Someone known to the Yunkishmen, whose presence in their camp might go unnoticed ...”

“Daario calls you Ser Grandfather,” Skahaz reminded him. “I will not say what he calls me. If you and I were the hostages, would he risk his skin for us?”

*Not likely,* he thought, but he said, “He might.”

“Daario might piss on us if we were burning. Elsewise do not look to him for help. Let the Stormcrows choose another captain, one who knows his place. If the queen does not return, the world will be one sellsword short. Who will grieve?”

“And when she does return?”

“She will weep and tear her hair and curse the Yunkai’i. Not us. No blood on our hands. You can comfort her. Tell her some tale of the old days, she likes those. Poor Daario, her brave captain ... she will never forget him, no ... but better for all of us if he is dead, yes? Better for Daenerys too.”

*Better for Daenerys, and for Westeros.* Daenerys Targaryen loved her captain, but that was the girl in her, not the queen. *Prince Rhaegar loved his Lady Lyanna, and thousands died for it. Daemon Blackfyre loved the first Daenerys, and rose in rebellion when denied her. Bittersteel and Bloodraven both loved Shiera Seastar, and the Seven Kingdoms bled. The Prince of Dragonflies loved Jenny of Oldstones so much he cast aside a crown, and Westeros paid the bride price in corpses.* All three of the sons of the fifth Aegon had wed for love, in defiance of their father’s wishes. And because that unlikely monarch had himself followed his heart when he chose his queen, he allowed his sons to have their way, making bitter enemies where he might have had fast friends. Treason and turmoil followed, as night follows day, ending at Summerhall in sorcery, fire, and grief.

*Her love for Daario is poison. A slower poison than the locusts, but in the end as deadly.* “There is still Jhogo,” Ser Barristan said. “Him, and Hero. Both precious to Her Grace.”

“We have hostages as well,” Skahaz Shavepate reminded him. “If the slavers kill one of ours, we kill one of theirs.”

For a moment Ser Barristan did not know whom he meant. Then it came to him. “The queen’s cupbearers?”

“*Hostages,*” insisted Skahaz mo Kandaq. “Grazdar and Qezza are the blood of the Green Grace. Mezzara is of Merreq, Kezmya is Pahl, Azzak

Ghazeen. Bhakaz is Loraq, Hizdahr's own kin. All are sons and daughters of the pyramids. Zhak, Quazzar, Uhlez, Hazkar, Dhazak, Yherizan, all children of Great Masters."

"Innocent girls and sweet-faced boys." Ser Barristan had come to know them all during the time they served the queen, Grazhar with his dreams of glory, shy Mezzara, lazy Miklaz, vain, pretty Kezmya, Qezza with her big soft eyes and angel's voice, Dhazzar the dancer, and the rest. "Children."

"Children of the Harpy. Only blood can pay for blood."

"So said the Yunkishman who brought us Groleo's head."

"He was not wrong."

"I will not permit it."

"What use are hostages if they may not be touched?"

"Mayhaps we might offer three of the children for Daario, Hero, and Jhogo," Ser Barristan allowed. "Her Grace—"

"—is not here. It is for you and me to do what must be done. You know that I am right."

"Prince Rhaegar had two children," Ser Barristan told him. "Rhaenys was a little girl, Aegon a babe in arms. When Tywin Lannister took King's Landing, his men killed both of them. He served the bloody bodies up in crimson cloaks, a gift for the new king." *And what did Robert say when he saw them? Did he smile?* Barristan Selmy had been badly wounded on the Trident, so he had been spared the sight of Lord Tywin's gift, but oft he wondered. *If I had seen him smile over the red ruins of Rhaegar's children, no army on this earth could have stopped me from killing him.* "I will not suffer the murder of children. Accept that, or I'll have no part of this."

Skahaz chuckled. "You are a stubborn old man. Your sweet-faced boys will only grow up to be Sons of the Harpy. Kill them now or kill them then."

“You kill men for the wrongs they have done, not the wrongs that they may do someday.”

The Shavepate took an axe down off the wall, inspected it, and grunted. “So be it. No harm to Hizdahr or our hostages. Will that content you, Ser Grandfather?”

*Nothing about this will content me.* “It will serve. The hour of the wolf. Remember.”

“I am not like to forget, ser.” Though the bat’s brass mouth did not move, Ser Barristan could sense the grin beneath the mask. “Long has Kandaq waited for this night.”

*That is what I fear.* If King Hizdahr was innocent, what they did this day would be treason. But how could he be innocent? Selmy had heard him urging Daenerys to taste the poisoned locusts, shouting at his men to slay the dragon. *If we do not act, Hizdahr will kill the dragons and open the gates to the queen’s enemies. We have no choice in this.* Yet no matter how he turned and twisted this, the old knight could find no honor in it.

The rest of that long day raced past as swiftly as a snail.

Elsewhere, he knew, King Hizdahr was consulting with Reznak mo Reznak, Marghaz zo Loraq, Galazza Galare, and his other Meereenese advisors, deciding how best to respond to Yunkai’s demands ... but Barristan Selmy was no longer a part of such councils. Nor did he have a king to guard. Instead he made the rounds of the pyramid from top to bottom, to ascertain that the sentries were all at their posts. That took most of the morning. He spent that afternoon with his orphans, even took up sword and shield himself to provide a sterner test for a few of the older lads.

Some of them had been training for the fighting pits when Daenerys Targaryen took Meereen and freed them from their chains. Those had had a good acquaintance with sword and spear and battle-axe even before Ser Barristan got hold of them. A few might well be ready. *The boy from the Basilisk Isles, for a start. Tumco Lho.* Black as maester’s ink he was, but fast and strong, the best natural swordsman Selmy had seen since Jaime

Lannister. *Larraq as well. The Lash.* Ser Barristan did not approve of his fighting style, but there was no doubting his skills. Larraq had years of work ahead of him before he mastered proper knightly weapons, sword and lance and mace, but he was deadly with his whip and trident. The old knight had warned him that the whip would be useless against an armored foe ... until he saw how Larraq used it, snapping it around the legs of his opponents to yank them off their feet. *No knight as yet, but a fierce fighter.*

Larraq and Tumco were his best. After them the Lhazarene, the one the other boys called Red Lamb, though as yet that one was all ferocity and no technique. Perhaps the brothers too, three lowborn Ghiscari enslaved to pay their father's debts.

That made six. *Six out of twenty-seven.* Selmy might have hoped for more, but six was a good beginning. The other boys were younger for the most part, and more familiar with looms and plows and chamber pots than swords and shields, but they worked hard and learned quickly. A few years as squires, and he might have six more knights to give his queen. As for those who would never be ready, well, not every boy was meant to be a knight. *The realm needs candlemakers and innkeeps and armorers as well.* That was as true in Meereen as it was in Westeros.

As he watched them at their drills, Ser Barristan pondered raising Tumco and Larraq to knighthood then and there, and mayhaps the Red Lamb too. It required a knight to make a knight, and if something should go awry tonight, dawn might find him dead or in a dungeon. Who would dub his squires then? On the other hand, a young knight's repute derived at least in part from the honor of the man who conferred knighthood on him. It would do his lads no good at all if it was known that they were given their spurs by a traitor, and might well land them in the dungeon next to him. *They deserve better,* Ser Barristan decided. *Better a long life as a squire than a short one as a soiled knight.*

As the afternoon melted into evening, he bid his charges to lay down their swords and shields and gather round. He spoke to them about what it meant to be a knight. "It is chivalry that makes a true knight, not a sword," he said. "Without honor, a knight is no more than a common killer. It is better to die



with honor than to live without it.” The boys looked at him strangely, he thought, but one day they would understand.

Afterward, back at the apex of the pyramid, Ser Barristan found Missandei amongst piles of scrolls and books, reading. “Stay here tonight, child,” he told her. “Whatever happens, whatever you see or hear, do not leave the queen’s chambers.”

“This one hears,” the girl said. “If she may ask—”

“Best not.” Ser Barristan stepped out alone onto the terrace gardens. *I am not made for this*, he reflected as he looked out over the sprawling city. The pyramids were waking, one by one, lanterns and torches flickering to life as shadows gathered in the streets below. *Plots, ploys, whispers, lies, secrets within secrets, and somehow I have become part of them.*

Perhaps by now he should have grown used to such things. The Red Keep had its secrets too. *Even Rhaegar*. The Prince of Dragonstone had never trusted him as he had trusted Arthur Dayne. Harrenhal was proof of that. *The year of the false spring.*

The memory was still bitter. Old Lord Whent had announced the tourney shortly after a visit from his brother, Ser Oswell Whent of the Kingsguard. With Varys whispering in his ear, King Aerys became convinced that his son was conspiring to depose him, that Whent’s tourney was but a ploy to give Rhaegar a pretext for meeting with as many great lords as could be brought together. Aerys had not set foot outside the Red Keep since Duskendale, yet suddenly he announced that he would accompany Prince Rhaegar to Harrenhal, and everything had gone awry from there.

*If I had been a better knight ... if I had unhorsed the prince in that last tilt, as I unhorsed so many others, it would have been for me to choose the queen of love and beauty ...*

Rhaegar had chosen Lyanna Stark of Winterfell. Barristan Selmy would have made a different choice. Not the queen, who was not present. Nor Elia of Dorne, though she was good and gentle; had she been chosen, much war and woe might have been avoided. His choice would have been a young

maiden not long at court, one of Elia's companions ... though compared to Ashara Dayne, the Dornish princess was a kitchen drab.

Even after all these years, Ser Barristan could still recall Ashara's smile, the sound of her laughter. He had only to close his eyes to see her, with her long dark hair tumbling about her shoulders and those haunting purple eyes. *Daenerys has the same eyes.* Sometimes when the queen looked at him, he felt as if he were looking at Ashara's daughter ...

But Ashara's daughter had been stillborn, and his fair lady had thrown herself from a tower soon after, mad with grief for the child she had lost, and perhaps for the man who had dishonored her at Harrenhal as well. She died never knowing that Ser Barristan had loved her. *How could she?* He was a knight of the Kingsguard, sworn to celibacy. No good could have come from telling her his feelings. *No good came from silence either. If I had unhorsed Rhaegar and crowned Ashara queen of love and beauty, might she have looked to me instead of Stark?*

He would never know. But of all his failures, none haunted Barristan Selmy so much as that.

The sky was overcast, the air hot, muggy, oppressive, yet there was something in it that made his spine tingle. *Rain*, he thought. *A storm is coming. If not tonight, upon the morrow.* Ser Barristan wondered if he would live to see it. *If Hizdahr has his own Spider, I am as good as dead.* Should it come to that, he meant to die as he had lived, with his long-sword in his hand.

When the last light had faded in the west, behind the sails of the prowling ships on Slaver's Bay, Ser Barristan went back inside, summoned a pair of serving men, and told them to heat some water for a bath. Sparring with his squires in the afternoon heat had left him feeling soiled and sweaty.

The water, when it came, was only lukewarm, but Selmy lingered in the bath until it had grown cold and scrubbed his skin till it was raw. Clean as he had ever been, he rose, dried himself, and clad himself in whites. Stockings, smallclothes, silken tunic, padded jerkin, all fresh-washed and bleached. Over that he donned the armor that the queen had given him as a

token of her esteem. The mail was gilded, finely wrought, the links as supple as good leather, the plate enameled, hard as ice and bright as new-fallen snow. His dagger went on one hip, his long-sword on the other, hung from a white leather belt with golden buckles. Last of all he took down his long white cloak and fastened it about his shoulders.

The helm he left upon its hook. The narrow eye slit limited his vision, and he needed to be able to see for what was to come. The halls of the pyramid were dark at night, and foes could come at you from either side. Besides, though the ornate dragon's wings that adorned the helm were splendid to look upon, they could too easily catch a sword or axe. He would leave them for his next tourney if the Seven should grant him one.

Armed and armored, the old knight waited, sitting in the gloom of his small chamber adjoining the queen's apartments. The faces of all the kings that he had served and failed floated before him in the darkness, and the faces of the brothers who had served beside him in the Kingsguard as well. He wondered how many of them would have done what he was about to do. *Some, surely. But not all. Some would not have hesitated to strike down the Shavepate as a traitor.* Outside the pyramid, it began to rain. Ser Barristan sat along in the dark, listening. *It sounds like tears,* he thought. *It sounds like dead kings, weeping.*

Then it was time to go.

The Great Pyramid of Meereen had been built as an echo to the Great Pyramid of Ghis whose colossal ruins Lomas Longstrider had once visited. Like its ancient predecessor, whose red marble halls were now the haunt of bats and spiders, the Meereenese pyramid boasted three-and-thirty levels, that number being somehow sacred to the gods of Ghis. Ser Barristan began the long descent alone, his white cloak rippling behind him as he started down. He took the servants' steps, not the grand stairways of veined marble, but the narrower, steeper, straighter stairs hidden within the thick brick walls.

Twelve levels down he found the Shavepate waiting, his coarse features still hidden by the mask he had worn that morning, the blood bat. Six Brazen Beasts were with him. All were masked as insects, identical to one another.

*Locusts*, Selmy realized. “Groleo,” he said. “Groleo,” one of the locusts replied. “I have more locusts if you need them,” said Skahaz. “Six should serve. What of the men on the doors?”

“Mine. You will have no trouble.”

Ser Barristan clasped the Shavepate by the arm. “Shed no blood unless you must. Come the morrow we will convene a council and tell the city what we’ve done and why.”

“As you say. Good fortune to you, old man.”

They went their separate ways. The Brazen Beasts fell in behind Ser Barristan as he continued his descent.

The king’s apartments were buried in the very heart of the pyramid, on the sixteenth and seventeenth levels. When Selmy reached those floors, he found the doors to the interior of the pyramid chained shut, with a pair of Brazen Beasts posted as guards. Beneath the hoods of their patchwork cloaks, one was a rat, the other a bull.

“Groleo,” Ser Barristan said. “Groleo,” the bull returned. “Third hall to the right.” The rat unlocked the chain. Ser Barristan and his escort stepped through into a narrow, torchlit servants’ corridor of red and black brick. Their footsteps echoed on the floors as they strode past two halls and took the third one to the right.

Outside the carved hardwood doors to the king’s chambers stood Steel-skin, a younger pit fighter, not yet regarded as of the first rank. His cheeks and brow were scarred with intricate tattoos in green and black, ancient Valyrian sorcerer’s signs that supposedly made his flesh and skin as hard as steel. Similar markings covered his chest and arms, though whether they would actually stop a sword or axe remained to be seen.

Even without them, Steelskin looked formidable—a lean and wiry youth who overtopped Ser Barristan by half a foot. “Who goes there?” he called out, swinging his longaxe sideways to bar their way. When he saw Ser Barristan, with the brass locusts behind him, he lowered it again. “Old Ser.”

“If it please the king, I must needs have words with him.”

“The hour is late.”

“The hour is late, but the need is urgent.”

“I can ask.” Steelskin slammed the butt of his longaxe against the door to the king’s apartments. A slidehole opened. A child’s eye appeared. A child’s voice called through the door. Steelskin replied. Ser Barristan heard the sound of a heavy bar being drawn back. The door swung open.

“Only you,” said Steelskin. “The beasts wait here.”

“As you wish.” Ser Barristan nodded to the locusts. One returned his nod. Alone, Selmy slipped through the door.

Dark and windowless, surrounded on all sides by brick walls eight feet thick, the chambers that the king had made his own were large and luxurious within. Great beams of black oak supported the high ceilings. The floors were covered with silk carpets out of Qarth. On the walls were priceless tapestries, ancient and much faded, depicting the glory of the Old Empire of Ghis. The largest of them showed the last survivors of a defeated Valyrian army passing beneath the yoke and being chained. The archway leading to the royal bedchamber was guarded by a pair of sandalwood lovers, shaped and smoothed and oiled. Ser Barristan found them distasteful, though no doubt they were meant to be arousing. *The sooner we are gone from this place, the better.*

An iron brazier gave the only light. Beside it stood two of the queen’s cupbearers, Draqaz and Qezza. “Miklaz has gone to wake the king,” said Qezza. “May we bring you wine, ser?”

“No. I thank you.”

“You may sit,” said Draqaz, indicating a bench. “I prefer to stand.” He could hear voices drifting through the archway from the bedchamber. One of them was the king’s.

It was still a good few moments before King Hizdahr zo Loraq, Fourteenth of That Noble Name, emerged yawning, knotting the sash that closed his robe. The robe was green satin, richly worked with pearls and silver thread. Under it the king was quite naked. That was good. Naked men felt vulnerable and were less inclined to acts of suicidal heroism.

The woman Ser Barristan glimpsed peering through the archway from behind a gauzy curtain was naked as well, her breasts and hips only partially concealed by the blowing silk.

“Ser Barristan.” Hizdahr yawned again. “What hour is it? Is there news of my sweet queen?”

“None, Your Grace.”

Hizdahr sighed. ” ‘Your *Magnificence*,‘ please. Though at his hour, ‘Your Sleepiness’ would be more apt.” The king crossed to the sideboard to pour himself a cup of wine, but only a trickle remained in the bottom of the flagon. A flicker of annoyance crossed his face. “Miklaz, wine. At once.”

“Yes, Your Worship.”

“Take Draqaz with you. One flagon of Arbor gold, and one of that sweet red. None of our yellow piss, thank you. And the next time I find my flagon dry, I may have to take a switch to those pretty pink cheeks of yours.” The boy went running off, and the king turned back to Selmy. “I dreamed you found Daenerys.”

“Dreams can lie, Your Grace.”

” ‘Your Radiance’ would serve. What brings you to me at this hour, ser? Some trouble in the city?”

“The city is tranquil.”

“Is it so?” Hizdahr looked confused. “Why have you come?”

“To ask a question. Magnificence, are you the Harpy?”

Hizdahr's wine cup slipped through his fingers, bounced off the carpet, rolled. "You come to my bedchamber in the black of night and ask me that? Are you mad?" It was only then that the king seemed to notice that Ser Barristan was wearing his plate and mail. "What ... why ... how dare you ..."

"Was the poison your work, Magnificence?"

King Hizdahr backed away a step. "The locusts? That ... that was the Dornishman. Quentyn, the so-called prince. Ask Reznak if you doubt me."

"Have you proof of that? Has Reznak?"

"No, else I would have had them seized. Perhaps I should do so in any case. Marghaz will wring a confession out of them, I do not doubt. They're all poisoners, these Dornish. Reznak says they worship snakes."

"They eat snakes," said Ser Barristan. "It was your pit, your box, your seats. Sweet wine and soft cushions, figs and melons and honeyed locusts. You provided all. You urged Her Grace to try the locusts but never tasted one yourself."

"I ... hot spices do not agree with me. She was my wife. My queen. Why would I want to poison her?"

*Was, he says. He believes her dead.* "Only you can answer that, Magnificence. It might be that you wished to put another woman in her place." Ser Barristan nodded at the girl peering timidly from the bedchamber. "That one, perhaps?"

The king looked around wildly. "*Her?* She's nothing. A bedslave." He raised his hands. "I misspoke. Not a slave. A free woman. Trained in pleasure. Even a king has needs, she ... she is none of your concern, ser. I would never harm Daenerys. Never."

"You urged the queen to try the locusts. I heard you."

“I thought she might enjoy them.” Hizdahr retreated another step. “Hot and sweet at once.”

“Hot and sweet and poisoned. With mine own ears I heard you commanding the men in the pit to kill Drogon. Shouting at them.”

Hizdahr licked his lips. “The beast devoured Barsena’s flesh. Dragons prey on men. It was killing, burning ...”

“... burning men who meant harm to your queen. Harpy’s Sons, as like as not. Your friends.”

“Not my friends.”

“You say that, yet when you told them to stop killing they obeyed. Why would they do that if you were not one of them?”

Hizdahr shook his head. This time he did not answer. “Tell me true,” Ser Barristan said, “did you ever love her, even a little? Or was it just the crown you lusted for?”

“Lust? You dare speak to me of *lust*?” The king’s mouth twisted in anger. “I lusted for the crown, aye ... but not half so much as she lusted for her sellsword. Perhaps it was her precious captain who tried to poison her, for putting him aside. And if I had eaten of his locusts too, well, so much the better.”

“Daario is a killer but not a poisoner.” Ser Barristan moved closer to the king. “Are you the Harpy?” This time he put his hand on the hilt of his longsword. “Tell me true, and I promise you shall have a swift, clean death.”

“You presume too much, ser,” said Hizdahr. “I am done with these questions, and with you. You are dismissed from my service. Leave Meereen at once and I will let you live.”

“If you are not the Harpy, give me his name.” Ser Barristan pulled his sword from the scabbard. Its sharp edge caught the light from the brazier,



became a line of orange fire.

Hizdahr broke. “Khrazz!” he shrieked, stumbling backwards toward his bedchamber. “Khrazz! *Khrazz!*”

Ser Barristan heard a door open, somewhere to his left. He turned in time to see Khrazz emerge from behind a tapestry. He moved slowly, still groggy from sleep, but his weapon of choice was in his hand: a Dothraki *arakh*, long and curved. A slasher’s sword, made to deliver deep, slicing cuts from horseback. *A murderous blade against half-naked foes, in the pit or on the battlefield.* But here at close quarters, the *arakh*’s length would tell against it, and Barristan Selmy was clad in plate and mail.

“I am here for Hizdahr,” the knight said. “Throw down your steel and stand aside, and no harm need come to you.”

Khrazz laughed. “Old man. I will eat your heart.” The two men were of a height, but Khrazz was two stone heavier and forty years younger, with pale skin, dead eyes, and a crest of bristly red-black hair that ran from his brow to the base of his neck.

“Then come,” said Barristan the Bold. Khrazz came.

For the first time all day, Selmy felt certain. *This is what I was made for*, he thought. *The dance, the sweet steel song, a sword in my hand and a foe before me.*

The pit fighter was fast, blazing fast, as quick as any man Ser Barristan had ever fought. In those big hands, the *arakh* became a whistling blur, a steel storm that seemed to come at the old knight from three directions at once. Most of the cuts were aimed at his head. Khrazz was no fool. Without a helm, Selmy was most vulnerable above the neck.

He blocked the blows calmly, his longsword meeting each slash and turning it aside. The blades rang and rang again. Ser Barristan retreated. On the edge of his vision, he saw the cupbearers watching with eyes as big and white as chicken eggs. Khrazz cursed and turned a high cut into a low one, slipping past the old knight’s blade for once, only to have his blow scrape

uselessly off a white steel greave. Selmy's answering slash found the pit fighter's left shoulder, parting the fine linen to bite the flesh beneath. His yellow tunic began to turn pink, then red.

"Only cowards dress in iron," Khrazz declared, circling. No one wore armor in the fighting pits. It was blood the crowds came for: death, dismemberment, and shrieks of agony, the music of the scarlet sands.

Ser Barristan turned with him. "This coward is about to kill you, ser." The man was no knight, but his courage had earned him that much courtesy. Khrazz did not know how to fight a man in armor. Ser Barristan could see it in his eyes: doubt, confusion, the beginnings of fear. The pit fighter came on again, screaming this time, as if sound could slay his foe where steel could not. The *arakh* slashed low, high, low again.

Selmy blocked the cuts at his head and let his armor stop the rest, whilst his own blade opened the pit fighter's cheek from ear to mouth, then traced a raw red gash across his chest. Blood welled from Khrazz's wounds. That only seemed to make him wilder. He seized the brazier with his off hand and flipped it, scattering embers and hot coals at Selmy's feet. Ser Barristan leapt over them. Khrazz slashed at his arm and caught him, but the *arakh* could only chip the hard enamel before it met the steel below.

"In the pit that would have taken your arm off, old man."

"We are not in the pit."

*"Take off that armor!"*

"It is not too late to throw down your steel. Yield."

"Die," spat Khrazz ... but as he lifted his *arakh*, its tip grazed one of the wall hangings and hung. That was all the chance Ser Barristan required. He slashed open the pit fighter's belly, parried the *arakh* as it wrenched free, then finished Khrazz with a quick thrust to the heart as the pit fighter's entrails came sliding out like a nest of greasy eels.

Blood and viscera stained the king's silk carpets. Selmy took a step back. The longsword in his hand was red for half its length. Here and there the carpets had begun to smolder where some of the scattered coals had fallen. He could hear poor Qezza sobbing. "Don't be afraid," the old knight said. "I mean you no harm, child. I want only the king."

He wiped his sword clean on a curtain and stalked into the bedchamber, where he found Hizdahr zo Loraq, Fourteenth of His Noble Name, hiding behind a tapestry and whimpering. "Spare me," he begged. "I do not want to die."

"Few do. Yet all men die, regardless." Ser Barristan sheathed his sword and pulled Hizdahr to his feet. "Come. I will escort you to a cell." By now, the Brazen Beasts should have disarmed Steelskin. "You will be kept a prisoner until the queen returns. If nothing can be proved against you, you will not come to harm. You have my word as a knight." He took the king's arm and led him from the bedchamber, feeling strangely light-headed, almost drunk. *I was a Kingsguard. What am I now?*

Miklaz and Draqaz had returned with Hizdahr's wine. They stood in the open door, cradling the flagons against their chests and staring wide-eyed at the corpse of Khrazz. Qezza was still crying, but Jezhene had appeared to comfort her. She hugged the younger girl, stroking her hair. Some of the other cupbearers stood behind them, watching. "Your Worship," Miklaz said, "the noble Reznak mo Reznak says to t-tell you, come at once."

The boy addressed the king as if Ser Barristan were not there, as if there were no dead man sprawled upon the carpet, his life's blood slowly staining the silk red. *Skahaz was supposed to take Reznak into custody until we could be certain of his loyalty. Had something gone awry?* "Come where?" Ser Barristan asked the boy. "Where does the seneschal want His Grace to go?"

"Outside." Miklaz seemed to see him for the first time. "Outside, ser. To the t-terrace. To see."

"To see what?"

“D-d-dragons. The dragons have been loosed, ser.” *Seven save us all*, the old knight thought.