

The Prince's Justice

The sword hurled toward Areo Hotah. The captain raised his own blade to parry. The sound of crashing steel rang out through the crowd, a circle of a hundred men and one Sand Snake. Hotah breathed hard and tasted sulfur in the air. Torches lit the sands before them, and Hotah was careful to keep his eyes off the flames. His opponent, Ser Balon Swann, wore a halfhelm, a breastplate, and, as always, a white cloak. The knight looked at ease as he slashed again and again at the captain. Hotah dodged and blocked with his shield. He was unnerved by what he felt. *Exhaustion.*

Hotah's heart beat faster, his arms aching. Martell spearmen parted as he retreated from Balon's blows. The captain searched for an opening to strike, but the Kingsguard gave him nothing. Then Hotah stepped left when he should have pivoted right and he knew at once that he was caught. As the knight's sword drew close, Hotah put his weight behind a last, desperate counter, but he struck only air. *A feint, though he had his opening. A wary, disciplined fighter.* Then Ser Balon slammed his steel against the captain's copper scales and the sands rushed up to meet Hotah's cheek.

Lannister men cheered over Martell groans. Hotah lifted his face from the ground and leaned on his hip. Ser Balon tossed his practice blade to one squire as another took his shield. Then he walked up to Hotah and offered his open palm. The onlookers went silent.

"A fine spar, Captain," Balon said, his forehead covered with sweat. "You fight well."

I was slow. Hotah cleared his throat. "You fought better." He noted the knight's brow. *It's as it was in Sunspear.* He took the knight's hand and pulled himself up; even so, effort brought him to his feet. "Thank you, ser."

Murmuring began and Hotah sensed relief washing over the crowd. It had been Ser Balon's idea to spar for the men, thinking it would lift their spirits. Obara Sand had pushed the party across the desert from the Greenblood at a brutal pace with no thought to their bearing. Four sand steeds had died on the journey, and when they had finally reached the Brimstone, they found they had ridden too far south: it had cost them a full day to follow the yellow river north to the Hellholt. Hotah wondered again why Prince Doran had selected Obara to lead the mission. He sought her viper eyes now without finding them. *She stomped off when I fell.*

With a smile, Ser Ulwyck Uller approached Hotah. The heir to the Hellholt stood shorter than the captain, but had a bigger belly by half. "I've got a dragon on you, Captain."

"A dragon, ser?" Hotah's voice was a low grumble as he brushed the sand from his copper scales. "Did you lose a wager?"

"No," Ulwyck scoffed, "but I'm less confident than before." He punched Hotah's chest. "Against my lord brother, I bet that *you* would deal the killing blow to that fiend, Darkstar. My brother predicted it would be Ser Balon. Lady Obara bet on herself." He let out a chortle. "Don't let me down, Captain."

“We need a blunted axe. The sword is clearly not his weapon,” said Lord Morros Slynt, a squire of Ser Balon. Morros was nine-and-ten, but his skills placed him far from knighthood. “You are from Pentos, yes?”

“Norvos,” Hotah said.

“Norvos?” asked Danos Slynt, a squire of one-and-ten. “Where’s that?”

A third squire, Jothos, elbowed his younger brother. “It’s one of the Free Cities, you dolt! On the Rhoyme!”

“The Noyne,” Hotah corrected.

Danos made an ugly face. “The *Noyne*? What a stupid name for a river!” Then he giggled. “I am King Tommen, King of the Andals, the *Noynar*, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms!”

“Quiet,” commanded Morros. His frog-face looked uneasy at the mention of Tommen amongst Dornishmen. “You are lord of nothing.”

“*You* are a lord, I hear,” Ser Ulwyck said to Morros. “Should we call you Lord Squire?”

Morros stood up straight. “I am Lord of Chyttering, ser, and the former heir to Harrenhal. I have not yet been seated, but we have been told our lands will be taken back soon. Lord Randyll will crush what’s left of Stannis’s forces while the would-be usurper rots on the Wall.”

Ser Ulwyck smiled. “Yes, I am certain. A Lannister always pay his debts ... or her debts. Tell me again, who is it that rots on the Wall?”

The young man’s face flushed with anger, but Ser Balon intervened before the squire said anything more. “Ser Ulwyck, your lord brother offered a tour of your cellars. We would like to ... pay our respects.”

“The dungeons, you mean. To be sure.”

The hour of the owl came and the party convened by the gates of the Hellholt. They were greeted by Ser Ulwyck, Lord Harmen and four Uller guards. Ser Balon was accompanied by his knights Ser Tanton, Ser Merlon, and Ser Timon. Of the Dornishmen, the Knight of Lemonwood and Lady Obara had come. Everyone in the party was armed, including Areo Hotah. He felt whole again with his ash-and-iron wife by his side.

“Obara? I am surprised to see you here,” said Lord Harmen. “You have seen the bones a dozen times.”

Obara looked sideways at Ser Balon and his knights. “I never miss a chance to revel over the fallen enemies of Dorne.”

Hotah knew the truth of it, though. Prince Doran had ordered her to keep the white knight close. She was the prince’s eyes, his ears, his voice. Everything Ser Balon said and everything he knew, Obara was to report back to Doran each opportunity she got. Just two hours prior, Hotah had seen a raven fly from the Hellholt. What the prince had not mentioned to Obara was that he

had given the same orders to Hotah, just before dispatching him to High Hermitage as the Prince's Justice. *Serve. Obey, Protect.*

Inside the castle, fragrant candles covered the miasma of the nearby river. Hellholt guards stared forward, stationed every few feet along the entry hall; they wore yellow and crimson plate and wielded spears with shafts painted red. Hotah followed behind the rest of the party and watched. Ser Tanton polished the apple pommel of his sword with his thumb. Tall Ser Merlon Crakehall kept his eyes on the archways above to avoid hitting his head. Ser Deziel Dalt had a dagger hidden in his jerkin and a second in his boot. Obara Sand gripped her spear as if she were strangling it.

Ser Timon was the queerest of the bunch. The knight was lean and light on his feet, with a mop of blond hair. He was never without a smile, and he stopped to nod at each Uller guard in turn. Timon kept his hand off his sword hilt, allowing his blade to swing and rattle loudly inside an ornate metal scabbard from Myr. Hotah had heard others call the knight the Scrapesword for the sound his sword made when he unsheathed it. *This one is a distraction*, the captain thought.

Ser Balon Swann was the one Hotah needed to watch. The knight was at the front of the party, speaking with Lord Uller. From the rear, all Hotah could see was Ser Balon's white wool cloak. Unlike Ser Arys, Balon never went without it. The sight of it riled the Dornish, Hotah knew, and Obara most of all. Yet the brooch of quarreling swans that clasped it at his neck was as fixed as a black-and-white tattoo.

The passage they walked emptied into the great hall, filled with a hundred trestle tables. On the walls, vibrant tapestries depicted the Dornish wars, the Andal founding of the Hellholt, and the fiery event that gave the castle its name—when the ancient Lord Uller had invited his foes to feast with him in the name of peace, only to lock them in his hall and burn them alive.

"The Ullers have a proud and beautiful history." Lord Harmen's eyes were bright with mockery as he gestured to an image of banquet guests engulfed in flame. *Some of those guests had been children.*

Tanton Fossoway looked pale, while Ser Merlon and Ser Timon exchanged a look. *Half of the Ullers are half mad*, the captain thought. *The other half are worse.* It was difficult to imagine that the gentle Ellaria had been raised here.

"These are fine tapestries, my lord," Ser Balon said in a courteous tone. "We are honored that you share them with us."

"You want to see dead dragons," said Lord Harmen. It was not a question.

The party was escorted down another corridor to a narrow passageway revealing stairs. It was a steep descent, and they went one at a time. An Uller guard led the way, followed by Lord Harmen, his brother, a second guard, then Ser Balon and his knights. A third guard went in front of Hotah, with the Knight of Lemonwood, Obara, and a fourth guard coming after. *A bad place for a battle*, Hotah thought. *My axe has little room.*

"This is the oldest part of the castle," called out Ser Ulwyck as they made their way down. "These dungeons kept House Uller safe from the fires of history."

The thirteen reached the underground hall and a guard waved a torch to illuminate the way. The damp stone walls were flecked with nitre and lined with casks of wine. There was enough Dornish red to keep the castle drunk for years.

“These prisoners should be freed,” japed the Scrapesword, as he and Ser Tanton examined the vintages written on the casks. “Ten years old, from the Torentine Valley. Older than our princess.”

Ser Timon’s comment struck Hotah as odd. *Older than Myrcella?*

“That’s Dayne wine,” said Obara Sand. “Darkstar is likely in his cups on that same swill.”

“The wine of Lemonwood is vastly superior,” said Ser Deziel. “Its flavor lingers on the tongue, full and rich, free of deceit.”

“The cider of the Cockleswhent is the finest drink in the Seven Kingdoms,” countered Ser Tanton. “After I slay the rogue Ser Gerold in single combat, I will buy each of you a barrel.”

Obara and Ser Deziel stared at Ser Tanton blankly. Ser Timon snorted back laughter.

“Shall we continue?” Lord Harmen called back to the stragglers.

After passing several empty cells, the party came to the Hall of Bones. Ser Balon and his knights gaped in wonder.

Ser Ulwyck took in their faces with a dry chuckle. “This is the very reason I bring my paramours here.”

Encased in jagged sheets of milky glass, the sun-mottled bones of a monstrous beast stretched the length of the hall.

“It’s true then.” Ser Balon tiptoed toward the ancient skeleton as if it were alive and hungry. “They say Meraxes could swallow a horse whole. Only the Black Dread surpassed Meraxes in size.” The knight touched the milky glass.

“That glass is said to be from the Dragon’s Wroth,” explained Ulwyck Uller. “Aegon and Visenya flew down to the Hellholt and scorched its sands from horizon to horizon, fusing glass with the bones of the fallen mount.”

Hotah watched Balon’s eyes as they followed from dragon tail to dragon neck. The bones and glass had been raised and supported with thin iron bars to return Meraxes to her shape in life.

“The dragon is missing a head,” observed Ser Merlon.

“The Dornish cleaned the skull of glass and carried it to King’s Landing long ago,” said Lord Harmen. “It was a gift of peace.”

“I would have kept it,” said the Scrapesword. “Send a whale skull in its place.”

“A whale skull isn’t big enough,” objected the Knight of Lemonwood. “And, as you can see, dragonbone is black.”

“The First Dornish War raged on for years,” recited Lord Harmen. “There was scarce more difficult a time in our history. Meraxes rained hellfire upon Lord Uthor’s smallfolk, his towers, his ships. Scorpions lined the walls and dotted every tower, but no one expected they would truly kill a dragon. We all believed the dragons invincible—Valyrian gods—and so we aimed at the riders. Danlai was naught but a tailor, thrust onto the scorpions when the dragons came south. Atop the tallest tower in the castle, he aimed for Queen Rhaenys, but his iron bolt missed. It was the most glorious failure in the history of all Dorne, as his bolt hit not the dragonrider, but the dragon’s eye.”

“The eye, my lord?” asked Ser Merlon Crakehall, turning. “I had heard the gullet.”

“I believe it was the ear,” pronounced Ser Tanton.

“Nonsense,” said Lord Harmen, annoyed. “The eye of Meraxes bled fire, all the tales agree. The shriek of a dying dragon had not been heard in Westeros since the days of Florian, and it was music to the ear. Meraxes flailed in the air, spit her pillars of flame, and crashed through the same tower she’d been shot from. Scores died just from the dragon’s fall, including Danlai Boltmaster—as men later named him.”

“They should have called him Boltnovice,” the Scrapesword whispered to Hotah. “He missed.”

The lord continued. “The dreaded beast broke through the castle wall on her way to the earth, where she let out one last bone-rattling song. None could say whether Meraxes crushed her in landing or whether she fell to her death beforehand, but Aegon’s favorite queen was never seen again.”

“Save for by Lord Uthor,” Ser Ulwyck added.

Ulwyck’s lord brother smiled. “That is but a story.”

“It’s a story I tell my paramours.”

“I am sorry, ser,” said Ser Merlon. “Are you saying that Rhaenys survived?”

“I will be clear,” Ser Ulwyck said. “Lord Uthor Uller loved Queen Rhaenys deeply ... and repeatedly ... in this very dungeon.”

The knights looked about their grim surroundings. There were no windows, no chairs, no benches, no beds. The stone walls had no sconces. Without the light the guards carried, they would be in utter darkness. Ser Tanton’s eyes went to a chain on the rear wall.

“Why the faces?” tutted Ulwyck Uller. “The silver bitch and her ilk killed thousands of innocents. Men, women, babes, burned alive ... and still people brood on *her* fate. You should not. Any maester will tell you that no one should love the dragon. Not the Rhoynar, not the Andals, not the First Men ... and not the Noynar neither.” He smiled at Hotah.

“Still,” Ser Deziel Dalt said stiffly. “If the story is true, Lord Uthor’s actions cannot be admired.”

“Lord Uthor faced justice for his crime in short order,” said Ser Ulwyck. “He was stabbed by a catspaw after King Aegon put a bounty on his head. One by one his trueborn sons were murdered, until his only kin was a bastard babe with purple eyes.”

Lord Harmen smiled at his guests apologetically. "Again, these are crib tales. My brother enjoys telling women we have Targaryen blood in us."

"It would explain the madness," snorted Obara.

The lord and his brother brushed off the insult with laughter. Then Lord Harmen regarded Obara coolly. "What do you think drew your father to my daughter Ellaria?"

"The same thing that drew him to my mother."

"This has been a most generous tour, my lord," interrupted Ser Balon, "but we must retire to our camp. We rise early to venture to Sandstone. We are most grateful for the water you have provided."

Lord Harmen nodded. "Please let us know of anything else you may need."

"There is one thing," Ser Balon said. "Could your armory spare a blunted axe?"

That night Hotah dreamed of a bearded dragon, though he woke before he could be burned.

The next morning, Lady Obara was ready to depart, but the Scrapesword was missing.

"Is he at the sept again?" she growled. The same had happened at Vaith and Godsgrace before. "The pious fool."

Hotah had spent more than twenty years in Dorne, but still he understood neither the seven-faced god nor its followers. Knights were warriors of the gods and made solemn vows to them, not so different from his own. *Simple vows for simple men.* Yet each knight Hotah knew was a puzzle to him. Ser Balon Swann prayed each morning with Morros, Jothos, and Danos, yet Prince Doran had said the knight conspired to murder his son. Ser Tanton and Ser Merlon's prayers were never more than cursory, but they appeared to be good men. Hotah had not seen Ser Timon pray at all, though the Scrapesword would go to sept to light candles at every opportunity.

Oberyn was a knight, the captain thought. The Mountain was a knight. Darkstar is a knight.

Ser Timon returned in a short time, his scabbard rattling. The white knight rode up beside him.

"In the name of the Father?" asked Ser Balon.

Ser Timon shook his head. "In the name of the Warrior."

Obara Sand led the hundred westward across the Dornish desert. The gods were good and the desert sky was overcast: a welcome respite. They made good time, and Lady Obara allowed for ample rest to water the horses. *Learning from her mistakes.* During one rest, Ser Tanton sang about a girl named Meggett, with both Lannister and Martell men joining in. The water smelled of rotten eggs, but Hotah heard few complaints. The party marched through the afternoon and partway through the evening, then camped by a tall outcrop of sandstone.

Ser Balon Swann found him sharpening his longaxe. Their men did not need cheering tonight, so they crested an eroding hill to retreat from view. Without a word, the captain and the

Kingsguard struck steel on steel. Ser Balon swung his practice blade with deft precision; Hotah twirled his dull longaxe with ease.

Balon's parries slowed as Hotah's axe descended from every direction. The captain swung with fury while wide-eyed Balon backed away with each deflection. Finally, Hotah managed to slide his axe along Balon's blade and push the sword aside. In one quick motion, Hotah held the rounded steel against Ser Balon's breast.

Balon Swann stared, then laughed. "Well done." They stepped away from one another, and Balon eyed his opponent. "It seems I have much to learn, though you should see me with my morningstar ... Tell me, how is it that the Prince of Dorne has a Norvoshi captain of guard?"

"I was his wife's guardsman," Hotah answered, catching his breath. "She returned for Norvos. I remained in Dorne."

"She returned? Why did you stay in the hot desert when your lady headed back home?"

Hotah swallowed. He did not like to think about Lady Mellario's return to Great Norvos. Dressed in a dark cloak over a jade dress, she had boarded *Rhaelle's Reverie* without her children, without her husband, without her guardsman. She had proved a good woman and a better master. Many an evening he wondered how she fared back in Norvos.

Areo Hotah missed her.

My little princess looks so much like her.

"Lady Mellario commanded me to stay," said Hotah. "I was to serve House Martell, obey the prince, protect her children."

"In that order?" asked Ser Balon.

Hotah met his look. He remained silent.

"Forgive me," said Ser Balon. "A bad jape."

"How did you become a Kingsguard?" asked Hotah. He had little interest in Swann's story, but it was polite to return the inquiry.

"From a young age, I knew I wanted to be a knight," said Ser Balon, quickly taking up the change of subject. "I had little choice as a second son. My brother is not the open-handed sort. When he becomes lord, there is no place for me at Stonehelm. Do you have siblings?"

"Five," said Hotah.

"Then perhaps you understand. My father had me trained to fight with sword and lance, and I was knighted at six-and-ten. But I was not yet a knight in truth."

Hotah did not follow. "No?"

"At court, I knew a knight named Ser Preston Greenfield," Ser Balon continued. "I did not like him. He was a dull man, a braggart, a philanderer, only adequate with the blade. I believed

myself a better man in every respect. Yet, the day that Myrcella sailed for Dorne, there was a riot. I fled for the safety of the Red Keep along with most of the royal procession. Ser Preston fought to protect the High Septon and lost his life.”

The captain nodded. *Protect. Obey. Serve.*

“Ser Preston had a code, and that is the code I want to live my life by. I remember every aspect of that day. Every face. Every scream. My own shame. Soon after, I was asked to replace Ser Preston on the Kingsguard.”

Hotah thought on Ser Balon’s words and saw Ser Arys Oakheart charging at him like a fool. *Who was he protecting?* He thought of Trystane and what Prince Doran had said of Ser Balon. The sweat on the knight’s brow at the Sunspear feast revealed his guilt. *These knights are riddles.*

They resumed their spar. “I did not know Myrcella very well,” said the knight, “though I resided at court around her family for some time. I was distressed to hear of her injury; even more so to see it.”

“Lady Nymeria will ensure she arrives safely in King’s Landing,” said Hotah.

“Not all those who accompanied Princess Myrcella to Dorne are returning with her, am I correct?”

“Whom do you mean?” Hotah replied between strikes.

“Myrcella’s cousin, if I recall, and her septa.”

“Her handmaid.” Hotah spun and threw his whole weight behind a downward slash. “Rosamund.”

Ser Balon deflected and jumped back, sure-footed. “And Eglantine, yes. Did some ill fate befall them, as with Ser Arys?”

“Ser Gerold Dayne killed your white brother,” Hotah lied, but with honesty he said, “I cannot say for sure where Rosamund or Eglantine are. I cannot say for sure that they did not return with Princess Myrcella.”

“Did you ever meet a guard named Rolder?” asked Balon, lunging forward with a slash. “A man called Dake?”

Hotah blocked. “I attend Prince Doran at the Water Gardens. Myrcella was in Sunspear. I was not familiar with her shields.”

“I rode for Dorne with a scrawled list of everyone who left King’s Landing the day of the riot. I was wondering if you knew where they went.”

Hotah shook his head. The dance of dull steel went on.

“You mentioned my brother in white. I wanted to ask, but forgot until now ... Where was Ser Arys’s silk cloak?”

Areo Hotah nearly took a crack to the hip. "Silk cloak?" He remembered the blazing sun looking down on Ser Arys's body, at the end. He had no head, but he had a silk cloak. Red washed down the white.

"I was collecting Ser Arys's things when I noticed his ceremonial cloak was missing." Ser Balon's vigor swelled, and his slices came down twice as fast. His wool cloak billowed.

"That must have been what he wore when Darkstar slew him." Hotah struggled to speak and parry at once.

"That's what I assumed, but then I thought, 'What was Ser Arys doing wearing his silken white cloak when Ser Gerold Dayne snuffed out his life's fire?' Was there perhaps some great ceremony concerning Princess Myrcella, or even Prince Doran, when the incident occurred?"

Hotah had no answers. Prince Doran was meant for weaving truths and lies into a believable tapestry, but Areo Hotah was naught but the watcher. "I do not know why he was wearing it."

Ser Balon finally backed away and afforded Hotah a brief rest. "Well, surely you know what my brother was doing when Darkstar murdered him."

Areo Hotah stood still as a statue. "I do not know. I was not there." He remembered Ser Arys's light brown eyes staring at him when his head ended its roll.

"I apologize for asking so many questions. It must sound like I'm suspicious of you or Prince Doran." Ser Balon straightened his back and raised his chin. "I simply must fulfill my duty as Kingsguard. Princess Myrcella deserves justice, and I do not know if that stops at executing this Ser Gerold Dayne."

Justice for his little princess. Hotah stood upright and gripped his longaxe tight. "You can ask Prince Doran when we return to Sunspear." They recommenced their spar anew.

That night Areo Hotah dreamt of the brand on his chest, the smell of hair and flesh. He awoke and scratched the mark until it bled.

Their band of Martell and Lannister men was within hours of Sandstone when Obara Sand rode up beside him.

"Captain, I know we have had our differences," the Sand Snake said with a grimace, "but I entreat you to continue sparring with Ser Balon. I heard you dueled with him the other night until you both were dire sore."

Hotah nodded, confused. "Is there cause for concern, my lady?"

Her sand steed fell in closer, though the nearest ears were Dornish and a hundred feet away. "Ser Balon will send his last raven to King's Landing at Sandstone. The night following our departure, spar with Ser Balon. Tire him out. He is a good fighter, from what I saw at the Hellholt. I will need him fatigued if I am to slay the man."

Areo Hotah felt his brow furrow. "You mean to murder Ser Balon."

“To dispense justice,” Obara said. “The man plotted to kill my cousin. My men will take care of Ser Balon’s companions as they sleep off the wine Lord Qorgyle will send with us. We outnumber the lions four to one. Ser Balon is not a drunk, however, and his blade can match your own. Fatigue him. My spear will find a chink in his armor.” *She is quick and strong. If he were exhausted ...*

“The squires,” said Hotah suddenly. “Danos is one-and-ten.”

Obara only stared at him.

He thought of the Prince’s words. *Tell me, Captain, is that my shame or my glory?* Hotah scratched his chest. “This could start a war.”

“The crime will be Darkstar’s.” A laugh twisted her lips. “An ambush in the night, we will say.” Obara Sand’s horse moved away. “This is my command.”

“I follow the commands of Prince Doran,” he answered dully.

“Whom did he command you to obey?”

They reached Sandstone by midday. The castle proved smaller than the Hellholt, but taller. A hundred edifices rose up around the only well for fifty miles. Red walls encased a dozen tall towers of differing heights, each topped with a scorpion, its stinger wrought in iron. Lord Quentyn Qorgyle had planned a feast for the men in the evening, which gave them time for leisure. Most went to the brothel. Some opted only to sleep. The Scrapesword went to the sept.

When the sun set, the men convened in Lord Quentyn’s banquet hall. The dishes were of the western desert; many were foreign to Hotah. There was snake-on-the-spit, roasted swallow, desert-mouse ear, buzzard’s wing: each of these was served caked in spices. Most of the dishes, though, were scorpion. Scorpion tail, scorpion claw, sand-scorpion, crab-scorpion, beggar-scorpion, skewered scorpion, scorpion soup, lizard fried in scorpion oil—the Qorgyles of Sandstone were plainly fond of their sigil. The Lannister men choked on the blood-red strongwine, and the Dornishmen laughed at a man-sized dish of a lion and a stag entwined in love, made only of chickpea and olive paste.

The stewards could not agree on where to seat Areo Hotah. He had never been to Sandstone but when accompanying Prince Doran or Lady Mellario. With them, it had seemed proper that he stand on the dais, his axe ever at the ready. Having him guard a fighter like Ser Balon, however, would be insulting—yet to sit with the lords was well above his station. In the end, he was seated with the knights and squires, between Danos and Jothos Slynt. Their brother Morros was given a place on the dais, amongst Lord and Lady Qorgyle, their sons, Ser Balon, the Knight of Lemonwood, and Lady Obara.

Hotah spent most of the meal wondering what the lords and the white knight spoke of. To his right, Jothos ate ravenously. Danos made two fried scorpions battle to his left.

“Jothos,” Ser Merlon yelled from down the table. “How goes your training with the blade? Better than Lord Squire’s, I hope.”

“Fair, ser,” said the squire. “Ser Balon says I have promise.”

“Learn quickly, my boy,” said the Scrapesword. “I began my life as a hedge knight close to your age. I was seven-and-ten.”

“I was a household knight at eight-and-ten,” added Ser Tanton.

Hotah watched Jothos eat. The boy was large for five-and-ten and had a healthy appetite. Scorpion after scorpion went into the boy’s mouth. The sleeves of his shirt were too short, Hotah observed. A boy who soon outgrew his clothes.

The stewards placed me at the right table.

A serving man came to Hotah. “Captain, Lady Obara would like a word.”

Hotah rose and approached Obara Sand at the end of the dais.

“I would like you to watch Ser Timon,” the Sand Snake said, her voice hushed so Morros would not hear.

“My lady?”

“I sent a man to the sept to ask about Ser Scabbard. The septon reported the knight lit some candles, prayed to the Mother, and then inquired if he had seen a girl of nine or ten years, green eyes, cheerful in spirit, with golden hair.”

“Myrcella.” Hotah could smell the sweet wine in Obara’s glass.

“Why would the Scrapesword think she and Nym would be traveling this way?” She glared at Ser Timon, who was drinking with Ser Merlon. “He also thought the girl might be traveling with a septa. That means Tyene is with them.”

Hotah stood silent.

“Doran schemes. Tell me what his game is.”

“I cannot say,” said Hotah. He had vowed to keep his prince’s secrets. Even if he had not, he could not explain why Lady Nym or Tyene Sand would be passing through Sandstone.

“They were supposed to head to King’s Landing, but now they venture west, toward Oldtown. Toward Sarella.” Obara’s face was red with anger. “Why would my uncle lie to me? Does he not trust me?”

“I cannot say,” Hotah repeated.

“Leave me,” spat Obara.

Hotah returned to his seat. He watched Ser Timon for a long while, as ordered, though he doubted the knight would say much. The Scrapesword was near asleep from wine. Hotah turned back to look at Ser Balon. The white knight’s plate was filled with food, but he did not eat. His cup was filled with wine, but he did not drink. He spoke with Ser Gulian Qorgyle, then with his brother Ser Arron, though Hotah was too far to hear. He watched Ser Balon’s mouth, trying to make out a single word.

“Jothos,” said Danos, “I dare you to eat the soup.”

“No, *you* eat it.”

“You are a craven unless you eat the soup.”

“You know it is too spicy. Do you want me screaming in the privy like Ser Balon at Sunspear?”

He did eat the stew? Hotah prided himself on his powers of observation. *Could I have erred?*

Hotah did not sleep that night. He did not want to dream again. His chest still itched.

The next day was a haze. The captain rode at the head of the column. He did not look back. Hotah did not want to see their faces. *The faces of the dead*. During rests, he kept his gaze on the sands of Dorne. Would that his ears could stay on the dunes as well. Once, he heard Ser Balon telling Jothos about the proper riding position for tilts. Ser Tanton sang at one point, this time about a woman named Bessa. Obara shouted orders at someone. Ser Timon’s scabbard jangled. Danos laughed.

The captain watched the sands shift from orange to red as the sun set, then darken as night fell. The skins of Qorgyle made their way around camp, Hotah could hear. The men were loud and merry, though the Lannister voices rose above the Dornish.

Hotah decided to walk. The stars glimmered and the moon was almost full. Somewhere in the night, a desert wolf howled. All the points of the Great Boat were in view, and he could make out the Bell in the eastern sky. The Squirrel was half-hidden by the horizon, as it was always in Dorne. These were his only companions left from Norvos. These, and his faith.

Looking above, Areo Hotah felt doubt for a moment. He pushed the sin out of his mind. It was not for him to question whether his god was watching him. *Obey, Serve, Protect*.

Hotah hiked up to a small outcrop among the dull red rocks where he could rest his head, overlooking the camp below. From up high, the sounds of the camp were faint, though Obara Sand’s order to retire was clear enough. As silence settled, he found himself thinking of Jothos and Danos.

Our quest was justice for an attempt on a child’s life. Now Obara would kill children to slake her taste for vengeance. Why did Prince Doran give command to Obara? He knew what she was.

Hotah did not remember falling asleep. He opened his eyes to find Ser Balon Swann standing over him. He was holding out an open palm.

“I have a game for us to play this time,” said the white knight as they picked their starting places. “For every hit I land, you tell me a truth, and I will do the same.”

Hotah looked down at the blunted axe he’d been handed, then at Balon. “You have vowed to keep secrets.”

“I have,” said Ser Balon. “I have also sworn to protect Princess Myrcella, and I believe that vow takes precedence. Perhaps you feel the same about House Martell.”

Hotah considered the stakes. Ser Balon was a dead man. Any secret the captain told would not leave the camp. His vow would remain intact. The choice was easy.

Hotah nodded and raised the axe.

The men danced.

Hotah began with an aggressive lunge that took Ser Balon unawares. Hotah's blunted mistress met Balon's chest.

The knight stepped back, resetting his stance. "What would you like to know first?"

Hotah had his first question ready. "Are you tracking Lady Nymeria?"

Ser Balon looked confused. "No. I thought she made for King's Landing. Why in the seven hells would I be following *her*?"

"You have not scored a hit."

Balon shrugged, and they began again. Hotah faked a slash with his axe. When Balon lifted his shield, Hotah used the butt of his axe to knock the shield aside. His axe blade came back to strike the knight's leg.

The captain's second question was, "At Sunspear, did you eat the stew?"

Another confused look—then the white knight laughed. "You do have the most curious inquiries. Yes, I ate that venom, to my grief. The whole night I was ill on its spice."

They danced. Ser Balon slashed; Hotah parried. The captain swung at the knight, again and again, and met his shield each time. Hotah then hit high and Balon's halfhelm rattled.

Hotah paused before asking his third question. "Did you plan on murdering Prince Trystane Martell?"

A look of concern fell on Ser Balon's face. "Never. If someone told you that, they lied. I am not one to murder children."

"You are one to follow your liege, and I was told your queen ordered it."

"Queen Cersei does only what she believes benefits her. What advantage to her is a dead prince?"

Hotah had not considered the queen's motive.

"No, Queen Cersei only commanded me to deliver the head of Ser Gregor and return with Princess Myrcella. It was stressed, however, that her return was paramount and absolute." Ser Balon returned to a fighting stance. "Had Prince Doran refused to give her up, we would have stolen her away from her tower, or wherever she was kept. But the prince agreed to return Myrcella, so it never came to that."

Ser Balon thrust his sword at him. At the last moment, Hotah blocked with the grip of his longaxe. He swung the axe in counterattack; Balon blocked with his shield. Hotah struck again,

this time with more power—but before his blow reached the white knight, he felt a sword hit hard on his hip.

Hotah let the butt of his axe rest in the sand. “Ask your question.”

“Did Ser Gerold Dayne cut Princess Myrcella?”

“I cannot say.”

“I scored a fair hit.”

“I cannot say. I did not see.”

Ser Balon’s eyes opened wide. “Then you were there.”

Hotah resumed his stance.

The captain went on the attack, but Balon retreated so deftly that he hardly had to block. Despite the shifting sands, his balance was exquisite. When Areo Hotah stumbled mid-swing, the rap he got across the legs was a formality.

Balon Swann asked his second question. “Did Lady Nymeria depart for King’s Landing with Princess Myrcella?”

It was Hotah’s turn to laugh. “A strange question. Yes. This was the prince’s order.” *Did he not just say he believed Nym headed there?*

Now Ser Balon advanced with speed. A flurry of slashes came at the captain; his parries could not keep pace. *He was holding back before.* The white knight’s sword tip ended square on Hotah’s chest.

The third question. “Did Ser Gerold Dayne kill Ser Arys Oakheart?”

Hotah looked up from the sword to Ser Balon’s face. It shone with sweat. “No.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

Hotah had no answer.

Then Ser Balon looked over Hotah’s shoulder. “My lady.”

The captain turned and saw. A cloud had crossed the moon and the figure moved half in shadow, but Hotah knew its long stride and its cold eyes. In one hand it held a spear, in the other a round shield. Both glimmered where they caught the starlight.

“Have you come to spar with us, my lady?” called Ser Balon.

The Sand Snake’s walk became a run. “I come for justice.” She danced forward and smashed her spear into Balon Swann’s half-raised shield. She spun and skipped around him, lashing blows at his boots. He stooped with his heavy shield, blocking low.

“What treachery is this?” cried Ser Balon.

“You speak of treachery?” screamed Obara. “You came to Dorne with a mummer’s skull and a plot to slay Trystane!”

Ser Balon moved to slash Obara’s side. She made no attempt to parry, instead lunging her spear at Balon’s leg. Each strike found its mark, and Hotah heard Obara’s ribs crack. Had Ser Balon held live steel, Obara would have been gutted, but his practice blade did not as much as break her skin. Ser Balon, though, was bleeding from his thigh.

The knight ignored the wound. He pressed forward, frenzied, throwing his sword in circles at Obara, each time barely missing her, each miss met with a kick or a blow from the spear-shaft to his unprotected side.

The kingsguard staggered. Obara grimaced, dropped her shield, and clutched her side in pain. She saw the white knight’s blood leaking into the sand and smiled. The two circled each other.

The Sand Snake shifted closer to Hotah, paying him no mind. Her back was to him.

Protect. Serve.

She wore no helmet, Hotah observed. He looked at his axe. It was blunted, but hard enough to crack a skull.

Areo Hotah lifted the axe with effort. He was tired too.

Obey.

He did not strike.

Screaming, Obara darted at Ser Balon again. Her spear met shield, but Swann was sent sprawling onto his face, losing his sword. The warrior tried to rise, but his tired limbs wobbled and gave out under him. Obara hefted her spear in an overarm grip and drove it down into the knight’s back.

His body was still.

Obara pulled her spear from the corpse of the white knight, then limped to a boulder. She hit the spear against the rock four times, then another four. *A signal*, Hotah knew. Without a word, without a look, Obara made her way back down to the camp, wincing with every step.

Hotah was left with the body of Ser Balon Swann, but he did not see it. He kept his gaze on the sands of Dorne.

Before long, the captain heard the sounds of battle from the canyon below. Steel on steel. Steel on flesh. The scraping sound of a sword drawn from a metal scabbard.

Areo Hotah sat and listened to the screams of a prince’s plan come to pass.