

## The Envoy

The obelisk drank the morning light.

“An old place,” Jorgen the Giantslayer spat. “Old and cursed.” His horse nickered and stepped back from the ancient marker as if it had caught the scent of something foul.

“Let us turn back then,” said the Knight of Lemonwood, his tone mocking. “You can tell Prince Doran all about the fearsome rock.”

The other men sniggered, but their mirth curdled at the sound of grunts and wheezes. When Obara Sand’s horse crested the ridge, most men’s eyes went elsewhere: to the view of the green Torentine Valley below, to the red stone of the mountains above, to the black pillar before them. Areo Hotah studied the Sand Snake, slumped in her saddle. She looked worse than yesterday, and yesterday she looked half a corpse.

Her ribs had been broken by Ser Balon in the desert, that much was certain, turning the trot of her horse to agony. But that was not the worst of it, for some other wound lingered within, rotting her from the inside out. When the men suggested they return to Sandstone or even find a maester at Starfall, she only shook her head. *Does she fear our crimes would be revealed?* Hotah wondered. *Or is it mere stubbornness?*

Most of the remaining spearmen hailed from Lemonwood, so they had looked to Ser Deziel to lead in her stead. Lady Obara said nothing on the matter, but neither did she protest when the knight slipped unmistakable orders in amidst his quips and japes. That was the way of his command: never serious, but never smiling.

Ser Deziel scanned the ground around the obelisk. “The earth is level here,” he lied. “The gods favor us with this gift of respite. The marker tells us that we are but a stone’s throw from High Hermitage, our villain’s lair. Water the horses and water the rocks. You don’t want to piss yourself if we are taken unawares ... again.” As the Knight of Lemonwood dismounted, the Scrapesword’s blade jangled in its scabbard.

Hotah climbed down off Ser Balon’s former mount, a beautiful and robust sand steed that had been a gift from Doran Martell. It was the finest horse Hotah had ever sat, tireless and tractable. Its eyes were deep brown and glassy. One of them reflected a haggard face, deeply lined and with grey eyebrows; stern, spent, sad. Hotah looked close and hard at the stranger. *When did I become ugly?*

In all his years, Areo Hotah had never owned a mirror. Vanity was a sin: so the bearded priests had told him long ago, when they caught him shaving over a dark puddle. *A man’s gaze falls*

*always upon others, they had said. It is never wasted upon himself. That is what it means to serve.* He had understood; still, a lashing had reinforced the lesson. That was the way of it.

Reins in hand, Hotah made for a rock near the pillar where he might sit and rest, but the horse balked and let out a whinny. It was the first resistance the steed had shown him. "Come," Hotah commanded with a pull. Again it refused. "Mirror, come."

"Queer name for a horse," called out Pate of the Shadow City as he unlaced his breeches.

"The Kingsguard named it," Hotah said. He gave the reins a yank, a hard one this time, to no avail. "For an ancestor, he said."

"Ser Byron Swann, I bet," announced Reginald, whom the others called the Goblin Butcher. "That dimwit tried to slay Vhagar with a sword and silvered shield during the Dance of the Dragons."

"The dragon's name was Syrax," Jorgen corrected. His horse let out another nervous whicker, so he stroked its muzzle. "I heard a song about it once."

The Butcher shook his head. "I assure you, the beast was Vhagar. Ser Byron was at Storm's End, defending the queen's son against the dragon's rider, that one-eyed kinslayer ... what was his name?"

"Bloodraven," Pate answered confidently.

The Giantslayer snorted with laughter. "You'd make a fine maester, Pate. Damned shame you can't heal the sick." He glanced furtively at Lady Obara, but her eyes were only half-open, surrounded by dark circles.

Pate was indignant. "This man or that man; this dragon or that dragon. What does it matter? Some fool thought he was Ser Serwyn and died all the same." The spearman turned and made water next to his fidgeting horse.

Hotah knew little of history—books were for men who could read. But he had heard the story of Serwyn's deeds. "The knights he slew stalked him day and night," the Red Viper had told a wide-eyed Sarella one evening at the Water Gardens. "Remember that, girl. Dragons die and then you're done with them. Dead men will show you no such courtesy."

The captain had never seen a living dragon and never cared to, but he *did* know what it was to be haunted. All of them did. Ser Balon's howl echoed with each and every one of Obara's grunts. Nine men nursed wounds, keepsakes of those they'd killed. Each riderless horse that trailed behind them in pack strings was a reminder of a dead man. The Butcher barely slept; Hotah heard him at night, breaths coming too quickly, reaching for the comfort of the hilt he kept beside him. Others did the same.

They had been a hundred that evening in the desert, but not half had lived till dawn. Thirty graves of sand were hastily dug for the dead Dornishmen while the one-and-twenty Lannister bodies were left to rot beneath the baking sun. *The dunes will have covered them by now.* A burial of sorts, he supposed.

Hotah heard the tale when he'd returned to camp that morning. "The sorcerer queen sent wargs and skinchangers with her white knight," Aldonzo of Lemonwood had told him. "The monstrous Ser Merlon killed five before a spear found the back of the giant's neck. And the singing devil, Ser Tanton, took seven men to the seven hells with him. I swear I could hear the song and screams long after they died. Even the elder two Slynt boys turned out to be rock goblins, they did. Each killed a man before being hacked to pieces. Only way we could stop the arms and legs from moving."

*Ser Balon trained the boys well,* Hotah had thought. *He might have made them knights once they returned home.* Innocent Danos, only one-and-ten, had been carved up with his brothers. *They died in service, and will face their god without beards.* It was small comfort.

"Ser Timon killed three," the spearman had continued. "His drawn blade was a screaming wraith, a horrible sound. My liege was almost his fourth, but Ser Deziel knocked the magic sword from his hand." The Scrapesword had managed to stagger into the night and escape the fray on foot. He had not been found, but his ornate metal scabbard was discovered a hundred yards from camp the next morning, no doubt abandoned because it caught the moonlight. With no well for a hundred miles around, the jovial knight was condemned to die of thirst, Ser Deziel assured them.

Yet it was the Knight of Lemonwood who also insisted they take the horses. The Scrapesword could double back and find a mount, should they release them into the desert. They would either bring them or kill them, and the men had had their fill of slaughter. Tied together behind the party in packs of five, they made an odd sight for the mountain folk on their terraced farms, though the simple farmers were happy to trade water and dried fruit for steeds worth ten times as much.

One night they had sought shelter from a storm in a tall stone house surrounded by rocky fields and lime trees. The purple-eyed farmer who lived there gave them a gracious welcome, but spoke only praise when asked about his liege. "Our silver knight lets us be, m'lord," the man said as he and his sons feasted on horse steak. "His men only take grain when we have more than enough." *Rarely, then,* Hotah had thought. *These mountains do not look bountiful.* Perhaps it was kindness that kept Darkstar away, though Dornish law did forbid lords to tax their subjects amid famine.

In all, two horses had been traded with the smallfolk and one had been slaughtered for meat, leaving eight-and-forty with ghosts for riders. *Too many horses,* thought Hotah, *not enough men.* Only forty of them were fit for battle, perhaps one-and-forty if Gyles improved. Hotah heard

whispers by night that they were too few now to siege High Hermitage, but none was bold enough to protest by the light of day.

“Scout!” Aldonzo yelled, pointing up the mountain trail. Men fumbled for their bows, but the rider was gone before they’d notched their arrows. Four men rode up the rocky trail in pursuit, but returned an hour later, empty-handed.

“A great success, I see,” said Ser Deziel. “Remind me to knight you all on the morrow.”

“His horse must have been some sort of goat, ser,” said a rider.

“Yes, mayhaps it was a unicorn.”

The rider swallowed his retort, though it cost him some effort. Instead he said, “We saw the scout ride into a castle. It’s not two leagues from here. We’ve arrived.”

High Hermitage was made of pale white stone save for a series of large black blocks near one corner, glistening in the sun, relics of some older structure. Built with the steep mountains at its back, any assault would have to come from the front. The castle’s drawbridge opened at a downward angle, so an attacker was forced to climb if it were down, which it was not. The moat was dry, but the castle had a sluice gate that could no doubt be opened to access the waters of some Torentine tributary.

The castle was large enough to hold an admirable host, though Hotah could only guess how many were inside now. On either side of the gate a square tower shot up high. Unlike most castles, whose walls are adorned by crenellations both within and without, High Hermitage had half towers, leaving the defenses open to its courtyard. Hotah counted eight helmed men on the wall—small, distant figures.

The mountain fastness was as old as House Dayne, Ser Deziel had said, perhaps older if the smallfolk were to be believed. A white-haired farmer claimed it had once been the lair of a great and powerful greenseer who still watched over the land in spirit. More recently, the son of Vorian Dayne, last King of the Torentine, had been granted High Hermitage after his cousin had usurped the lordship of Starfall. There had been rivalry between the two Houses Dayne ever since, though marriages had helped ease the feud over the centuries.

Ser Deziel ordered the party to make camp behind the final ridge, concealing their numbers. They were on lower ground and exposed to attack, but the knight doubted that Darkstar would attempt a sortie. Still, a scout was stationed in sight of the castle to alert them in case the drawbridge lowered.

“There is no wood for towers or ladders here,” Hotah observed.

Deziel shrugged. "We will send men down into the valley. Surely nothing would please them more than hauling felled trees up a mountain." He looked to the tent where Obara lay resting. "A long siege is not in our interest."

"A mule!" the scout yelled from the top of the ridge. "A mule! A girl on a mule! The drawbridge is still up. She must have used a side sally port and ridden through the moat."

Hotah, Ser Deziel, and half a dozen men mounted up.

The girl that awaited them at the moat's edge was indeed seated on a mule. She had a tumble of sandy blonde hair that writhed in the wind. Hotah squinted for a moment. *Myrcella?* When they rode closer, he saw that she was tanned, skinny, her hands dirty and callused. She wore a roughspun tunic, her feet bare. Hotah looked to see if her eyes were green, but instead they proved violet. A haunting violet.

"Well met, m'lord," the girl called out. Her voice was shrill and high-pitched.

The Knight of Lemonwood cleared his throat. "Tell the men inside to give us audience. We bring justice to the outlaw—"

"I have a message from Ser Gerold Dayne," she blurted out. "Knight of High Hermitage, the Sword of the Evening, Guardian of the Red Caves, the Memory of the First Men." She paused to take a breath. "Protector of the Old Source, Keeper of the Opal Scroll, Defender of the Fallen Stone."

As the titles rattled on, the men muttered to themselves, but the Knight of Lemonwood was unmoved. "Ser Gerold honors us greatly by sending a little girl to treat in his stead. You are what, ten?"

"One-and-ten, m'lord." She turned to look up at the battlements, where the helmed men stood and watched her. "My name is Tansy."

"Are you here to negotiate or play at tea?" asked Ser Deziel. "In the former case, I can offer you three dolls for our quarry, the fiend Darkstar."

"Ser will talk with your man tomorrow at dawn," Tansy said. "Send only one, no more."

Deziel nodded. "I look forward to—"

"No Dalts!" the girl interrupted again. "Ser says he cannot stand the stink of a rotten lemon!"

The knight feigned offense. "I recall no quarrel with Ser Gerold. Why does he loathe me so?"

"I couldn't say, m'lord, but it's what Ser said. *No Dalts.*"

The men exchanged looks. "The girl is a brat," said the Giantslayer. "Leave her to me and I'd teach her a lesson."

"I had no idea you aspired to be a eunuch," the Knight of Lemonwood said coolly.

Hotah considered the girl. "She is a test. Ser Gerold is watching how we treat an innocent."

Ser Deziel looked at Hotah, surprise in his eyes. "Who knew the Norvoshi was a clever one? Beneath the silence, a working mind." The Knight of Lemonwood wheeled his horse around. "Let us hope it is of use on the morrow."

In the morning Hotah found himself back at the edge of the moat, alone, holding the rainbow banner of a seven-faced god he did not understand. Two helmed archers fixed arrows on him as the drawbridge lowered. Darkstar came forth quickly, his horse in a canter before he pulled the reins hard. The destrier went to its hind legs and whinnied.

"Hold, Mirror!" Hotah warned his own steed. *Does he mean to intimidate me?*

Ser Gerold Dayne was a handsome man, perhaps the comeliest Hotah had ever seen. He had a square jaw, smooth skin, and silver hair that made him look almost Lysene, with a streak in it as black as the obelisk. He understood now why Arianne had made him part of her plot. A brooch of onyx carved into a sword and falling star fastened a purple cloak around his shoulders. The color brought out his eyes.

"Ser Gerold." Hotah gave a curt nod.

"Doran's pet Norvoshi," Darkstar greeted Hotah in return. "I was puzzled at first when I saw you ride forth, but I think I've riddled out why they sent you."

*There was no one else*, Hotah thought, but what he said was, "Lady Obara disdains to treat with a fugitive. You know of her pride."

"To be sure," the knight looked up. "I also know that she is bound to the gods of that peace banner. You, on the other hand, worship a black goat, do you not?"

Hotah contained his anger. "I am here as an envoy, not an assassin."

"Good. You would most certainly die if you were to make a charge, though it is not the arrows you need fear. No doubt you have heard that no man matches my skill with the blade."

That was true enough. Darkstar was dangerous, it was said, a master with the sword, clever and unpredictable. Others painted him as reckless as well, resentful at not being dubbed Sword of the Morning, impatient to prove himself. Above all, they warned of his arrogance.

Hotah left his longaxe in its sling. Instead he reached into his saddlebag and produced a warrant, then unrolled it and pretended to read. "By decree of Doran of House Nymeros Martell, Lord of Sunspear, Prince of Dorne, justice shall be dispensed to the false knight Gerold—"

"Yes, yes, and I am stripped of lands and incomes and sentenced to death." He forced a yawn. "Yet here I am, very much alive and ruling this castle."

"We have terms," Hotah said, putting away the prince's orders. "Surrender to us and the garrison will be pardoned for any aid they provided. Your lands will pass lawfully to your kin."

"Of what crimes am I accused? Conspiring with the prince's bitch of a daughter to overthrow the king? Somehow I doubt the heir to Dorne has been judged quite as harshly as I have been."

"You are charged with maiming the Princess Myrcella Barathon and ..." He made himself meet Ser Gerold's gaze. "Murdering Ser Arys Oakheart."

Darkstar returned his solemn look for a few moments, nodding thoughtfully. Then he burst out laughing. "Listen to yourself. *You* killed Oakheart. Well, the poor fool killed himself, more like, but on your axe. What sort of miserable creature accuses another man of his own crime and calls it justice?"

Hotah had no answer. "You are still to pay for your violence against the princess."

"She was no princess." Darkstar waved his hand in dismissal. "I once traveled to King's Landing, did you know? It was Prince Joffrey's twelfth name day and I tried my hand at jousting. I am no tourney knight, truth be told, but I wanted to get the measure of my rivals. In the lists I faced Ser Boros Blount, who had begged to wear Myrcella's favor. When that fat knight knocked me from my horse, she squealed with delight: a moment I'll not soon forget. I can say to you with certainty that the girl in the desert was not her."

*He claims they were swapped.* Hotah had his suspicions as well. Ser Balon's questions had haunted him these past nights. "Then where is the princess?"

"Have you misplaced her? Oh dear." Darkstar smiled. "I believe I could point you in the right direction ... but alas! I am but a fallen star, plucked from the sky before my season. Quite unjustly, I might add."

"Trying to kill any girl is still a crime."

Darkstar laughed again. "To accuse me of murdering a child is vile enough, but to say I tried and failed? A grave insult to my swordsmanship. Tell me, captain, did you see this deed of mine with your own eyes?"

“No,” Hotah admitted. “If not you, who did it?”

“Do not play coy. You and I both know it was Ser Andrey Dalt. He has been Doran’s underling for years, hoping the old man would reward him with his daughter’s hand. More fool him.”

*Ser Deziel’s brother.* Hotah chewed on Ser Gerold’s words. “You think the attack was the prince’s doing?” After countless days spent at the Water Gardens, listening to the sounds of children splashing in the pools, it was hard for Areo Hotah to imagine the prince harming a child.

“Are you so blind you cannot see what is plain before you? Tell me, if Doran knew of our intention to crown Myrcella, why would he let Arianne make off with the girl? The whole unhappy adventure was the prince’s scheme, and it all went to plan, from what I can tell. A Dayne to blame for maiming a princess and killing a Kingsguard ... or is it two Kingsguard, now?”

The steep bridge they stood on suddenly felt steeper. “Two?”

“Ser Balon Swann,” said Darkstar. “That is his horse, is it not? Mirror, you called it?”

*I am a fool.* “The horse is mine,” Hotah replied, his voice low and dull.

“A gift from the Kingsguard, was it?” He flashed a grin. “The white knight rode south, but never yet rode north. That’s what Blackhaven tells me, amongst other things. The Dondarrions and the Daynes are close, soon to be joined, you know.”

All Dorne knew that Allyria Dayne and Beric Dondarrion were betrothed, a rare joining of Dornishmen and Marchers. The lord of Blackhaven was missing, but custom decreed that his younger brother would marry Lady Allyria in his stead if he did not return soon. Hotah thought of questions to ask, then thought better of betraying any ignorance. “Ser Balon is in Sunspear.”

“Does it not chafe you to lie so poorly, and so often?” Ser Gerold asked. “Your dishonesty bores me, so let me say this: my scout counted fifty men with you, some bandaged, and twice as many horses. This makes me wonder—what ill fate befell you on your way here?” He let the question hang in the air. “As it happens, I have just as many men within my walls as you have outside them. Send your spears against me and they will die. If you had a hundred healthy men, perhaps this story would have a different ending, but as it is, the ink is dry.”

“We can lay siege,” said Hotah. “Forces will come to augment ours. Blackmont is not far.”

“Starfall is no farther, and I am quite dear to my cousin Allyria. I do hope the Dondarrions do not examine the bedding too closely on her wedding night. As fate would have it, she is the one who now rules from atop the Palestone Sword, in her lost nephew’s stead. It may interest you to know that she’s received word lately from a ghost.”

*A ghost?* Hotah could not spare a thought for Darkstar’s riddles, so he simply waited.



“The late Jon Connington,” Ser Gerold added when the Norvoshi showed no sign of asking.

Hotah knew the name. “Connington?”

“An exile who refuses to stay banished ... or dead. The man rules the stormlands now. He’s trying to put Elia Martell’s son on the Iron Throne or some such calamity. Normally, the squabbles of men north of the Red Mountains do not interest me, but Connington knew Allyria’s sister Ashara well, years and years ago. Some say they were lovers—that Ser Jon was the father of Ashara’s bastard. Who is to say? What is certain is that Ashara trusted the man, and Allyria is inclined to, as well. In fact, she was ready to send word to Blackhaven asking them to offer the lost lord the hospitality of House Dondarrion. But then the seasons changed.”

“So winter has come.” *They are celebrating in Norvos right now.* “But the cold has not reached us here. We can still lay—”

“—a siege as the first snows fall, and wouldn’t that be a pretty sight, but it was the *raven* that Oldtown sent that was more important than the weather. You see, when white wings came to Starfall two days past, the bird also squawked at my dear cousin to “*Beware Jon!*” An odd little message, and one that shook poor Allyria to the bone. Now she knows not what to do, and looks to her beloved Darkstar for counsel. I received a raven with the same warning, as it happens.” Another thoughtful nod. “It is a heavy question, one lords across the realm are surely pondering as they greet the season: to follow Connington? Or not?” Ser Gerold’s purple eyes met Hotah’s dull brown. “That’s what this is all about, is it not? Why I find myself falsely accused?”

“I do not understand.”

“Will Connington prevail? I judge it a coin flip. With such odds, our prince will need a whipping boy.”

Hotah remembered Tyene’s giggle. *Why not? It is all Darkstar’s doing.* “You think yourself a scapegoat.”

“I think myself a binder. No captain as prudent as Prince Doran would leave port in such waters without one. If Connington fails in his war with Dornishmen in his ranks, my life promises to pay for the prince’s mistake in lending him support.”

“How?” asked Hotah. “We are far from the stormlands.”

“But Blackhaven is not, and sweet Allyria is all but betrothed to that Dondarrion boy, Bartholomys. When Lord Yronwood marches his host past Blackhaven to join Connington, Beric’s heir will do nothing, not against a host so large, and not with Dayne soldiers under the Bloodroyal’s command. The boy’s inaction, however, will seem as good as conspiracy with

Yronwood, and in that *conspiracy* will be discerned the influence of the monstrous Daynes. Our gouty prince will claim that Lady Allyria and I seized control over the Dornish armies. Whatever they actually believed, Queen Cersei or Ser Kevan or whoever's in charge in King's Landing will accept the prince's tale and his renewed support. Especially against the word of Ser Gerold Dayne, who, although handsome, viciously slew a Kingsguard, marred the little princess ... and killed Doran's captain of guards."

*Could Prince Doran have planned that, too?* "That is quite a fable."

"You do not believe it? Let me spin another story for you, then, one I like far better." He was in deadly earnest. "*You* will be surrendering to *me*. You for the murder of Ser Arys, and Ser Deziel for the crimes of his brother. You will send the rest of your men home, to Sunspear."

*He is an arrogant one.* "Doran is the law in Dorne. Why should we?"

"Because I have dark wings."

For an absurd moment, Hotah saw Ser Gerold gliding through the sky. He could have laughed. "A raven. If Starfall answers you and lifts our siege, we can treat with Lady Allyria then. Why would we surrender to you now?"

"Not a raven, but *ravens*. You must know that my friends are as numerous as the evening stars, and they live in the shadows, awaiting my command. You may not believe my stories. They will. Surrender or I send word to my precious Allyria, who will alert our allies in the Prince's Pass and in the Boneway. The word on ravens' wings will be *war*. Our soldiers will come alive in the night and take the other spearmen unawares. The armies of Dorne will be torn apart from within."

*An attack in the night from supposed allies. A familiar tale, Hotah thought, but this time thousands would die instead of dozens. Could Darkstar give such a command, and be obeyed?*

*Would he?*

"We can shoot your messages down," he said slowly. It was a lie, another one. Ser Balon had been the only archer in their company skilled enough to down a raven. He raised his eyes to the battlements, squinted, looked away.

"I have many birds," laughed Darkstar. "You will not hit them all. In fact, for good measure, I will also send word to King Tommen, to Lord Connington—seven hells, perhaps to King Stannis, if my old maester can work out which leg to tie the message to. The world will know Doran's treachery ... as well as you and I do."

Hotah felt dizzy. He could not muster a reply. He looked down to his horse.

*Was I always ugly?*

His gaze returned to Darkstar's thrice-damned beautiful face. The man was cruel, arrogant, but he was innocent. As innocent as the others.

"Struck dumb," Ser Gerold muttered. "What else should I have expected from the prince's silent guardian? I've naught else to say, Hotah, except that if my demands are not met on the morrow, ravens will fly and blood will flow. Scurry back to your camp. Report what I have said." Darkstar wheeled his horse around toward High Hermitage, then looked back over his shoulder. "Oh, and should you have a mind to assault while the castle sleeps, remember: I'm deadliest by starlight."

It was a slow ride back to camp. Hotah was in no rush, instead giving himself over to thought. He thought of the many dead and the many soon to die. Of Jothos and Morros, Ser Tanton and Ser Merlon. Of Danos. Of Ser Timon's sword jangling eerily at Ser Deziel's hip. He thought of Obara, her back turned to him. Of Doran, his plans, his pawns, his lies. Of Doran's lady wife Mellario, long since returned to Norvos. The oath that he had sworn, to protect her children. His little princess. The princess Myrcella. The screams of a young girl, her blood seeping into the sand. Tyene's laughter. Ser Arys Oakheart's eyes staring at him. Ser Balon Swann. His vows.

*Arys's death was not my choice. But Balon's was.*

The mountain air was brisk and the captain felt a chill. *Winter*, he thought. His mind went to wintercakes and nahsa, to the night markets and the ringing of bells. They were happy times in Norvos, but that was before he'd learned to obey.

"He's lying," whispered pale-faced Obara Sand. The wounded Sand Snake lay abed, wrapped in a cloak. "Darkstar hasn't got the men or the ravens." Beside her in the shelter of her tent stood the Knight of Lemonwood, silent. He fingered the hilt of the Scrapesword's blade, deep in thought.

"Darkstar demands an answer by morning. Lady Allyria Dayne is prepared to make war within the Dornish hosts."

"We heard you," Obara grunted, her brow covered in sweat. "And he means to tell every would-be king in Westeros about Prince Doran's so-called plan. It's nonsense. We storm the castle ..." Obara coughed painfully. "... tonight, at the hour of the wolf."

"My lady," Hotah said. "We will die."

"Enough, captain." She paused as a spasm of pain hit her. "You did your duty as the prince's envoy. Now Ser Deziel shall prepare the men ..." She coughed again. "... for an assault. They have returned with wood for the ladders. Go sharpen your axe."

"What will the crown do when Darkstar's message reaches them? There will be war." *But that's what she wants. That's what she's always wanted.*

“You are dismissed,” the Sand Snake said. With that, the Knight of Lemonwood escorted Hotah from the tent.

*Obey. Serve. Protect.*

*No. Choose.*

The next morning, Lady Obara Sand was dead.

Areo Hotah stacked a cairn atop her body himself. A burial of sorts, he supposed.

A host of six-and-forty, led by Pate of the Shadow City, departed for Sunspear. Behind them they left Hotah, Ser Deziel, and half a hundred horses.

“There go my loyal men,” quipped the knight.

“They were not your men,” said the captain. “They were mine.”

After Lady Obara’s death, Hotah had informed the men that her command was his. To his relief, the Knight of Lemonwood had made no challenge. To take definite leadership now was to die upon those walls or to answer to Prince Doran for his failure, neither of which suited Ser Deziel. He preferred to become a prisoner: a landed knight brings a fine ransom.

Areo Hotah and Ser Deziel Dalt exchanged no words on their ride to High Hermitage. The only sounds were made by the wind, the horses roped behind them, and the Scrapesword’s blade in its scabbard. The morning sky was clear and Hotah breathed deep in the cool mountain air, savoring his last moments of freedom.

A helmed bowman popped his head over the battlements when Hotah and Dalt stopped and dismounted in front of the moat. Soon the drawbridge was lowered. Two men with grey beards came forth and fettered Hotah and Ser Deziel. The one who took Hotah’s axe struggled with its weight.

Ser Gerold Dayne emerged from the castle once they were bound. He wore a brilliant chainmail hauberk of purple and silver under heavy plate. Pink-purple plumage rose higher over his helmet than his arms could reach. “You have made a wise choice today,” the dashing knight assured them. “May that provide comfort in your cell.”

The prisoners were escorted across the drawbridge into High Hermitage. Once they were past the portcullis, Hotah looked to the inside of the castle walls, where a giant winch sat in disrepair. His companion followed his glance. “The sluice gate is broken,” Ser Deziel accused.

“Yes,” said Darkstar happily. “I cannot recall a time before the moat was dry. Did you assume otherwise?”

Hotah brought his eyes back to the ground in front of him and walked, but the Knight of Lemonwood was not yet satisfied. In the courtyard, he turned and scanned the defenses in the half-towers. “Children on crates. Where are your other men?”

“Ah, yes, my little girls dressed as archers.” Gerold Dayne stifled laughter. “My idea, and I’m rather proud of it. The smallfolk are loath to give up their boys, but they part with young girls quite readily. I’ve only five grown men to defend the whole castle, myself included. Makes rationing easier, thank the gods.”

On a bench at the side of the courtyard sat a cage with a giant white raven. “*Marsh!*” it screamed.

“My raven,” Darkstar gloated. “I do think he’s lonely.”

“You only have the one,” Ser Deziel said. He was no longer asking.

“Just so,” said Ser Gerold. “Ravens have the pesky drawback of needing to be returned. As few enough make the journey here, our rookery has been empty for some time. Of course, I lack a maester to tend them, besides.”

“Then you couldn’t have got word to your cousin,” pressed the knight.

“Well, perhaps we could’ve got the mule girl past you with a message. Though, to tell the truth, Allyria despises me. She refused me when I sent my man Old Tom to Starfall for help. The ordeal with the Ashara was years ago, but the wench still holds a grudge.”

Ser Deziel slumped in his fetters. “Everything was a lie?”

“Most everything. I am an excellent jousting knight, I’ll have you know. Oh, but that bit about Jon Connington—that much was true, if it soothes your pride. Tom brought that tale back with him from a tavern, though I would have preferred a lot of sellswords.”

“*Wine!*” the raven yelled. “*Wine?*”

“Don’t believe the bird, it already drank half a flagon,” Darkstar said. “It didn’t improve the conversation.”

Deziel rose to his full height again, defiant. “Then you lied about my brother too, didn’t you?”

Ser Gerold sauntered up and relieved the knight of the daggers in his jerkin and boot, the ones his men had missed. “Drey or Sylva—had to have been one of them. Which one maimed the girl makes little difference to me.”

*Darkstar knows not why I should truly wear these chains either,* Hotah surmised. He wondered if being brought to justice would stop him hearing Balon’s scream at night. Then he broke his silence. “Where is the real Myrcella?”

Ser Gerold chortled. “How in the seven hells should I know? I might ask *you*.”

*Why would he let Arianne make off with the girl?* Hotah furrowed his thick brow. “Ser Gerold, answer me just one more question. Where do septas go?”