

The Price of Sacrifice

Sidestep, double parry, riposte. How many times so far?

Shane had lived the way of the blade his entire life. He knew many who had, because when you gave yourself entirely to something, you met your kindred. Yet he had left them all behind. Well, all but the person in front of him now.

The Sandman drifted slightly, tapping Shane's attack aside with his sword in one hand, and coming in high with the long knife in the other. So impossibly fast.

Shane had often wondered how he would fare against a legend. After besting rank upon rank of his own countrymen, there was no one left except rumors from far away to measure himself against.

Parry with his own knife, quarter-circle and lunge with his sword hand.

The Sandman gave up two steps as he deflected it. Two steps. Shane knew he'd lost at least ten times that so far to the dusty mirage that had pushed him closer to his limit than any other swordsman in his experience. This was *very* much an existential experience.

Feint, semi-feint with the knife, and lunge again with the sword.

Around him in the Great Hall, Sandlings fought against what remained of the King's Guard. He wanted so much to register that surrounding conflict, but to look away now would be to lose. The fate of his two brothers, Beron and Kaite were being written in that fight, but Shane was the Ward, after all. His ability had elevated him to a place outside of the law that governed lesser men, but exacted its price.

He was the one set apart to defend the Lord of the realm and his family, and this was the scribing of that into what would ultimately become history. His sweat and growing uncertainty bridged the physical and mental, but meant nothing really, because the blade would tell in the end.

The Sandman's eyes were a blue that was so pale as to almost not be a color. He'd only spoken once since he and Shane had engaged each other. His words had been soft and dull through the dun-colored fabric wrapped around most of his head, at odds with the precision of his movement.

"I thought you'd be better."

The accent had been almost indistinguishable. It spoke to the man's proficiency in all things.

Shane had not responded. What was there to say?

Parry, feint times two, quarter-circle. Riposte.

The Sandman countered, and pressed him back two more steps with his own attacks. Shane knew they were not far from the doorway to the Sanctum, where the royal family awaited within, hopes pinned directly on him for their safety. The battle around him echoed off of the high stone ceiling, but the sound of it may as well be echoes of the past. That's what it felt like to Shane in the moment.

It seemed a foregone conclusion now, and this devil from a desert so far away would have stolen Shane's whole life's effort, and the trust it had bought him. All his sacrifice, undone by someone...more.

So be it. There is always someone better.

He thought it even as he rallied, and pushed back against the idea. He had never been one to let anger and bitterness color the work of his hands. Whether he'd lose or not, he *had* paid his dues.

It was a frenzy, but without desperation. Move after move seemed to come from somewhere he'd never had to be before. There was an exultancy in it he'd never fully felt.

Yet, the Sandman countered every one, though not without cost.

Shane drew first real blood with a thrust that slid up a parry attempt, cutting a gash in the leather-clad forearm of his opponent. It was a moment measured between them in part of a heartbeat, but Shane could see the Sandman reorient. The nearly colorless eyes narrowed just a bit, and Shane knew he'd awakened the man's full intent. A small triumph had become a harbinger of his own end.

Still, Shane regained nearly five steps against him with his own sustained ferocity before the desert devil brought what he'd clearly been holding back. In just a few moves, Shane saw his own death reflected in what the man's steel could really do.

Shane would never know the why the Sandman hadn't finished him much earlier. He would have years to try to puzzle it, but it would always remain a mystery as he got to mourn the cost.

Because Beron was an in-bound missile, his own sword raised and intent as he came in from the side. His youngest brother, beautiful, but mass-over-talent had seen fit to intervene. Brawn had carried him through all his training, and Shane's own place in the hierarchy had made sure Beron had made it into the King's guard. Shane got to wish for the rest of his life that wasn't the truth even as his sibling saved him.

The Sandman halted Shane's attacks with an ungodly speed, and still had time to eviscerate his brother with a single stroke as Beron swung too late. Blood and viscera spilled out onto the flag-stones as he fell, his body carried by his own impetus to measure itself on the cold floor.

Had he been a lesser man, and had he not trained hesitation out of his life, Shane might have stalled at the sight, and lost his opening. Even so, it was a close thing. He drove his sword forward even as the mirage of a man in front of him tried to parry. The blade slid through the sand-encrusted leather directly into the heart, even as the Sandman's own sword clacked ineffectively against it. Shane slammed his other hand against the pommel, and felt the steel length exit the man's back.

He ripped it free as the Sandman dropped to the floor, near his brother's body, those almost-blue eyes empty and unfocused.

The warrior in him continued on, killing Sandlings with the rest of the guard until the threat was gone. Kaite embraced him after the last fell.

Only then did he begin to grieve.