

DAENERYS

The hall rang to Yunkish laughter, Yunkish songs, Yunkish prayers. Dancers danced; musicians played queer tunes with bells and squeaks and bladders; singers sang ancient love songs in the incomprehensible tongue of Old Ghis. Wine flowed—not the thin pale stuff of Slaver’s Bay but rich sweet vintages from the Arbor and dreamwine from Qarth, flavored with strange spices. The Yunkai’i had come at King Hizdahr’s invitation, to sign the peace and witness the rebirth of Meereen’s far-famed fighting pits. Her noble husband had opened the Great Pyramid to fete them.

I hate this, thought Daenerys Targaryen. How did this happen, that I am drinking and smiling with men I’d sooner flay?

A dozen different sorts of meat and fish were served: camel, crocodile, singing squid, lacquered ducks and spiny grubs, with goat and ham and horse for those whose tastes were less exotic. Plus dog. No Ghiscari feast was complete without a course of dog. Hizdahr’s cooks prepared dog four different ways. “Ghiscari will eat anything that swims or flies or crawls, but for man and dragon,” Daario had warned her, “and I’d wager they’d eat dragon too if given half a chance.” Meat alone does not make a meal, though, so there were fruits and grains and vegetables as well. The air was redolent with the scents of saffron, cinnamon, cloves, pepper, and other costly spices.

Dany scarce touched a bite. *This is peace*, she told herself. *This is what I wanted, what I worked for, this is why I married Hizdahr. So why does it taste so much like defeat?*

“It is only for a little while more, my love,” Hizdahr had assured her. “The Yunkai’i will soon be gone, and their allies and hirelings with them. We shall have all we desired. Peace, food, trade. Our port is open once again, and ships are being permitted to come and go.”

“They are *permitting* that, yes,” she had replied, “but their warships remain. They can close their fingers around our throat again whenever they wish.

They have opened a slave market within sight of my walls!"

"*Outside* our walls, sweet queen. That was a condition of the peace, that Yunkai would be free to trade in slaves as before, unmolested."

"In their own city. Not where I have to see it." The Wise Masters had established their slave pens and auction block just south of the Skahazadhan, where the wide brown river flowed into Slaver's Bay. "They are mocking me to my face, making a show of how powerless I am to stop them."

"Posing and posturing," said her noble husband. "A show, as you have said. Let them have their mummery. When they are gone, we will make a fruit market of what they leave behind."

"When they are gone," Dany repeated. "And when will they be gone? Riders have been seen beyond the Skahazadhan. Dothraki scouts, Rakharo says, with a *khalasar* behind them. They will have captives. Men, women, and children, gifts for the slavers." Dothraki did not buy or sell, but they gave gifts and received them. "That is why the Yunkai'i have thrown up this market. They will leave here with thousands of new slaves."

Hizdahr zo Loraq shrugged. "But they will leave. That is the important part, my love. Yunkai will trade in slaves, Meereen will not, this is what we have agreed. Endure this for a little while longer, and it shall pass."

So Daenerys sat silent through the meal, wrapped in a vermillion *tokar* and black thoughts, speaking only when spoken to, brooding on the men and women being bought and sold outside her walls, even as they feasted here within the city. Let her noble husband make the speeches and laugh at the feeble Yunkish japes. That was a king's right and a king's duty.

Much of the talk about the table was of the matches to be fought upon the morrow. Barsena Blackhair was going to face a boar, his tusks against her dagger. Khrazz was fighting, as was the Spotted Cat. And in the day's final pairing, Goghor the Giant would go against Belaquo Bonebreaker. One would be dead before the sun went down. *No queen has clean hands*, Dany told herself. She thought of Doreah, of Quaro, of Eroeh ... of a little girl she

had never met, whose name had been Hazzea. *Better a few should die in the pit than thousands at the gates. This is the price of peace, I pay it willingly. If I look back, I am lost.*

The Yunkish Supreme Commander, Yurkhaz zo Yunzak, might have been alive during Aegon's Conquest, to judge by his appearance. Bent-backed, wrinkled, and toothless, he was carried to the table by two strapping slaves. The other Yunkish lords were hardly more impressive. One was small and stunted, though the slave soldiers who attended him were grotesquely tall and thin. The third was young, fit, and dashing, but so drunk that Dany could scarce understand a word he said. *How could I have been brought to this pass by creatures such as these?*

The sellswords were a different matter. Each of the four free companies serving Yunkai had sent its commander. The Windblown were represented by the Pentoshi nobleman known as the Tattered Prince, the Long Lances by Gylo Rhegan, who looked more shoemaker than soldier and spoke in murmurs. Bloodbeard, from the Company of the Cat, made enough noise for him and a dozen more. A huge man with a great bush of beard and a prodigious appetite for wine and women, he bellowed, belched, farted like a thunderclap, and pinched every serving girl who came within his reach. From time to time he would pull one down into his lap to squeeze her breasts and fondle her between the legs.

The Second Sons were represented too. *If Daario were here, this meal would end in blood.* No promised peace could ever have persuaded her captain to permit Brown Ben Plumm to stroll back into Meereen and leave alive. Dany had sworn that no harm would come to the seven envoys and commanders, though that had not been enough for the Yunkai'i. They had required hostages of her as well. To balance the three Yunkish nobles and four sellsword captains, Meereen sent seven of its own out to the siege camp: Hizdahr's sister, two of his cousins, Dany's bloodrider Jhogo, her admiral Groleo, the Unsullied captain Hero, and Daario Naharis.

"I will leave my girls with you," her captain had said, handing her his sword belt and its gilded wantons. "Keep them safe for me, beloved. We would not want them making bloody mischief amongst the Yunkai'i."

The Shavepate was absent as well. The first thing Hizdahr had done upon being crowned was to remove him from command of the Brazen Beasts, replacing him with his own cousin, the plump and pasty Marghaz zo Loraq. *It is for the best. The Green Grace says there is blood between Loraq and Kandaq, and the Shavepate never made a secret of his disdain for my lord husband. And Daario ...*

Daario had only grown wilder since her wedding. Her peace did not please him, her marriage pleased him less, and he had been furious at being deceived by the Dornishmen. When Prince Quentyn told them that the other Westerosi had come over to the Stormcrows at the command of the Tattered Prince, only the intercession of Grey Worm and his Unsullied prevented Daario from killing them all. The false deserters had been imprisoned safely in the bowels of the pyramid ... but Daario's rage continued to fester.

He will be safer as a hostage. My captain was not made for peace. Dany could not risk his cutting down Brown Ben Plumm, making mock of Hizdahr before the court, provoking the Yunkai'i, or otherwise upsetting the agreement that she had given up so much to win. Daario was war and woe. Henceforth, she must keep him out of her bed, out of her heart, and out of her. If he did not betray her, he would master her. She did not know which of those she feared the most.

When the gluttony was done and all the half-eaten food had been cleared away—to be given to the poor who gathered below, at the queen's insistence—tall glass flutes were filled with a spiced liqueur from Qarth as dark as amber. Then began the entertainments.

A troupe of Yunkish castrati owned by Yurkhaz zo Yunzak sang them songs in the ancient tongue of the Old Empire, their voices high and sweet and impossibly pure. "Have you ever heard such singing, my love?" Hizdahr asked her. "They have the voices of gods, do they not?"

"Yes," she said, "though I wonder if they might not have preferred to have the fruits of men."

All of the entertainers were slaves. That had been part of the peace, that slaveowners be allowed the right to bring their chattels into Meereen

without fear of having them freed. In return the Yunkai'i had promised to respect the rights and liberties of the former slaves that Dany had freed. A fair bargain, Hizdahr said, but the taste it left in the queen's mouth was foul. She drank another cup of wine to wash it out.

"If it please you, Yurkhaz will be pleased to give us the singers, I do not doubt," her noble husband said. "A gift to seal our peace, an ornament to our court."

He will give us these castrati, Dany thought, and then he will march home and make some more. The world is full of boys.

The tumblers who came next failed to move her either, even when they formed a human pyramid nine levels high, with a naked little girl on top. *Is that meant to represent my pyramid?* the queen wondered. *Is the girl on top meant to be me?*

Afterward her lord husband led his guests onto the lower terrace, so the visitors from the Yellow City might behold Meereen by night. Wine cups in hand, the Yunkai'i wandered the garden in small groups, beneath lemon trees and night-blooming flowers, and Dany found herself face-to-face with Brown Ben Plumm.

He bowed low. "Worship. You look lovely. Well, you always did. None of them Yunkishmen are half so pretty. I thought I might bring a wedding gift for you, but the bidding went too high for old Brown Ben."

"I want no gifts from you."

"This one you might. The head of an old foe."

"Your own?" she said sweetly. "You betrayed me."

"Now that's a harsh way o' putting it, if you don't mind me saying." Brown Ben scratched at his speckled grey-and-white whiskers. "We went over to the winning side, is all. Same as we done before. It weren't all me, neither. I put it to my men."

“So *they* betrayed me, is that what you are saying? Why? Did I mistreat the Second Sons? Did I cheat you on your pay?”

“Never that,” said Brown Ben, “but it’s not all about the coin, Your High-and-Mightiness. I learned that a long time back, at my first battle. Morning after the fight, I was rooting through the dead, looking for the odd bit o’ plunder, as it were. Came upon this one corpse, some axeman had taken his whole arm off at the shoulder. He was covered with flies, all crusty with dried blood, might be why no one else had touched him, but under them he wore this studded jerkin, looked to be good leather. I figured it might fit me well enough, so I chased away the flies and cut it off him. The damn thing was heavier than it had any right to be, though. Under the lining, he’d sewn a fortune in coin. *Gold*, Your Worship, sweet yellow gold. Enough for any man to live like a lord for the rest o’ his days. But what good did it do him? There he was with all his coin, lying in the blood and mud with his fucking arm cut off. And that’s the lesson, see? Silver’s sweet and gold’s our mother, but once you’re dead they’re worth less than that last shit you take as you lie dying. I told you once, there are old sellswords and there are bold sellswords, but there are no old bold sellswords. My boys didn’t care to die, that’s all, and when I told them that you couldn’t unleash them dragons against the Yunkishmen, well ...”

You saw me as defeated, Dany thought, *and who am I to say that you were wrong?* “I understand.” She might have ended it there, but she was curious. “Enough gold to live like a lord, you said. What did you do with all that wealth?”

Brown Ben laughed. “Fool boy that I was, I told a man I took to be my friend, and he told our serjeant, and my brothers-in-arms come and relieved me o’ that burden. Serjeant said I was too young, that I’d only waste it all on whores and such. He let me keep the jerkin, though.” He spat. “You don’t never want to trust a sellsword, m’lady.”

“I have learned that much. One day I must be sure to thank you for the lesson.”

Brown Ben’s eyes crinkled up. “No need. I know the sort o’ thanks you have in mind.” He bowed again and moved away.

Dany turned to gaze out over her city. Beyond her walls the yellow tents of the Yunkai'i stood in orderly rows beside the sea, protected by the ditches their slaves had dug for them. Two iron legions out of New Ghis, trained and armed in the same fashion as Unsullied, were encamped across the river to the north. Two more Ghiscari legions had made camp to the east, choking off the road to the Khyzai Pass. The horse lines and cookfires of the free companies lay to the south. By day thin plumes of smoke hung against the sky like ragged grey ribbons. By night distant fires could be seen. Hard by the bay was the abomination, the slave market at her door. She could not see it now, with the sun set, but she knew that it was there. That just made her angrier.

"Ser Barristan?" she said softly.

The white knight appeared at once. "Your Grace."

"How much did you hear?"

"Enough. He was not wrong. Never trust a sellsword."

Or a queen, thought Dany. "Is there some man in the Second Sons who might be persuaded to ... remove ... Brown Ben?"

"As Daario Naharis once removed the other captains of the Stormcrows?" The old knight looked uncomfortable. "Perhaps. I would not know, Your Grace."

No, she thought, *you are too honest and too honorable*. "If not, the Yunkai'i employ three other companies."

"Rogues and cutthroats, scum of a hundred battlefields," Ser Barristan warned, "with captains full as treacherous as Plumm."

"I am only a young girl and know little of such things, but it seems to me that we *want* them to be treacherous. Once, you'll recall, I convinced the Second Sons and Stormcrows to join us."

“If Your Grace wishes a privy word with Gylo Rhegan or the Tattered Prince, I could bring them up to your apartments.”

“This is not the time. Too many eyes, too many ears. Their absence would be noted even if you could separate them discreetly from the Yunkai’i. We must find some quieter way of reaching out to them ... not tonight, but soon.”

“As you command. Though I fear this is not a task for which I am well suited. In King’s Landing work of this sort was left to Lord Littlefinger or the Spider. We old knights are simple men, only good for fighting.” He patted his sword hilt.

“Our prisoners,” suggested Dany. “The Westerosi who came over from the Windblown with the three Dornishmen. We still have them in cells, do we not? Use them.”

“Free them, you mean? Is that wise? They were sent here to worm their way into your trust, so they might betray Your Grace at the first chance.”

“Then they failed. I do not trust them. I will never trust them.” If truth be told, Dany was forgetting how to trust. “We can still use them. One was a woman. Meris. Send her back, as a ... a gesture of my regard. If their captain is a clever man, he will understand.”

“The woman is the worst of all.”

“All the better.” Dany considered a moment. “We should sound out the Long Lances too. And the Company of the Cat.”

“Bloodbeard.” Ser Barristan’s frown deepened. “If it please Your Grace, we want no part of him. Your Grace is too young to remember the Ninepenny Kings, but this Bloodbeard is cut from the same savage cloth. There is no honor in him, only hunger ... for gold, for glory, for blood.”

“You know more of such men than me, ser.” If Bloodbeard might be truly the most dishonorable and greedy of the sellswords, he might be the easiest to sway, but she was loath to go against Ser Barristan’s counsel in such

matters. “Do as you think best. But do it soon. If Hizdahr’s peace should break, I want to be ready. I do not trust the slavers.” *I do not trust my husband.* “They will turn on us at the first sign of weakness.”

“The Yunkai’i grow weaker as well. The bloody flux has taken hold amongst the Tolosi, it is said, and spread across the river to the third Ghiscari legion.”

The pale mare. Daenerys sighed. *Quaithe warned me of the pale mare’s coming. She told me of the Dornish prince as well, the sun’s son. She told me much and more, but all in riddles.* “I cannot rely on plague to save me from my enemies. Set Pretty Meris free. At once.”

“As you command. Though ... Your Grace, if I may be so bold, there is another road ...”

“The Dornish road?” Dany sighed. The three Dornishmen had been at the feast, as befit Prince Quentyn’s rank, though Reznak had taken care to seat them as far as possible from her husband. Hizdahr did not seem to be of a jealous nature, but no man would be pleased by the presence of a rival suitor near his new bride. “The boy seems pleasant and well spoken, but ...”

“House Martell is ancient and noble, and has been a leal friend to House Targaryen for more than a century, Your Grace. I had the honor of serving with Prince Quentyn’s great-uncle in your father’s seven. Prince Lewyn was as valiant a brother-in-arms as any man could wish for. Quentyn Martell is of the same blood, if it please Your Grace.”

“It would please me if he had turned up with these fifty thousand swords he speaks of. Instead he brings two knights and a parchment. Will a parchment shield my people from the Yunkai’i? If he had come with a fleet ...”

“Sunspear has never been a sea power, Your Grace.”

“No.” Dany knew enough of Westerosi history to know that. Nymeria had landed ten thousand ships upon Dorne’s sandy shores, but when she wed her Dornish prince she had burned them all and turned her back upon the

sea forever. “Dorne is too far away. To please this prince, I would need to abandon all my people. You should send him home.”

“Dornishmen are notoriously stubborn, Your Grace. Prince Quentyn’s forebears fought your own for the better part of two hundred years. He will not go without you.”

Then he will die here, Daenerys thought, *unless there is more to him than I can see*. “Is he still within?”

“Drinking with his knights.”

“Bring him to me. It is time he met my children.”

A flicker of doubt passed across the long, solemn face of Barristan Selmy. “As you command.”

Her king was laughing with Yurkhaz zo Yunzak and the other Yunkish lords. Dany did not think that he would miss her, but just in case she instructed her handmaids to tell him that she was answering a call of nature, should he inquire after her.

Ser Barristan was waiting by the steps with the Dornish prince. Martell’s square face was flushed and ruddy. *Too much wine*, the queen concluded, though he was doing his best to conceal that. Apart from the line of copper suns that ornamented his belt, the Dornishman was plainly dressed. *They call him Frog*, Dany recalled. She could see why. He was not a handsome man.

She smiled. “My prince. It is a long way down. Are you certain that you wish to do this?”

“If it would please Your Grace.”

“Then come.”

A pair of Unsullied went down the steps before them, bearing torches; behind came two Brazen Beasts, one masked as a fish, the other as a hawk. Even here in her own pyramid, on this happy night of peace and

celebration, Ser Barristan insisted on keeping guards about her everywhere she went. The small company made the long descent in silence, stopping thrice to refresh themselves along the way. “The dragon has three heads,” Dany said when they were on the final flight. “My marriage need not be the end of all your hopes. I know why you are here.”

“For you,” said Quentyn, all awkward gallantry. “No,” said Dany. “For fire and blood.”

One of the elephants trumpeted at them from his stall. An answering roar from below made her flush with sudden heat. Prince Quentyn looked up in alarm. “The dragons know when she is near,” Ser Barristan told him.

Every child knows its mother, Dany thought. *When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves ...* “They call to me. Come.” She took Prince Quentyn by the hand and led him to the pit where two of her dragons were confined. “Remain outside,” Dany told Ser Barristan, as the Unsullied were opening the huge iron doors. “Prince Quentyn will protect me.” She drew the Dornish prince inside with her, to stand above the pit.

The dragons craned their necks around, gazing at them with burning eyes. Viserion had shattered one chain and melted the others. He clung to the roof of the pit like some huge white bat, his claws dug deep into the burnt and crumbling bricks. Rhaegal, still chained, was gnawing on the carcass of a bull. The bones on the floor of the pit were deeper than the last time she had been down here, and the walls and floors were black and grey, more ash than brick. They would not hold much longer ... but behind them was only earth and stone. *Can dragons tunnel through rock, like the firewyrms of old Valyria?* She hoped not.

The Dornish prince had gone as white as milk. “I ... I had heard that there were three.”

“Drogon is hunting.” He did not need to hear the rest. “The white one is Viserion, the green is Rhaegal. I named them for my brothers.” Her voice echoed off the scorched stone walls. It sounded small—a girl’s voice, not the voice of a queen and conqueror, nor the glad voice of a new-made bride.

Rhaegal roared in answer, and fire filled the pit, a spear of red and yellow. Viserion replied, his own flames gold and orange. When he flapped his wings, a cloud of grey ash filled the air. Broken chains clanked and clattered about his legs. Quentyn Martell jumped back a foot.

A crueller woman might have laughed at him, but Dany squeezed his hand and said, “They frighten me as well. There is no shame in that. My children have grown wild and angry in the dark.”

“You ... you mean to ride them?”

“One of them. All I know of dragons is what my brother told me when I was a girl, and some I read in books, but it is said that even Aegon the Conqueror never dared mount Vhagar or Meraxes, nor did his sisters ride Balerion the Black Dread. Dragons live longer than men, some for hundreds of years, so Balerion had other riders after Aegon died ... but no rider ever flew two dragons.”

Viserion hissed again. Smoke rose between his teeth, and deep down in his throat they could see gold fire churning.

“They are ... they are fearsome creatures.”

“They are *dragons*, Quentyn.” Dany stood on her toes and kissed him lightly, once on each cheek. “And so am I.”

The young prince swallowed. “I ... I have the blood of the dragon in me as well, Your Grace. I can trace my lineage back to the first Daenerys, the Targaryen princess who was sister to King Daeron the Good and wife to the Prince of Dorne. He built the Water Gardens for her.”

“The Water Gardens?” She knew little and less of Dorne or its history, if truth be told.

“My father’s favorite palace. It would please me to show them to you one day. They are all of pink marble, with pools and fountains, overlooking the sea.”

“They sound lovely.” She drew him away from the pit. *He does not belong here. He should never have come.* “You ought to return there. My court is no safe place for you, I fear. You have more enemies than you know. You made Daario look a fool, and he is not a man to forget such a slight.”

“I have my knights. My sworn shields.”

“Two knights. Daario has five hundred Stormcrows. And you would do well to beware of my lord husband too. He seems a mild and pleasant man, I know, but do not be deceived. Hizdahr’s crown derives from mine, and he commands the allegiance of some of the most fearsome fighters in the world. If one of them should think to win his favor by disposing of a rival ...”

“I am a prince of Dorne, Your Grace. I will not run from slaves and sell swords.”

Then you truly are a fool, Prince Frog. Dany gave her wild children one last lingering look. She could hear the dragons screaming as she led the boy back to the door, and see the play of light against the bricks, reflections of their fires. *If I look back, I am lost.* “Ser Barristan will have summoned a pair of sedan chairs to carry us back up to the banquet, but the climb can still be wearisome.” Behind them, the great iron doors closed with a resounding *clang*. “Tell me of this other Daenerys. I know less than I should of the history of my father’s kingdom. I never had a maester growing up.” *Only a brother.*

“It would be my pleasure, Your Grace,” said Quentyn.

It was well past midnight before the last of their guests took their leave and Dany retired to her own apartments to join her lord and king. Hizdahr at least was happy, if somewhat drunk. “I keep my promises,” he told her, as Irri and Jhiqui were robing them for bed. “You wished for peace, and it is yours.”

And you wished for blood, and soon enough I must give it to you, Dany thought, but what she said was, “I am grateful.”

The excitement of the day had inflamed her husband's passions. No sooner had her handmaids retired for the night than he tore the robe from her and tumbled her backwards into bed. Dany slid her arms around him and let him have his way. Drunk as he was, she knew he would not be inside her long.

Nor was he. Afterward he nuzzled at her ear and whispered, "Gods grant that we have made a son tonight."

The words of Mirri Maz Duur rang in her head. *When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When your womb quickens again, and you bear a living child. Then he will return, and not before.* The meaning was plain enough; Khal Drogo was as like to return from the dead as she was to bear a living child. But there are some secrets she could not bring herself to share, even with a husband, so she let Hizdahr zo Loraq keep his hopes.

Her noble husband was soon fast asleep. Daenerys could only twist and turn beside him. She wanted to shake him, wake him, make him hold her, kiss her, fuck her again, but even if he did, he would fall back to sleep again afterward, leaving her alone in the darkness. She wondered what Daario was doing. Was he restless as well? Was he thinking about her? Did he love her, truly? Did he hate her for marrying Hizdahr? *I should never have taken him into my bed.* He was only a sellsword, no fit consort for a queen, and yet ...

I knew that all along, but I did it anyway. "My queen?" said a soft voice in the darkness.

Dany flinched. "Who is there?"

"Only Missandei." The Naathi scribe moved closer to the bed. "This one heard you crying."

"Crying? I was not crying. Why would I cry? I have my peace, I have my king, I have everything a queen might wish for. You had a bad dream, that was all."

“As you say, Your Grace.” She bowed and made to go. “Stay,” said Dany. “I do not wish to be alone.”

“His Grace is with you,” Missandei pointed out. “His Grace is dreaming, but I cannot sleep. On the morrow I must bathe in blood. The price of peace.” She smiled wanly and patted the bed. “Come. Sit. Talk with me.”

“If it please you.” Missandei sat down beside her. “What shall we talk of?”

“Home,” said Dany. “Naath. Butterflies and brothers. Tell me of the things that make you happy, the things that make you giggle, all your sweetest memories. Remind me that there is still good in the world.”

Missandei did her best. She was still talking when Dany finally fell to sleep, to dream queer, half-formed dreams of smoke and fire.

The morning came too soon.