

# THE DRAGONTAMER

The night crept past on slow black feet. The hour of the bat gave way to the hour of the eel, the hour of the eel to the hour of ghosts. The prince lay abed, staring at his ceiling, dreaming without sleeping, remembering, imagining, twisting beneath his linen coverlet, his mind feverish with thoughts of fire and blood.

Finally, despairing of rest, Quentyn Martell made his way to his solar, where he poured himself a cup of wine and drank it in the dark. The taste was sweet solace on his tongue, so he lit a candle and poured himself another. *Wine will help me sleep*, he told himself, but he knew that was a lie.

He stared at the candle for a long time, then put down his cup and held his palm above the flame. It took every bit of will he had to lower it until the fire touched his flesh, and when it did he snatched his hand back with a cry of pain.

“Quentyn, are you mad?”

*No, just scared. I do not want to burn.* “Gerris?”

“I heard you moving about.”

“I could not sleep.”

“Are burns a cure for that? Some warm milk and a lullaby might serve you well. Or better still, I could take you to the Temple of the Graces and find a girl for you.”

“A whore, you mean.”

“They call them Graces. They come in different colors. The red ones are the only ones who fuck.” Gerris seated himself across the table. “The septas back home should take up the custom, if you ask me. Have you noticed that old septas always look like prunes? That’s what a life of chastity will do to you.”

Quentyn glanced out at the terrace, where night's shadows lay thick amongst the trees. He could hear the soft sound of falling water. "Is that rain? Your whores will be gone."

"Not all of them. There are little snuggeries in the pleasure gardens, and they wait there every night until a man chooses them. Those who are not chosen must remain until the sun comes up, feeling lonely and neglected. We could console them."

"They could console me, is what you mean."

"That too."

"That is not the sort of consolation I require."

"I disagree. Daenerys Targaryen is not the only woman in the world. Do you want to die a man-maid?"

Quentyn did not want to die at all. *I want to go back to Yronwood and kiss both of your sisters, marry Gwyneth Yronwood, watch her flower into beauty, have a child by her. I want to ride in tourneys, hawk and hunt, visit with my mother in Norvos, read some of those books my father sends me. I want Cletus and Will and Maester Kedry to be alive again.* "Do you think Daenerys would be pleased to hear that I had bedded some whore?"

"She might be. Men may be fond of maidens, but women like a man who knows what he's about in the bedchamber. It's another sort of sword-play. Takes training to be good at it."

The gibe stung. Quentyn had never felt so much a boy as when he'd stood before Daenerys Targaryen, pleading for her hand. The thought of bedding her terrified him almost as much as her dragons had. What if he could not please her? "Daenerys has a paramour," he said defensively. "My father did not send me here to amuse the queen in the bedchamber. You know why we have come."

"You cannot marry her. She has a husband."

“She does not love Hizdahr zo Loraq.”

“What has love to do with marriage? A prince should know better. Your father married for love, it’s said. How much joy has he had of that?”

*Little and less.* Doran Martell and his Norvoshi wife had spent half their marriage apart and the other half arguing. It was the only rash thing his father had ever done, to hear some tell it, the only time he had followed his heart instead of his head, and he had lived to rue it. “Not all risks lead to ruin,” he insisted. “This is my duty. My destiny.” *You are supposed to be my friend, Gerris. Why must you mock my hopes? I have doubts enough without your throwing oil on the fire of my fear.* “This will be my grand adventure.”

“Men die on grand adventures.”

He was not wrong. That was in the stories too. The hero sets out with his friends and companions, faces dangers, comes home triumphant. Only some of his companions don’t return at all. *The hero never dies, though. I must be the hero.* “All I need is courage. Would you have Dorne remember me as a failure?”

“Dorne is not like to remember any of us for long.”

Quentyn sucked at the burned spot on his palm. “Dorne remembers Aegon and his sisters. Dragons are not so easily forgotten. They will remember Daenerys as well.”

“Not if she’s died.”

“She lives.” *She must.* “She is lost, but I can find her.” *And when I do, she will look at me the way she looks at her sellsword. Once I have proven myself worthy of her.*

“From dragonback?”

“I have been riding horses since I was six years old.”

“And you’ve been thrown a time or three.”

“That never stopped me from getting back into the saddle.”

“You’ve never been thrown off a thousand feet above the ground,” Gerris pointed out. “And horses seldom turn their riders into charred bones and ashes.”

*I know the dangers.* “I’ll hear no more of this. You have my leave to go. Find a ship and run home, Gerris.” The prince rose, blew the candle out, and crept back to his bed and its sweat-soaked linen sheets. *I should have kissed one of the Drinkwater twins, or maybe both of them. I should have kissed them whilst I could. I should have gone to Norvos to see my mother and the place that gave her birth, so she would know that I had not forgotten her.* He could hear the rain falling outside, drumming against the bricks.

By the time the hour of the wolf crept upon them, the rain was falling steadily, slashing down in a hard, cold torrent that would soon turn the brick streets of Meereen into rivers. The three Dornishmen broke their fast in the predawn chill—a simple meal of fruit and bread and cheese, washed down with goat milk. When Gerris made to pour himself a cup of wine, Quentyn stopped him. “No wine. There will be time enough for drink afterward.”

“One hopes,” said Gerris.

The big man looked out toward the terrace. “I knew it would rain,” he said in a gloomy tone. “My bones were aching last night. They always ache before it rains. The dragons won’t like this. Fire and water don’t mix, and that’s a fact. You get a good cookfire lit, blazing away nice, then it starts to piss down rain and next thing your wood is sodden and your flames are dead.”

Gerris chuckled. “Dragons are not made of wood, Arch.”

“Some are. That old King Aegon, the randy one, he built wooden dragons to conquer us. That ended bad, though.”

*So may this,* the prince thought. The follies and failures of Aegon the Unworthy did not concern him, but he was full of doubts and misgivings.

The labored banter of his friends was only making his head ache. *They do not understand. They may be Dornish, but I am Dorne. Years from now, when I am dead, this will be the song they sing of me.* He rose abruptly. “It’s time.”

His friends got to their feet. Ser Archibald drained the last of his goat’s milk and wiped the milk mustache from his upper lip with the back of a big hand. “I’ll get our mummer’s garb.”

He returned with the bundle that they had collected from the Tattered Prince at their second meeting. Within were three long hooded cloaks made from myriad small squares of cloth sewn together, three cudgels, three shortswords, three masks of polished brass. A bull, a lion, and an ape.

Everything required to be a Brazen Beast. “They may ask for a word,” the Tattered Prince had warned them when he handed over the bundle. “It’s *dog*.”

“You are certain of that?” Gerris had asked him. “Certain enough to wager a life upon it.”

The prince did not mistake his meaning. “My life.”

“That would be the one.”

“How did you learn their word?”

“We chanced upon some Brazen Beasts and Meris asked them prettily. But a prince should know better than to pose such questions, Dornish. In Pentos, we have a saying. Never ask the baker what went into the pie. Just eat.”

*Just eat.* There was wisdom in that, Quentyn supposed. “I’ll be the bull,” Arch announced.

Quentyn handed him the bull mask. “The lion for me.”

“Which makes a monkey out of me.” Gerris pressed the ape mask to his face. “How do they breathe in these things?”

“Just put it on.” The prince was in no mood for japes.

The bundle contained a whip as well—a nasty piece of old leather with a handle of brass and bone, stout enough to peel the hide off an ox. “What’s that for?” Arch asked.

“Daenerys used a whip to cow the black beast.” Quentyn coiled the whip and hung it from his belt. “Arch, bring your hammer as well. We may have need of it.”

It was no easy thing to enter the Great Pyramid of Meereen by night. The doors were closed and barred each day at sunset and remained closed until first light. Guards were posted at every entrance, and more guards patrolled the lowest terrace, where they could look down on the street. Formerly those guards had been Unsullied. Now they were Brazen Beasts. And that would make all the difference, Quentyn hoped.

The watch changed when the sun came up, but dawn was still half an hour off as the three Dornishmen made their way down the servants’ steps. The walls around them were made of bricks of half a hundred colors, but the shadows turned them all to grey until touched by the light of the torch that Gerris carried. They encountered no one on the long descent. The only sound was the scuff of their boots on the worn bricks beneath their feet.

The pyramid’s main gates fronted on Meereen’s central plaza, but the Dornishmen made their way to a side entrance opening on an alley. These were the gates that slaves had used in former days as they went about their masters’ business, where smallfolk and tradesmen came and went and made their deliveries.

The doors were solid bronze, closed with a heavy iron bar. Before them stood two Brazen Beasts, armed with cudgels, spears, and short swords. Torchlight glimmered off the polished brass of their masks—a rat and a fox. Quentyn gestured for the big man to stay back in the shadows. He and Gerris strode forward together.

“You come early,” the fox said.

Quentyn shrugged. “We can leave again, if you like. You’re welcome to stand our watch.” He sounded not at all Ghiscari, he knew; but half the Brazen Beasts were freed slaves, with all manner of native tongues, so his accent went unremarked.

“Bugger that,” the rat remarked. “Give us the day’s word,” said the fox. “Dog,” said the Dornishman.

The two Brazen Beasts exchanged a look. For three long heartbeats Quentyn was afraid that something had gone amiss, that somehow Pretty Meris and the Tattered Prince had gotten the word wrong. Then the fox grunted. “Dog, then,” he said. “The door is yours.” As they moved off, the prince began to breathe again.

They did not have long. The real relief would doubtless turn up shortly. “Arch,” he called, and the big man appeared, the torchlight shining off his bull’s mask. “The bar. Hurry.”

The iron bar was thick and heavy, but well oiled. Ser Archibald had no trouble lifting it. As he was standing it on end, Quentyn pulled the doors open and Gerris stepped through, waving the torch. “Bring it in now. Be quick about it.”

The butcher’s wagon was outside, waiting in the alley. The driver gave the mule a lick and rumbled through, iron-rimmed wheels *clacking* loudly over bricks. The quartered carcass of an ox filled the wagon bed, along with two dead sheep. Half a dozen men entered afoot. Five wore the cloaks and masks of Brazen Beasts, but Pretty Meris had not troubled to disguise herself. “Where is your lord?” he asked Meris.

“I have no *lord*,” she answered. “If you mean your fellow prince, he is near, with fifty men. Bring your dragon out, and he will see you safe away, as promised. Caggo commands here.”

Ser Archibald was giving the butcher’s wagon the sour eye. “Will that cart be big enough to hold a dragon?” he asked.

“Should. It’s held two oxen.” The Corpsekiller was garbed as a Brazen Beast, his seamed, scarred face hidden behind a cobra mask, but the familiar black *arakh* slung at his hip gave him away. “We were told these beasts are smaller than the queen’s monster.”

“The pit has slowed their growth.” Quentyn’s readings had suggested that the same thing had occurred in the Seven Kingdoms. None of the dragons bred and raised in the Dragonpit of King’s Landing had ever approached the size of Vhagar or Meraxes, much less that of the Black Dread, King Aegon’s monster. “Have you brought sufficient chains?”

“How many dragons do you have?” said Pretty Meris. “We have chains enough for ten, concealed beneath the meat.”

“Very good.” Quentyn felt light-headed. None of this seemed quite real. One moment it felt like a game, the next like some nightmare, like a bad dream where he found himself opening a dark door, knowing that horror and death waited on the other side, yet somehow powerless to stop himself. His palms were slick with sweat. He wiped them on his legs and said, “There will be more guards outside the pit.”

“We know,” said Gerris. “We need to be ready for them.”

“We are,” said Arch.

There was a cramp in Quentyn’s belly. He felt a sudden need to move his bowels, but knew he dare not beg off now. “This way, then.” He had seldom felt more like a boy. Yet they followed; Gerris and the big man, Meris and Caggo and the other Windblown. Two of the sellswords had produced crossbows from some hiding place within the wagon.

Beyond the stables, the ground level of the Great Pyramid became a labyrinth, but Quentyn Martell had been through here with the queen, and he remembered the way. Under three huge brick arches they went, then down a steep stone ramp into the depths, through the dungeons and torture chambers and past a pair of deep stone cisterns. Their footsteps echoed hollowly off the walls, the butcher’s cart rumbling behind them. The big man snatched a torch down from a wall sconce to lead the way.



At last a pair of heavy iron doors rose before them, rust-eaten and forbidding, closed with a length of chain whose every link was as thick around as a man's arm. The size and thickness of those doors was enough to make Quentyn Martell question the wisdom of this course. Even worse, both doors were plainly dented by something inside trying to get out. The thick iron was cracked and splitting in three places, and the upper corner of the left-hand door looked partly melted.

Four Brazen Beasts stood guarding the door. Three held long spears; the fourth, the serjeant, was armed with short sword and dagger. His mask was wrought in the shape of a basilisk's head. The other three were masked as insects.

*Locusts*, Quentyn realized. "Dog," he said.

The serjeant stiffened.

That was all it took for Quentyn Martell to realize that something had gone awry. "Take them," he croaked, even as the basilisk's hand darted for his shortsword.

He was quick, that serjeant. The big man was quicker. He flung the torch at the nearest locust, reached back, and unslung his warhammer. The basilisk's blade had scarce slipped from its leather sheath when the hammer's spike slammed into his temple, crunching through the thin brass of his mask and the flesh and bone beneath. The serjeant staggered sideways half a step before his knees folded under him and he sank down to the floor, his whole body shaking grotesquely.

Quentyn stared transfixed, his belly roiling. His own blade was still in its sheath. He had not so much as reached for it. His eyes were locked on the serjeant dying before him, jerking. The fallen torch was on the floor, guttering, making every shadow leap and twist in a monstrous mockery of the dead man's shaking. The prince never saw the locust's spear coming toward him until Gerris slammed into him, knocking him aside. The spearpoint grazed the cheek of the lion's head he wore. Even then the blow was so violent it almost tore the mask off. *It would have gone right through my throat*, the prince thought, dazed.

Gerris cursed as the locusts closed around him. Quentyn heard the sound of running feet. Then the sellswords came rushing from the shadows. One of the guards glanced at them just long enough for Gerris to get inside his spear. He drove the point of his sword under the brass mask and up through the wearer's throat, even as the second locust sprouted a cross-bow bolt from his chest.

The last locust dropped his spear. "Yield. I yield."

"No. You die." Caggo took the man's head off with one swipe of his *arakh*, the Valyrian steel shearing through flesh and bone and gristle as if they were so much suet. "Too much noise," he complained. "Any man with ears will have heard."

"Dog," Quentyn said. "The day's word was supposed to be dog. Why wouldn't they let us pass? We were told ..."

"You were told your scheme was madness, have you forgotten?" said Pretty Meris. "Do what you came to do."

*The dragons, Prince Quentyn thought. Yes. We came for the dragons.* He felt as though he might be sick. *What am I doing here? Father, why? Four men dead in as many heartbeats, and for what?* "Fire and blood," he whispered, "blood and fire." The blood was pooling at his feet, soaking into the brick floor. The fire was beyond those doors. "The chains ... we have no key ..."

Arch said, "I have the key." He swung his warhammer hard and fast. Sparks flew when the hammerhead struck the lock. And then again, again, again. On his fifth swing the lock shattered, and the chains fell away in a rattling clatter so loud Quentyn was certain half the pyramid must have heard them. "Bring the cart." The dragons would be more docile once fed. *Let them gorge themselves on charred mutton.*

Archibald Yronwood grasped the iron doors and pulled them apart. Their rusted hinges let out a pair of screams, for all those who might have slept through the breaking of the lock. A wash of sudden heat assaulted them, heavy with the odors of ash, brimstone, and burnt meat.

It was black beyond the doors, a sullen stygian darkness that seemed alive and threatening, hungry. Quentyn could sense that there was something in that darkness, coiled and waiting. *Warrior, grant me courage*, he prayed. He did not want to do this, but he saw no other way. *Why else would Daenerys have shown me the dragons? She wants me to prove myself to her*. Gerris handed him a torch. He stepped through the doors.

*The green one is Rhaegal, the white Viserion*, he reminded himself. *Use their names, command them, speak to them calmly but sternly. Master them, as Daenerys mastered Drogon in the pit*. The girl had been alone, clad in wisps of silk, but fearless. *I must not be afraid. She did it, so can I*. The main thing was to show no fear. *Animals can smell fear, and dragons ...* What did he know of dragons? *What does any man know of dragons? They have been gone from the world for more than a century*.

The lip of the pit was just ahead. Quentyn edged forward slowly, moving the torch from side to side. Walls and floor and ceiling drank the light. *Scorched*, he realized. *Bricks burned black, crumbling into ash*. The air grew warmer with every step he took. He began to sweat.

Two eyes rose up before him.

Bronze, they were, brighter than polished shields, glowing with their own heat, burning behind a veil of smoke rising from the dragon's nostrils. The light of Quentyn's torch washed over scales of dark green, the green of moss in the deep woods at dusk, just before the last light fades. Then the dragon opened its mouth, and light and heat washed over them. Behind a fence of sharp black teeth he glimpsed the furnace glow, the shimmer of a sleeping fire a hundred times brighter than his torch. The dragon's head was larger than a horse's, and the neck stretched on and on, uncoiling like some great green serpent as the head rose, until those two glowing bronze eyes were staring down at him.

*Green*, the prince thought, *his scales are green*. "Rhaegal," he said. His voice caught in his throat, and what came out was a broken croak. *Frog*, he thought, *I am turning into Frog again*. "The food," he croaked, remembering. "Bring the food."

The big man heard him. Arch wrestled one of the sheep off the wagon by two legs, then spun and flung it into the pit.

Rhaegal took it in the air. His head snapped round, and from between his jaws a lance of flame erupted, a swirling storm of orange-and-yellow fire shot through with veins of green. The sheep was burning before it began to fall. Before the smoking carcass could strike the bricks, the drag-on's teeth closed round it. A nimbus of flames still flickered about the body. The air stank of burning wool and brimstone. *Dragonstink.*

"I thought there were two," the big man said.

*Viserion. Yes. Where is Viserion?* The prince lowered his torch to throw some light into the gloom below. He could see the green dragon ripping at the smoking carcass of the sheep, his long tail lashing from side to side as he ate. A thick iron collar was visible about his neck, with three feet of broken chain dangling from it. Shattered links were strewn across the floor of the pit amongst the blackened bones—twists of metal, partly melted. *Rhaegal was chained to the wall and floor the last time I was here,* the prince recalled, *but Viserion hung from the ceiling.* Quentyn stepped back, lifted the torch, craned his head back.

For a moment he saw only the blackened arches of the bricks above, scorched by dragonflame. A trickle of ash caught his eye, betraying movement. Something pale, half-hidden, stirring. *He's made himself a cave,* the prince realized. *A burrow in the brick.* The foundations of the Great Pyramid of Meereen were massive and thick to support the weight of the huge structure overhead; even the interior walls were three times thicker than any castle's curtain walls. But Viserion had dug himself a hole in them with flame and claw, a hole big enough to sleep in.

*And we've just woken him.* He could see what looked like some huge white serpent uncoiling inside the wall, up where it curved to become the ceiling. More ash went drifting downward, and a bit of crumbling brick fell away. The serpent resolved itself into a neck and tail, and then the dragon's long horned head appeared, his eyes glowing in the dark like golden coals. His wings rattled, stretching.

All of Quentyn's plans had fled his head. He could hear Caggo Corpse-killer shouting to his sellswords. *The chains, he is sending for the chains*, the Dornish prince thought. The plan had been to feed the beasts and chain them in their torpor, just as the queen had done. One dragon, or preferably both.

"More meat," Quentyn said. *Once the beasts were fed they will become sluggish*. He had seen it work with snakes in Dorne, but here, with these monsters ... "Bring ... bring ..."

Viserion launched himself from the ceiling, pale leather wings unfolding, spreading wide. The broken chain dangling from his neck swung wildly. His flame lit the pit, pale gold shot through with red and orange, and the stale air exploded in a cloud of hot ash and sulfur as the white wings beat and beat again.

A hand seized Quentyn by the shoulder. The torch spun from his grip to bounce across the floor, then tumbled into the pit, still burning. He found himself face-to-face with a brass ape. *Gerris*. "Quent, this will not work. They are too wild, they ..."

The dragon came down between the Dornishmen and the door with a roar that would have sent a hundred lions running. His head moved side to side as he inspected the intruders—Dornishmen, Windblown, Caggo. Last and longest the beast stared at Pretty Meris, sniffing. *The woman*, Quentyn realized. *He knows that she is female. He is looking for Daenerys. He wants his mother and does not understand why she's not here*.

Quentyn wrenched free of Gerris's grip. "Viserion," he called. *The white one is Viserion*. For half a heartbeat he was afraid he'd gotten it wrong. "Viserion," he called again, fumbling for the whip hanging from his belt. *She cowed the black one with a whip. I need to do the same*.

The dragon knew his name. His head turned, and his gaze lingered on the Dornish prince for three long heartbeats. Pale fires burned behind the shining black daggers of his teeth. His eyes were lakes of molten gold, and smoke rose from his nostrils.

“Down,” Quentyn said. Then he coughed, and coughed again.

The air was thick with smoke and the sulfur stench was choking. Viserion lost interest. The dragon turned back toward the Windblown and lurched toward the door. Perhaps he could smell the blood of the dead guards or the meat in the butcher’s wagon. Or perhaps he had only now seen that the way was open.

Quentyn heard the sellswords shouting. Caggo was calling for the chains, and Pretty Meris was screaming at someone to step aside. The dragon moved awkwardly on the ground, like a man scrabbling on his knees and elbows, but quicker than the Dornish prince would have believed. When the Windblown were too late to get out of his way, Viserion let loose with another roar. Quentyn heard the rattle of chains, the deep *thrum* of a crossbow.

“No,” he screamed, “no, don’t, *don’t*,” but it was too late. *The fool* was all that he had time to think as the quarrel caromed off Viserion’s neck to vanish in the gloom. A line of fire gleamed in its wake—dragon’s blood, glowing gold and red.

The crossbowman was fumbling for another quarrel as the dragon’s teeth closed around his neck. The man wore the mask of a Brazen Beast, the fearsome likeness of a tiger. As he dropped his weapon to try and pry apart Viserion’s jaws, flame gouted from the tiger’s mouth. The man’s eyes burst with soft popping sounds, and the brass around them began to run. The dragon tore off a hunk of flesh, most of the sellsword’s neck, then gulped it down as the burning corpse collapsed to the floor.

The other Windblown were pulling back. This was more than even Pretty Meris had the stomach for. Viserion’s horned head moved back and forth between them and his prey, but after a moment he forgot the sellswords and bent his neck to tear another mouthful from the dead man. A lower leg this time.

Quentyn let his whip uncoil. “Viserion,” he called, louder this time. He could do this, he would do this, his father had sent him to the far ends of the

earth for this, he would not fail him. “*VISERION!*” He snapped the whip in the air with a *crack* that echoed off the blackened walls.

The pale head rose. The great gold eyes narrowed. Wisps of smoke spiraled upward from the dragon’s nostrils.

“Down,” the prince commanded. *You must not let him smell your fear.*  
“Down, down, *down.*” He brought the whip around and laid a lash across the dragon’s face. Viserion *hissed*.

And then a hot wind buffeted him and he heard the sound of leathern wings and the air was full of ash and cinders and a monstrous roar went echoing off the scorched and blackened bricks and he could hear his friends shouting wildly. Gerris was calling out his name, over and over, and the big man was bellowing, “Behind you, behind you, *behind you!*”

Quentyn turned and threw his left arm across his face to shield his eyes from the furnace wind. *Rhaegal*, he reminded himself, *the green one is Rhaegal.*

When he raised his whip, he saw that the lash was burning. His hand as well. All of him, all of him was burning.

*Oh*, he thought. Then he began to scream.