

DAENERYS

The sky was a merciless blue, without a wisp of cloud in sight. *The bricks will soon be baking in the sun*, thought Dany. *Down on the sands, the fighters will feel the heat through the soles of their sandals.*

Jhiqui slipped Dany's silk robe from her shoulders and Irri helped her into her bathing pool. The light of the rising sun shimmered on the water, broken by the shadow of the persimmon tree. "Even if the pits must open, must Your Grace go yourself?" asked Missandei as she was washing the queen's hair.

"Half of Meereen will be there to see me, gentle heart."

"Your Grace," said Missandei, "this one begs leave to say that half of Meereen will be there to watch men bleed and die."

She is not wrong, the queen knew, *but it makes no matter.*

Soon Dany was as clean as she was ever going to be. She pushed herself to her feet, splashing softly. Water ran down her legs and beaded on her breasts. The sun was climbing up the sky, and her people would soon be gathering. She would rather have drifted in the fragrant pool all day, eating iced fruit off silver trays and dreaming of a house with a red door, but a queen belongs to her people, not to herself.

Jhiqui brought a soft towel to pat her dry. "*Khaleesi*, which *tokar* will you want today?" asked Irri.

"The yellow silk." The queen of the rabbits could not be seen without her floppy ears. The yellow silk was light and cool, and it would be blistering down in the pit. *The red sands will burn the soles of those about to die.* "And over it, the long red veils." The veils would keep the wind from blowing sand into her mouth. *And the red will hide any blood spatters.*

As Jhiqui brushed Dany's hair and Irri painted the queen's nails, they chattered happily about the day's matches. Missandei reemerged. "Your

Grace. The king bids you join him when you are dressed. And Prince Quentyn has come with his Dornish Men. They beg a word, if that should please you.”

Little about this day shall please me. “Some other day.”

At the base of the Great Pyramid, Ser Barristan awaited them beside an ornate open palanquin, surrounded by Brazen Beasts. *Ser Grandfather*, Dany thought. Despite his age, he looked tall and handsome in the armor that she’d given him. “I would be happier if you had Unsullied guards about you today, Your Grace,” the old knight said, as Hizdahr went to greet his cousin. “Half of these Brazen Beasts are untried freedmen.” *And the other half are Meereenese of doubtful loyalty*, he left unsaid. Selmy mistrusted all the Meereenese, even shavepates.

“And untried they shall remain unless we try them.”

“A mask can hide many things, Your Grace. Is the man behind the owl mask the same owl who guarded you yesterday and the day before? How can we know?”

“How should Meereen ever come to trust the Brazen Beasts if I do not? There are good brave men beneath those masks. I put my life into their hands.” Dany smiled for him. “You fret too much, ser. I will have you beside me, what other protection do I need?”

“I am one old man, Your Grace.”

“Strong Belwas will be with me as well.”

“As you say.” Ser Barristan lowered his voice. “Your Grace. We set the woman Meris free, as you commanded. Before she went, she asked to speak with you. I met with her instead. She claims this Tattered Prince meant to bring the Windblown over to your cause from the beginning. That he sent her here to treat with you secretly, but the Dornishmen unmasked them and betrayed them before she could make her own approach.”

Treachery on treachery, the queen thought wearily. *Is there no end to it?*
“How much of this do you believe, ser?”

“Little and less, Your Grace, but those were her words.”

“Will they come over to us, if need be?”

“She says they will. But for a price.”

“Pay it.” Meereen needed iron, not gold. “The Tattered Prince will want more than coin, Your Grace. Meris says that he wants Pentos.”

“Pentos?” Her eyes narrowed. “How can I give him Pentos? It is half a world away.”

“He would be willing to wait, the woman Meris suggested. Until we march for Westeros.”

And if I never march for Westeros? “Pentos belongs to the Pentoshi. And Magister Illyrio is in Pentos. He who arranged my marriage to Khal Drogo and gave me my dragon eggs. Who sent me you, and Belwas, and Groleo. I owe him much and more. I will *not* repay that debt by giving his city to some sellsword. No.”

Ser Barristan inclined his head. “Your Grace is wise.”

“Have you ever seen such an auspicious day, my love?” Hizdahr zo Loraq commented when she rejoined him. He helped Dany up onto the palanquin, where two tall thrones stood side by side.

“Auspicious for you, perhaps. Less so for those who must die before the sun goes down.”

“All men must die,” said Hizdahr, “but not all can die in glory, with the cheers of the city ringing in their ears.” He lifted a hand to the soldiers on the doors. “Open.”

The plaza that fronted on her pyramid was paved with bricks of many colors, and the heat rose from them in shimmering waves. People swarmed

everywhere. Some rode litters or sedan chairs, some forked donkeys, many were afoot. Nine of every ten were moving westward, down the broad brick thoroughfare to Daznak's Pit. When they caught sight of the palanquin emerging from the pyramid, a cheer went up from those nearest and spread across the plaza. *How queer*, the queen thought. *They cheer me on the same plaza where I once impaled one hundred sixty-three Great Masters.*

A great drum led the royal procession to clear their way through the streets. Between each beat, a shavepate herald in a shirt of polished copper disks cried for the crowd to part. *BOMM*. "They come!" *BOMM*. "Make way!" *BOMM*. "The queen!" *BOMM*. "The king!" *BOMM*. Behind the drum marched Brazen Beasts four abreast. Some carried cudgels, others staves; all wore pleated skirts, leathern sandals, and patchwork cloaks sewn from squares of many colors to echo the many-colored bricks of Meereen. Their masks gleamed in the sun: boars and bulls, hawks and herons, lions and tigers and bears, fork-tongued serpents and hideous basilisks.

Strong Belwas, who had no love for horses, walked in front of them in his studded vest, his scarred brown belly jiggling with every step. Irri and Jhiqui followed a horse, with Aggo and Rakharo, then Reznak in an ornate sedan chair with an awning to keep the sun off his head. Ser Barristan Selmy rode at Dany's side, his armor flashing in the sun. A long cloak flowed from his shoulders, bleached as white as bone. On his left arm was a large white shield. A little farther back was Quentyn Martell, the Dornish prince, with his two companions.

The column crept slowly down the long brick street. *BOMM*. "They come!" *BOMM*. "Our queen. Our king." *BOMM*. "Make way."

Dany could hear her handmaids arguing behind her, debating who was going to win the day's final match. Jhiqui favored the gigantic Goghor, who looked more bull than man, even to the bronze ring in his nose. Irri insisted that Belaquo Bonebreaker's flail would prove the giant's undoing. *My handmaids are Dothraki*, she told herself. *Death rides with every khalasar*. The day she wed Khal Drogo, the *arakhs* had flashed at her wedding feast, and men had died whilst others drank and mated. Life and death went hand in hand amongst the horselords, and a sprinkling of blood was thought to

bless a marriage. Her new marriage would soon be drenched in blood. How blessed it would be.

BOMM, BOMM, BOMM, BOMM, BOMM, BOMM, came the drumbeats, faster than before, suddenly angry and impatient. Ser Barristan drew his sword as the column ground to an abrupt halt between the pink-and-white pyramid of Pahl and the green-and-black of Naqqan.

Dany turned. “Why are we stopped?”

Hizdahr stood. “The way is blocked.”

A palanquin lay overturned athwart their way. One of its bearers had collapsed to the bricks, overcome by heat. “Help that man,” Dany commanded. “Get him off the street before he’s stepped on and give him food and water. He looks as though he has not eaten in a fortnight.”

Ser Barristan glanced uneasily to left and right. Ghiscari faces were visible on the terraces, looking down with cool and unsympathetic eyes. “Your Grace, I do not like this halt. This may be some trap. The Sons of the Harpy —”

“—have been tamed,” declared Hizdahr zo Loraq. “Why should they seek to harm my queen when she has taken me for her king and consort? Now help that man, as my sweet queen has commanded.” He took Dany by the hand and smiled.

The Brazen Beasts did as they were bid. Dany watched them at their work. “Those bearers were slaves before I came. I made them free. Yet that palanquin is no lighter.”

“True,” said Hizdahr, “but those men are paid to bear its weight now. Before you came, that man who fell would have an overseer standing over him, stripping the skin off his back with a whip. Instead he is being given aid.”

It was true. A Brazen Beast in a boar mask had offered the litter bearer a skin of water. “I suppose I must be thankful for small victories,” the queen

said.

“One step, then the next, and soon we shall be running. Together we shall make a new Meereen.” The street ahead had finally cleared. “Shall we continue on?”

What could she do but nod? *One step, then the next, but where is it I’m going?*

At the gates of Daznak’s Pit two towering bronze warriors stood locked in mortal combat. One wielded a sword, the other an axe; the sculptor had depicted them in the act of killing one another, their blades and bodies forming an archway overhead.

The mortal art, thought Dany.

She had seen the fighting pits many times from her terrace. The small ones dotted the face of Meereen like pockmarks; the larger were weeping sores, red and raw. None compared to this one, though. Strong Belwas and Ser Barristan fell in to either side as she and her lord husband passed beneath the bronzes, to emerge at the top of a great brick bowl ringed by descending tiers of benches, each a different color.

Hizdahr zo Loraq led her down, through black, purple, blue, green, white, yellow, and orange to the red, where the scarlet bricks took the color of the sands below. Around them peddlers were selling dog sausages, roast onions, and unborn puppies on a stick, but Dany had no need of such. Hizdahr had stocked their box with flagons of chilled wine and sweetwater, with figs, dates, melons, and pomegranates, with pecans and peppers and a big bowl of honeyed locusts. Strong Belwas bellowed, “*Locusts!*” as he seized the bowl and began to crunch them by the handful.

“Those are very tasty,” advised Hizdahr. “You ought to try a few yourself, my love. They are rolled in spice before the honey, so they are sweet and hot at once.”

“That explains the way Belwas is sweating,” Dany said. “I believe I will content myself with figs and dates.”

Across the pit the Graces sat in flowing robes of many colors, clustered around the austere figure of Galazza Galare, who alone amongst them wore the green. The Great Masters of Meereen occupied the red and orange benches. The women were veiled, and the men had brushed and lacquered their hair into horns and hands and spikes. Hizdahr's kin of the ancient line of Loraq seemed to favor *tokars* of purple and indigo and lilac, whilst those of Pahl were striped in pink and white. The envoys from Yunkai were all in yellow and filled the box beside the king's, each of them with his slaves and servants. Meereenese of lesser birth crowded the upper tiers, more distant from the carnage. The black and purple benches, highest and most distant from the sand, were crowded with freedmen and other common folk. The sellswords had been placed up there as well, Daenerys saw, their captains seated right amongst the common soldiers. She spied Brown Ben's weathered face and Bloodbeard's fiery red whiskers and long braids.

Her lord husband stood and raised his hands. "*Great Masters!* My queen has come this day, to show her love for you, her people. By her grace and with her leave, I give you now your mortal art. *Meereen!* Let Queen Daenerys hear your love!"

Ten thousand throats roared out their thanks; then twenty thousand; then all. They did not call her name, which few of them could pronounce. "*Mother!*" they cried instead; in the old dead tongue of Ghis, the word was *Mhysa!* They stamped their feet and slapped their bellies and shouted, "*Mhysa, Mhysa, Mhysa,*" until the whole pit seemed to tremble. Dany let the sound wash over her. *I am not your mother*, she might have shouted, back, *I am the mother of your slaves, of every boy who ever died upon these sands whilst you gorged on honeyed locusts*. Behind her, Reznak leaned in to whisper in her ear, "Magnificence, hear how they love you!"

No, she knew, *they love their mortal art*. When the cheers began to ebb, she allowed to herself to sit. Their box was in the shade, but her head was pounding. "Jhiqui," she called, "sweet water, if you would. My throat is very dry."

"Khrazz will have the honor of the day's first kill," Hizdahr told her. "There has never been a better fighter."

“Strong Belwas was better,” insisted Strong Belwas.

Khrazz was Meereenese, of humble birth—a tall man with a brush of stiff red-black hair running down the center of his head. His foe was an ebon-skinned spearman from the Summer Isles whose thrusts kept Khrazz at bay for a time, but once he slipped inside the spear with his shortsword, only butchery remained. After it was done, Khrazz cut the heart from the black man, raised it above his head red and dripping, and took a bite from it.

“Khrazz believes the hearts of brave men make him stronger,” said Hizdahr. Jhiqui murmured her approval. Dany had once eaten a stallion’s heart to give strength to her unborn son ... but that had not saved Rhaego when the *maegi* murdered him in her womb. *Three treasons shall you know. She was the first, Jorah was the second, Brown Ben Plumm the third.* Was she done with betrayals?

“Ah,” said Hizdahr, pleased. “Now comes the Spotted Cat. See how he moves, my queen. A poem on two feet.”

The foe Hizdahr had found for the walking poem was as tall as Goghor and as broad as Belwas, but slow. They were fighting six feet from Dany’s box when the Spotted Cat hamstrung him. As the man stumbled to his knees, the Cat put a foot on his back and a hand around his head and opened his throat from ear to ear. The red sands drank his blood, the wind his final words. The crowd screamed its approval.

“Bad fighting, good dying,” said Strong Belwas. “Strong Belwas hates it when they scream.” He had finished all the honeyed locusts. He gave a belch and took a swig of wine.

Pale Qartheen, black Summer Islanders, copper-skinned Dothraki, Tyr oshi with blue beards, Lamb Men, Jogos Nhai, sullen Braavosi, brindle-skinned half-men from the jungles of Sothoros—from the ends of the world they came to die in Daznak’s Pit. “This one shows much promise, my sweet,” Hizdahr said of a Lysene youth with long blond hair that fluttered in the wind ... but his foe grabbed a handful of that hair, pulled the boy off-balance, and gutted him. In death he looked even younger than he had with blade in hand. “A boy,” said Dany. “He was only a boy.”

“Six-and-ten,” Hizdahr insisted. “A man grown, who freely chose to risk his life for gold and glory. No children die today in Daznak’s, as my gentle queen in her wisdom has decreed.”

Another small victory. Perhaps I cannot make my people good, she told herself, but I should at least try to make them a little less bad. Daenerys would have prohibited contests between women as well, but Barsena Blackhair protested that she had as much right to risk her life as any man. The queen had also wished to forbid the follies, comic combats where cripples, dwarfs, and crones had at one another with cleavers, torches, and hammers (the more inept the fighters, the funnier the folly, it was thought), but Hizdahr said his people would love her more if she laughed with them, and argued that without such frolics, the cripples, dwarfs, and crones would starve. So Dany had relented.

It had been the custom to sentence criminals to the pits; that practice she agreed might resume, but only for certain crimes. “Murderers and rapers may be forced to fight, and all those who persist in slaving, but not thieves or debtors.”

Beasts were still allowed, though. Dany watched an elephant make short work of a pack of six red wolves. Next a bull was set against a bear in a bloody battle that left both animals torn and dying. “The flesh is not wasted,” said Hizdahr. “The butchers use the carcasses to make a healthful stew for the hungry. Any man who presents himself at the Gates of Fate may have a bowl.”

“A good law,” Dany said. *You have so few of them.* “We must make certain that this tradition is continued.”

After the beast fights came a mock battle, pitting six men on foot against six horsemen, the former armed with shields and longswords, the latter with Dothraki *arakhs*. The mock knights were clad in mail hauberks, whilst the mock Dothraki wore no armor. At first the riders seemed to have the advantage, riding down two of their foes and slashing the ear from a third, but then the surviving knights began to attack the horses, and one by one the riders were unmounted and slain, to Jhiqui’s great disgust. “That was no true *khalasar*,” she said.

“These carcasses are not destined for your healthful stew, I would hope,” Dany said, as the slain were being removed.

“The horses, yes,” said Hizdahr. “The men, no.”

“Horsemeat and onions makes you strong,” said Belwas.

The battle was followed by the day’s first folly, a tilt between a pair of jousting dwarfs, presented by one of the Yunkish lords that Hizdahr had invited to the games. One rode a hound, the other a sow. Their wooden armor had been freshly painted, so one bore the stag of the usurper Robert Baratheon, the other the golden lion of House Lannister. That was for her sake, plainly. Their antics soon had Belwas snorting laughter, though Dany’s smile was faint and forced. When the dwarf in red tumbled from the saddle and began to chase his sow across the sands, whilst the dwarf on the dog galloped after him, whapping at his buttocks with a wooden sword, she said, “This is sweet and silly, but ...”

“Be patient, my sweet,” said Hizdahr. “They are about to loose the lions.”

Daenerys gave him a quizzical look. “Lions?”

“Three of them. The dwarfs will not expect them.”

She frowned. “The dwarfs have wooden swords. Wooden armor. How do you expect them to fight lions?”

“Badly,” said Hizdahr, “though perhaps they will surprise us. More like they will shriek and run about and try to climb out of the pit. That is what makes this a folly.”

Dany was not pleased. “I forbid it.”

“Gentle queen. You do not want to disappoint your people.”

“You swore to me that the fighters would be grown men who had freely consented to risk their lives for gold and honor. These dwarfs did not consent to battle lions with wooden swords. You will stop it. Now.”

The king's mouth tightened. For a heartbeat Dany thought she saw a flash of anger in those placid eyes. "As you command." Hizdahr beckoned to his pitmaster. "No lions," he said when the man trotted over, whip in hand.

"Not one, Magnificence? Where is the fun in that?"

"My queen has spoken. The dwarfs will not be harmed."

"The crowd will not like it."

"Then bring on Barsena. That should appease them."

"Your Worship knows best." The pitmaster snapped his whip and shouted out commands. The dwarfs were herded off, pig and dog and all, as the spectators hissed their disapproval and pelted them with stones and rotten fruit.

A roar went up as Barsena Blackhair strode onto the sands, naked save for breechclout and sandals. A tall, dark woman of some thirty years, she moved with the feral grace of a panther. "Barsena is much loved," Hizdahr said, as the sound swelled to fill the pit. "The bravest woman I have ever seen."

Strong Belwas said, "Fighting girls is not so brave. Fighting Strong Belwas would be brave."

"Today she fights a boar," said Hizdahr.

Aye, thought Dany, because you could not find a woman to face her, no matter how plump the purse. "And not with a wooden sword, it would seem."

The boar was a huge beast, with tusks as long as a man's forearm and small eyes that swam with rage. She wondered whether the boar that had killed Robert Baratheon had looked as fierce. *A terrible creature and a terrible death.* For a heartbeat she felt almost sorry for the Usurper.

"Barsena is very quick," Reznak said. "She will dance with the boar, Magnificence, and slice him when he passes near her. He will be awash in

blood before he falls, you shall see.”

It began just as he said. The boar charged, Barsena spun aside, her blade flashed silver in the sun. “She needs a spear,” Ser Barristan said, as Barsena vaulted over the beast’s second charge. “That is no way to fight a boar.” He sounded like someone’s fussy old grandsire, just as Daario was always saying.

Barsena’s blade was running red, but the boar soon stopped. *He is smarter than a bull*, Dany realized. *He will not charge again*. Barsena came to the same realization. Shouting, she edged closer to the boar, tossing her knife from hand to hand. When the beast backed away, she cursed and slashed at his snout, trying to provoke him ... and succeeding. This time her leap came an instant too late, and a tusk ripped her left leg open from knee to crotch.

A moan went up from thirty thousand throats. Clutching at her torn leg, Barsena dropped her knife and tried to hobble off, but before she had gone two feet the boar was on her once again. Dany turned her face away. “Was that brave enough?” she asked Strong Belwas, as a scream rang out across the sand.

“Fighting pigs is brave, but it is not brave to scream so loud. It hurts Strong Belwas in the ears.” The eunuch rubbed his swollen stomach, crisscrossed with old white scars. “It makes Strong Belwas sick in his belly too.”

The boar buried his snout in Barsena’s belly and began rooting out her entrails. The smell was more than the queen could stand. The heat, the flies, the shouts from the crowd ... *I cannot breathe*. She lifted her veil and let it flutter away. She took her *tokar* off as well. The pearls rattled softly against one another as she unwound the silk.

“*Khaleesi?*” Irri asked. “What are you doing?”

“Taking off my floppy ears.” A dozen men with boar spears came trotting out onto the sand to drive the boar away from the corpse and back to his pen. The pitmaster was with them, a long barbed whip in his hand. As he

snapped it at the boar, the queen rose. “Ser Barristan, will you see me safely back to my garden?”

Hizdahr looked confused. “There is more to come. A folly, six old women, and three more matches. Belaquo and Goghor!”

“Belaquo will win,” Irri declared. “It is known.”

“It is *not* known,” Jhiqui said. “Belaquo will die.”

“One will die, or the other will,” said Dany. “And the one who lives will die some other day. This was a mistake.”

“Strong Belwas ate too many locusts.” There was a queasy look on Belwas’s broad brown face. “Strong Belwas needs milk.”

Hizdahr ignored the eunuch. “Magnificence, the people of Meereen have come to celebrate our union. You heard them cheering you. Do not cast away their love.”

“It was my floppy ears they cheered, not me. Take me from this abbatoir, husband.” She could hear the boar snorting, the shouts of the spear-men, the *crack* of the pitmaster’s whip.

“Sweet lady, no. Stay only a while longer. For the folly, and one last match. Close your eyes, no one will see. They will be watching Belaquo and Ghogor. This is no time for—”

A shadow rippled across his face.

The tumult and the shouting died. Ten thousand voices stilled. Every eye turned skyward. A warm wind brushed Dany’s cheeks, and above the beating of her heart she heard the sound of wings. Two spearmen dashed for shelter. The pitmaster froze where he stood. The boar went snuffling back to Barsena. Strong Belwas gave a moan, stumbled from his seat, and fell to his knees.

Above them all the dragon turned, dark against the sun. His scales were black, his eyes and horns and spinal plates blood red. Ever the largest of her

three, in the wild Drogon had grown larger still. His wings stretched twenty feet from tip to tip, black as jet. He flapped them once as he swept back above the sands, and the sound was like a clap of thunder. The boar raised his head, snorting ... and flame engulfed him, black fire shot with red. Dany felt the wash of heat thirty feet away. The beast's dying scream sounded almost human. Drogon landed on the carcass and sank his claws into the smoking flesh. As he began to feed, he made no distinction between Barsena and the boar.

"Oh, gods," moaned Reznak, "he's *eating her!*" The seneschal covered his mouth. Strong Belwas was retching noisily. A queer look passed across Hizdahr zo Loraq's long, pale face—part fear, part lust, part rapture. He licked his lips. Dany could see the Pahls streaming up the steps, clutching their *tokars* and tripping over the fringes in their haste to be away. Others followed. Some ran, shoving at one another. More stayed in their seats.

One man took it on himself to be a hero.

He was one of the spearmen sent out to drive the boar back to his pen. Perhaps he was drunk, or mad. Perhaps he had loved Barsena Blackhair from afar or had heard some whisper of the girl Hazzea. Perhaps he was just some common man who wanted bards to sing of him. He darted forward, his boar spear in his hands. Red sand kicked up beneath his heels, and shouts rang out from the seats. Drogon raised his head, blood dripping from his teeth. The hero leapt onto his back and drove the iron spearpoint down at the base of the dragon's long scaled neck.

Dany and Drogon screamed as one.

The hero leaned into his spear, using his weight to twist the point in deeper. Drogon arched upward with a hiss of pain. His tail lashed sideways. She watched his head crane around at the end of that long serpentine neck, saw his black wings unfold. The dragonslayer lost his footing and went tumbling to the sand. He was trying to struggle back to his feet when the dragon's teeth closed hard around his forearm. "No" was all the man had time to shout. Drogon wrenched his arm from his shoulder and tossed it aside as a dog might toss a rodent in a rat pit.

“Kill it,” Hizdahr zo Loraq shouted to the other spearmen. “*Kill the beast!*”

Ser Barristan held her tightly. “Look away, Your Grace.”

“Let me go!” Dany twisted from his grasp. The world seemed to slow as she cleared the parapet. When she landed in the pit she lost a sandal. Running, she could feel the sand between her toes, hot and rough. Ser Barristan was calling after her. Strong Belwas was still vomiting. She ran faster.

The spearmen were running too. Some were rushing toward the dragon, spears in hand. Others were rushing away, throwing down their weapons as they fled. The hero was jerking on the sand, the bright blood pouring from the ragged stump of his shoulder. His spear remained in Drogon’s back, wobbling as the dragon beat his wings. Smoke rose from the wound. As the other spears closed in, the dragon spat fire, bathing two men in black flame. His tail lashed sideways and caught the pitmaster creeping up behind him, breaking him in two. Another attacker stabbed at his eyes until the dragon caught him in his jaws and tore his belly out. The Meereenese were screaming, cursing, howling. Dany could hear someone pounding after her. “Drogon,” she screamed. “*Drogon.*”

His head turned. Smoke rose between his teeth. His blood was smoking too, where it dripped upon the ground. He beat his wings again, sending up a choking storm of scarlet sand. Dany stumbled into the hot red cloud, coughing. He snapped.

“No” was all that she had time to say. *No, not me, don’t you know me?* The black teeth closed inches from her face. *He meant to tear my head off.* The sand was in her eyes. She stumbled over the pitmaster’s corpse and fell on her backside.

Drogon roared. The sound filled the pit. A furnace wind engulfed her. The dragon’s long scaled neck stretched toward her. When his mouth opened, she could see bits of broken bone and charred flesh between his black teeth. His eyes were molten. *I am looking into hell, but I dare not look away.* She had never been so certain of anything. *If I run from him, he will burn me and devour me.* In Westeros the septons spoke of seven hells and seven

heavens, but the Seven Kingdoms and their gods were far away. If she died here, Dany wondered, would the horse god of the Doth raki part the grass and claim her for his starry *khalasar*; so she might ride the nightlands beside her sun-and-stars? Or would the angry gods of Ghis send their harpies to seize her soul and drag her down to torment? Drogon roared full in her face, his breath hot enough to blister skin. Off to her right Dany heard Barristan Selmy shouting, “*Me! Try me. Over here. Me!*”

In the smoldering red pits of Drogon’s eyes, Dany saw her own reflection. How small she looked, how weak and frail and scared. *I cannot let him see my fear.* She scrabbled in the sand, pushing against the pitmaster’s corpse, and her fingers brushed against the handle of his whip. Touching it made her feel braver. The leather was warm, alive. Drogon roared again, the sound so loud that she almost dropped the whip. His teeth snapped at her.

Dany hit him. “*No,*” she screamed, swinging the lash with all the strength that she had in her. The dragon jerked his head back. “*No,*” she screamed again. “*NO!*” The barbs raked along his snout. Drogon rose, his wings covering her in shadow. Dany swung the lash at his scaled belly, back and forth until her arm began to ache. His long serpentine neck bent like an archer’s bow. With a *hisssssss*, he spat black fire down at her. Dany darted underneath the flames, swinging the whip and shouting, “*No, no, no. Get DOWN!*” His answering roar was full of fear and fury, full of pain. His wings beat once, twice ...

... and folded. The dragon gave one last *hiss* and stretched out flat upon his belly. Black blood was flowing from the wound where the spear had pierced him, smoking where it dripped onto the scorched sands. *He is fire made flesh*, she thought, *and so am I.*

Daenerys Targaryen vaulted onto the dragon’s back, seized the spear, and ripped it out. The point was half-melted, the iron red-hot, glowing. She flung it aside. Drogon twisted under her, his muscles rippling as he gathered his strength. The air was thick with sand. Dany could not see, she could not breathe, she could not think. The black wings cracked like thunder, and suddenly the scarlet sands were falling away beneath her.

Dizzy, Dany closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she glimpsed the Meereenese beneath her through a haze of tears and dust, pouring up the steps and out into the streets.

The lash was still in her hand. She flicked it against Drogon's neck and cried, "*Higher!*" Her other hand clutched at his scales, her fingers scrabbling for purchase. Drogon's wide black wings beat the air. Dany could feel the heat of him between her thighs. Her heart felt as if it were about to burst. *Yes, she thought, yes, now, now, do it, do it, take me, take me, FLY!*