

DAENERYS

The dancers shimmered, their sleek shaved bodies covered with a fine sheen of oil. Blazing torches whirled from hand to hand to the beat of drums and the trilling of a flute. Whenever two torches crossed in the air, a naked girl leapt between them, spinning. The torchlight shone off oiled limbs and breasts and buttocks.

The three men were erect. The sight of their arousal was arousing, though Daenerys Targaryen found it comical as well. The men were all of a height, with long legs and flat bellies, every muscle as sharply etched as if it had been chiseled out of stone. Even their faces looked the same, somehow ... which was passing strange, since one had skin as dark as ebony, while the second was as pale as milk, and the third gleamed like burnished copper.

Are they meant to inflame me? Dany stirred amongst her silken cushions. Against the pillars her Unsullied stood like statues in their spiked caps, their smooth faces expressionless. Not so the whole men. Reznak mo Reznak's mouth was open, and his lips glistened wetly as he watched. Hizdahr zo Loraq was saying something to the man beside him, yet all the time his eyes were on the dancing girls. The Shavepate's ugly, oily face was as stern as ever, but he missed nothing.

It was harder to know what her honored guest was dreaming. The pale, lean, hawk-faced man who shared her high table was resplendent in robes of maroon silk and cloth-of-gold, his bald head shining in the torchlight as he devoured a fig with small, precise, elegant bites. Opals winked along the nose of Xaro Xhoan Daxos as his head turned to follow the dancers.

In his honor Daenerys had donned a Qartheen gown, a sheer confection of violet samite cut so as to leave her left breast bare. Her silver-gold hair brushed lightly over her shoulder, falling almost to her nipple. Half the men in the hall had stolen glances at her, but not Xaro. *It was the same in Qarth.* She could not sway the merchant prince that way. *Sway him I must, however.* He had come from Qarth upon the galleas *Silken Cloud* with thirteen galleys sailing attendance, his fleet an answered prayer. Meereen's

trade had dwindled away to nothing since she had ended slavery, but Xaro had the power to restore it.

As the drums reached a crescendo, three of the girls leapt above the flames, spinning in the air. The male dancers caught them about the waists and slid them down onto their members. Dany watched as the women arched their backs and coiled their legs around their partners while the flutes wept and the men thrust in time to the music. She had seen the act of love before; the Dothraki mated as openly as their mares and stallions. This was the first time she had seen lust put to music, though.

Her face was warm. *The wine*, she told herself. Yet somehow she found herself thinking of Daario Naharis. His messenger had come that morning. The Stormcrows were returning from Lhazar. Her captain was riding back to her, bringing her the friendship of the Lamb Men. *Food and trade*, she reminded herself. *He did not fail me, nor will he. Daario will help me save my city.* The queen longed to see his face, to stroke his three-pronged beard, to tell him her troubles ... but the Stormcrows were still many days away, beyond the Khyzai Pass, and she had a realm to rule.

Smoke hung between the purple pillars. The dancers knelt, heads bowed. “You were splendid,” Dany told them. “Seldom have I seen such grace, such beauty.” She beckoned to Reznak mo Reznak, and the seneschal scurried to her side. Beads of sweat dotted his bald, wrinkled head. “Escort our guests to the baths, that they may refresh themselves, and bring them food and drink.”

“It shall be my great honor, Magnificence.”

Daenerys held out her cup for Irri to refill. The wine was sweet and strong, redolent with the smell of eastern spices, much superior to the thin Ghiscari wines that had filled her cup of late. Xaro perused the fruits on the platter Jhiqui offered him and chose a persimmon. Its orange skin matched the color of the coral in his nose. He took a bite and pursed his lips. “Tart.”

“Would my lord prefer something sweeter?”

“Sweetness cloy. Tart fruit and tart women give life its savor.” Xaro took another bite, chewed, swallowed. “Daenerys, sweet queen, I cannot tell you what pleasure it gives me to bask once more in your presence. A child departed Qarth, as lost as she was lovely. I feared she was sailing to her doom, yet now I find her here enthroned, mistress of an ancient city, surrounded by a mighty host that she raised up out of dreams.”

No, she thought, *out of blood and fire*. “I am glad you came to me. It is good to see your face again, my friend.” *I will not trust you, but I need you. I need your Thirteen, I need your ships, I need your trade.*

For centuries Meereen and her sister cities Yunkai and Astapor had been the linchpins of the slave trade, the place where Dothraki khals and the corsairs of the Basilisk Isles sold their captives and the rest of the world came to buy. Without slaves, Meereen had little to offer traders. Copper was plentiful in the Ghiscari hills, but the metal was not as valuable as it had been when bronze ruled the world. The cedars that had once grown tall along the coast grew no more, felled by the axes of the Old Empire or consumed by dragonfire when Ghis made war against Valyria. Once the trees had gone, the soil baked beneath the hot sun and blew away in thick red clouds. “It was these calamities that transformed my people into slavers,” Galazza Galare had told her, at the Temple of the Graces. *And I am the calamity that will change these slavers back into people*, Dany had sworn to herself.

“I had to come,” said Xaro in a languid tone. “Even far away in Qarth, fearful tales had reached my ears. I wept to hear them. It is said that your enemies have promised wealth and glory and a hundred virgin slave girls to any man who slays you.”

“The Sons of the Harpy.” *How does he know that?* “They scrawl on walls by night and cut the throats of honest freedmen as they sleep. When the sun comes up they hide like roaches. They fear my Brazen Beasts.” Skahaz mo Kandaq had given her the new watch she had asked for, made up in equal numbers of freedmen and shavepate Meereenese. They walked the streets both day and night, in dark hoods and brazen masks. The Sons of the Harpy had promised grisly death to any traitor who dared serve the dragon queen, and to their kith and kin as well, so the Shavepate’s men went about as

jackals, owls, and other beasts, keeping their true faces hidden. “I might have cause to fear the Sons if they saw me wandering alone through the streets, but only if it was night and I was naked and unarmed. They are craven creatures.”

“A craven’s knife can slay a queen as easily as a hero’s. I would sleep more soundly if I knew my heart’s delight had kept her fierce horselords close around her. In Qarth, you had three bloodriders who never left your side. Wherever have they gone?”

“Aggo, Jhoqo, and Rakharo still serve me.” *He is playing games with me.* Dany could play as well. “I am only a young girl and know little of such things, but older, wiser men tell me that to hold Meereen I must control its hinterlands, all the land west of Lhazar as far south as the Yunkish hills.”

“Your hinterlands are not precious to me. Your person is. Should any ill befall you, this world would lose its savor.”

“My lord is good to care so much, but I am well protected.” Dany gestured toward where Barristan Selmy stood with one hand resting on his sword hilt. “Barristan the Bold, they call him. Twice he has saved me from assassins.”

Xaro gave Selmy a cursory inspection. “Barristan the Old, did you say? Your bear knight was younger, and devoted to you.”

“I do not wish to speak of Jorah Mormont.”

“To be sure. The man was coarse and hairy.” The merchant prince leaned across the table. “Let us speak instead of love, of dreams and desire and Daenerys, the fairest woman in this world. I am drunk with the sight of you.”

She was no stranger to the overblown courtesies of Qarth. “If you are drunk, blame the wine.”

“No wine is half so intoxicating as your beauty. My manse has seemed as empty as a tomb since Daenerys departed, and all the pleasures of the

Queen of Cities have been as ashes in my mouth. Why did you abandon me?"

I was hounded from your city in fear for my life. "It was time. Qarth wished me gone."

"Who? The Pureborn? They have water in their veins. The Spicers? There are curds between their ears. And the Undying are all dead. You should have taken me to husband. I am almost certain that I asked you for your hand. Begged you, even."

"Only half a hundred times," Dany teased. "You gave up too easily, my lord. For I *must* marry, all agree."

"A *khaleesi* must have a khal," said Irri, as she filled the queen's cup once again. "This is known."

"Shall I ask again?" wondered Xaro. "No, I know that smile. It is a cruel queen who dices with men's hearts. Humble merchants like myself are no more than stones beneath your jeweled sandals." A single tear ran slowly down his pale white cheek.

Dany knew him too well to be moved. Qartheen men could weep at will. "Oh, stop that." She took a cherry from the bowl on the table and threw it at his nose. "I may be a young girl, but I am not so foolish as to wed a man who finds a fruit platter more enticing than my breast. I saw which dancers you were watching."

Xaro wiped away his tear. "The same ones Your Grace was following, I believe. You see, we are alike. If you will not take me for your husband, I am content to be your slave."

"I want no slave. I free you." His jeweled nose made a tempting target. This time Dany threw an apricot at him.

Xaro caught it in the air and took a bite. "Whence came this madness? Should I count myself fortunate that you did not free my own slaves when you were my guest in Qarth?"

I was a beggar queen and you were Xaro of the Thirteen, Dany thought, *and all you wanted were my dragons*. “Your slaves seemed well treated and content. It was not till Astapor that my eyes were opened. Do you know how Unsullied are made and trained?”

“Cruelly, I have no doubt. When a smith makes a sword, he thrusts the blade into the fire, beats on it with a hammer, then plunges it into iced water to temper the steel. If you would savor the sweet taste of the fruit, you must water the tree.”

“This tree has been watered with blood.”

“How else, to grow a soldier? Your Radiance enjoyed my dancers. Would it surprise you to know that they are slaves, bred and trained in Yunkai? They have been dancing since they were old enough to walk. How else to achieve such *perfection*?” He took a swallow of his wine. “They are expert in all the erotic arts as well. I had thought to make Your Grace a gift of them.”

“By all means.” Dany was unsurprised. “I shall free them.”

That made him wince. “And what would they do with freedom? As well give a fish a suit of mail. They were made to dance.”

“Made by who? Their masters? Perhaps your dancers would sooner build or bake or farm. Have you asked them?”

“Perhaps your elephants would sooner be nightingales. Instead of sweet song, Meereen’s nights would be filled with thunderous trumpetings, and your trees would shatter beneath the weight of great grey birds.” Xaro sighed. “Daenerys, my delight, beneath that sweet young breast beats a tender heart ... but take counsel from an older, wiser head. Things are not always as they seem. Much that may seem evil can be good. Consider rain.”

“Rain?” *Does he take me for a fool, or just a child?* “We curse the rain when it falls upon our heads, yet without it we should starve. The world *needs* rain ... and slaves. You make a face, but it is true. Consider Qarth. In art, music, magic, trade, all that makes us more than beasts, Qarth sits above the rest of mankind as you sit at the summit of this pyramid ... but

below, in place of bricks, the magnificence that is the Queen of Cities rests upon the backs of *slaves*. Ask yourself, if all men must grub in the dirt for food, how shall any man lift his eyes to contemplate the stars? If each of us must break his back to build a hovel, who shall raise the temples to glorify the gods? For some men to be great, others must be enslaved.”

He was too eloquent for her. Dany had no answer for him, only the raw feeling in her belly. “Slavery is not the same as rain,” she insisted. “I have been rained on and I have been sold. It is *not the same*. No man wants to be *owned*.”

Xaro gave a languid shrug. “As it happens, when I came ashore in your sweet city, I chanced to see upon the riverbank a man who had once been a guest in my manse, a merchant who dealt in rare spices and choice wines. He was naked from the waist up, red and peeling, and seemed to be digging a hole.”

“Not a hole. A ditch, to bring water from the river to the fields. We mean to plant beans. The beanfields must have water.”

“How kind of my old friend to help with the digging. And how very unlike him. Is it possible he was given no choice in the matter? No, surely not. You have no slaves in Meereen.”

Dany flushed. “Your friend is being paid with food and shelter. I cannot give him back his wealth. Meereen needs beans more than it needs rare spices, and beans require water.”

“Would you set my dancers to digging ditches as well? Sweet queen, when he saw me, my old friend fell to his knees and begged me to buy him as a slave and take him back to Qarth.”

She felt as if he’d slapped her. “Buy him, then.”

“If it please you. I know it will please *him*.” He put his hand upon her arm. “There are truths only a friend may tell you. I helped you when you came to Qarth a beggar, and I have crossed long leagues and stormy seas to help you once again. Is there some place where we might speak frankly?”

Dany could feel the warmth of his fingers. *He was warm in Qarth as well*, she recalled, *until the day he had no more use for me*. She rose to her feet. “Come,” she said, and Xaro followed her through the pillars, to the wide marble steps that led up to her private chambers at the apex of the pyramid.

“Oh most beautiful of women,” Xaro said, as they began to climb, “there are footsteps behind us. We are followed.”

“My old knight does not frighten you, surely? Ser Barristan is sworn to keep my secrets.”

She took him out onto the terrace that overlooked the city. A full moon swam in the black sky above Meereen. “Shall we walk?” Dany slipped her arm through his. The air was heavy with the scent of night-blooming flowers. “You spoke of help. Trade with me, then. Meereen has salt to sell, and wine ...”

“Ghiscari wine?” Xaro made a sour face. “The sea provides all the salt that Qarth requires, but I would gladly take as many olives as you cared to sell me. Olive oil as well.”

“I have none to offer. The slavers burned the trees.” Olives had been grown along the shores of Slaver’s Bay for centuries; but the Meereenese had put their ancient groves to the torch as Dany’s host advanced on them, leaving her to cross a blackened wasteland. “We are replanting, but it takes seven years before an olive tree begins to bear, and thirty years before it can truly be called productive. What of copper?”

“A pretty metal, but fickle as a woman. Gold, now ... gold is *sincere*. Qarth will gladly give you gold ... for slaves.”

“Meereen is a free city of free men.”

“A poor city that once was rich. A hungry city that once was fat. A bloody city that once was peaceful.”

His accusations stung. There was too much truth in them. “Meereen will be rich and fat and peaceful once again, and free as well. Go to the Dothraki if

you must have slaves.”

“Dothraki make slaves, Ghiscari train them. And to reach Qarth, the horselords must needs drive their captives across the red waste. Hundreds would die, if not thousands ... and many horses too, which is why no khal will risk it. And there is this: Qarth wants no *khalasars* seething round our walls. The stench of all those horses ... meaning no offense, *Khaleesi*.”

“A horse has an honest smell. That is more than can be said of some great lords and merchant princes.”

Xaro took no notice of the sally. “Daenerys, let me be honest with you, as befits a friend. You will *not* make Meereen rich and fat and peaceful. You will only bring it to destruction, as you did Astapor. You are aware that there was battle joined at the Horns of Hazzat? The Butcher King has fled back to his palace, his new Unsullied running at his heels.”

“This is known.” Brown Ben Plumm had sent back word of the battle from the field. “The Yunkai’i have bought themselves new sellswords, and two legions from New Ghis fought beside them.”

“Two will soon become four, then ten. And Yunkish envoys have been sent to Myr and Volantis to hire more blades. The Company of the Cat, the Long Lances, the Windblown. Some say that the Wise Masters have bought the Golden Company as well.”

Her brother Viserys had once feasted the captains of the Golden Company, in hopes they might take up his cause. *They ate his food and heard his pleas and laughed at him.* Dany had only been a little girl, but she remembered. “I have sellswords too.”

“Two companies. The Yunkai’i will send twenty against you if they must. And when they march, they will not march alone. Tolos and Mantarys have agreed to an alliance.”

That was ill news, if true. Daenerys had sent missions to Tolos and Mantarys, hoping to find new friends to the west to balance the enmity of

Yunkai to the south. Her envoys had not returned. “Meereen has made alliance with Lhazar.”

That only made him chuckle. “The Dothraki horselords call the Lhazarene the *Lamb Men*. When you shear them, all they do is bleat. They are not a martial people.”

Even a sheepish friend is better than none. “The Wise Masters should follow their example. I spared Yunkai before, but I will not make that mistake again. If they should dare attack me, this time I shall raze their Yellow City to the ground.”

“And whilst you are razing Yunkai, my sweet, Meereen shall rise behind you. Do not close your eyes to your peril, Daenerys. Your eunuchs are fine soldiers, but they are too few to match the hosts that Yunkai will send against you, once Astapor has fallen.”

“My freedman—” Dany started. “Bedslaves, barbers, and brickmakers win no battles.”

He was wrong in that, she hoped. The freedmen had been a rabble once, but she had organized the men of fighting age into companies and commanded Grey Worm to make them into soldiers. *Let him think what he will.* “Have you forgotten? I have *dragons*.”

“Do you? In Qarth, you were seldom seen without a dragon on your shoulder ... yet now that shapely shoulder is as fair and bare as your sweet breast, I observe.”

“My dragons have grown, my shoulders have not. They range far afield, hunting.” *Hazzea, forgive me.* She wondered how much Xaro knew, what whispers he had heard. “Ask the Good Masters of Astapor about my dragons if you doubt them.” *I saw a slaver’s eyes melt and go running down his cheeks.* “Tell me true, old friend, why did you seek me out if not to trade?”

“To bring a gift, for the queen of my heart.”

“Say on.” *What trap is this, now?* “The gift you begged of me in Qarth. Ships. There are thirteen galleys in the bay. Yours, if you will have them. I have brought you a fleet, to carry you home to Westeros.”

A fleet. It was more than she could hope for, so of course it made her wary. In Qarth, Xaro had offered her thirty ships ... for a dragon. “And what price do you ask for these ships?”

“None. I no longer lust for dragons. I saw their work at Astapor on my way here, when my *Silken Cloud* put in for water. The ships are yours, sweet queen. Thirteen galleys, and men to pull the oars.”

Thirteen. To be sure. Xaro was one of the Thirteen. No doubt he had convinced each of his fellow members to give up one ship. She knew the merchant prince too well to think that he would sacrifice thirteen of his *own* ships. “I must consider this. May I inspect these ships?”

“You have grown suspicious, Daenerys.”

Always. “I have grown wise, Xaro.”

“Inspect all you wish. When you are satisfied, swear to me that you shall return to Westeros forthwith, and the ships are yours. Swear by your dragons and your seven-faced god and the ashes of your fathers, and *go*.”

“And if I should decide to wait a year, or three?”

A mournful look crossed Xaro’s face. “That would make me very sad, my sweet delight ... for young and strong as you now seem, you shall not live so long. Not here.”

He offers the honeycomb with one hand and shows the whip with the other. “The Yunkai’i are not so fearsome as all that.”

“Not all your enemies are in the Yellow City. Beware men with cold hearts and blue lips. You had not been gone from Qarth a fortnight when Pyat Pree set out with three of his fellow warlocks, to seek for you in Pentos.”

Dany was more amused than afraid. "It is good I turned aside, then. Pentos is half a world from Meereen."

"This is so," he allowed, "yet soon or late word must reach them of the dragon queen of Slaver's Bay."

"Is that meant to frighten me? I lived in fear for fourteen years, my lord. I woke afraid each morning and went to sleep afraid each night ... but my fears were burned away the day I came forth from the fire. Only one thing frightens me now."

"And what is it that you fear, sweet queen?"

"I am only a foolish young girl." Dany rose on her toes and kissed his cheek. "But not so foolish as to tell you that. My men shall look at these ships. Then you shall have my answer."

"As you say." He touched her bare breast lightly, and whispered, "Let me stay and help persuade you."

For a moment she was tempted. Perhaps the dancers had stirred her after all. *I could close my eyes and pretend that he was Daario.* A dream Daario would be safer than the real one. But she pushed the thought aside. "No, my lord. I thank you, but no." Dany slipped from his arms. "Some other night, perhaps."

"Some other night." His mouth was sad, but his eyes seemed more relieved than disappointed.

If I were a dragon, I could fly to Westeros, she thought when he was gone. *I would have no need of Xaro or his ships.* Dany wondered how many men thirteen galleys could hold. It had taken three to carry her and her *khalasar* from Qarth to Astapor, but that was before she had acquired eight thousand Unsullied, a thousand sellswords, and a vast horde of freedmen. *And the dragons, what am I to do with them?* "Drogon," she whispered softly, "where are you?" For a moment she could almost see him sweeping across the sky, his black wings swallowing the stars.

She turned her back upon the night, to where Barristan Selmy stood silent in the shadows. “My brother once told me a Westerosi riddle. Who listens to everything yet hears nothing?”

“A knight of the Kingsguard.” Selmy’s voice was solemn. “You heard Xaro make his offer?”

“I did, Your Grace.” The old knight took pains not to look at her bare breast as he spoke to her.

Ser Jorah would not turn his eyes away. He loved me as a woman, where Ser Barristan loves me only as his queen. Mormont had been an informer, reporting to her enemies in Westeros, yet he had given her good counsel too. “What do you think of it? Of him?”

“Of him, little and less. These ships, though ... Your Grace, with these ships we might be home before year’s end.”

Dany had never known a home. In Braavos, there had been a house with a red door, but that was all. “Beware of Qartheen bearing gifts, especially merchants of the Thirteen. There is some trap here. Perhaps these ships are rotten, or ...”

“If they were so unseaworthy, they could not have crossed the sea from Qarth,” Ser Barristan pointed out, “but Your Grace was wise to insist upon inspection. I will take Admiral Groleo to the galleys at first light with his captains and two score of his sailors. We can crawl over every inch of those ships.”

It was good counsel. “Yes, make it so.” *Westeros. Home.* But if she left, what would happen to her city? *Meereen was never your city,* her brother’s voice seemed to whisper. *Your cities are across the sea. Your Seven Kingdoms, where your enemies await you. You were born to serve them blood and fire.*

Ser Barristan cleared his throat and said, “This warlock that the merchant spoke of ...”

“Pyat Pree.” She tried to recall his face, but all she could see were his lips. The wine of the warlocks had turned them blue. *Shade-of-the-evening*, it was called. “If a warlock’s spell could kill me, I would be dead by now. I left their palace all in ashes.” *Drogon saved me when they would have drained my life from me. Drogon burned them all.*

“As you say, Your Grace. Still. I will be watchful.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I know you will. Come, walk me back down to the feast.”

The next morning Dany woke as full of hope as she had been since first she came to Slaver’s Bay. Daario would soon be at her side once more, and together they would sail for Westeros. *For home*. One of her young hostages brought her morning meal, a plump shy girl named Mezzara, whose father ruled the pyramid of Merreq, and Dany gave her a happy hug and thanked her with a kiss.

“Xaro Xhoan Daxos has offered me thirteen galleys,” she told Irri and Jhiqui as they were dressing her for court.

“Thirteen is a bad number, *Khaleesi*,” murmured Jhiqui, in the Dothraki tongue. “It is known.”

“It is known,” Irri agreed. “Thirty would be better,” Daenerys agreed. “Three hundred better still. But thirteen may suffice to carry us to Westeros.”

The two Dothraki girls exchanged a look. “The poison water is accursed, *Khaleesi*,” said Irri. “Horses cannot drink it.”

“I do not intend to drink it,” Dany promised them.

Only four petitioners awaited her that morning. As ever, Lord Ghael was the first to present himself, looking even more wretched than usual. “Your Radiance,” he moaned, as he fell to the marble at her feet, “the armies of the Yunkai’i descend on Astapor. I beg you, come south with all your strength!”

“I warned your king that this war of his was folly,” Dany reminded him.
“He would not listen.”

“Great Cleon sought only to strike down the vile slavers of Yunkai.”

“Great Cleon is a slaver himself.”

“I know that the Mother of Dragons will not abandon us in our hour of peril. Lend us your Unsullied to defend our walls.”

And if I do, who will defend my walls? “Many of my freedmen were slaves in Astapor. Perhaps some will wish to help defend your king. That is their choice, as free men. I gave Astapor its freedom. It is up to you to defend it.”

“We are all dead, then. You gave us death, not freedom.” Ghael leapt to his feet and spat into her face.

Strong Belwas seized him by the shoulder and slammed him down onto the marble so hard that Dany heard Ghael’s teeth crack. The Shavepate would have done worse, but she stopped him.

“Enough,” she said, dabbing at her cheek with the end of her *tokar*. “No one has ever died from spittle. Take him away.”

They dragged him out feet first, leaving several broken teeth and a trail of blood behind. Dany would gladly have sent the rest of the petitioners away ... but she was still their queen, so she heard them out and did her best to give them justice.

Late that afternoon Admiral Groleo and Ser Barristan returned from their inspection of the galleys. Dany assembled her council to hear them. Grey Worm was there for the Unsullied, Skahaz mo Kandaq for the Brazen Beasts. In the absence of her bloodriders, a wizened *jaqqa rhan* called Rommo, squint-eyed and bowlegged, came to speak for her Dothraki. Her freedmen were represented by the captains of the three companies she had formed—Mollono Yos Dob of the Stalwart Shields, Symon Stripe-back of the Free Brothers, Marselen of the Mother’s Men. Reznak mo Reznak

hovered at the queen's elbow, and Strong Belwas stood behind her with his huge arms crossed. Dany would not lack for counsel.

Groleo had been a most unhappy man since they had broken up his ship to build the siege engines that won Meereen for her. Dany had tried to console him by naming him her lord admiral, but it was a hollow honor; the Meereenese fleet had sailed for Yunkai when Dany's host approached the city, so the old Pentoshi was an admiral without ships. Yet now he was smiling through his ragged salt-streaked beard in a way that the queen could scarce remember.

"The ships are sound, then?" she said, hoping. "Sound enough, Your Grace. They are old ships, aye, but most are well maintained. The hull of the *Pureborn Princess* is worm-eaten. I'd not want to take her beyond the sight of land. The *Narraqqa* could stand a new rudder and lines, and the *Banded Lizard* has some cracked oars, but they will serve. The rowers are slaves, but if we offer them an honest oarsman's wage, most will stay with us. Rowing's all they know. Those who leave can be replaced from my own crews. It is a long hard voyage to Westeros, but these ships are sound enough to get us there, I'd judge."

Reznak mo Reznak gave a piteous moan. "Then it is true. Your Worship means to abandon us." He wrung his hands. "The Yunkai'i will restore the Great Masters the instant you are gone, and we who have so faithfully served your cause will be put to the sword, our sweet wives and maiden daughters raped and enslaved."

"Not mine," grumbled Skahaz Shavepate. "I will kill them first, with mine own hand." He slapped his sword hilt.

Dany felt as if he had slapped her face instead. "If you fear what may follow when I leave, come with me to Westeros."

"Wherever the Mother of Dragons goes, the Mother's Men will go as well," announced Marselen, Missandei's remaining brother.

"How?" asked Symon Stripeback, named for the tangle of scars that ridged his back and shoulders, a reminder of the whippings he had suffered as a

slave in Astapor. “Thirteen ships ... that’s not enough. A hundred ships might not be enough.”

“Wooden horses are no good,” objected Rommo, the old *jaqqa rhan*. “Dothraki will ride.”

“These ones could march overland along the shore,” suggested Grey Worm. “The ships could keep pace and resupply the column.”

“That might serve until you reached the ruins of Bhorash,” said the Shavepate. “Beyond that, your ships would need to turn south past Tolos and the Isle of Cedars and sail around Valyria, whilst the foot continued on to Mantarys by the old dragon road.”

“The *demon road*, they call it now,” said Mollono Yos Dob. The plump commander of the Stalwart Shields looked more like a scribe than a soldier, with his inky hands and heavy paunch, but he was as clever as they came. “Many and more of us would die.”

“Those left behind in Meereen would envy them their easy deaths,” moaned Reznak. “They will make *slaves* of us, or throw us in the pits. All will be as it was, or worse.”

“Where is your courage?” Ser Barristan lashed out. “Her Grace freed you from your chains. It is for you to sharpen your swords and defend your own freedom when she leaves.”

“Brave words, from one who means to sail into the sunset,” Symon Stripeback snarled back. “Will you look back at our dying?”

“Your Grace—”

“Magnificence—”

“Your Worship—”

“*Enough*.” Dany slapped the table. “No one will be left to die. You are all my people.” Her dreams of home and love had blinded her. “I will not

abandon Meereen to the fate of Astapor. It grieves me to say so, but Westeros must wait.”

Groleo was aghast. “We *must* accept these ships. If we refuse this gift ...”

Ser Barristan went to one knee before her. “My queen, your realm has need of you. You are not wanted here, but in Westeros men will flock to your banners by the thousands, great lords and noble knights. ‘*She is come,*’ they will shout to one another, in glad voices. ‘*Prince Rhaegar’s sister has come home at last.*’ ”

“If they love me so much, they will wait for me.” Dany stood. “Reznak, summon Xaro Xhoan Daxos.”

She received the merchant prince alone, seated on her bench of polished ebony, on the cushions Ser Barristan had brought her. Four Qartheen sailors accompanied him, bearing a rolled tapestry upon their shoulders. “I have brought another gift for the queen of my heart,” Xaro announced. “It has been in my family vaults since before the Doom that took Valyria.”

The sailors unrolled the tapestry across the floor. It was old, dusty, faded ... and huge. Dany had to move to Xaro’s side before the patterns became plain. “A map? It is beautiful.” It covered half the floor. The seas were blue, the lands were green, the mountains black and brown. Cities were shown as stars in gold or silver thread. *There is no Smoking Sea*, she realized. *Valyria is not yet an island.*

“There you see Astapor, and Yunkai, and Meereen.” Xaro pointed at three silver stars beside the blue of Slaver’s Bay. “Westeros is ... somewhere down there.” His hand waved vaguely toward the far end of the hall. “You turned north when you should have continued south and west, across the Summer Sea, but with my gift you shall soon be back where you belong. Accept my galleys with a joyful heart, and bend your oars westward.”

Would that I could. “My lord, I will gladly have those ships, but I cannot give you the promise that you ask.” She took his hand. “Give me the galleys, and I swear that Qarth will have the friendship of Meereen until the

stars go out. Let me trade with them, and you will have a good part of the profits.”

Xaro’s glad smile died upon his lips. “What are you saying? Are you telling me you will not go?”

“I *cannot* go.”

Tears welled from his eyes, creeping down his nose, past emeralds, amethysts, and black diamonds. “I told the Thirteen that you would heed my wisdom. It grieves me to learn that I was wrong. Take these ships and sail away, or you will surely die screaming. You cannot know how many enemies you have made.”

I know one stands before me now, weeping mummer’s tears. The realization made her sad.

“When I went to the Hall of a Thousand Thrones to beg the Pureborn for your life, I said that you were no more than a child,” Xaro went on, “but Egon Emeros the Exquisite rose and said, ‘She is a *foolish* child, mad and heedless and too dangerous to live.’ When your dragons were small they were a wonder. Grown, they are death and devastation, a flaming sword above the world.” He wiped away the tears. “I should have slain you in Qarth.”

“I was a guest beneath your roof and ate of your meat and mead,” she said. “In memory of all you did for me, I will forgive those words ... *once* ... but never presume to threaten me again.”

“Xaro Xhoan Daxos does not threaten. He promises.”

Her sadness turned to fury. “And I promise you that if you are not gone before the sun comes up, we will learn how well a liar’s tears can quench dragonfire. Leave me, Xaro. *Quickly*.”

He went but left his world behind. Dany seated herself upon her bench again to gaze across the blue silk sea, toward distant Westeros. *One day*, she promised herself.

The next morning Xaro's galleas was gone, but the "gift" that he had brought her remained behind in Slaver's Bay. Long red streamers flew from the masts of the thirteen Qartheen galleys, writhing in the wind. And when Daenerys descended to hold court, a messenger from the ships awaited her. He spoke no word but laid at her feet a black satin pillow, upon which rested a single bloodstained glove.

"What is this?" Skahaz demanded. "A bloody glove ..."

"... means war," said the queen.