



## DAENERYS

**M**eereen was as large as Astapor and Yunkai combined. Like her sister cities she was built of brick, but where Astapor had been red and Yunkai yellow, Meereen was made with bricks of many colors. Her walls were higher than Yunkai's and in better repair, studded with bastions and anchored by great defensive towers at every angle. Behind them, huge against the sky, could be seen the top of the Great Pyramid, a monstrous thing eight hundred feet tall with a towering bronze harpy at its top.

"The harpy is a craven thing," Daario Naharis said when he saw it. "She has a woman's heart and a chicken's legs. Small wonder her sons hide behind their walls."

But the hero did not hide. He rode out the city gates, armored in scales of copper and jet and mounted upon a white charger whose striped pink-and-white barding matched the silk cloak flowing from the hero's shoulders. The lance he bore was fourteen feet long, swirled in pink and white, and his hair was shaped and teased and lacquered into two great curling ram's horns. Back and forth he rode beneath the walls of multicolored bricks, challenging the besiegers to send a champion forth to meet him in single combat.

Her bloodriders were in such a fever to go meet him that they almost came to blows. "Blood of my blood," Dany told them, "your place is here by me. This man is a buzzing fly, no more. Ignore him, he will soon be

gone.” Aggo, Jhogo, and Rakharo were brave warriors, but they were young, and too valuable to risk. They kept her *khalasar* together, and were her best scouts too.

“That was wisely done,” Ser Jorah said as they watched from the front of her pavilion. “Let the fool ride back and forth and shout until his horse goes lame. He does us no harm.”

“He does,” Arstan Whitebeard insisted. “Wars are not won with swords and spears alone, ser. Two hosts of equal strength may come together, but one will break and run whilst the other stands. This hero builds courage in the hearts of his own men and plants the seeds of doubt in ours.”

Ser Jorah snorted. “And if our champion were to lose, what sort of seed would that plant?”

“A man who fears battle wins no victories, ser.”

“We’re not speaking of battle. Meereen’s gates will not open if that fool falls. Why risk a life for naught?”

“For honor, I would say.”

“I have heard enough.” Dany did not need their squabbling on top of all the other troubles that plagued her. Meereen posed dangers far more serious than one pink-and-white hero shouting insults, and she could not let herself be distracted. Her host numbered more than eighty thousand after Yunkai, but fewer than a quarter of them were soldiers. The rest . . . well, Ser Jorah called them mouths with feet, and soon they would be starving.

The Great Masters of Meereen had withdrawn before Dany’s advance, harvesting all they could and burning what they could not harvest. Scorched fields and poisoned wells had greeted her at every hand. Worst of all, they had nailed a slave child up on every milepost along the coast road from Yunkai, nailed them up still living with their entrails hanging out and one arm always outstretched to point the way to Meereen. Leading her van, Daario had given orders for the children to be taken down before Dany had to see them, but she had countermanded him as soon as she was told. “I *will* see them,” she said. “I will see every one, and count them, and look upon their faces. And I will remember.”

By the time they came to Meereen sitting on the salt coast beside her river, the count stood at one hundred and sixty-three. *I will have this city*, Dany pledged to herself once more.

The pink-and-white hero taunted the besiegers for an hour, mocking their manhood, mothers, wives, and gods. Meereen's defenders cheered him on from the city walls. "His name is Oznak zo Pahl," Brown Ben Plumm told her when he arrived for the war council. He was the new commander of the Second Sons, chosen by a vote of his fellow sellswords. "I was bodyguard to his uncle once, before I joined the Second Sons. The Great Masters, what a ripe lot o' maggots. The women weren't so bad, though it was worth your life to look at the wrong one the wrong way. I knew a man, Scarb, this Oznak cut his liver out. Claimed to be defending a lady's honor, he did, said Scarb had raped her with his eyes. How do you rape a wench with *eyes*, I ask you? But his uncle is the richest man in Meereen and his father commands the city guard, so I had to run like a rat before he killed me too."

They watched Oznak zo Pahl dismount his white charger, undo his robes, pull out his manhood, and direct a stream of urine in the general direction of the olive grove where Dany's gold pavilion stood among the burnt trees. He was still pissing when Daario Naharis rode up, *arakh* in hand. "Shall I cut that off for you and stuff it down his mouth, Your Grace?" His tooth shone gold amidst the blue of his forked beard.

"It's his city I want, not his meager manhood." She was growing angry, however. *If I ignore this any longer, my own people will think me weak*. Yet who could she send? She needed Daario as much as she did her bloodriders. Without the flamboyant Tyroshi, she had no hold on the Stormcrows, many of whom had been followers of Prendahl na Ghezn and Sallor the Bald.

High on the walls of Meereen, the jeers had grown louder, and now hundreds of the defenders were taking their lead from the hero and pissing down through the ramparts to show their contempt for the besiegers. *They are pissing on slaves, to show how little they fear us*, she thought. *They would never dare such a thing if it were a Dothraki khalasar outside their gates*.

"This challenge must be met," Arstan said again.

“It will be.” Dany said, as the hero tucked his penis away again. “Tell Strong Belwas I have need of him.”

They found the huge brown eunuch sitting in the shade of her pavilion, eating a sausage. He finished it in three bites, wiped his greasy hands clean on his trousers, and sent Arstan Whitebeard to fetch him his steel. The aged squire honed Belwas’s *arakh* every evening and rubbed it down with bright red oil.

When Whitebeard brought the sword, Strong Belwas squinted down the edge, grunted, slid the blade back into its leather sheath, and tied the swordbelt about his vast waist. Arstan had brought his shield as well: a round steel disk no larger than a pie plate, which the eunuch grasped with his off hand rather than strapping to his forearm in the manner of Westeros. “Find liver and onions, Whitebeard,” Belwas said. “Not for now, for after. Killing makes Strong Belwas hungry.” He did not wait for a reply, but lumbered from the olive grove toward Oznak zo Pahl.

“Why that one, *Khaleesi*?” Rakharo demanded of her. “He is fat and stupid.”

“Strong Belwas was a slave here in the fighting pits. If this highborn Oznak should fall to such the Great Masters will be shamed, while if he wins . . . well, it is a poor victory for one so noble, one that Meereen can take no pride in.” And unlike Ser Jorah, Daario, Brown Ben, and her three bloodriders, the eunuch did not lead troops, plan battles, or give her counsel. *He does nothing but eat and boast and bellow at Arstan.* Belwas was the man she could most easily spare. And it was time she learned what sort of protector Magister Illyrio had sent her.

A thrum of excitement went through the siege lines when Belwas was seen plodding toward the city, and from the walls and towers of Meereen came shouts and jeers. Oznak zo Pahl mounted up again, and waited, his striped lance held upright. The charger tossed his head impatiently and pawed the sandy earth. As massive as he was, the eunuch looked small beside the hero on his horse.

“A chivalrous man would dismount,” said Arstan.

Oznak zo Pahl lowered his lance and charged.

Belwas stopped with legs spread wide. In one hand was his small round shield, in the other the curved *arakh* that Arstan tended with such care. His great brown stomach and sagging chest were bare above the yellow silk sash knotted about his waist, and he wore no armor but his studded leather vest, so absurdly small that it did not even cover his nipples. “We should have given him chainmail,” Dany said, suddenly anxious.

“Mail would only slow him,” said Ser Jorah. “They wear no armor in the fighting pits. It’s blood the crowds come to see.”

Dust flew from the hooves of the white charger. Oznak thundered toward Strong Belwas, his striped cloak streaming from his shoulders. The whole city of Meereen seemed to be screaming him on. The besiegers’ cheers seemed few and thin by comparison; her Unsullied stood in silent ranks, watching with stone faces. Belwas might have been made of stone as well. He stood in the horse’s path, his vest stretched tight across his broad back. Oznak’s lance was leveled at the center of his chest. Its bright steel point winked in the sunlight. *He’s going to be impaled*, she thought . . . as the eunuch spun sideways. And quick as the blink of an eye the horseman was beyond him, wheeling, raising the lance. Belwas made no move to strike at him. The Meereenese on the walls screamed even louder. “What is he doing?” Dany demanded.

“Giving the mob a show,” Ser Jorah said.

Oznak brought the horse around Belwas in a wide circle, then dug in with his spurs and charged again. Again Belwas waited, then spun and knocked the point of the lance aside. She could hear the eunuch’s booming laughter echoing across the plain as the hero went past him. “The lance is too long,” Ser Jorah said. “All Belwas needs do is avoid the point. Instead of trying to spit him so prettily, the fool should ride right over him.”

Oznak zo Pahl charged a third time, and now Dany could see plainly that he was riding *past* Belwas, the way a Westerosi knight might ride at an opponent in a tilt, rather than *at* him, like a Dothraki riding down a foe. The flat level ground allowed the charger to get up a good speed, but it also made it easy for the eunuch to dodge the cumbersome fourteen-foot lance.

Meereen’s pink-and-white hero tried to anticipate this time, and swung his lance sideways at the last second to catch Strong Belwas when he

dodged. But the eunuch had anticipated too, and this time he dropped down instead of spinning sideways. The lance passed harmlessly over his head. And suddenly Belwas was rolling, and bringing the razor-sharp *arakh* around in a silver arc. They heard the charger scream as the blade bit into his legs, and then the horse was falling, the hero tumbling from the saddle.

A sudden silence swept along the brick parapets of Meereen. Now it was Dany's people who were screaming and cheering.

Oznak leapt clear of his horse and managed to draw his sword before Strong Belwas was on him. Steel sang against steel, too fast and furious for Dany to follow the blows. It could not have been a dozen heartbeats before Belwas's chest was awash in blood from a slice below his breasts, and Oznak zo Pahl had an *arakh* planted right between his ram's horns. The eunuch wrenched the blade loose and parted the hero's head from his body with three savage blows to the neck. He held it up high for the Meereenese to see, then flung it toward the city gates and let it bounce and roll across the sand.

"So much for the hero of Meereen," said Daario, laughing.

"A victory without meaning," Ser Jorah cautioned. "We will not win Meereen by killing its defenders one at a time."

"No," Dany agreed, "but I'm pleased we killed this one."

The defenders on the walls began firing their crossbows at Belwas, but the bolts fell short or skittered harmlessly along the ground. The eunuch turned his back on the steel-tipped rain, lowered his trousers, squatted, and shat in the direction of the city. He wiped himself with Oznak's striped cloak, and paused long enough to loot the hero's corpse and put the dying horse out of his agony before trudging back to the olive grove.

The besiegers gave him a raucous welcome as soon as he reached the camp. Her Dothraki hooted and screamed, and the Unsullied sent up a great clangor by banging their spears against their shields. "Well done," Ser Jorah told him, and Brown Ben tossed the eunuch a ripe plum and said, "A sweet fruit for a sweet fight." Even her Dothraki handmaids had words of praise. "We would braid your hair and hang a bell in it, Strong Belwas," said Jhiqui, "but you have no hair to braid."

“Strong Belwas needs no tinkly bells.” The eunuch ate Brown Ben’s plum in four big bites and tossed aside the stone. “Strong Belwas needs liver and onions.”

“You shall have it,” said Dany. “Strong Belwas is hurt.” His stomach was red with the blood sheeting down from the meaty gash beneath his breasts.

“It is nothing. I let each man cut me once, before I kill him.” He slapped his bloody belly. “Count the cuts and you will know how many Strong Belwas has slain.”

But Dany had lost Khal Drogo to a similar wound, and she was not willing to let it go untreated. She sent Missandei to find a certain Yunkish freedman renowned for his skill in the healing arts. Belwas howled and complained, but Dany scolded him and called him a big bald baby until he let the healer stanch the wound with vinegar, sew it shut, and bind his chest with strips of linen soaked in fire wine. Only then did she lead her captains and commanders inside her pavilion for their council.

“I must have this city,” she told them, sitting crosslegged on a pile of cushions, her dragons all about her. Irri and Jhiqui poured wine. “Her granaries are full to bursting. There are figs and dates and olives growing on the terraces of her pyramids, and casks of salt fish and smoked meat buried in her cellars.”

“And fat chests of gold, silver, and gemstones as well,” Daario reminded them. “Let us not forget the gemstones.”

“I’ve had a look at the landward walls, and I see no point of weakness,” said Ser Jorah Mormont. “Given time, we might be able to mine beneath a tower and make a breach, but what do we eat while we’re digging? Our stores are all but exhausted.”

“No weakness in the *landward* walls?” said Dany. Meereen stood on a jut of sand and stone where the slow brown Skahazadhan flowed into Slaver’s Bay. The city’s north wall ran along the riverbank, its west along the bay shore. “Does that mean we might attack from the river or the sea?”

“With three ships? We’ll want to have Captain Groleo take a good look at the wall along the river, but unless it’s crumbling that’s just a wetter way to die.”

“What if we were to build siege towers? My brother Viserys told tales of such, I know they can be made.”

“From wood, Your Grace,” Ser Jorah said. “The slavers have burnt every tree within twenty leagues of here. Without wood, we have no trebuchets to smash the walls, no ladders to go over them, no siege towers, no turtles, and no rams. We can storm the gates with axes, to be sure, but . . .”

“Did you see them bronze heads above the gates?” asked Brown Ben Plumm. “Rows of harpy heads with open mouths? The Meereenese can squirt boiling oil out them mouths, and cook your axemen where they stand.”

Daario Naharis gave Grey Worm a smile. “Perhaps the Unsullied should wield the axes. Boiling oil feels like no more than a warm bath to you, I have heard.”

“This is false.” Grey Worm did not return the smile. “These ones do not feel burns as men do, yet such oil blinds and kills. The Unsullied do not fear to die, though. Give these ones rams, and we will batter down these gates or die in the attempt.”

“You would die,” said Brown Ben. At Yunkai, when he took command of the Second Sons, he claimed to be the veteran of a hundred battles. “Though I will not say I fought bravely in all of them. There are old sellswords and bold sellswords, but no old bold sellswords.” She saw that it was true.

Dany sighed. “I will not throw away Unsullied lives, Grey Worm. Perhaps we can starve the city out.”

Ser Jorah looked unhappy. “We’ll starve long before they do, Your Grace. There’s no food here, nor fodder for our mules and horses. I do not like this river water either. Meereen shits into the Skahazadhan but draws its drinking water from deep wells. Already we’ve had reports of sickness in the camps, fever and brownleg and three cases of the bloody flux. There will be more if we remain. The slaves are weak from the march.”

“Freedmen,” Dany corrected. “They are slaves no longer.”

“Slave or free, they are hungry and they’ll soon be sick. The city is better provisioned than we are, and can be resupplied by water. Your three ships



are not enough to deny them access to both the river and the sea.”

“Then what do you advise, Ser Jorah?”

“You will not like it.”

“I would hear it all the same.”

“As you wish. I say, let this city be. You cannot free every slave in the world, *Khaleesi*. Your war is in Westeros.”

“I have not forgotten Westeros.” Dany dreamt of it some nights, this fabled land that she had never seen. “If I let Meereen’s old brick walls defeat me so easily, though, how will I ever take the great stone castles of Westeros?”

“As Aegon did,” Ser Jorah said, “with fire. By the time we reach the Seven Kingdoms, your dragons will be grown. And we will have siege towers and trebuchets as well, all the things we lack here . . . but the way across the Lands of the Long Summer is long and grueling, and there are dangers we cannot know. You stopped at Astapor to buy an army, not to start a war. Save your spears and swords for the Seven Kingdoms, my queen. Leave Meereen to the Meereenese and march west for Pentos.”

“Defeated?” said Dany, bristling.

“When cowards hide behind great walls, it is they who are defeated, *Khaleesi*,” Ko Jhogo said.

Her other bloodriders concurred. “Blood of my blood,” said Rakharo, “when cowards hide and burn the food and fodder, great *khals* must seek for braver foes. This is known.”

“It is known,” Jhiqui agreed, as she poured.

“Not to me.” Dany set great store by Ser Jorah’s counsel, but to leave Meereen untouched was more than she could stomach. She could not forget the children on their posts, the birds tearing at their entrails, their skinny arms pointing up the coast road. “Ser Jorah, you say we have no food left. If I march west, how can I feed my freedmen?”

“You can’t. I am sorry, *Khaleesi*. They must feed themselves or starve. Many and more will die along the march, yes. That will be hard, but there is no way to save them. We need to put this scorched earth well behind us.”

Dany had left a trail of corpses behind her when she crossed the red waste. It was a sight she never meant to see again. “No,” she said. “I will not march my people off to die.” *My children*. “There must be *some* way into this city.”

“I know a way.” Brown Ben Plumm stroked his speckled grey-and-white beard. “Sewers.”

“Sewers? What do you mean?”

“Great brick sewers empty into the Skahazadhan, carrying the city’s wastes. They might be a way in, for a few. That was how I escaped Meereen, after Scarb lost his head.” Brown Ben made a face. “The smell has never left me. I dream of it some nights.”

Ser Jorah looked dubious. “Easier to go out than in, it would seem to me. These sewers empty into the river, you say? That would mean the mouths are right below the walls.”

“And closed with iron grates,” Brown Ben admitted, “though some have rusted through, else I would have drowned in shit. Once inside, it is a long foul climb in pitch-dark through a maze of brick where a man could lose himself forever. The filth is never lower than waist high, and can rise over your head from the stains I saw on the walls. There’s *things* down there too. Biggest rats you ever saw, and worse things. Nasty.”

Daario Naharis laughed. “As nasty as you, when you came crawling out? If any man were fool enough to try this, every slaver in Meereen would smell them the moment they emerged.”

Brown Ben shrugged. “Her Grace asked if there was a way in, so I told her . . . but Ben Plumm isn’t going down in them sewers again, not for all the gold in the Seven Kingdoms. If there’s others want to try it, though, they’re welcome.”

Aggo, Jhogo, and Grey Worm all tried to speak at once, but Dany raised her hand for silence. “These sewers do not sound promising.” Grey Worm would lead his Unsullied down the sewers if she commanded it, she knew; her bloodriders would do no less. But none of them was suited to the task. The Dothraki were horsemen, and the strength of the Unsullied was their discipline on the battlefield. *Can I send men to die in the dark on such a slender hope?* “I must think on this some more. Return to your duties.”

Her captains bowed and left her with her handmaids and her dragons. But as Brown Ben was leaving, Viserion spread his pale white wings and flapped lazily at his head. One of the wings buffeted the sellsword in his face. The white dragon landed awkwardly with one foot on the man's head and one on his shoulder, shrieked, and flew off again. "He likes you, Ben," said Dany.

"And well he might." Brown Ben laughed. "I have me a drop of the dragon blood myself, you know."

"You?" Dany was startled. Plumm was a creature of the free companies, an amiable mongrel. He had a broad brown face with a broken nose and a head of nappy grey hair, and his Dothraki mother had bequeathed him large, dark, almond-shaped eyes. He claimed to be part Braavosi, part Summer Islander, part Ibbenese, part Qohorik, part Dothraki, part Dornish, and part Westerosi, but this was the first she had heard of Targaryen blood. She gave him a searching look and said, "How could that be?"

"Well," said Brown Ben, "there was some old Plumm in the Sunset Kingdoms who wed a dragon princess. My grandmama told me the tale. He lived in King Aegon's day."

"Which King Aegon?" Dany asked. "Five Aegons have ruled in Westeros." Her brother's son would have been the sixth, but the Usurper's men had dashed his head against a wall.

"Five, were there? Well, that's a confusion. I could not give you a number, my queen. This old Plumm was a lord, though, must have been a famous fellow in his day, the talk of all the land. The thing was, begging your royal pardon, he had himself a cock six foot long."

The three bells in Dany's braid tinkled when she laughed. "You mean inches, I think."

"Feet," Brown Ben said firmly. "If it was inches, who'd want to talk about it, now? Your Grace."

Dany giggled like a little girl. "Did your grandmother claim she'd actually seen this prodigy?"

"That the old crone never did. She was half-Ibbenese and half-Qohorik, never been to Westeros, my grandfather must have told her. Some Dothraki

killed him before I was born.”

“And where did your grandfather’s knowledge come from?”

“One of them tales told at the teat, I’d guess.” Brown Ben shrugged. “That’s all I know about Aegon the Unnumbered or old Lord Plumm’s mighty manhood, I fear. I best see to my Sons.”

“Go do that,” Dany told him.

When Brown Ben left, she lay back on her cushions. “If you were grown,” she told Drogon, scratching him between the horns, “I’d fly you over the walls and melt that harpy down to slag.” But it would be years before her dragons were large enough to ride. *And when they are, who shall ride them? The dragon has three heads, but I have only one.* She thought of Daario. *If ever there was a man who could rape a woman with his eyes . . .*

To be sure, she was just as guilty. Dany found herself stealing looks at the Tyroshi when her captains came to council, and sometimes at night she remembered the way his gold tooth glittered when he smiled. That, and his eyes. *His bright blue eyes.* On the road from Yunkai, Daario had brought her a flower or a sprig of some plant every evening when he made his report . . . to help her learn the land, he said. Waspwillow, dusky roses, wild mint, lady’s lace, daggerleaf, broom, prickly ben, harpy’s gold . . . *He tried to spare me the sight of the dead children too.* He should not have done that, but he meant it kindly. And Daario Naharis made her laugh, which Ser Jorah never did.

Dany tried to imagine what it would be like if she allowed Daario to kiss her, the way Jorah had kissed her on the ship. The thought was exciting and disturbing, both at once. *It is too great a risk.* The Tyroshi sellsword was not a good man, no one needed to tell her that. Under the smiles and the jests he was dangerous, even cruel. Sallor and Prendahl had woken one morning as his partners; that very night he’d given her their heads. *Khal Drogo could be cruel as well, and there was never a man more dangerous.* She had come to love him all the same. *Could I love Daario? What would it mean, if I took him into my bed? Would that make him one of the heads of the dragon?* Ser Jorah would be angry, she knew, but he was the one who’d said she had to take two husbands. *Perhaps I should marry them both and be done with it.*

But these were foolish thoughts. She had a city to take, and dreaming of kisses and some sellsword's bright blue eyes would not help her breach the walls of Meereen. *I am the blood of the dragon*, Dany reminded herself. Her thoughts were spinning in circles, like a rat chasing its tail. Suddenly she could not stand the close confines of the pavilion another moment. *I want to feel the wind on my face, and smell the sea*. "Missandei," she called, "have my silver saddled. Your own mount as well."

The little scribe bowed. "As Your Grace commands. Shall I summon your bloodriders to guard you?"

"We'll take Arstan. I do not mean to leave the camps." She had no enemies among her children. And the old squire would not talk too much as Belwas would, or look at her like Daario.

The grove of burnt olive trees in which she'd raised her pavilion stood beside the sea, between the Dothraki camp and that of the Unsullied. When the horses had been saddled, Dany and her companions set out along the shoreline, away from the city. Even so, she could feel Meereen at her back, mocking her. When she looked over one shoulder, there it stood, the afternoon sun blazing off the bronze harpy atop the Great Pyramid. Inside Meereen the slavers would soon be reclining in their fringed *tokars* to feast on lamb and olives, unborn puppies, honeyed dormice and other such delicacies, whilst outside her children went hungry. A sudden wild anger filled her. *I will bring you down*, she swore.

As they rode past the stakes and pits that surrounded the eunuch encampment, Dany could hear Grey Worm and his sergeants running one company through a series of drills with shield, shortsword, and heavy spear. Another company was bathing in the sea, clad only in white linen breechclouts. The eunuchs were very clean, she had noticed. Some of her sellswords smelled as if they had not washed or changed their clothes since her father lost the Iron Throne, but the Unsullied bathed each evening, even if they'd marched all day. When no water was available they cleansed themselves with sand, the Dothraki way.

The eunuchs knelt as she passed, raising clenched fists to their breasts. Dany returned the salute. The tide was coming in, and the surf foamed about the feet of her silver. She could see her ships standing out to sea.

*Balerion* floated nearest; the great cog once known as *Saduleon*, her sails furled. Further out were the galleys *Meraxes* and *Vhagar*, formerly *Joso's Prank* and *Summer Sun*. They were Magister Illyrio's ships, in truth, not hers at all, and yet she had given them new names with hardly a thought. Dragon names, and more; in old Valyria before the Doom, *Balerion*, *Meraxes*, and *Vhagar* had been gods.

South of the ordered realm of stakes, pits, drills, and bathing eunuchs lay the encampments of her freedmen, a far noisier and more chaotic place. Dany had armed the former slaves as best she could with weapons from Astapor and Yunkai, and Ser Jorah had organized the fighting men into four strong companies, yet she saw no one drilling here. They passed a driftwood fire where a hundred people had gathered to roast the carcass of a horse. She could smell the meat and hear the fat sizzling as the spit boys turned, but the sight only made her frown.

Children ran behind their horses, skipping and laughing. Instead of salutes, voices called to her on every side in a babble of tongues. Some of the freedmen greeted her as "Mother," while others begged for boons or favors. Some prayed for strange gods to bless her, and some asked her to bless them instead. She smiled at them, turning right and left, touching their hands when they raised them, letting those who knelt reach up to touch her stirrup or her leg. Many of the freedmen believed there was good fortune in her touch. *If it helps give them courage, let them touch me*, she thought. *There are hard trials yet ahead . . .*

Dany had stopped to speak to a pregnant woman who wanted the Mother of Dragons to name her baby when someone reached up and grabbed her left wrist. Turning, she glimpsed a tall ragged man with a shaved head and a sunburnt face. "Not so hard," she started to say, but before she could finish he'd yanked her bodily from the saddle. The ground came up and knocked the breath from her, as her silver whinnied and backed away. Stunned, Dany rolled to her side and pushed herself onto one elbow . . .

. . . and then she saw the sword.

"There's the treacherous sow," he said. "I knew you'd come to get your feet kissed one day." His head was bald as a melon, his nose red and peeling, but she knew that voice and those pale green eyes. "I'm going to

start by cutting off your teats.” Dany was dimly aware of Missandei shouting for help. A freedman edged forward, but only a step. One quick slash, and he was on his knees, blood running down his face. Mero wiped his sword on his breeches. “Who’s next?”

“I am.” Arstan Whitebeard leapt from his horse and stood over her, the salt wind riffling through his snowy hair, both hands on his tall hardwood staff.

“Grandfather,” Mero said, “run off before I break your stick in two and bugger you with—”

The old man feinted with one end of the staff, pulled it back, and whipped the other end about faster than Dany would have believed. The Titan’s Bastard staggered back into the surf, spitting blood and broken teeth from the ruin of his mouth. Whitebeard put Dany behind him. Mero slashed at his face. The old man jerked back, cat-quick. The staff thumped Mero’s ribs, sending him reeling. Arstan splashed sideways, parried a looping cut, danced away from a second, checked a third mid-swing. The moves were so fast she could hardly follow. Missandei was pulling Dany to her feet when she heard a *crack*. She thought Arstan’s staff had snapped until she saw the jagged bone jutting from Mero’s calf. As he fell, the Titan’s Bastard twisted and lunged, sending his point straight at the old man’s chest. Whitebeard swept the blade aside almost contemptuously and smashed the other end of his staff against the big man’s temple. Mero went sprawling, blood bubbling from his mouth as the waves washed over him. A moment later the freedmen washed over him too, knives and stones and angry fists rising and falling in a frenzy.

Dany turned away, sickened. She was more frightened now than when it had been happening. *He would have killed me.*

“Your Grace.” Arstan knelt. “I am an old man, and shamed. He should never have gotten close enough to seize you. I was lax. I did not know him without his beard and hair.”

“No more than I did.” Dany took a deep breath to stop her shaking. *Enemies everywhere.* “Take me back to my tent. Please.”

By the time Mormont arrived, she was huddled in her lion pelt, drinking a cup of spice wine. “I had a look at the river wall,” Ser Jorah started. “It’s a

few feet higher than the others, and just as strong. And the Meereenese have a dozen fire hulks tied up beneath the ramparts—”

She cut him off. “You might have warned me that the Titan’s Bastard had escaped.”

He frowned. “I saw no need to frighten you, Your Grace. I have offered a reward for his head—”

“Pay it to Whitebeard. Mero has been with us all the way from Yunkai. He shaved his beard off and lost himself amongst the freedmen, waiting for a chance for vengeance. Arstan killed him.”

Ser Jorah gave the old man a long look. “A squire with a stick slew Mero of Braavos, is that the way of it?”

“A stick,” Dany confirmed, “but no longer a squire. Ser Jorah, it’s my wish that Arstan be knighted.”

“*No.*”

The loud refusal was surprise enough. Stranger still, it came from both men at once.

Ser Jorah drew his sword. “The Titan’s Bastard was a nasty piece of work. And good at killing. Who are you, old man?”

“A better knight than you, ser,” Arstan said coldly.

*Knight?* Dany was confused. “You said you were a squire.”

“I was, Your Grace.” He dropped to one knee. “I squired for Lord Swann in my youth, and at Magister Illyrio’s behest I have served Strong Belwas as well. But during the years between, I was a knight in Westeros. I have told you no lies, my queen. Yet there are truths I have withheld, and for that and all my other sins I can only beg your forgiveness.”

“What truths have you withheld?” Dany did not like this. “You will tell me. Now.”

He bowed his head. “At Qarth, when you asked my name, I said I was called Arstan. That much was true. Many men had called me by that name while Belwas and I were making our way east to find you. But it is not my true name.”



She was more confused than angry. *He has played me false, just as Jorah warned me, yet he saved my life just now.*

Ser Jorah flushed red. “Mero shaved his beard, but you grew one, didn’t you? No wonder you looked so bloody familiar . . .”

“You know him?” Dany asked the exile knight, lost.

“I saw him perhaps a dozen times . . . from afar most often, standing with his brothers or riding in some tourney. But every man in the Seven Kingdoms knew Barristan the Bold.” He laid the point of his sword against the old man’s neck. “*Khaleesi*, before you kneels Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, who betrayed your House to serve the Usurper Robert Baratheon.”

The old knight did not so much as blink. “The crow calls the raven black, and *you* speak of betrayal.”

“Why are you here?” Dany demanded of him. “If Robert sent you to kill me, why did you save my life?” *He served the Usurper. He betrayed Rhaegar’s memory, and abandoned Viserys to live and die in exile. Yet if he wanted me dead, he need only have stood aside . . .* “I want the *whole* truth now, on your honor as a knight. Are you the Usurper’s man, or mine?”

“Yours, if you will have me.” Ser Barristan had tears in his eyes. “I took Robert’s pardon, aye. I served him in Kingsguard and council. Served with the Kingslayer and others near as bad, who soiled the white cloak I wore. Nothing will excuse that. I might be serving in King’s Landing still if the vile boy upon the Iron Throne had not cast me aside, it shames me to admit. But when he took the cloak that the White Bull had draped about my shoulders, and sent men to kill me that selfsame day, it was as though he’d ripped a caul off my eyes. That was when I knew I must find my true king, and die in his service—”

“I can grant that wish,” Ser Jorah said darkly.

“Quiet,” said Dany. “I’ll hear him out.”

“It may be that I must die a traitor’s death,” Ser Barristan said. “If so, I should not die alone. Before I took Robert’s pardon I fought against him on the Trident. You were on the other side of that battle, Mormont, were you not?” He did not wait for an answer. “Your Grace, I am sorry I misled you.

It was the only way to keep the Lannisters from learning that I had joined you. You are watched, as your brother was. Lord Varys reported every move Viserys made, for years. Whilst I sat on the small council, I heard a hundred such reports. And since the day you wed Khal Drogo, there has been an informer by your side selling your secrets, trading whispers to the Spider for gold and promises.”

*He cannot mean . . .* “You are mistaken.” Dany looked at Jorah Mormont. “Tell him he’s mistaken. There’s no informer. Ser Jorah, tell him. We crossed the Dothraki sea together, and the red waste . . .” Her heart fluttered like a bird in a trap. “Tell him, Jorah. Tell him how he got it wrong.”

“The Others take you, Selmy.” Ser Jorah flung his longsword to the carpet. “*Khaleesi*, it was only at the start, before I came to know you . . . before I came to love . . .”

“*Do not say that word!*” She backed away from him. “*How could you?* What did the Usurper promise you? Gold, was it gold?” The Undying had said she would be betrayed twice more, once for gold and once for love. “Tell me what you were promised?”

“Varys said . . . I might go home.” He bowed his head.

*I was going to take you home!* Her dragons sensed her fury. Viserion roared, and smoke rose grey from his snout. Drogon beat the air with black wings, and Rhaegal twisted his head back and belched flame. *I should say the word and burn the two of them.* Was there no one she could trust, no one to keep her safe? “Are all the knights of Westeros so false as you two? Get out, before my dragons roast you both. What does roast liar smell like? As foul as Brown Ben’s sewers? *Go!*”

Ser Barristan rose stiff and slow. For the first time, he looked his age. “Where shall we go, Your Grace?”

“To hell, to serve King Robert.” Dany felt hot tears on her cheeks. Drogon screamed, lashing his tail back and forth. “The Others can have you both.” *Go, go away forever, both of you, the next time I see your faces I’ll have your traitors’ heads off.* She could not say the words, though. *They betrayed me. But they saved me. But they lied.* “You go . . .” *My bear, my fierce strong bear, what will I do without him? And the old man, my brother’s friend.* “You go . . . go . . .” *Where?*

And then she knew.