

DAENERYS

Each morning, from her western ramparts, the queen would count the sails on Slaver's Bay.

Today she counted five-and-twenty, though some were far away and moving, so it was hard to be certain. Sometimes she missed one, or counted one twice. *What does it matter? A strangler only needs ten fingers.* All trade had stopped, and her fisherfolk did not dare put out into the bay. The boldest still dropped a few lines into the river, though even that was hazardous; more remained tied up beneath Meereen's walls of many-colored brick.

There were ships from Meereen out in the bay too, warships and trading galleys whose captains had taken them to sea when Dany's host first laid siege to the city, now returned to augment the fleets from Qarth, Tolos, and New Ghis.

Her admiral's counsel had proved worse than useless. "Let them see your dragons," Groleo said. "Let the Yunkishmen have a taste of fire, and the trade will flow again."

"Those ships are strangling us, and all my admiral can do is talk of dragons," Dany said. "You *are* my admiral, are you not?"

"An admiral without ships."

"*Build* ships."

"Warships cannot be made from brick. The slavers burned every stand of timber within twenty leagues of here."

"Then ride out two-and-twenty leagues. I will give you wagons, workers, mules, whatever you require."

"I am a sailor, not a shipwright. I was sent to fetch Your Grace back to Pentos. Instead you brought us here and tore my *Saduleon* to pieces for

some nails and scraps of wood. I will never see her like again. I may never see my home again, nor my old wife. It was not me who refused the ships this Daxos offered. I cannot fight the Qartheen with fishing boats.”

His bitterness dismayed her, so much so that Dany found herself wondering if the grizzled Pentoshi could be one of her three betrayers. *No, he is only an old man, far from home and sick at heart.* “There must be *something* we can do.”

“Aye, and I’ve told you what. These ships are made of rope and pitch and canvas, of Qohorik pine and teak from Sothoros, old oak from Great Norvos, yew and ash and spruce. Wood, Your Grace. Wood burns. The dragons—”

“I will hear no more about my dragons. Leave me. Go pray to your Pentoshi gods for a storm to sink our foes.”

“No sailor prays for storms, Your Grace.”

“I am tired of hearing what you will not do. Go.”

Ser Barristan remained. “Our stores are ample for the moment,” he reminded her, “and Your Grace has planted beans and grapes and wheat. Your Dothraki have harried the slavers from the hills and struck the shackles from their slaves. They are planting too, and will be bringing their crops to Meereen to market. And you will have the friendship of Lhazar.”

Daario won that for me, for all that it is worth. “The Lamb Men. Would that lambs had teeth.”

“That would make the wolves more cautious, no doubt.”

That made her laugh. “How fare your orphans, ser?”

The old knight smiled. “Well, Your Grace. It is good of you to ask.” The boys were his pride. “Four or five have the makings of knights. Perhaps as many as a dozen.”

“One would be enough if he were as true as you.” The day might come soon when she would have need of every knight. “Will they joust for me? I should like that.” Viserys had told her stories of the tourneys he had witnessed in the Seven Kingdoms, but Dany had never seen a joust herself.

“They are not ready, Your Grace. When they are, they will be pleased to demonstrate their prowess.”

“I hope that day comes quickly.” She would have kissed her good knight on the cheek, but just then Missandei appeared beneath the arched doorway. “Missandei?”

“Your Grace. Skahaz awaits your pleasure.”

“Send him up.”

The Shavepate was accompanied by two of his Brazen Beasts. One wore a hawk mask, the other the likeness of a jackal. Only their eyes could be seen behind the brass. “Your Radiance, Hizdahr was seen to enter the pyramid of Zhak last evening. He did not depart until well after dark.”

“How many pyramids has he visited?” asked Dany. “Eleven.”

“And how long since the last murder?”

“Six-and-twenty days.” The Shavepate’s eyes brimmed with fury. It had been his notion to have the Brazen Beasts follow her betrothed and take note of all his actions.

“So far Hizdahr has made good on his promises.”

“*How?* The Sons of the Harpy have put down their knives, but why? Because the noble Hizdahr asked sweetly? He is one of them, I tell you. That’s why they obey him. He may well be the Harpy.”

“If there is a Harpy.” Skahaz was convinced that somewhere in Meereen the Sons of the Harpy had a highborn overlord, a secret general commanding an army of shadows. Dany did not share his belief. The Brazen Beasts had taken dozens of the Harpy’s Sons, and those who had survived their capture

had yielded names when questioned sharply ... too many names, it seemed to her. It would have been pleasant to think that all the deaths were the work of a single enemy who might be caught and killed, but Dany suspected that the truth was otherwise. *My enemies are legion.* “Hizdahr zo Loraq is a persuasive man with many friends. And he is wealthy. Perhaps he has bought this peace for us with gold, or convinced the other highborn that our marriage is in their best interests.”

“If he is not the Harpy, he knows him. I can find the truth of that easy enough. Give me your leave to put Hizdahr to the question, and I will bring you a confession.”

“No,” she said. “I do not trust these confessions. You’ve brought me too many of them, all of them worthless.”

“Your Radiance—”

“*No*, I said.”

The Shavepate’s scowl turned his ugly face even uglier. “A mistake. The Great Master Hizdahr plays Your Worship for a fool. Do you want a serpent in your bed?”

I want Daario in my bed, but I sent him away for the sake of you and yours. “You may continue to watch Hizdahr zo Loraq, but no harm is to come to him. Is that understood?”

“I am not deaf, Magnificence. I will obey.” Skahaz drew a parchment scroll from his sleeve. “Your Worship should have a look at this. A list of all the Meereenese ships in the blockade, with their captains. Great Masters all.”

Dany studied the scroll. All the ruling families of Meereen were named: Hazkar, Merreq, Quazzar, Zhak, Rhazdar, Ghazeen, Pahl, even Reznak and Loraq. “What am I to do with a list of names?”

“Every man on that list has kin within the city. Sons and brothers, wives and daughters, mothers and fathers. Let my Brazen Beasts seize them. Their lives will win you back those ships.”

“If I send the Brazen Beasts into the pyramids, it will mean open war inside the city. I have to trust in Hizdahr. I have to hope for peace.” Dany held the parchment above a candle and watched the names go up in flame, while Skahaz glowered at her.

Afterward, Ser Barristan told her that her brother Rhaegar would have been proud of her. Dany remembered the words Ser Jorah had spoken at Astapor: *Rhaegar fought valiantly, Rhaegar fought nobly, Rhaegar fought honorably. And Rhaegar died.*

When she descended to the purple marble hall, she found it almost empty. “Are there no petitioners today?” Dany asked Reznak mo Reznak. “No one who craves justice or silver for a sheep?”

“No, Your Worship. The city is afraid.”

“There is nothing to fear.”

But there was much and more to fear as she learned that evening. As her young hostages Miklaz and Kezmya were laying out a simple supper of autumn greens and ginger soup for her, Irri came to tell her that Galazza Galare had returned, with three Blue Graces from the temple. “Grey Worm is come as well, *Khaleesi*. They beg words with you, most urgently.”

“Bring them to my hall. And summon Reznak and Skahaz. Did the Green Grace say what this was about?”

“Astapor,” said Irri.

Grey Worm began the tale. “He came out of the morning mists, a rider on a pale horse, dying. His mare was staggering as she approached the city gates, her sides pink with blood and lather, her eyes rolling with terror. Her rider called out, ‘*She is burning, she is burning,*’ and fell from the saddle. This one was sent for, and gave orders that the rider be brought to the Blue Graces. When your servants carried him inside the gates, he cried out again, ‘*She is burning.*’ Under his *tokar* he was a skeleton, all bones and fevered flesh.”

One of the Blue Graces took up the tale from there. “The Unsullied brought this man to the temple, where we stripped him and bathed him in cool water. His clothes were soiled, and my sisters found half an arrow in his thigh. Though he had broken off the shaft, the head remained inside him, and the wound had mortified, filling him with poisons. He died within the hour, still crying out that she was burning.”

” ‘She is burning,’ ” Daenerys repeated. “Who is *she*?”

“Astapor, Your Radiance,” said another of the Blue Graces. “He said it, once. He said ‘*Astapor* is burning.’ ”

“It might have been his fever talking.”

“Your Radiance speaks wisely,” said Galazza Galare, “but Ezzara saw something else.”

The Blue Grace called Ezzara folded her hands. “My queen,” she murmured, “his fever was not brought on by the arrow. He had soiled himself, not once but many times. The stains reached to his knees, and there was dried blood amongst his excrement.”

“His horse was bleeding, Grey Worm said.”

“This thing is true, Your Grace,” the eunuch confirmed. “The pale mare was bloody from his spur.”

“That may be so, Your Radiance,” said Ezzara, “but this blood was mingled with his stool. It stained his smallclothes.”

“He was bleeding from the bowels,” said Galazza Galare. “We cannot be certain,” said Ezzara, “but it may be that Meereen has more to fear than the spears of the Yunkai’i.”

“We must pray,” said the Green Grace. “The gods sent this man to us. He comes as a harbinger. He comes as a sign.”

“A sign of what?” asked Dany. “A sign of wroth and ruin.”

She did not want to believe that. “He was one man. One sick man with an arrow in his leg. A horse brought him here, not a god.” *A pale mare*. Dany rose abruptly. “I thank you for your counsel and for all that you did for this poor man.”

The Green Grace kissed Dany’s fingers before she took her leave. “We shall pray for Astapor.”

And for me. Oh, pray for me, my lady. If Astapor had fallen, nothing remained to prevent Yunkai from turning north.

She turned to Ser Barristan. “Send riders into the hills to find my bloodriders. Recall Brown Ben and the Second Sons as well.”

“And the Stormcrows, Your Grace?”

Daario. “Yes. Yes.” Just three nights ago she had dreamed of Daario lying dead beside the road, staring sightlessly into the sky as crows quarreled above his corpse. Other nights she tossed in her bed, imagining that he’d betrayed her, as he had once betrayed his fellow captains in the Stormcrows. *He brought me their heads*. What if he had taken his company back to Yunkai, to sell her for a pot of gold? *He would not do that. Would he?* “The Stormcrows too. Send riders after them at once.”

The Second Sons were the first to return, eight days after the queen sent forth her summons. When Ser Barristan told her that her captain desired words with her, she thought for a moment that it was Daario, and her heart leapt. But the captain that he spoke of was Brown Ben Plumm.

Brown Ben had a seamed and weathered face, skin the color of old teak, white hair, and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Dany was so pleased to see his leathery brown face that she hugged him. His eyes crinkled in amusement. “I heard talk Your Grace was going to take a husband,” he said, “but no one told me it was me.” They laughed together as Reznak sputtered, but the laughter ceased when Brown Ben said, “We caught three Astapori. Your Worship had best hear what they say.”

“Bring them.”

Daenerys received them in the grandeur of her hall as tall candles burned amongst the marble pillars. When she saw that the Astapori were half-starved, she sent for food at once. These three were all that remained of a dozen who had set out together from the Red City: a bricklayer, a weaver, and a cobbler. “What befell the rest of your party?” the queen asked.

“Slain,” said the cobbler. “Yunkai’s sellswords roam the hills north of Astapor, hunting down those who flee the flames.”

“Has the city fallen, then? Its walls were thick.”

“This is so,” said the bricklayer, a stoop-backed man with rheumy eyes, “but they were old and crumbling as well.”

The weaver raised her head. “Every day we told each other that the dragon queen was coming back.” The woman had thin lips and dull dead eyes, set in a pinched and narrow face. “Cleon had sent for you, it was said, and you were coming.”

He sent for me, thought Dany. That much is true, at least. “Outside our walls, the Yunkai’i devoured our crops and slaughtered our herds,” the cobbler went on. “Inside we starved. We ate cats and rats and leather. A horsehide was a feast. King Cutthroat and Queen Whore accused each other of feasting on the flesh of the slain. Men and women gathered in secret to draw lots and gorge upon the flesh of him who drew the black stone. The pyramid of Nakloz was despoiled and set aflame by those who claimed that Kraznys mo Nakloz was to blame for all our woes.”

“Others blamed Daenerys,” said the weaver, “but more of us still loved you. ‘She is on her way,’ we said to one another. ‘She is coming at the head of a great host, with food for all.’ ”

I can scarce feed my own folk. If I had marched to Astapor, I would have lost Meereen.

The cobbler told them how the body of the Butcher King had been disinterred and clad in copper armor, after the Green Grace of Astapor had a vision that he would deliver them from the Yunkai’i. Armored and stinking,

the corpse of Cleon the Great was strapped onto the back of a starving horse to lead the remnants of his new Unsullied on a sortie, but they rode right into the iron teeth of a legion from New Ghis and were cut down to a man.

“Afterward the Green Grace was impaled upon a stake in the Plaza of Punishment and left until she died. In the pyramid of Ullhor, the survivors had a great feast that lasted half the night, and washed the last of their food down with poison wine so none need wake again come morning. Soon after came the sickness, a bloody flux that killed three men of every four, until a mob of dying men went mad and slew the guards on the main gate.”

The old brickmaker broke in to say, “No. That was the work of healthy men, running to escape the flux.”

“Does it matter?” asked the cobbler. “The guards were torn apart and the gates thrown open. The legions of New Ghis came pouring into Astapor, followed by the Yunkai’i and the sellswords on their horses. Queen Whore died fighting them with a curse upon her lips. King Cutthroat yielded and was thrown into a fighting pit, to be torn apart by a pack of starving dogs.”

“Even then some said that you were coming,” said the weaver. “They swore they had seen you mounted on a dragon, flying high above the camps of the Yunkai’i. Every day we looked for you.”

I could not come, the queen thought. *I dare not*. “And when the city fell?” demanded Skahaz. “What then?”

“The butchery began. The Temple of the Graces was full of the sick who had come to ask the gods to heal them. The legions sealed the doors and set the temple ablaze with torches. Within the hour fires were burning in every corner of the city. As they spread they joined with one another. The streets were full of mobs, running this way and that to escape the flames, but there was no way out. The Yunkai’i held the gates.”

“Yet *you* escaped,” the Shavepate said. “How is that?”

The old man answered. “I am by trade a brickmaker, as my father and his father were before me. My grandfather built our house up against the city

walls. It was an easy thing to work loose a few bricks every night. When I told my friends, they helped me shore up the tunnel so it would not collapse. We all agreed that it might be good to have our own way out.”

I left you with a council to rule over you, Dany thought, a healer, a scholar, and a priest. She could still recall the Red City as she had first seen it, dry and dusty behind its red brick walls, dreaming cruel dreams, yet full of life. *There were islands in the Worm where lovers kissed, but in the Plaza of Punishment they peeled the skin off men in strips and left them hanging naked for the flies.* “It is good that you have come,” she told the Astapori. “You will be safe in Meereen.”

The cobbler thanked her for that, and the old brickmaker kissed her foot, but the weaver looked at her with eyes as hard as slate. *She knows I lie, the queen thought. She knows I cannot keep them safe. Astapor is burning, and Meereen is next.*

“There’s more coming,” Brown Ben announced when the Astapori had been led away. “These three had horses. Most are afoot.”

“How many are they?” asked Reznak.

Brown Ben shrugged. “Hundreds. Thousands. Some sick, some burned, some wounded. The Cats and the Windblown are swarming through the hills with lance and lash, driving them north and cutting down the laggards.”

“Mouths on feet. And *sick*, you say?” Reznak wrung his hands. “Your Worship must not allow them in the city.”

“I wouldn’t,” said Brown Ben Plumm. “I’m no maester, mind you, but I know you got to keep the bad apples from the good.”

“These are not apples, Ben,” said Dany. “These are men and women, sick and hungry and afraid.” *My children.* “I should have gone to Astapor.”

“Your Grace could not have saved them,” said Ser Barristan. “You warned King Cleon against this war with Yunkai. The man was a fool, and his

hands were red with blood.”

And are my hands any cleaner? She remembered what Daario had said—that all kings must be butchers, or meat. “Cleon was the enemy of our enemy. If I had joined him at the Horns of Hazzat, we might have crushed the Yunkai’i between us.”

The Shavepate disagreed. “If you had taken the Unsullied south to Hazzat, the Sons of the Harpy—”

“I know. I *know*. It is Eroeh all over again.”

Brown Ben Plumm was puzzled. “Who is Eroeh?”

“A girl I thought I’d saved from rape and torment. All I did was make it worse for her in the end. And all I did in Astapor was make ten thousand Eroehs.”

“Your Grace could not have known—”

“I am the queen. It was my place to know.”

“What is done is done,” said Reznak mo Reznak. “Your Worship, I beg you, take the noble Hizdahr for your king at once. He can speak with the Wise Masters, make a peace for us.”

“On what terms?” *Beware the perfumed seneschal*, Quaithe had said. The masked woman had foretold the coming of the pale mare, was she right about the noble Reznak too? “I may be a young girl innocent of war, but I am not a lamb to walk bleating into the harpy’s den. I still have my Unsullied. I have the Stormcrows and the Second Sons. I have three companies of freedmen.”

“Them, and dragons,” said Brown Ben Plumm, with a grin. “In the pit, in chains,” wailed Reznak mo Reznak. “What good are dragons that cannot be controlled? Even the Unsullied grow fearful when they must open the doors to feed them.”

“What, o’ the queen’s little pets?” Brown Ben’s eyes crinkled in amusement. The grizzled captain of the Second Sons was a creature of the free companies, a mongrel with the blood of a dozen different peoples flowing through his veins, but he had always been fond of the dragons, and them of him.

“Pets?” screeched Reznak. “Monsters, rather. Monsters that feed on children. We cannot—”

“*Silence*,” said Daenerys. “We will not speak of that.”

Reznak shrank away from her, flinching from the fury in her tone. “Forgive me, Magnificence, I did not ...”

Brown Ben Plumm bulled over him. “Your Grace, the Yunkish got three free companies against our two, and there’s talk the Yunkishmen sent to Volantis to fetch back the Golden Company. Those bastards field ten thousand. Yunkai’s got four Ghiscari legions too, maybe more, and I heard it said they sent riders across the Dothraki sea to maybe bring some big *khalasar* down on us. We *need* them dragons, the way I see it.”

Dany sighed. “I am sorry, Ben. I dare not loose the dragons.” She could see that was not the answer that he wanted.

Plumm scratched at his speckled whiskers. “If there’s no dragons in the balance, well ... we should leave before them Yunkish bastards close the trap ... only first, make the slavers pay to see our backs. They pay the khals to leave their cities be, why not us? Sell Meereen back to them and start west with wagons full o’ gold and gems and such.”

“You want me to loot Meereen and flee? No, I will not do that. Grey Worm, are my freedmen ready for battle?”

The eunuch crossed his arms against his chest. “They are not Unsullied, but they will not shame you. This one will swear to that by spear and sword, Your Worship.”

“Good. That’s good.” Daenerys looked at the faces of the men around her. The Shavepate, scowling. Ser Barristan, with his lined face and sad blue eyes. Reznak mo Reznak, pale, sweating. Brown Ben, white-haired, grizzled, tough as old leather. Grey Worm, smooth-cheeked, stolid, expressionless. *Daario should be here, and my bloodriders*, she thought. *If there is to be a battle, the blood of my blood should be with me*. She missed Ser Jorah Mormont too. *He lied to me, informed on me, but he loved me too, and he always gave good counsel*. “I defeated the Yunkai’i before. I will defeat them again. Where, though? How?”

“You mean to take the field?” The Shavepate’s voice was thick with disbelief. “That would be folly. Our walls are taller and thicker than the walls of Astapor, and our defenders are more valiant. The Yunkai’i will not take this city easily.”

Ser Barristan disagreed. “I do not think we should allow them to invest us. Theirs is a patchwork host at best. These slavers are no soldiers. If we take them unawares ...”

“Small chance of that,” the Shavepate said. “The Yunkai’i have many friends inside the city. They will know.”

“How large an army can we muster?” Dany asked. “Not large enough, begging your royal pardon,” said Brown Ben Plumm. “What does Naharis have to say? If we’re going to make a fight o’ this, we need his Stormcrows.”

“Daario is still in the field.” *Oh, gods, what have I done? Have I sent him to his death?* “Ben, I will need your Second Sons to scout our enemies. Where they are, how fast they are advancing, how many men they have, and how they are disposed.”

“We’ll need provisions. Fresh horses too.”

“Of course. Ser Barristan will see to it.”

Brown Ben scratched his chin. “Might be we could get some o’ them to come over. If Your Grace could spare a few bags o’ gold and gems ... just

to give their captains a good taste, as it were ... well, who knows?"

"Buy them, why not?" Dany said. That sort of thing went on all the time amongst the free companies of the Disputed Lands, she knew. "Yes, very good. Reznak, see to it. Once the Second Sons ride out, close the gates and double the watch upon the walls."

"It shall be done, Magnificence," said Reznak mo Reznak. "What of these Astapori?"

My children. "They are coming here for help. For succor and protection. We cannot turn our backs on them."

Ser Barristan frowned. "Your Grace, I have known the bloody flux to destroy whole armies when left to spread unchecked. The seneschal is right. We cannot have the Astapori in Meereen."

Dany looked at him helplessly. It was good that dragons did not cry. "As you say, then. We will keep them outside the walls until this ... this curse has run its course. Set up a camp for them beside the river, west of the city. We will send them what food we can. Perhaps we can separate the healthy from the sick." All of them were looking at her. "Will you make me say it twice? Go and do as I've commanded you." Dany rose, brushed past Brown Ben, and climbed the steps to the sweet solitude of her terrace.

Two hundred leagues divided Meereen from Astapor, yet it seemed to her that the sky was darker to the southwest, smudged and hazy with the smoke of the Red City's passing. *Brick and blood built Astapor, and brick and blood its people.* The old rhyme rang in her head. *Ash and bone is Astapor, and ash and bone its people.* She tried to recall Eroeh's face, but the dead girl's features kept turning into smoke.

When Daenerys finally turned away, Ser Barristan stood near her, wrapped in his white cloak against the chill of evening. "Can we make a fight of this?" she asked him.

"Men can always fight, Your Grace. Ask rather if we can win. Dying is easy, but victory comes hard. Your freedmen are half-trained and un-

blooded. Your sellswords once served your foes, and once a man turns his cloak he will not scruple to turn it again. You have two dragons who cannot be controlled, and a third that may be lost to you. Beyond these walls your only friends are the Lhazarene, who have no taste for war.”

“My walls are strong, though.”

“No stronger than when we sat outside them. And the Sons of the Harpy are inside the walls with us. So are the Great Masters, both those you did not kill and the sons of those you did.”

“I know.” The queen sighed. “What do you counsel, ser?”

“Battle,” said Ser Barristan. “Meereen is overcrowded and full of hungry mouths, and you have too many enemies within. We cannot long withstand a siege, I fear. Let me meet the foe as he comes north, on ground of my own choosing.”

“Meet the foe,” she echoed, “with the freedmen you’ve called half-trained and unblooded.”

“We were all unblooded once, Your Grace. The Unsullied will help stiffen them. If I had five hundred knights ...”

“Or five. And if I give you the Unsullied, I will have no one but the Brazen Beasts to hold Meereen.” When Ser Barristan did not dispute her, Dany closed her eyes. *Gods, she prayed, you took Khal Drogo, who was my sun-and-stars. You took our valiant son before he drew a breath. You have had your blood of me. Help me now, I pray you. Give me the wisdom to see the path ahead and the strength to do what I must to keep my children safe.*

The gods did not respond.

When she opened her eyes again, Daenerys said, “I cannot fight two enemies, one within and one without. If I am to hold Meereen, I must have the city behind me. The *whole* city. I need ... I need ...” She could not say it.

“Your Grace?” Ser Barristan prompted, gently. *A queen belongs not to herself but to her people.* “I need Hizdahr zo Loraq.”