

DAENERYS

The stench of the camp was so appalling it was all that Dany could do not to gag.

Ser Barristan wrinkled up his nose, and said, “Your Grace should not be here, breathing these black humors.”

“I am the blood of the dragon,” Dany reminded him. “Have you ever seen a dragon with the flux?” Viserys had oft claimed that Targaryens were untroubled by the pestilences that afflicted common men, and so far as she could tell, it was true. She could remember being cold and hungry and afraid, but never sick.

“Even so,” the old knight said, “I would feel better if Your Grace would return to the city.” The many-colored brick walls of Meereen were half a mile back. “The bloody flux has been the bane of every army since the Dawn Age. Let us distribute the food, Your Grace.”

“On the morrow. I am here now. I want to see.” She put her heels into her silver. The others trotted after her. Jhogo rode before her, Aggo and Rakharo just behind, long Dothraki whips in hand to keep away the sick and dying. Ser Barristan was at her right, mounted on a dapple grey. To her left was Symon Stripeback of the Free Brothers and Marselen of the Mother’s Men. Three score soldiers followed close behind the captains, to protect the food wagons. Mounted men all, Dothraki and Brazen Beasts and freedmen, they were united only by their distaste for this duty.

The Astapori stumbled after them in a ghastly procession that grew longer with every yard they crossed. Some spoke tongues she did not understand. Others were beyond speaking. Many lifted their hands to Dany, or knelt as her silver went by. “Mother,” they called to her, in the dialects of Astapor, Lys, and Old Volantis, in guttural Dothraki and the liquid syllables of Qarth, even in the Common Tongue of Westeros. “Mother, please ... mother, help my sister, she is sick ... give me food for my little ones ... please, my old father ... help him ... help her ... help me ...”

I have no more help to give, Dany thought, despairing. The Astapori had no place to go. Thousands remained outside Meereen's thick walls— men and women and children, old men and little girls and newborn babes. Many were sick, most were starved, and all were doomed to die. Daenerys dare not open her gates to let them in. She had tried to do what she could for them. She had sent them healers, Blue Graces and spell-singers and barber-surgeons, but some of those had sickened as well, and none of their arts had slowed the galloping progression of the flux that had come on the pale mare. Separating the healthy from the sick had proved impractical as well. Her Stalwart Shields had tried, pulling husbands away from wives and children from their mothers, even as the Astapori wept and kicked and pelted them with stones. A few days later, the sick were dead and the healthy ones were sick. Dividing the one from the other had accomplished nothing.

Even feeding them had grown difficult. Every day she sent them what she could, but every day there were more of them and less food to give them. It was growing harder to find drivers willing to deliver the food as well. Too many of the men they had sent into the camp had been stricken by the flux themselves. Others had been attacked on the way back to the city. Yesterday a wagon had been overturned and two of her soldiers killed, so today the queen had determined that she would bring the food herself. Every one of her advisors had argued fervently against it, from Reznak and the Shavepate to Ser Barristan, but Daenerys would not be moved. "I will not turn away from them," she said stubbornly. "A queen must know the sufferings of her people."

Suffering was the only thing they did not lack. "There is scarcely a horse or mule left, though many rode from Astapor," Marselen reported to her. "They've eaten every one, Your Grace, along with every rat and scavenger dog that they could catch. Now some have begun to eat their own dead."

"Man must not eat the flesh of man," said Aggo.

"It is known," agreed Rahkaro. "They will be cursed."

"They're past cursing," said Symon Stripeback.

Little children with swollen stomachs trailed after them, too weak or scared to beg. Gaunt men with sunken eyes squatted amidst sand and stones, shitting out their lives in stinking streams of brown and red. Many shat where they slept now, too feeble to crawl to the ditches she'd commanded them to dig. Two women fought over a charred bone. Nearby a boy of ten stood eating a rat. He ate one-handed, the other clutching a sharpened stick lest anyone try to wrest away his prize. Unburied dead lay everywhere. Dany saw one man sprawled in the dirt under a black cloak, but as she rode past his cloak dissolved into a thousand flies. Skeletal women sat upon the ground clutching dying infants. Their eyes followed her. Those who had the strength called out. "Mother ... please, Mother ... bless you, Mother ..."

Bless me, Dany thought bitterly. Your city is gone to ash and bone, your people are dying all around you. I have no shelter for you, no medicine, no hope. Only stale bread and wormy meat, hard cheese, a little milk. Bless me, bless me.

What kind of mother has no milk to feed her children?

"Too many dead," Aggo said. "They should be burned."

"Who will burn them?" asked Ser Barristan. "The bloody flux is everywhere. A hundred die each night."

"It is not good to touch the dead," said Jhogo.

"This is known," Aggo and Rakharo said, together.

"That may be so," said Dany, "but this thing must be done, all the same." She thought a moment. "The Unsullied have no fear of corpses. I shall speak to Grey Worm."

"Your Grace," said Ser Barristan, "the Unsullied are your best fighters. We dare not loose this plague amongst them. Let the Astapori bury their own dead."

"They are too feeble," said Symon Stripeback.

Dany said, “More food might make them stronger.”

Symon shook his head. “Food should not be wasted on the dying, Your Worship. We do not have enough to feed the living.”

He was not wrong, she knew, but that did not make the words any easier to hear. “This is far enough,” the queen decided. “We’ll feed them here.” She raised a hand. Behind her the wagons bumped to a halt, and her riders spread out around them, to keep the Astapori from rushing at the food. No sooner had they stopped than the press began to thicken around them, as more and more of the afflicted came limping and shambling toward the wagons. The riders cut them off. “Wait your turn,” they shouted. “No pushing. Back. Stay back. Bread for everyone. Wait your turn.”

Dany could only sit and watch. “Ser,” she said to Barristan Selmy, “is there no more we can do? You have provisions.”

“Provisions for Your Grace’s soldiers. We may well need to withstand a long siege. The Stormcrows and the Second Sons can harry the Yunkishmen, but they cannot hope to turn them. If Your Grace would allow me to assemble an army ...”

“If there must be a battle, I would sooner fight it from behind the walls of Meereen. Let the Yunkai’i try and storm my battlements.” The queen surveyed the scene around her. “If we were to share our food equally ...”

“... the Astapori would eat through their portion in days, and we would have that much less for the siege.”

Dany gazed across the camp, to the many-colored brick walls of Meereen. The air was thick with flies and cries. “The gods have sent this pestilence to humble me. So many dead ... I will *not* have them eating corpses.” She beckoned Aggo closer. “Ride to the gates and bring me Grey Worm and fifty of his Unsullied.”

“*Khaleesi*. The blood of your blood obeys.” Aggo touched his horse with his heels and galloped off.

Ser Barristan watched with ill-concealed apprehension. “You should not linger here overlong, Your Grace. The Astapori are being fed, as you commanded. There’s no more we can do for the poor wretches. We should repair back to the city.”

“Go if you wish, ser. I will not detain you. I will not detain any of you.” Dany vaulted down from the horse. “I cannot heal them, but I can show them that their Mother cares.”

Jhogo sucked in his breath. “*Khaleesi*, no.” The bell in his braid rang softly as he dismounted. “You must not get any closer. Do not let them touch you! Do not!”

Dany walked right past him. There was an old man on the ground a few feet away, moaning and staring up at the grey belly of the clouds. She knelt beside him, wrinkling her nose at the smell, and pushed back his dirty grey hair to feel his brow. “His flesh is on fire. I need water to bathe him. Seawater will serve. Marselen, will you fetch some for me? I need oil as well, for the pyre. Who will help me burn the dead?”

By the time Aggo returned with Grey Worm and fifty of the Unsullied loping behind his horse, Dany had shamed all of them into helping her. Symon Stripeback and his men were pulling the living from the dead and stacking up the corpses, while Jhogo and Rakharo and their Dothraki helped those who could still walk toward the shore to bathe and wash their clothes. Aggo stared at them as if they had all gone mad, but Grey Worm knelt beside the queen and said, “This one would be of help.”

Before midday a dozen fires were burning. Columns of greasy black smoke rose up to stain a merciless blue sky. Dany’s riding clothes were stained and sooty as she stepped back from the pyres. “Worship,” Grey Worm said, “this one and his brothers beg your leave to bathe in the salt sea when our work here is done, that we might be purified according to the laws of our great goddess.”

The queen had not known that the eunuchs had a goddess of their own. “Who is this goddess? One of the gods of Ghis?”

Grey Worm looked troubled. “The goddess is called by many names. She is the Lady of Spears, the Bride of Battle, the Mother of Hosts, but her true name belongs only to these poor ones who have burned their manhoods upon her altar. We may not speak of her to others. This one begs your forgiveness.”

“As you wish. Yes, you may bathe if that is your desire. Thank you for your help.”

“These ones live to serve you.”

When Daenerys returned to her pyramid, sore of limb and sick of heart, she found Missandei reading some old scroll whilst Irri and Jhiqui argued about Rakharo. “You are too skinny for him,” Jhiqui was saying. “You are almost a boy. Rakharo does not bed with boys. This is known.” Irri bristled back. “It is known that you are almost a cow. Rakharo does not bed with cows.”

“Rakharo is blood of my blood. His life belongs to me, not you,” Dany told the two of them. Rakharo had grown almost half a foot during his time away from Meereen and returned with arms and legs thick with muscle and four bells in his hair. He towered over Aggo and Jhogo now, as her handmaids had both noticed. “Now be quiet. I need to bathe.” She had never felt more soiled. “Jhiqui, help me from these clothes, then take them away and burn them. Irri, tell Qezza to find me something light and cool to wear. The day was very hot.”

A cool wind was blowing on her terrace. Dany sighed with pleasure as she slipped into the waters of her pool. At her command, Missandei stripped off her clothes and climbed in after her. “This one heard the Astapori scratching at the walls last night,” the little scribe said as she was washing Dany’s back.

Irri and Jhiqui exchanged a look. “No one was scratching,” said Jhiqui. “Scratching ... how could they scratch?”

“With their hands,” said Missandei. “The bricks are old and crumbling. They are trying to claw their way into the city.”

“This would take them many years,” said Irri. “The walls are very thick. This is known.”

“It is known,” agreed Jhiqui.

“I dream of them as well.” Dany took Missandei’s hand. “The camp is a good half-mile from the city, my sweetling. No one was scratching at the walls.”

“Your Grace knows best,” said Missandei. “Shall I wash your hair? It is almost time. Reznak mo Reznak and the Green Grace are coming to discuss —”

“—the wedding preparations.” Dany sat up with a splash. “I had almost forgotten.” *Perhaps I wanted to forget.* “And after them, I am to dine with Hizdahr.” She sighed. “Irri, bring the green *tokar*; the silk one fringed with Myrish lace.”

“That one is being repaired, *Khaleesi*. The lace was torn. The blue *tokar* has been cleaned.”

“Blue, then. They will be just as pleased.”

She was only half-wrong. The priestess and the seneschal were happy to see her garbed in a *tokar*, a proper Meereenese lady for once, but what they really wanted was to strip her bare. Daenerys heard them out, incredulous. When they were done, she said, “I have no wish to give offense, but I will *not* present myself naked to Hizdahr’s mother and sisters.”

“But,” said Reznak mo Reznak, blinking, “but you must, Your Worship. Before a marriage it is traditional for the women of the man’s house to examine the bride’s womb and, ah ... her female parts. To ascertain that they are well formed and, ah ...”

“... fertile,” finished Galazza Galare. “An ancient ritual, Your Radiance. Three Graces shall be present to witness the examination and say the proper prayers.”

“Yes,” said Reznak, “and afterward there is a special cake. A women’s cake, baked only for betrothals. Men are not allowed to taste it. I am told it is delicious. Magical.”

And if my womb is withered and my female parts accursed, is there a special cake for that as well? “Hizdahr zo Loraq may inspect my women’s parts after we are wed.” *Khal Drogo found no fault with them, why should he?* “Let his mother and his sisters examine one another and share the special cake. I shall not be eating it. Nor shall I wash the noble Hizdahr’s noble feet.”

“Magnificence, you do not understand,” protested Reznak. “The washing of the feet is hallowed by tradition. It signifies that you shall be your husband’s handmaid. The wedding garb is fraught with meaning too. The bride is dressed in dark red veils above a *tokar* of white silk, fringed with baby pearls.”

The queen of the rabbits must not be wed without her floppy ears. “All those pearls will make me rattle when I walk.”

“The pearls symbolize fertility. The more pearls Your Worship wears, the more healthy children she will bear.”

“Why would I want a hundred children?” Dany turned to the Green Grace. “If we should wed by Westerosi rites ...”

“The gods of Ghis would deem it no true union.” Galazza Galare’s face was hidden behind a veil of green silk. Only her eyes showed, green and wise and sad. “In the eyes of the city you would be the noble Hizdahr’s concubine, not his lawful wedded wife. Your children would be bastards. Your Worship must marry Hizdahr in the Temple of the Graces, with all the nobility of Meereen on hand to bear witness to your union.”

Get the heads of all the noble houses out of their pyramids on some pretext, Daario had said. *The dragon’s words are fire and blood.* Dany pushed the thought aside. It was not worthy of her. “As you wish,” she sighed. “I shall marry Hizdahr in the Temple of the Graces wrapped in a white *tokar* fringed with baby pearls. Is there anything else?”

“One more small matter, Your Worship,” said Reznak. “To celebrate your nuptials, it would be most fitting if you would allow the fighting pits to open once again. It would be your wedding gift to Hizdahr and to your loving people, a sign that you had embraced the ancient ways and customs of Meereen.”

“And most pleasing to the gods as well,” the Green Grace added in her soft and kindly voice.

A bride price paid in blood. Daenerys was weary of fighting this battle. Even Ser Barristan did not think she could win. “No ruler can make a people good,” Selmy had told her. “Baelor the Blessed prayed and fasted and built the Seven as splendid a temple as any gods could wish for, yet he could not put an end to war and want.” *A queen must listen to her people,* Dany reminded herself. “After the wedding Hizdahr will be king. Let him reopen the fighting pits if he wishes. I want no part of it.” *Let the blood be on his hands, not mine.* She rose. “If my husband wishes me to wash his feet, he must first wash mine. I will tell him so this evening.” She wondered how her betrothed would take that.

She need not have been concerned. Hizdahr zo Loraq arrived an hour after the sun had set. His own *tokar* was burgundy, with a golden stripe and a fringe of golden beads. Dany told him of her meeting with Reznak and the Green Grace as she was pouring wine for him. “These rituals are empty,” Hizdahr declared, “just the sort of thing we must sweep aside.

Meereen has been steeped in these foolish old traditions for too long.” He kissed her hand and said, “Daenerys, my queen, I will gladly wash you from head to heel if that is what I must do to be your king and consort.”

“To be my king and consort, you need only bring me peace. Skahaz tells me you have had messages of late.”

“I have.” Hizdahr crossed his long legs. He looked pleased with himself. “Yunkai will give us peace, but for a price. The disruption of the slave trade has caused great injury throughout the civilized world. Yunkai and her allies will require an indemnity of us, to be paid in gold and gem-stones.”

Gold and gems were easy. “What else?”

“The Yunkai’i will resume slaving, as before. Astapor will be rebuilt, as a slave city. You will not interfere.”

“The Yunkai’i resumed their slaving before I was two leagues from their city. Did I turn back? King Cleon begged me to join with him against them, and I turned a deaf ear to his pleas. *I want no war with Yunkai*. How many times must I say it? What promises do they require?”

“Ah, there is the thorn in the bower, my queen,” said Hizdahr zo Loraq. “Sad to say, Yunkai has no faith in your promises. They keep plucking the same string on the harp, about some envoy that your dragons set on fire.”

“Only his *tokar* was burned,” said Dany scornfully. “Be that as it may, they do not trust you. The men of New Ghis feel the same. Words are wind, as you yourself have so oft said. No words of yours will secure this peace for Meereen. Your foes require deeds. They would see us wed, and they would see me crowned as king, to rule beside you.”

Dany filled his wine cup again, wanting nothing so much as to pour the flagon over his head and drown his complacent smile. “Marriage or carnage. A wedding or a war. Are those my choices?”

“I see only one choice, Your Radiance. Let us say our vows before the gods of Ghis and make a new Meereen together.”

The queen was framing her response when she heard a step behind her. *The food*, she thought. Her cooks had promised her to serve the noble Hizdahr’s favorite meal, dog in honey, stuffed with prunes and peppers. But when she turned to look, it was Ser Barristan standing there, freshly bathed and clad in white, his longsword at his side. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing, “I am sorry to disturb you, but I thought that you would want to know at once. The Stormcrows have returned to the city, with word of the foe. The Yunkishmen are on the march, just as we had feared.”

A flicker of annoyance crossed the noble face of Hizdahr zo Loraq. “The queen is at her supper. These sellswords can wait.”

Ser Barristan ignored him. “I asked Lord Daario to make his report to me, as Your Grace had commanded. He laughed and said that he would write it out in his own blood if Your Grace would send your little scribe to show him how to make the letters.”

“Blood?” said Dany, horrified. “Is that a jape? No. No, don’t tell me, I must see him for myself.” She was a young girl, and alone, and young girls can change their minds. “Convene my captains and commanders. Hizdahr, I know you will forgive me.”

“Meereen must come first.” Hizdahr smiled genially. “We will have other nights. A thousand nights.”

“Ser Barristan will show you out.” Dany hurried off, calling for her handmaids. She would not welcome her captain home in a *tokar*. In the end she tried a dozen gowns before she found one she liked, but she refused the crown that Jhiqui offered her.

As Daario Naharis took a knee before her, Dany’s heart gave a lurch. His hair was matted with dried blood, and on his temple a deep cut glistened red and raw. His right sleeve was bloody almost to the elbow. “You’re hurt,” she gasped.

“This?” Daario touched his temple. “A crossbowman tried to put a quarrel through my eye, but I outrode it. I was hurrying home to my queen, to bask in the warmth of her smile.” He shook his sleeve, spattering red droplets. “This blood is not mine. One of my serjeants said we should go over to the Yunkai’i, so I reached down his throat and pulled his heart out. I meant to bring it to you as a gift for my silver queen, but four of the Cats cut me off and came snarling and spitting after me. One almost caught me, so I threw the heart into his face.”

“Very gallant,” said Ser Barristan, in a tone that suggested it was anything but, “but do you have tidings for Her Grace?”

“Hard tidings, Ser Grandfather. Astapor is gone, and the slavers are coming north in strength.”

“This is old news, and stale,” growled the Shavepate. “Your mother said the same of your father’s kisses,” Daario replied. “Sweet queen, I would have been here sooner, but the hills are aswarm with Yunkish sellswords. Four free companies. Your Stormcrows had to cut their way through all of them. There is more, and worse. The Yunkai’i are marching their host up the coast road, joined by four legions out of New Ghis. They have elephants, a hundred, armored and towered. Tolosi slingers too, and a corps of Qartheen camelry. Two more Ghiscari legions took ship at Astapor. If our captives told it true, they will be landed beyond the Skahazadhan to cut us off from the Dothraki sea.”

As he told his tale, from time to time a drop of bright red blood would patter against the marble floor, and Dany would wince. “How many men were killed?” she asked when he was done.

“Of ours? I did not stop to count. We gained more than we lost, though.”

“More turncloaks?”

“More brave men drawn to your noble cause. My queen will like them. One is an axeman from the Basilisk Isles, a brute, bigger than Belwas. You should see him. Some Westerosi too, a score or more. Deserters from the Windblown, unhappy with the Yunkai’i. They’ll make good Stormcrows.”

“If you say.” Dany would not quibble. Meereen might soon have need of every sword.

Ser Barristan frowned at Daario. “Captain, you made mention of *four* free companies. We know of only three. The Windblown, the Long Lances, and the Company of the Cat.”

“Ser Grandfather knows how to count. The Second Sons have gone over to the Yunkai’i.” Daario turned his head and spat. “That’s for Brown Ben Plumm. When next I see his ugly face I will open him from throat to groin and rip out his black heart.”

Dany tried to speak and found no words. She remembered Ben’s face the last time she had seen it. *It was a warm face, a face I trusted.* Dark skin and

white hair, the broken nose, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Even the dragons had been fond of old Brown Ben, who liked to boast that he had a drop of dragon blood himself. *Three treasons will you know. Once for gold and once for blood and once for love.* Was Plumm the third treason, or the second? And what did that make Ser Jorah, her gruff old bear? Would she never have a friend that she could trust? *What good are prophecies if you cannot make sense of them? If I marry Hizdahr before the sun comes up, will all these armies melt away like morning dew and let me rule in peace?*

Daario's announcement had sparked an uproar. Reznak was wailing, the Shavepate was muttering darkly, her bloodriders were swearing vengeance. Strong Belwas thumped his scarred belly with his fist and swore to eat Brown Ben's heart with plums and onions. "Please," Dany said, but only Missandei seemed to hear. The queen got to her feet. "*Be quiet!* I have heard enough."

"Your Grace." Ser Barristan went to one knee. "We are yours to command. What would you have us do?"

"Continue as we planned. Gather food, as much as you can." *If I look back I am lost.* "We must close the gates and put every fighting man upon the walls. No one enters, no one leaves."

The hall was quiet for a moment. The men looked at one another. Then Reznak said, "What of the Astapori?"

She wanted to scream, to gnash her teeth and tear her clothes and beat upon the floor. Instead she said, "*Close the gates.* Will you make me say it thrice?" They were her children, but she could not help them now. "Leave me. Daario, remain. That cut should be washed, and I have more questions for you."

The others bowed and went. Dany took Daario Naharis up the steps to her bedchamber, where Irri washed his cut with vinegar and Jhiqui wrapped it in white linen. When that was done she sent her handmaids off as well. "Your clothes are stained with blood," she told Daario. "Take them off."

"Only if you do the same." He kissed her.

His hair smelled of blood and smoke and horse, and his mouth was hard and hot on hers. Dany trembled in his arms. When they broke apart, she said, “I thought you would be the one to betray me. Once for blood and once for gold and once for love, the warlocks said. I thought ... I never thought Brown Ben. Even my dragons seemed to trust him.” She clutched her captain by the shoulders. “Promise me that you will never turn against me. I could not bear that. Promise me.”

“Never, my love.”

She believed him. “I swore that I should wed Hizdahr zo Loraq if he gave me ninety days of peace, but now ... I wanted you from the first time that I saw you, but you were a sellsword, fickle, *treacherous*. You boasted that you’d had a hundred women.”

“A hundred?” Daario chuckled through his purple beard. “I lied, sweet queen. It was a thousand. But never once a dragon.”

She raised her lips to his. “What are you waiting for?”