

DAENERYS

The drapes kept out the dust and heat of the streets, but they could not keep out disappointment. Dany climbed inside wearily, glad for the refuge from the sea of Qartheen eyes. “Make way,” Jhogo shouted at the crowd from horseback, snapping his whip, “make way, make way for the Mother of Dragons.”

Reclining on cool satin cushions, Xaro Xhoan Daxos poured ruby-red wine into matched goblets of jade and gold, his hands sure and steady despite the sway of the palanquin. “I see a deep sadness written upon your face, my light of love.” He offered her a goblet. “Could it be the sadness of a lost dream?”

“A dream delayed, no more.” Dany’s tight silver collar was chafing against her throat. She unfastened it and flung it aside. The collar was set with an enchanted amethyst that Xaro swore would ward her against all poisons. The Pureborn were notorious for offering poisoned wine to those they thought dangerous, but they had not given Dany so much as a cup of water. *They never saw me for a queen*, she thought bitterly. *I was only an afternoon’s amusement, a horse girl with a curious pet.*

Rhaegal hissed and dug sharp black claws into her bare shoulder as Dany stretched out a hand for the wine. Wincing, she shifted him to her other shoulder, where he could claw her gown instead of her skin. She was garbed after the Qartheen fashion. Xaro had warned her that the Enthroned would never listen to a Dothraki, so she had taken care to go before them in flowing green samite with one breast bared, silvered sandals on her feet, with a belt of black-and-white pearls about her waist. *For all the help they offered, I could have gone naked. Perhaps I should have.* She drank deep.

Descendants of the ancient kings and queens of Qarth, the Pureborn commanded the Civic Guard and the fleet of ornate galleys that ruled the straits between the seas. Daenerys Targaryen had wanted that fleet, or part of it, and some of their soldiers as well. She made the traditional sacrifice in the Temple of Memory, offered the traditional bribe to the Keeper of the

Long List, sent the traditional persimmon to the Opener of the Door, and finally received the traditional blue silk slippers summoning her to the Hall of a Thousand Thrones.

The Pureborn heard her pleas from the great wooden seats of their ancestors, rising in curved tiers from a marble floor to a high-domed ceiling painted with scenes of Qarth's vanished glory. The chairs were immense, fantastically carved, bright with goldwork and studded with amber, onyx, lapis, and jade, each one different from all the others, and each striving to be the most fabulous. Yet the men who sat in them seemed so listless and world-weary that they might have been asleep. *They listened, but they did not hear, or care*, she thought. *They are Milk Men indeed. They never meant to help me. They came because they were curious. They came because they were bored, and the dragon on my shoulder interested them more than I did.*

"Tell me the words of the Pureborn," prompted Xaro Xhoan Daxos. "Tell me what they said to sadden the queen of my heart."

"They said no." The wine tasted of pomegranates and hot summer days. "They said it with great courtesy, to be sure, but under all the lovely words, it was still no."

"Did you flatter them?"

"Shamelessly."

"Did you weep?"

"The blood of the dragon does not weep," she said testily.

Xaro sighed. "You ought to have wept." The Qartheen wept often and easily; it was considered a mark of the civilized man. "The men we bought, what did they say?"

"Mathos said nothing. Wendello praised the way I spoke. The Exquisite refused me with the rest, but he wept afterward."

"Alas, that Qartheen should be so faithless." Xaro was not himself of the Pureborn, but he had told her whom to bribe and how much to offer. "Weep, weep, for the treachery of men."

Dany would sooner have wept for her gold. The bribes she'd tendered to Mathos Mallarawan, Wendello Qar Deeth, and Egon Emeros the

Exquisite might have bought her a ship, or hired a score of sellswords. “Suppose I sent Ser Jorah to demand the return of my gifts?” she asked.

“Suppose a Sorrowful Man came to my palace one night and killed you as you slept,” said Xaro. The Sorrowful Men were an ancient sacred guild of assassins, so named because they always whispered, “I am so sorry,” to their victims before they killed them. The Qartheen were nothing if not polite. “It is wisely said that it is easier to milk the Stone Cow of Faros than to wring gold from the Pureborn.”

Dany did not know where Faros was, but it seemed to her that Qarth was full of stone cows. The merchant princes, grown vastly rich off the trade between the seas, were divided into three jealous factions: the Ancient Guild of Spicers, the Tourmaline Brotherhood, and the Thirteen, to which Xaro belonged. Each vied with the others for dominance, and all three contended endlessly with the Pureborn. And brooding over all were the warlocks, with their blue lips and dread powers, seldom seen but much feared.

She would have been lost without Xaro. The gold that she had squandered to open the doors of the Hall of a Thousand Thrones was largely a product of the merchant’s generosity and quick wits. As the rumor of living dragons had spread through the east, ever more seekers had come to learn if the tale was true—and Xaro Xhoan Daxos saw to it that the great and the humble alike offered some token to the Mother of Dragons.

The trickle he started soon swelled to a flood. Trader captains brought lace from Myr, chests of saffron from Yi Ti, amber and dragonglass out of Asshai. Merchants offered bags of coin, silversmiths rings and chains. Pipers piped for her, tumblers tumbled, and jugglers juggled, while dyers draped her in colors she had never known existed. A pair of Jogos Nhai presented her with one of their striped zorses, black and white and fierce. A widow brought the dried corpse of her husband, covered with a crust of silvered leaves; such remnants were believed to have great power, especially if the deceased had been a sorcerer, as this one had. And the Tourmaline Brotherhood pressed on her a crown wrought in the shape of a

three-headed dragon; the coils were yellow gold, the wings silver, the heads carved from jade, ivory, and onyx.

The crown was the only offering she'd kept. The rest she sold, to gather the wealth she had wasted on the Pureborn. Xaro would have sold the crown too—the Thirteen would see that she had a much finer one, he swore—but Dany forbade it. “Viserys sold my mother’s crown, and men called him a beggar. I shall keep this one, so men will call me a queen.” And so she did, though the weight of it made her neck ache.

Yet even crowned, I am a beggar still, Dany thought. I have become the most splendid beggar in the world, but a beggar all the same. She hated it, as her brother must have. *All those years of running from city to city one step ahead of the Usurper’s knives, pleading for help from archons and princes and magisters, buying our food with flattery. He must have known how they mocked him. Small wonder he turned so angry and bitter. In the end it had driven him mad. It will do the same to me if I let it.* Part of her would have liked nothing more than to lead her people back to Vaes Tolorro, and make the dead city bloom. *No, that is defeat. I have something Viserys never had. I have the dragons. The dragons are all the difference.*

She stroked Rhaegal. The green dragon closed his teeth around the meat of her hand and nipped hard. Outside, the great city murmured and thrummed and seethed, all its myriad voices blending into one low sound like the surge of the sea. “Make way, you Milk Men, make way for the Mother of Dragons,” Jhogo cried, and the Qartheen moved aside, though perhaps the oxen had more to do with that than his voice. Through the swaying draperies, Dany caught glimpses of him astride his grey stallion. From time to time he gave one of the oxen a flick with the silver-handled whip she had given him. Aggo guarded on her other side, while Rakharo rode behind the procession, watching the faces in the crowd for any sign of danger. Ser Jorah she had left behind today, to guard her other dragons; the exile knight had been opposed to this folly from the start. *He distrusts everyone, she reflected, and perhaps for good reason.*

As Dany lifted her goblet to drink, Rhaegal sniffed at the wine and drew his head back, hissing. “Your dragon has a good nose.” Xaro wiped

his lips. “The wine is ordinary. It is said that across the Jade Sea they make a golden vintage so fine that one sip makes all other wines taste like vinegar. Let us take my pleasure barge and go in search of it, you and I.”

“The Arbor makes the best wine in the world,” Dany declared. Lord Redwyne had fought for her father against the Usurper, she remembered, one of the few to remain true to the last. *Will he fight for me as well?* There was no way to be certain after so many years. “Come with me to the Arbor, Xaro, and you’ll have the finest vintages you ever tasted. But we’ll need to go in a warship, not a pleasure barge.”

“I have no warships. War is bad for trade. Many times I have told you, Xaro Xhoan Daxos is a man of peace.”

Xaro Xhoan Daxos is a man of gold, she thought, and gold will buy me all the ships and swords I need. “I have not asked you to take up a sword, only to lend me your ships.”

He smiled modestly. “Of trading ships I have a few, that is so. Who can say how many? One may be sinking even now, in some stormy corner of the Summer Sea. On the morrow, another will fall afoul of corsairs. The next day, one of my captains may look at the wealth in his hold and think, *All this should belong to me.* Such are the perils of trade. Why, the longer we talk, the fewer ships I am likely to have. I grow poorer by the instant.”

“Give me ships, and I will make you rich again.”

“Marry me, bright light, and sail the ship of my heart. I cannot sleep at night for thinking of your beauty.”

Dany smiled. Xaro’s flowery protestations of passion amused her, but his manner was at odds with his words. While Ser Jorah had scarcely been able to keep his eyes from her bare breast when he’d helped her into the palanquin, Xaro hardly deigned to notice it, even in these close confines. And she had seen the beautiful boys who surrounded the merchant prince, flitting through his palace halls in wisps of silk. “You speak sweetly, Xaro, but under your words I hear another *no*.”

“This Iron Throne you speak of sounds monstrous cold and hard. I cannot bear the thought of jagged barbs cutting your sweet skin.” The

jewels in Xaro's nose gave him the aspect of some strange glittery bird. His long, elegant fingers waved dismissal. "Let this be your kingdom, most exquisite of queens, and let me be your king. I will give you a throne of gold, if you like. When Qarth begins to pall, we can journey round Yi Ti and search for the dreaming city of the poets, to sip the wine of wisdom from a dead man's skull."

"I mean to sail to Westeros, and drink the wine of vengeance from the skull of the Usurper." She scratched Rhaegal under one eye, and his jade-green wings unfolded for a moment, stirring the still air in the palanquin.

A single perfect tear ran down the cheek of Xaro Xhoan Daxos. "Will nothing turn you from this madness?"

"Nothing," she said, wishing she was as certain as she sounded. "If each of the Thirteen would lend me ten ships—"

"You would have one hundred thirty ships, and no crew to sail them. The justice of your cause means naught to the common men of Qarth. Why should my sailors care who sits upon the throne of some kingdom at the edge of the world?"

"I will pay them to care."

"With what coin, sweet star of my heaven?"

"With the gold the seekers bring."

"That you may do," Xaro acknowledged, "but so much caring will cost dear. You will need to pay them far more than I do, and all of Qarth laughs at my ruinous generosity."

"If the Thirteen will not aid me, perhaps I should ask the Guild of Spicers or the Tourmaline Brotherhood?"

Xaro gave a languid shrug. "They will give you nothing but flattery and lies. The Spicers are dissemblers and braggarts and the Brotherhood is full of pirates."

"Then I must heed Pyat Pree, and go to the warlocks."

The merchant prince sat up sharply. "Pyat Pree has blue lips, and it is truly said that blue lips speak only lies. Heed the wisdom of one who loves

you. Warlocks are bitter creatures who eat dust and drink of shadows. They will give you naught. They have naught to give.”

“I would not need to seek sorcerous help if my friend Xaro Xhoan Daxos would give me what I ask.”

“I have given you my home and heart, do they mean nothing to you? I have given you perfume and pomegranates, tumbling monkeys and spitting snakes, scrolls from lost Valyria, an idol’s head and a serpent’s foot. I have given you this palanquin of ebony and gold, and a matched set of bullocks to bear it, one white as ivory and one black as jet, with horns inlaid with jewels.”

“Yes,” Dany said. “But it was ships and soldiers I wanted.”

“Did I not give you an army, sweetest of women? A thousand knights, each in shining armor.”

The armor had been made of silver and gold, the knights of jade and beryl and onyx and tourmaline, of amber and opal and amethyst, each as tall as her little finger. “A thousand lovely knights,” she said, “but not the sort my enemies need fear. And my bullocks cannot carry me across the water, I—why are we stopping?” The oxen had slowed notably.

“*Khaleesi*,” Aggo called through the drapes as the palanquin jerked to a sudden halt. Dany rolled onto an elbow to lean out. They were on the fringes of the bazaar, the way ahead blocked by a solid wall of people. “What are they looking at?”

Jhogo rode back to her. “A firemage, *Khaleesi*.”

“I want to sec.”

“Then you must.” The Dothraki offered a hand down. When she took it, he pulled her up onto his horse and sat her in front of him, where she could see over the heads of the crowd. The firemage had conjured a ladder in the air, a crackling orange ladder of swirling flame that rose unsupported from the floor of the bazaar, reaching toward the high latticed roof.

Most of the spectators, she noticed, were not of the city: she saw sailors off trading ships, merchants come by caravan, dusty men out of the red waste, wandering soldiers, craftsmen, slavers. Jhogo, slid one hand about

her waist and leaned close. “The Milk Men shun him. *Khaleesi*, do you see the girl in the felt hat? There, behind the fat priest. She is a—”

“—cutpurse,” finished Dany. She was no pampered lady, blind to such things. She had seen cutpurses aplenty in the streets of the Free Cities, during the years she’d spent with her brother, running from the Usurper’s hired knives.

The mage was gesturing, urging the flames higher and higher with broad sweeps of his arms. As the watchers craned their necks upward, the cutpurses squirmed through the press, small blades hidden in their palms. They relieved the prosperous of their coin with one hand while pointing upward with the other.

When the fiery ladder stood forty feet high, the mage leapt forward and began to climb it, scrambling up hand over hand as quick as a monkey. Each rung he touched dissolved behind him, leaving no more than a wisp of silver smoke. When he reached the top, the ladder was gone and so was he.

“A fine trick,” announced Jhogo with admiration.

“No trick,” a woman said in the Common Tongue.

Dany had not noticed Quaithe in the crowd, yet there she stood, eyes wet and shiny behind the implacable red lacquer mask. “What mean you, my lady?”

“Half a year gone, that man could scarcely wake fire from dragonglass. He had some small skill with powders and wildfire, sufficient to entrance a crowd while his cutpurses did their work. He could walk across hot coals and make burning roses bloom in the air, but he could no more aspire to climb the fiery ladder than a common fisherman could hope to catch a kraken in his nets.”

Dany looked uneasily at where the ladder had stood. Even the smoke was gone now, and the crowd was breaking up, each man going about his business. In a moment more than a few would find their purses flat and empty. “And now?”

“And now his powers grow, *Khaleesi*. And you are the cause of it.”

“Me?” She laughed. “How could that be?”

The woman stepped closer and lay two fingers on Dany's wrist. "You are the Mother of Dragons, are you not?"

"She is, and no spawn of shadows may touch her." Jhogo brushed Quaithe's fingers away with the handle of his whip.

The woman took a step backward. "You must leave this city soon, Daenerys Targaryen, or you will never be permitted to leave it at all."

Dany's wrist still tingled where Quaithe had touched her. "Where would you have me go?" she asked.

"To go north, you must journey south. To reach the west, you must go east. To go forward you must go back, and to touch the light you must pass beneath the shadow."

Asshai, Dany thought. *She would have me go to Asshai*. "Will the Asshai'i give me an army?" she demanded. "Will there be gold for me in Asshai? Will there be ships? What is there in Asshai that I will not find in Qarth?"

"Truth," said the woman in the mask. And bowing, she faded back into the crowd.

Rakharo snorted contempt through his drooping black mustachios. "*Khaleesi*, better a man should swallow scorpions than trust in the spawn of shadows, who dare not show their face beneath the sun. It is known."

"It is known," Aggo agreed.

Xaro Xhoan Daxos had watched the whole exchange from his cushions. When Dany climbed back into the palanquin beside him, he said, "Your savages are wiser than they know. Such truths as the Asshai'i hoard are not like to make you smile." Then he pressed another cup of wine on her, and spoke of love and lust and other trifles all the way back to his manse.

In the quiet of her chambers, Dany stripped off her finery and donned a loose robe of purple silk. Her dragons were hungry, so she chopped up a snake and charred the pieces over a brazier. *They are growing*, she realized as she watched them snap and squabble over the blackened flesh. *They must weigh twice what they had in Vaes Tolorro*. Even so, it would be years

before they were large enough to take to war. *And they must be trained as well, or they will lay my kingdom waste.* For all her Targaryen blood, Dany had not the least idea of how to train a dragon.

Ser Jorah Mormont came to her as the sun was going down. “The Pureborn refused you?”

“As you said they would. Come, sit, give me your counsel.” Dany drew him down to the cushions beside her, and Jhiqui brought them a bowl of purple olives and onions drowned in wine.

“You will get no help in this city, *Khaleesi*.” Ser Jorah took an onion between thumb and forefinger. “Each day I am more convinced of that than the day before. The Pureborn see no farther than the walls of Qarth, and Xaro...”

“He asked me to marry him again.”

“Yes, and I know why.” When the knight frowned, his heavy black brows joined together above his deep-set eyes.

“He dreams of me, day and night.” She laughed.

“Forgive me, my queen, but it is your dragons he dreams of.”

“Xaro assures me that in Qarth, man and woman each retain their own property after they are wed. The dragons are mine.” She smiled as Drogon came hopping and flapping across the marble floor to crawl up on the cushion beside her.

“He tells it true as far as it goes, but there’s one thing he failed to mention. The Qartheen have a curious wedding custom, my queen. On the day of their union, a wife may ask a token of love from her husband. Whatsoever she desires of his worldly goods, he must grant. And he may ask the same of her. One thing only may be asked, but whatever is named may not be denied.”

“One thing,” she repeated. “And it may not be denied?”

“With one dragon, Xaro Xhoan Daxos would rule this city, but one ship will further our cause but little.”

Dany nibbled at an onion and reflected ruefully on the faithlessness of men. “We passed through the bazaar on our way back from the Hall of a

Thousand Thrones,” she told Ser Jorah. “Quaithe was there.” She told him of the firemage and the fiery ladder, and what the woman in the red mask had told her.

“I would be glad to leave this city, if truth be told,” the knight said when she was done. “But not for Asshai.”

“Where, then?”

“East,” he said.

“I am half a world away from my kingdom even here. If I go any farther east I may never find my way home to Westeros.”

“If you go west, you risk your life.”

“House Targaryen has friends in the Free Cities,” she reminded him. “Truer friends than Xaro or the Pureborn.”

“If you mean Illyrio Mopatis, I wonder. For sufficient gold, Illyrio would sell you as quickly as he would a slave.”

“My brother and I were guests in Illyrio’s manse for half a year. If he meant to sell us, he could have done it then.”

“He did sell you,” Ser Jorah said. “To Khal Drogo.”

Dany flushed. He had the truth of it, but she did not like the sharpness with which he put it. “Illyrio protected us from the Usurper’s knives, and he believed in my brother’s cause.”

“Illyrio believes in no cause but Illyrio. Gluttons are greedy men as a rule, and magisters are devious. Illyrio Mopatis is both. What do you truly know of him?”

“I know that he gave me my dragon eggs.”

He snorted. “If he’d known they were like to hatch, he’d would have sat on them himself.”

That made her smile despite herself. “Oh, I have no doubt of that, ser. I know Illyrio better than you think. I was a child when I left his manse in Pentos to wed my sun-and-stars, but I was neither deaf nor blind. And I am no child now.”

“Even if Illyrio is the friend you think him,” the knight said stubbornly, “he is not powerful enough to enthrone you by himself, no more than he could your brother.”

“He is rich,” she said. “Not so rich as Xaro, perhaps, but rich enough to hire ships for me, and men as well.”

“Sellswords have their uses,” Ser Jorah admitted, “but you will not win your father’s throne with sweepings from the Free Cities. Nothing knits a broken realm together so quick as an invading army on its soil.”

“I am their rightful queen,” Dany protested.

“You are a stranger who means to land on their shores with an army of outlanders who cannot even speak the Common Tongue. The lords of Westeros do not know you, and have every reason to fear and mistrust you. You must win them over before you sail. A few at least.”

“And how am I to do that, if I go east as you counsel?”

He ate an olive and spit out the pit into his palm. “I do not know, Your Grace,” he admitted, “but I do know that the longer you remain in one place, the easier it will be for your enemies to find you. The name *Targaryen* still frightens them, so much so that they sent a man to murder you when they heard you were with child. What will they do when they learn of your dragons?”

Drogon was curled up beneath her arm, as hot as a stone that has soaked all day in the blazing sun. Rhaegal and Viserion were fighting over a scrap of meat, buffeting each other with their wings as smoke hissed from their nostrils. *My furious children*, she thought. *They must not come to harm*. “The comet led me to Qarth for a reason. I had hoped to find my army here, but it seems that will not be. What else remains, I ask myself?” *I am afraid*, she realized, *but I must be brave*. “Come the morrow, you must go to Pyat Pree.”