

## DAENERYS

In this city of splendors, Dany had expected the House of the Undying Ones to be the most splendid of all, but she emerged from her palanquin to behold a grey and ancient ruin.

Long and low, without towers or windows, it coiled like a stone serpent through a grove of black-barked trees whose inky blue leaves made the stuff of the sorcerous drink the Qartheen called *shade of the evening*. No other buildings stood near. Black tiles covered the palace roof, many fallen or broken; the mortar between the stones was dry and crumbling. She understood now why Xaro Xhoan Daxos called it the Palace of Dust. Even Drogon seemed disquieted by the sight of it. The black dragon *hissed*, smoke seeping out between his sharp teeth.

“Blood of my blood,” Jhogo said in Dothraki, “this is an evil place, a haunt of ghosts and *maegi*. See how it drinks the morning sun? Let us go before it drinks us as well.”

Ser Jorah Mormont came up beside them. “What power can they have if they live in *that*?”

“Heed the wisdom of those who love you best,” said Xaro Xhoan Daxos, lounging inside the palanquin. “Warlocks are bitter creatures who eat dust and drink of shadows. They will give you naught. They have naught to give.”

Aggo put a hand on his *arakh*. “*Khaleesi*, it is said that many go into the Palace of Dust, but few come out.”

“It is said,” Jhogo agreed.

“We are blood of your blood,” said Aggo, “sworn to live and die as you do. Let us walk with you in this dark place, to keep you safe from harm.”

“Some places even a *khal* must walk alone,” Dany said.

“Take me, then,” Ser Jorah urged. “The risk—”

“Queen Daenerys must enter alone, or not at all.” The warlock Pyat Pree stepped out from under the trees. *Has he been there all along?* Dany wondered. “Should she turn away now, the doors of wisdom shall be closed to her forevermore.”

“My pleasure barge awaits, even now,” Xaro Xhoan Daxos called out. “Turn away from this folly, most stubborn of queens. I have flutists who will soothe your troubled soul with sweet music, and a small girl whose tongue will make you sigh and melt.”

Ser Jorah Mormont gave the merchant prince a sour look. “Your Grace, remember Mirri Maz Duur.”

“I do,” Dany said, suddenly decided. “I remember that she had knowledge. And she was only a *maegi*.”

Pyat Pree smiled thinly. “The child speaks as sagely as a crone. Take my arm, and let me lead you.”

“I am no child.” Dany took his arm nonetheless.

It was darker than she would have thought under the black trees, and the way was longer. Though the path seemed to run straight from the street to the door of the palace, Pyat Pree soon turned aside. When she questioned him, the warlock said only, “The front way leads in, but never out again. Heed my words, my queen. The House of the Undying Ones was not made for mortal men. If you value your soul, take care and do just as I tell you.”

“I will do as you say,” Dany promised.

“When you enter, you will find yourself in a room with four doors: the one you have come through and three others. Take the door to your right. Each time, the door to your right. If you should come upon a stairwell, climb. Never go down, and never take any door but the first door to your right.”

“The door to my right,” Dany repeated. “I understand. And when I leave, the opposite?”

“By no means,” Pyat Pree said. “Leaving and coming, it is the same. Always up. Always the door to your right. Other doors may open to you. Within, you will see many things that disturb you. Visions of loveliness and

visions of horror, wonders and terrors. Sights and sounds of days gone by and days to come and days that never were. Dwellers and servitors may speak to you as you go. Answer or ignore them as you choose, but *enter no room* until you reach the audience chamber.”

“I understand.”

“When you come to the chamber of the Undying, be patient. Our little lives are no more than a flicker of a moth’s wing to them. Listen well, and write each word upon your heart.”

When they reached the door—a tall oval mouth, set in a wall fashioned in the likeness of a human face—the smallest dwarf Dany had ever seen was waiting on the threshold. He stood no higher than her knee, his faced pinched and pointed, snoutish, but he was dressed in delicate livery of purple and blue, and his tiny pink hands held a silver tray. Upon it rested a slender crystal glass filled with a thick blue liquid: *shade of the evening*, the wine of warlocks. “Take and drink,” urged Pyat Pree.

“Will it turn my lips blue?”

“One flute will serve only to unstop your ears and dissolve the caul from off your eyes, so that you may hear and see the truths that will be laid before you.”

Dany raised the glass to her lips. The first sip tasted like ink and spoiled meat, foul, but when she swallowed it seemed to come to life within her. She could feel tendrils spreading through her chest, like fingers of fire coiling around her heart, and on her tongue was a taste like honey and anise and cream, like mother’s milk and Drogo’s seed, like red meat and hot blood and molten gold. It was all the tastes she had ever known, and none of them... and then the glass was empty.

“Now you may enter,” said the warlock. Dany put the glass back on the servitor’s tray, and went inside.

She found herself in a stone anteroom with four doors, one on each wall. With never a hesitation, she went to the door on her right and stepped through. The second room was a twin to the first. Again she turned to the

right-hand door. When she pushed it open she faced yet another small antechamber with four doors. *I am in the presence of sorcery.*

The fourth room was oval rather than square and walled in worm-eaten wood in place of stone. Six passages led out from it in place of four. Dany chose the rightmost, and entered a long, dim, high-ceilinged hall. Along the right hand was a row of torches burning with a smoky orange light, but the only doors were to her left. Drogon unfolded wide black wings and beat the stale air. He flew twenty feet before thudding to an undignified crash. Dany strode after him.

The mold-eaten carpet under her feet had once been gorgeously colored, and whorls of gold could still be seen in the fabric, glinting broken amidst the faded grey and mottled green. What remained served to muffle her footfalls, but that was not all to the good. Dany could hear sounds within the walls, a faint scurrying and scrabbling that made her think of rats. Drogon heard them too. His head moved as he followed the sounds, and when they stopped he gave an angry scream. Other sounds, even more disturbing, came through some of the closed doors. One shook and thumped, as if someone were trying to break through. From another came a dissonant piping that made the dragon lash his tail wildly from side to side. Dany hurried quickly past.

Not all the doors were closed. *I will not look*, Dany told herself, but the temptation was too strong.

In one room, a beautiful woman sprawled naked on the floor while four little men crawled over her. They had rattish pointed faces and tiny pink hands, like the servitor who had brought her the glass of shade. One was pumping between her thighs. Another savaged her breasts, worrying at the nipples with his wet red mouth, tearing and chewing.

Farther on she came upon a feast of corpses. Savagely slaughtered, the feasters lay strewn across overturned chairs and hacked trestle tables, asprawl in pools of congealing blood. Some had lost limbs, even heads. Severed hands clutched bloody cups, wooden spoons, roast fowl, heels of bread. In a throne above them sat a dead man with the head of a wolf. He

wore an iron crown and held a leg of lamb in one hand as a king might hold a scepter, and his eyes followed Dany with mute appeal.

She fled from him, but only as far as the next open door. *I know this room*, she thought. She remembered those great wooden beams and the carved animal faces that adorned them. And there outside the window, a lemon tree! The sight of it made her heart ache with longing. *It is the house with the red door, the house in Braavos*. No sooner had she thought it than old Ser Willem came into the room, leaning heavily on his stick. “Little princess, there you are,” he said in his gruff kind voice. “Come,” he said, “come to me, my lady, you’re home now, you’re safe now.” His big wrinkled hand reached for her, soft as old leather, and Dany wanted to take it and hold it and kiss it, she wanted that as much as she had ever wanted anything. Her foot edged forward, and then she thought, *He’s dead, he’s dead, the sweet old bear, he died a long time ago*. She backed away and ran.

The long hall went on and on and on, with endless doors to her left and only torches to her right. She ran past more doors than she could count, closed doors and open ones, doors of wood and doors of iron, carved doors and plain ones, doors with pulls and doors with locks and doors with knockers. Drogon lashed against her back, urging her on, and Dany ran until she could run no more.

Finally a great pair of bronze doors appeared to her left, grander than the rest. They swung open as she neared, and she had to stop and look. Beyond loomed a cavernous stone hall, the largest she had ever seen. The skulls of dead dragons looked down from its walls. Upon a towering barbed throne sat an old man in rich robes, an old man with dark eyes and long silver-grey hair. “Let him be king over charred bones and cooked meat,” he said to a man below him. “Let him be the king of ashes.” Drogon shrieked, his claws digging through silk and skin, but the king on his throne never heard, and Dany moved on.

*Viserys*, was her first thought the next time she paused, but a second glance told her otherwise. The man had her brother’s hair, but he was taller, and his eyes were a dark indigo rather than lilac. “Aegon,” he said to a

woman nursing a newborn babe in a great wooden bed. “What better name for a king?”

“Will you make a song for him?” the woman asked.

“He has a song,” the man replied. “He is the prince that was promised, and his is the song of ice and fire.” He looked up when he said it and his eyes met Dany’s, and it seemed as if he saw her standing there beyond the door. “There must be one more,” he said, though whether he was speaking to her or the woman in the bed she could not say. “The dragon has three heads.” He went to the window seat, picked up a harp, and ran his fingers lightly over its silvery strings. Sweet sadness filled the room as man and wife and babe faded like the morning mist, only the music lingering behind to speed her on her way.

It seemed as though she walked for another hour before the long hall finally ended in a steep stone stair, descending into darkness. Every door, open or closed, had been to her left. Dany looked back behind her. The torches were going out, she realized with a start of fear. Perhaps twenty still burned. Thirty at most. One more guttered out even as she watched, and the darkness came a little farther down the hall, creeping toward her. And as she listened it seemed as if she heard something else coming, shuffling and dragging itself slowly along the faded carpet. Terror filled her. She could not go back and she was afraid to stay here, but how could she go on? There was no door on her right, and the steps went down, not up.

Yet another torch went out as she stood pondering, and the sounds grew faintly louder. Drogon’s long neck snaked out and he opened his mouth to scream, steam rising from between his teeth. *He hears it too.* Dany turned to the blank wall once more, but there was nothing. *Could there be a secret door, a door I cannot see?* Another torch went out. Another. *The first door on the right, he said, always the first door on the right. The first door on the right...*

It came to her suddenly... *is the last door on the left!*

She flung herself through. Beyond was another small room with four doors. To the right she went, and to the right, and to the right, and to the

right, and to the right, and to the right, and to the right, until she was dizzy and out of breath once more.

When she stopped, she found herself in yet another dank stone chamber... but this time the door opposite was round, shaped like an open mouth, and Pyat Pree stood outside in the grass beneath the trees. “Can it be that the Undying are done with you so soon?” he asked in disbelief when he saw her.

“So soon?” she said, confused. “I’ve walked for hours, and still not found them.”

“You have taken a wrong turning. Come, I will lead you.” Pyat Pree held out his hand.

Dany hesitated. There was a door to her right, still closed...

“That’s not the way,” Pyat Pree said firmly, his blue lips prim with disapproval. “The Undying Ones will not wait forever.”

“Our little lives are no more than a flicker of a moth’s wing to them,” Dany said, remembering.

“Stubborn child. You will be lost, and never found.”

She walked away from him, to the door on the right.

“No,” Pyat screeched. “No, to me, come to me, to *meeeeeee*.” His face crumbled inward, changing to something pale and wormlike.

Dany left him behind, entering a stairwell. She began to climb. Before long her legs were aching. She recalled that the House of the Undying Ones had seemed to have no towers.

Finally the stair opened. To her right, a set of wide wooden doors had been thrown open. They were fashioned of ebony and weirwood, the black and white grains swirling and twisting in strange interwoven patterns. They were very beautiful, yet somehow frightening. *The blood of the dragon must not be afraid*. Dany said a quick prayer, begging the Warrior for courage and the Dothraki horse god for strength. She made herself walk forward.

Beyond the doors was a great hall and a splendor of wizards. Some wore sumptuous robes of ermine, ruby velvet, and cloth of gold. Others

fancied elaborate armor studded with gemstones, or tall pointed hats speckled with stars. There were women among them, dressed in gowns of surpassing loveliness. Shafts of sunlight slanted through windows of stained glass, and the air was alive with the most beautiful music she had ever heard.

A kingly man in rich robes rose when he saw her, and smiled. “Daenerys of House Targaryen, be welcome. Come and share the food of forever. We are the Undying of Qarth.”

“Long have we awaited you,” said a woman beside him, clad in rose and silver. The breast she had left bare in the Qartheen fashion was as perfect as a breast could be.

“We knew you were to come to us,” the wizard king said. “A thousand years ago we knew, and have been waiting all this time. We sent the comet to show you the way.”

“We have knowledge to share with you,” said a warrior in shining emerald armor, “and magic weapons to arm you with. You have passed every trial. Now come and sit with us, and all your questions shall be answered.”

She took a step forward. But then Drogon leapt from her shoulder. He flew to the top of the ebony-and-weirwood door, perched there, and began to bite at the carved wood.

“A willful beast,” laughed a handsome young man. “Shall we teach you the secret speech of dragonkind? Come, come.”

Doubt seized her. The great door was so heavy it took all of Dany’s strength to budge it, but finally it began to move. Behind was another door, hidden. It was old grey wood, splintery and plain... but it stood to the right of the door through which she’d entered. The wizards were beckoning her with voices sweeter than song. She ran from them, Drogon flying back down to her. Through the narrow door she passed, into a chamber awash in gloom.

A long stone table filled this room. Above it floated a human heart, swollen and blue with corruption, yet still alive. It beat, a deep ponderous



throb of sound, and each pulse sent out a wash of indigo light. The figures around the table were no more than blue shadows. As Dany walked to the empty chair at the foot of the table, they did not stir, nor speak, nor turn to face her. There was no sound but the slow, deep beat of the rotting heart.

*...mother of dragons...* came a voice, part whisper and part moan... *dragons... dragons... dragons...* other voices echoed in the gloom. Some were male and some female. One spoke with the timbre of a child. The floating heart pulsed from dimness to darkness. It was hard to summon the will to speak, to recall the words she had practiced so assiduously. "I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros." *Do they hear me? Why don't they move?* She sat, folding her hands in her lap. "Grant me your counsel, and speak to me with the wisdom of those who have conquered death."

Through the indigo murk, she could make out the wizened features of the Undying One to her right, an old old man, wrinkled and hairless. His flesh was a ripe violet-blue, his lips and nails bluer still, so dark they were almost black. Even the whites of his eyes were blue. They stared unseeing at the ancient woman on the opposite side of the table, whose gown of pale silk had rotted on her body. One withered breast was left bare in the Qartheen manner, to show a pointed blue nipple hard as leather.

*She is not breathing.* Dany listened to the silence. *None of them are breathing, and they do not move, and those eyes see nothing. Could it be that the Undying Ones were dead?*

Her answer was a whisper as thin as a mouse's whisker... *we live... live... live...* it sounded. Myriad other voices whispered echoes... *And know... know... know... know...*

"I have come for the gift of truth," Dany said. "In the long hall, the things I saw... were they true visions, or lies? Past things, or things to come? What did they mean?"

*...the shape of shadows... morrows not yet made... drink from the cup of ice... drink from the cup of fire...*

*...mother of dragons... child of three...*

“Three?” She did not understand.

*...three heads has the dragon...* the ghost chorus yarnmered inside her skull with never a lip moving, never a breath stirring the still blue air... *mother of dragons... child of storm...* The whispers became a swirling song... *three fires must you light... one for life and one for death and one to love...* Her own heart was beating in unison to the one that floated before her, blue and corrupt... *three mounts must you ride... one to bed and one to dread and one to love...* The voices were growing louder, she realized, and it seemed her heart was slowing, and even her breath... *three treasons will you know... once for blood and once for gold and once for love...*

“I don’t...” Her voice was no more than a whisper, almost as faint as theirs. What was happening to her? “I don’t understand,” she said, more loudly. Why was it so hard to talk here? “Help me. Show me.”

*...help her...* the whispers mocked... *show her...*

Then phantoms shivered through the murk, images in indigo. Viserys screamed as the molten gold ran down his cheeks and filled his mouth. A tall lord with copper skin and silver-gold hair stood beneath the banner of a fiery stallion, a burning city behind him. Rubies flew like drops of blood from the chest of a dying prince, and he sank to his knees in the water and with his last breath murmured a woman’s name... *mother of dragons, daughter of death...* Glowing like sunset, a red sword was raised in the hand of a blue-eyed king who cast no shadow. A cloth dragon swayed on poles amidst a cheering crowd. From a smoking tower, a great stone beast took wing, breathing shadow fire... *mother of dragons, slayer of lies...* Her silver was trotting through the grass, to a darkling stream beneath a sea of stars. A corpse stood at the prow of a ship, eyes bright in his dead face, grey lips smiling sadly. A blue flower grew from a chink in a wall of ice, and filled the air with sweetness... *mother of dragons, bride of fire...*

Faster and faster the visions came, one after the other, until it seemed as if the very air had come alive. Shadows whirled and danced inside a tent, boneless and terrible. A little girl ran barefoot toward a big house with a red door. Mirri Maz Duur shrieked in the flames, a dragon bursting from her brow. Behind a silver horse the bloody corpse of a naked man bounced and

dragged. A white lion ran through grass taller than a man. Beneath the Mother of Mountains, a line of naked crones crept from a great lake and knelt shivering before her, their grey heads bowed. Ten thousand slaves lifted bloodstained hands as she raced by on her silver, riding like the wind. “*Mother!*” they cried. “*Mother, mother!*” They were reaching for her, touching her, tugging at her cloak, the hem of her skirt, her foot, her leg, her breast. They wanted her, needed her, the fire, the life, and Dany gasped and opened her arms to give herself to them...

But then black wings buffeted her round the head, and a scream of fury cut the indigo air, and suddenly the visions were gone, ripped away, and Dany’s gasp turned to horror. The Undying were all around her, blue and cold, whispering as they reached for her, pulling, stroking, tugging at her clothes, touching her with their dry cold hands, twining their fingers through her hair. All the strength had left her limbs. She could not move. Even her heart had ceased to beat. She felt a hand on her bare breast, twisting her nipple. Teeth found the soft skin of her throat. A mouth descended on one eye, licking, sucking, *biting*...

Then indigo turned to orange, and whispers turned to screams. Her heart was pounding, racing, the hands and mouths were gone, heat washed over her skin, and Dany blinked at a sudden glare. Perched above her, the dragon spread his wings and tore at the terrible dark heart, ripping the rotten flesh to ribbons, and when his head snapped forward, fire flew from his open jaws, bright and hot. She could hear the shrieks of the Undying as they burned, their high thin papery voices crying out in tongues long dead. Their flesh was crumbling parchment, their bones dry wood soaked in tallow. They danced as the flames consumed them; they staggered and writhed and spun and raised blazing hands on high, their fingers bright as torches.

Dany pushed herself to her feet and bulled through them. They were light as air, no more than husks, and they fell at a touch. The whole room was ablaze by the time she reached the door. “*Drogon,*” she called, and he flew to her through the fire.

Outside a long dim passageway stretched serpentine before her, lit by the flickering orange glare from behind. Dany ran, searching for a door, a

door to her right, a door to her left, any door, but there was nothing, only twisty stone walls, and a floor that seemed to move slowly under her feet, writhing as if to trip her. She kept her feet and ran faster, and suddenly the door was there ahead of her, a door like an open mouth.

When she spilled out into the sun, the bright light made her stumble. Pyat Pree was gibbering in some unknown tongue and hopping from one foot to the other. When Dany looked behind her, she saw thin tendrils of smoke forcing their way through cracks in the ancient stone walls of the Palace of Dust, and rising from between the black tiles of the roof.

Howling curses, Pyat Pree drew a knife and danced toward her, but Drogon flew at his face. Then she heard the *crack* of Jhogo's whip, and never was a sound so sweet. The knife went flying, and an instant later Rakharo was slamming Pyat to the ground. Ser Jorah Mormont knelt beside Dany in the cool green grass and put his arm around her shoulder.