

## DAENERYS

The candle was almost gone. Less than an inch remained, jutting from a pool of warm melted wax to cast its light over the queen's bed. The flame had begun to gutter.

*It will go out before much longer, Dany realized, and when it does another night will be at its end.*

Dawn always came too soon.

She had not slept, could not sleep, would not sleep. She had not even dared to close her eyes, for fear it would be morning when she opened them again. If only she had the power, she would have made their nights go on forever, but the best that she could do was stay awake to try and savor every last sweet moment before daybreak turned them into no more than fading memories.

Beside her, Daario Naharis was sleeping as peacefully as a newborn babe. He had a gift for sleeping, he'd boasted, smiling in that cocksure way of his. In the field, he would sleep in the saddle oft as not, he claimed, so as to be well rested should he come upon a battle. Sun or storm, it made no matter. "A warrior who cannot sleep soon has no strength to fight," he said. He was never vexed by nightmares either. When Dany told him how Serwyn of the Mirror Shield was haunted by the ghosts of all the knights he'd killed, Daario only laughed. "If the ones I killed come bother me, I will kill them all again." *He has a sellsword's conscience, she realized then. That is to say, none at all.*

Daario lay upon his stomach, the light linen coverlets tangled about his long legs, his face half-buried in the pillows.

Dany ran her hand down his back, tracing the line of his spine. His skin was smooth beneath her touch, almost hairless. *His skin is silk and satin.* She loved the feel of him beneath her fingers. She loved to run her fingers

through his hair, to knead the ache from his calves after a long day in the saddle, to cup his cock and feel it harden against her palm.

If she had been some ordinary woman, she would gladly have spent her whole life touching Daario, tracing his scars and making him tell her how he'd come by every one. *I would give up my crown if he asked it of me*, Dany thought ... but he had not asked it, and never would. Daario might whisper words of love when the two of them were as one, but she knew it was the dragon queen he loved. *If I gave up my crown, he would not want me*. Besides, kings who lost their crowns oft lost their heads as well, and she could see no reason why it would be any different for a queen.

The candle flickered one last time and died, drowned in its own wax. Darkness swallowed the feather bed and its two occupants, and filled every corner of the chamber. Dany wrapped her arms around her captain and pressed herself against his back. She drank in the scent of him, savoring the warmth of his flesh, the feel of his skin against her own. *Remember*, she told herself. *Remember how he felt*. She kissed him on his shoulder.

Daario rolled toward her, his eyes open. "Daenerys." He smiled a lazy smile. That was another of his talents; he woke all at once, like a cat. "Is it dawn?"

"Not yet. We have a while still."

"Liar. I can see your eyes. Could I do that if it were the black of night?" Daario kicked loose of the coverlets and sat up. "The half-light. Day will be here soon."

"I do not want this night to end."

"No? And why is that, my queen?"

"You know."

"The wedding?" He laughed. "Marry me instead."

"You know I cannot do that."

“You are a queen. You can do what you like.” He slid a hand along her leg. “How many nights remain to us?”

*Two. Only two.* “You know as well as I. This night and the next, and we must end this.”

“Marry me, and we can have all the nights forever.”

*If I could, I would.* Khal Drogo had been her sun-and-stars, but he had been dead so long that Daenerys had almost forgotten how it felt to love and be loved. Daario had helped her to remember. *I was dead and he brought me back to life. I was asleep and he woke me. My brave captain.* Even so, of late he grew too bold. On the day that he returned from his latest sortie, he had tossed the head of a Yunkish lord at her feet and kissed her in the hall for all the world to see, until Barristan Selmy pulled the two of them apart. Ser Grandfather had been so wroth that Dany feared blood might be shed. “We cannot wed, my love. You know why.”

He climbed from her bed. “Marry Hizdahr, then. I will give him a nice set of horns for his wedding gift. Ghiscari men like to prance about in horns. They make them from their own hair, with combs and wax and irons.” Daario found his breeches and pulled them on. He did not trouble himself with smallclothes.

“Once I am wed it will be high treason to desire me.” Dany pulled the coverlet up over her breasts.

“Then I must be a traitor.” He slipped a blue silk tunic over his head and straightened the prongs of his beard with his fingers. He had dyed it afresh for her, taking it from purple back to blue, as it had been when first she met him. “I smell of you,” he said, sniffing at his fingers and grinning.

Dany loved the way his gold tooth gleamed when he grinned. She loved the fine hairs on his chest. She loved the strength in his arms, the sound of his laughter, the way he would always look into her eyes and say her name as he slid his cock inside her. “You are beautiful,” she blurted as she watched him don his riding boots and lace them up. Some days he let her do that for him, but not today, it seemed. *That’s done with too.*

“Not beautiful enough to marry.” Daario took his sword belt off the peg where he had hung it.

“Where are you going?”

“Out into your city,” he said, “to drink a keg or two and pick a quarrel. It has been too long since I’ve killed a man. Might be I should seek out your betrothed.”

Dany threw a pillow at him. “You will leave Hizdahr be!”

“As my queen commands. Will you hold court today?”

“No. On the morrow I will be a woman wed, and Hizdahr will be king. Let *him* hold court. These are his people.”

“Some are his, some are yours. The ones you freed.”

“Are you chiding me?”

“The ones you call your children. They want their mother.”

“You are. You are *chiding* me.”

“Only a little, bright heart. Will you come hold court?”

“After my wedding, perhaps. After the peace.”

“This *after* that you speak of never comes. You should hold court. My new men do not believe that you are real. The ones who came over from the Windblown. Bred and born in Westeros, most of them, full of tales about Targaryens. They want to see one with their own eyes. The Frog has a gift for you.”

“The Frog?” she said, giggling. “And who is he?”

He shrugged. “Some Dornish boy. He squires for the big knight they call Greenguts. I told him he could give his gift to me and I’d deliver it, but he wouldn’t have it.”

“Oh, a clever frog. ‘*Give the gift to me.*’ ” She threw the other pillow at him. “Would I have ever seen it?”

Daario stroked his gilded mustachio. “Would I steal from my sweet queen? If it were a gift worthy of you, I would have put it into your soft hands myself.”

“As a token of your love?”

“As to that I will not say, but I told him that he could give it to you. You would not make a liar of Daario Naharis?” Dany was helpless to refuse. “As you wish. Bring your frog to court tomorrow. The others too. The Westerosi.” It would be nice to hear the Common Tongue from someone besides Ser Barristan.

“As my queen commands.” Daario bowed deeply, grinned, and took his leave, his cloak swirling behind him.

Dany sat amongst the rumpled bedclothes with her arms about her knees, so forlorn that she did not hear when Missandei came creeping in with bread and milk and figs. “Your Grace? Are you unwell? In the black of night this one heard you scream.”

Dany took a fig. It was black and plump, still moist with dew. *Will Hizdahr ever make me scream?* “It was the wind that you heard screaming.” She took a bite, but the fruit had lost its savor now that Daario was gone. Sighing, she rose and called to Irri for a robe, then wandered out onto her terrace.

Her foes were all about her. There were never less than a dozen ships drawn up on the shore. Some days there were as many as a hundred, when the soldiers were disembarking. The Yunkai’i were even bringing in wood by sea. Behind their ditches, they were building catapults, scorpions, tall trebuchets. On still nights she could hear the hammers ringing through the warm, dry air. *No siege towers, though. No battering rams.* They would not try to take Meereen by storm. They would wait behind their siege lines, flinging stones at her until famine and disease had brought her people to their knees.

*Hizdahr will bring me peace. He must.*

That night her cooks roasted her a kid with dates and carrots, but Dany could only eat a bite of it. The prospect of wrestling with Meereen once more left her feeling weary. Sleep came hard, even when Daario came back, so drunk that he could hardly stand. Beneath her coverlets she tossed and turned, dreaming that Hizdahr was kissing her ... but his lips were blue and bruised, and when he thrust himself inside her, his manhood was cold as ice. She sat up with her hair disheveled and the bed-clothes atangle. Her captain slept beside her, yet she was alone. She wanted to shake him, wake him, make him hold her, fuck her, help her forget, but she knew that if she did, he would only smile and yawn and say, "It was just a dream, my queen. Go back to sleep."

Instead she slipped into a hooded robe and stepped out onto her terrace. She went to the parapet and stood there gazing down upon the city as she had done a hundred times before. *It will never be my city. It will never be my home.*

The pale pink light of dawn found her still out on her terrace, asleep upon the grass beneath a blanket of fine dew. "I promised Daario that I would hold court today," Daenerys told her handmaids when they woke her. "Help me find my crown. Oh, and some clothes to wear, something light and cool."

She made her descent an hour later. "*All kneel for Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Khaleesi of Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Shackles and Mother of Dragons,*" Missandei called.

Reznak mo Reznak bowed and beamed. "Magnificence, every day you grow more beautiful. I think the prospect of your wedding has given you a glow. Oh, my shining queen!"

Dany sighed. "Summon the first petitioner."

It had been so long since she last held court that the crush of cases was almost overwhelming. The back of the hall was a solid press of people, and

scuffles broke out over precedence. Inevitably it was Galazza Galare who stepped forward, her head held high, her face hidden behind a shimmering green veil. “Your Radiance, it might be best were we to speak in private.”

“Would that I had the time,” said Dany sweetly. “I am to be wed upon the morrow.” Her last meeting with the Green Grace had not gone well. “What would you have of me?”

“I would speak to you about the presumption of a certain sellsword captain.”

*She dares say that in open court?* Dany felt a blaze of anger. *She has courage, I grant that, but if she thinks I am about to suffer another scolding, she could not be more wrong.* “The treachery of Brown Ben Plumm has shocked us all,” she said, “but your warning comes too late. And now I know you will want to return to your temple to pray for peace.”

The Green Grace bowed. “I shall pray for you as well.”

*Another slap,* thought Dany, color rising to her face.

The rest was a tedium the queen knew well. She sat upon her cushions, listening, one foot jiggling with impatience. Jhiqui brought a platter of figs and ham at midday. There seemed to be no end to the petitioners. For every two she sent off smiling, one left red-eyed or muttering.

It was close to sunset before Daario Naharis appeared with his new Stormcrows, the Westerosi who had come over to him from the Wind-blown. Dany found herself glancing at them as yet another petitioner droned on and on. *These are my people. I am their rightful queen.* They seemed a scruffy bunch, but that was only to be expected of sellswords. The youngest could not have been more than a year older than her; the oldest must have seen sixty namedays. A few sported signs of wealth: gold arm rings, silken tunics, silver-studded sword belts. *Plunder.* For the most part, their clothes were plainly made and showed signs of hard wear.

When Daario brought them forward, she saw that one of them was a woman, big and blond and all in mail. “Pretty Meris,” her captain named

her, though *pretty* was the last thing Dany would have called her. She was six feet tall and earless, with a slit nose, deep scars in both cheeks, and the coldest eyes the queen had ever seen. As for the rest ...

Hugh Hungerford was slim and saturnine, long-legged, long-faced, clad in faded finery. Webber was short and muscular, with spiders tattooed across his head and chest and arms. Red-faced Orson Stone claimed to be a knight, as did lanky Lucifer Long. Will of the Woods leered at her even as he took a knee. Dick Straw had cornflower-blue eyes, hair as white as flax, and an unsettling smile. Ginger Jack's face was hidden behind a bristly orange beard, and his speech was unintelligible. "He bit off half his tongue in his first battle," Hungerford explained to her.

The Dornishmen seemed different. "If it please Your Grace," said Daario, "these three are Greenguts, Gerrold, and Frog."

Greenguts was huge and bald as a stone, with arms thick enough to rival even Strong Belwas. Gerrold was a lean, tall youth with sun streaks in his hair and laughing blue-green eyes. *That smile has won many a maiden's heart, I'll wager.* His cloak was made of soft brown wool lined with sandsilk, a goodly garment.

Frog, the squire, was the youngest of the three, and the least impressive, a solemn, stocky lad, brown of hair and eye. His face was squarish, with a high forehead, heavy jaw, and broad nose. The stubble on his cheeks and chin made him look like a boy trying to grow his first beard. Dany had no inkling why anyone would call him Frog. *Perhaps he can jump farther than the others.*

"You may rise," she said. "Daario tells me you come to us from Dorne. Dornishmen will always have a welcome at my court. Sunspear stayed loyal to my father when the Usurper stole his throne. You must have faced many perils to reach me."

"Too many," said Gerrold, the handsome one with the sun-streaked hair. "We were six when we left Dorne, Your Grace."



“I am sorry for your losses.” The queen turned to his large companion.  
“Greenguts is a queer sort of name.”

“A jape, Your Grace. From the ships. I was greensick the whole way from Volantis. Heaving and ... well, I shouldn’t say.”

Dany giggled. “I think that I can guess, ser. It is *ser*, is it not? Daario tells me that you are a knight.”

“If it please Your Grace, we are all three knights.”

Dany glanced at Daario and saw anger flash across his face. *He did not know*. “I have need of knights,” she said.

Ser Barristan’s suspicions had awakened. “Knighthood is easily claimed this far from Westeros. Are you prepared to defend that boast with sword or lance?”

“If need be,” said Gerrold, “though I will not claim that any of us is the equal of Barristan the Bold. Your Grace, I beg your pardon, but we have come before you under false names.”

“I knew someone else who did that once,” said Dany, “a man called Arstan Whitebeard. Tell me your true names, then.”

“Gladly ... but if we may beg the queen’s indulgence, is there some place with fewer eyes and ears?”

*Games within games*. “As you wish. Skahaz, clear my court.”

The Shavepate roared out orders. His Brazen Beasts did the rest, herding the other Westerosi and the rest of the day’s petitioners from the hall. Her counselors remained.

“Now,” Dany said, “your names.”

Handsome young Gerrold bowed. “Ser Gerris Drinkwater, Your Grace. My sword is yours.”

Greenguts crossed his arms against his chest. “And my warhammer. I’m Ser Archibald Yronwood.”

“And you, ser?” the queen asked the boy called Frog.

“If it please Your Grace, may I first present my gift?”

“If you wish,” Daenerys said, curious, but as Frog started forward Daario Naharis stepped in front of him and held out a gloved hand. “Give this gift to me.”

Stone-faced, the stocky lad bent, unlaced his boot, and drew a yellowed parchment from a hidden flap within.

“This is your gift? A scrap of writing?” Daario snatched the parchment out of the Dornishman’s hands and unrolled it, squinting at the seals and signatures. “Very pretty, all the gold and ribbons, but I do not read your Westerosi scratchings.”

“Bring it to the queen,” Ser Barristan commanded. “Now.”

Dany could feel the anger in the hall. “I am only a young girl, and young girls must have their gifts,” she said lightly. “Daario, please, you must not tease me. Give it here.”

The parchment was written in the Common Tongue. The queen unrolled it slowly, studying the seals and signatures. When she saw the name Ser Willem Darry, her heart beat a little faster. She read it over once, and then again.

“May we know what it says, Your Grace?” asked Ser Barristan. “It is a secret pact,” Dany said, “made in Braavos when I was just a little girl. Ser Willem Darry signed for us, the man who spirited my brother and myself away from Dragonstone before the Usurper’s men could take us. Prince Oberyn Martell signed for Dorne, with the Sealord of Braavos as witness.” She handed the parchment to Ser Barristan, so he might read it for himself. “The alliance is to be sealed by a marriage, it says. In return for Dorne’s

help overthrowing the Usurper, my brother Viserys is to take Prince Doran's daughter Arianne for his queen."

The old knight read the pact slowly. "If Robert had known of this, he would have smashed Sunspear as he once smashed Pyke, and claimed the heads of Prince Doran and the Red Viper ... and like as not, the head of this Dornish princess too."

"No doubt that was why Prince Doran chose to keep the pact a secret," suggested Daenerys. "If my brother Viserys had known that he had a Dornish princess waiting for him, he would have crossed to Sunspear as soon as he was old enough to wed."

"And thereby brought Robert's warhammer down upon himself, and Dorne as well," said Frog. "My father was content to wait for the day that Prince Viserys found his army."

"Your father?"

"Prince Doran." He sank back onto one knee. "Your Grace, I have the honor to be Quentyn Martell, a prince of Dorne and your most leal subject."

Dany laughed.

The Dornish prince flushed red, whilst her own court and counselors gave her puzzled looks. "Radiance?" said Skahaz Shavepate, in the Ghiscari tongue. "Why do you laugh?"

"They call him *frog*," she said, "and we have just learned why. In the Seven Kingdoms there are children's tales of frogs who turn into enchanted princes when kissed by their true love." Smiling at the Dornish knights, she switched back to the Common Tongue. "Tell me, Prince Quentyn, are you enchanted?"

"No, Your Grace."

"I feared as much." *Neither enchanted nor enchanting, alas. A pity he's the prince, and not the one with the wide shoulders and the sandy hair.* "You

have come for a kiss, however. You mean to marry me. Is that the way of it? The gift you bring me is your own sweet self. Instead of Viserys and your sister, you and I must seal this pact if I want Dorne.”

“My father hoped that you might find me acceptable.”

Daario Naharis gave a scornful laugh. “I say you are a pup. The queen needs a man beside her, not a mewling boy. You are no fit husband for a woman such as her. When you lick your lips, do you still taste your mother’s milk?”

Ser Gerris Drinkwater darkened at his words. “Mind your tongue, sellsword. You are speaking to a prince of Dorne.”

“And to his wet nurse, I am thinking.” Daario brushed his thumbs across his sword hilts and smiled dangerously.

Skahaz scowled, as only he could scowl. “This boy might serve for Dorne, but Meereen needs a king of Ghiscari blood.”

“I know of this Dorne,” said Reznak mo Reznak. “Dorne is sand and scorpions, and bleak red mountains baking in the sun.”

Prince Quentyn answered him. “Dorne is fifty thousand spears and swords, pledged to our queen’s service.”

“Fifty thousand?” mocked Daario. “I count three.”

“*Enough*,” Daenerys said. “Prince Quentyn has crossed half the world to offer me his gift, I will not have him treated with discourtesy.” She turned to the Dornishmen. “Would that you had come a year ago. I am pledged to wed the noble Hizdahr zo Loraq.”

Ser Gerris said, “It is not too late—”

“I will be the judge of that,” Daenerys said. “Reznak, see that the prince and his companions are given quarters suitable to their high birth, and that their wants are attended to.”

“As you wish, Your Radiance.”

The queen rose. “Then we are done for now.”

Daario and Ser Barristan followed her up the steps to her apartments. “This changes everything,” the old knight said.

“This changes nothing,” Dany said, as Irri removed her crown. “What good are three men?”

“Three knights,” said Selmy. “Three liars,” Daario said darkly. “They deceived me.”

“And bought you too, I do not doubt.” He did not trouble to deny it. Dany unrolled the parchment and examined it again. *Braavos. This was done in Braavos, while we were living in the house with the red door.* Why did that make her feel so strange?

She found herself remembering her nightmare. *Sometimes there is truth in dreams.* Could Hizdahr zo Loraq be working for the warlocks, was that what the dream had meant? Could the dream have been a sending? Were the gods telling her to put Hizdahr aside and wed this Dornish prince instead? Something tickled at her memory. “Ser Barristan, what are the arms of House Martell?”

“A sun in splendor, transfixed by a spear.”

*The sun’s son.* A shiver went through her. “Shadows and whispers.” What else had Quaithe said? *The pale mare and the sun’s son. There was a lion in it too, and a dragon. Or am I the dragon?* “Beware the perfumed seneschal.” That she remembered. “Dreams and prophecies. Why must they always be in riddles? I hate this. Oh, leave me, ser. Tomorrow is my wedding day.”

That night Daario had her every way a man can have a woman, and she gave herself to him willingly. The last time, as the sun was coming up, she used her mouth to make him hard again, as Doreah had taught her long ago, then rode him so wildly that his wound began to bleed again, and for one

sweet heartbeat she could not tell whether he was inside of her, or her inside of him.

But when the sun rose upon her wedding day so did Daario Naharis, donning his clothes and buckling on his sword belt with its gleaming golden wantons. “Where are you going?” Dany asked him. “I forbid you to make a sortie today.”

“My queen is cruel,” her captain said. “If I cannot slay your foes, how shall I amuse myself whilst you are being wed?”

“By nightfall I shall have no foes.”

“It is only dawn, sweet queen. The day is long. Time enough for one last sortie. I will bring you back the head of Brown Ben Plumm for a wedding gift.”

“No heads,” Dany insisted. “Once you brought me flowers.”

“Let Hizdahr bring you flowers. He is not one to stoop and pluck a dandelion, true, but he has servants who will be pleased to do it for him. Do I have your leave to go?”

“No.” She wanted him to stay and hold her. *One day he will go and not return*, she thought. *One day some archer will put an arrow through his chest, or ten men will fall on him with spears and swords and axes, ten would-be heroes*. Five of them would die, but that would not make her grief easier to bear. *One day I will lose him, as I lost my sun-and-stars. But please gods, not today*. “Come back to bed and kiss me.” No one had ever kissed her like Daario Naharis. “I am your queen, and I command you to fuck me.”

She had meant it playfully, but Daario’s eyes hardened at her words. “Fucking queens is king’s work. Your noble Hizdahr can attend to that, once you’re wed. And if he proves to be too highborn for such sweaty work, he has servants who will be pleased to do that for him as well. Or perhaps you can call the Dornish boy into your bed, and his pretty friend as well, why not?” He strode from the bedchamber.

*He is going to make a sortie, Dany realized, and if he takes Ben Plumm's head, he'll walk into the wedding feast and throw it at my feet. Seven save me. Why couldn't he be better born?*

When he was gone, Missandei brought the queen a simple meal of goat cheese and olives, with raisins for a sweet. "Your Grace needs more than wine to break her fast. You are such a tiny thing, and you will surely need your strength today."

That made Daenerys laugh, coming from a girl so small. She relied so much on the little scribe that she oft forgot that Missandei had only turned eleven. They shared the food together on her terrace. As Dany nibbled on an olive, the Naathi girl gazed at her with eyes like molten gold and said, "It is not too late to tell them that you have decided not to wed."

*It is, though*, the queen thought, sadly. "Hizdahr's blood is ancient and noble. Our joining will join my freedmen to his people. When we become as one, so will our city."

"Your Grace does not love the noble Hizdahr. This one thinks you would sooner have another for your husband."

*I must not think of Daario today.* "A queen loves where she must, not where she will." Her appetite had left her. "Take this food away," she told Missandei. "It is time I bathed."

Afterward, as Jhiqui was patting Daenerys dry, Irri approached with her *tokar*. Dany envied the Dothraki maids their loose sandsilk trousers and painted vests. They would be much cooler than her in her *tokar*, with its heavy fringe of baby pearls. "Help me wind this round myself, please. I cannot manage all these pearls by myself."

She should be eager with anticipation for her wedding and the night that would follow, she knew. She remembered the night of her first wedding, when Khal Drogo had claimed her maidenhead beneath the stranger stars. She remembered how frightened she had been, and how excited. Would it be the same with Hizdahr? *No. I am not the girl I was, and he is not my sun-and-stars.*

Missandei reemerged from inside the pyramid. “Reznak and Skahaz beg the honor of escorting Your Grace to the Temple of the Graces. Reznak has ordered your palanquin made ready.”

Meereenese seldom rode within their city walls. They preferred palanquins, litters, and sedan chairs, borne upon the shoulders of their slaves. “Horses befoul the streets,” one man of Zakh had told her, “slaves do not.” Dany had freed the slaves, yet palanquins, litters, and sedan chairs still choked the streets as before, and none of them floated magically through the air.

“The day is too hot to be shut up in a palanquin,” said Dany. “Have my silver saddled. I would not go to my lord husband upon the backs of bearers.”

“Your Grace,” said Missandei, “this one is so sorry, but you cannot ride in a *tokar*.”

The little scribe was right, as she so often was. The *tokar* was not a garment meant for horseback. Dany made a face. “As you say. Not the palanquin, though. I would suffocate behind those drapes. Have them ready a sedan chair.” If she must wear her floppy ears, let all the rabbits see her.

When Dany made her descent, Reznak and Skahaz dropped to their knees. “Your Worship shines so brightly, you will blind every man who dares to look upon you,” said Reznak. The seneschal wore a *tokar* of maroon samite with golden fringes. “Hizdahr zo Loraq is most fortunate in you ... and you in him, if I may be so bold as to say. This match will save our city, you will see.”

“So we pray. I want to plant my olive trees and see them fruit.” *Does it matter that Hizdahr’s kisses do not please me? Peace will please me. Am I a queen or just a woman?*

“The crowds will be thick as flies today.” The Shavepate was clad in a pleated black skirt and a muscled breastplate, with a brazen helm shaped like a serpent’s head beneath one arm.



“Should I be afraid of flies? Your Brazen Beasts will keep me safe from any harm.”

It was always dusk inside the base of the Great Pyramid. Walls thirty feet thick muffled the tumult of the streets and kept the heat outside, so it was cool and dim within. Her escort was forming up inside the gates. Horses, mules, and donkeys were stabled in the western walls, elephants in the eastern. Dany had acquired three of those huge, queer beasts with her pyramid. They reminded her of hairless grey mammoths, though their tusks had been bobbed and gilded, and their eyes were sad.

She found Strong Belwas eating grapes, as Barristan Selmy watched a stableboy cinch the girth on his dapple grey. The three Dornishmen were with him, talking, but they broke off when the queen appeared. Their prince went to one knee. “Your Grace, I must entreat you. My father’s strength is failing, but his devotion to your cause is as strong as ever. If my manner or my person have displeased you, that is my sorrow, but—”

“If you would please me, ser, be happy for me,” Daenerys said. “This is my wedding day. They will be dancing in the Yellow City, I do not doubt.” She sighed. “Rise, my prince, and smile. One day I shall return to West-eros to claim my father’s throne, and look to Dorne for help. But on this day the Yunkai’i have my city ringed in steel. I may die before I see my Seven Kingdoms. Hizdahr may die. Westeros may be swallowed by the waves.” Dany kissed his cheek. “Come. It’s time I wed.”

Ser Barristan helped her up onto her sedan chair. Quentyn rejoined his fellow Dornishmen. Strong Belwas bellowed for the gates to be opened, and Daenerys Targaryen was carried forth into the sun. Selmy fell in beside her on his dapple grey.

“Tell me,” Dany said, as the procession turned toward the Temple of the Graces, “if my father and my mother had been free to follow their own hearts, whom would they have wed?”

“It was long ago. Your Grace would not know them.”

“You know, though. Tell me.”

The old knight inclined his head. “The queen your mother was always mindful of her duty.” He was handsome in his gold-and-silver armor, his white cloak streaming from his shoulders, but he sounded like a man in pain, as if every word were a stone he had to pass. “As a girl, though ... she was once smitten with a young knight from the stormlands who wore her favor at a tourney and named her queen of love and beauty. A brief thing.”

“What happened to this knight?”

“He put away his lance the day your lady mother wed your father. Afterward he became most pious, and was heard to say that only the Maiden could replace Queen Rhaella in his heart. His passion was impossible, of course. A landed knight is no fit consort for a princess of royal blood.”

*And Daario Naharis is only a sellsword, not fit to buckle on the golden spurs of even a landed knight.* “And my father? Was there some woman he loved better than his queen?”

Ser Barristan shifted in the saddle. “Not ... not loved. Mayhaps *wanted* is a better word, but ... it was only kitchen gossip, the whispers of washer-women and stableboys ...”

“I want to know. I never knew my father. I want to know everything about him. The good and ... the rest.”

“As you command.” The white knight chose his words with care. “Prince Aerys ... as a youth, he was taken with a certain lady of Casterly Rock, a cousin of Tywin Lannister. When she and Tywin wed, your father drank too much wine at the wedding feast and was heard to say that it was a great pity that the lord’s right to the first night had been abolished. A drunken jape, no more, but Tywin Lannister was not a man to forget such words, or the ... the liberties your father took during the bedding.” His face reddened. “I have said too much, Your Grace. I—”

*“Gracious queen, well met!”* Another procession had come up beside her own, and Hizdahr zo Loraq was smiling at her from his own sedan chair. *My king.* Dany wondered where Daario Naharis was, what he was doing. *If*

*this were a story, he would gallop up just as we reached the temple, to challenge Hizdahr for my hand.*

Side by side the queen's procession and Hizdahr zo Loraq's made their slow way across Meereen, until finally the Temple of the Graces loomed up before them, its golden domes flashing in the sun. *How beautiful*, the queen tried to tell herself, but inside her was some foolish little girl who could not help but look about for Daario. *If he loved you, he would come and carry you off at swordpoint, as Rhaegar carried off his northern girl*, the girl in her insisted, but the queen knew that was folly. Even if her captain was mad enough to attempt it, the Brazen Beasts would cut him down before he got within a hundred yards of her.

Galazza Galare awaited them outside the temple doors, surrounded by her sisters in white and pink and red, blue and gold and purple. *There are fewer than there were*. Dany looked for Ezzara and did not see her. *Has the bloody flux taken even her?* Though the queen had let the Astapori starve outside her walls to keep the bloody flux from spreading, it was spreading nonetheless. Many had been stricken: freedmen, sellswords, Brazen Beasts, even Dothraki, though as yet none of the Unsullied had been touched. She prayed the worst was past.

The Graces brought forth an ivory chair and a golden bowl. Holding her *tokar* daintily so as not to tread upon its fringes, Daenerys Targaryen eased herself onto the chair's plush velvet seat, and Hizdahr zo Loraq went to his knees, unlaced her sandals, and washed her feet whilst fifty eunuchs sang and ten thousand eyes looked on. *He has gentle hands*, she mused, as warm fragrant oils ran between her toes. *If he has a gentle heart as well, I may grow fond of him in time.*

When her feet were clean, Hizdahr dried them with a soft towel, laced her sandals on again, and helped her stand. Hand in hand, they followed the Green Grace inside the temple, where the air was thick with incense and the gods of Ghis stood cloaked in shadows in their alcoves.

Four hours later, they emerged again as man and wife, bound together wrist and ankle with chains of yellow gold.