



DAENERYS

Dany broke her fast under the persimmon tree that grew in the terrace garden, watching her dragons chase each other about the apex of the Great Pyramid where the huge bronze harpy once stood. Meereen had a score of lesser pyramids, but none stood even half as tall. From here she could see the whole city: the narrow twisty alleys and wide brick streets, the temples and granaries, hovels and palaces, brothels and baths, gardens and fountains, the great red circles of the fighting pits. And beyond the walls was the pewter sea, the winding Skahazadhan, the dry brown hills, burnt orchards, and blackened fields. Up here in her garden Dany sometimes felt like a god, living atop the highest mountain in the world.

Do all gods feel so lonely? Some must, surely. Missandei had told her of the Lord of Harmony, worshiped by the Peaceful People of Naath; he was the only true god, her little scribe said, the god who always was and always would be, who made the moon and stars and earth, and all the creatures that dwelt upon them. *Poor Lord of Harmony.* Dany pitied him. It must be terrible to be alone for all time, attended by hordes of butterfly women you could make or unmake at a word. Westeros had seven gods at least, though Viserys had told her that some septons said the seven were only aspects of a single god, seven facets of a single crystal. That was just confusing. The red priests believed in two gods, she had heard, but two who were eternally at war. Dany liked that even less. She would not want to be eternally at war.

Missandei served her duck eggs and dog sausage, and half a cup of sweetened wine mixed with the juice of a lime. The honey drew flies, but a scented candle drove them off. The flies were not so troublesome up here as they were in the rest of her city, she had found, something else she liked about the pyramid. “I must remember to do something about the flies,” Dany said. “Are there many flies on Naath, Missandei?”

“On Naath there are butterflies,” the scribe responded in the Common Tongue. “More wine?”

“No. I must hold court soon.” Dany had grown very fond of Missandei. The little scribe with the big golden eyes was wise beyond her years. *She is brave as well. She had to be, to survive the life she’s lived.* One day she hoped to see this fabled isle of Naath. Missandei said the Peaceful People made music instead of war. They did not kill, not even animals; they ate only fruit and never flesh. The butterfly spirits sacred to their Lord of Harmony protected their isle against those who would do them harm. Many conquerors had sailed on Naath to blood their swords, only to sicken and die. *The butterflies do not help them when the slave ships come raiding, though.* “I am going to take you home one day, Missandei,” Dany promised. *If I had made the same promise to Jorah, would he still have sold me?* “I swear it.”

“This one is content to stay with you, Your Grace. Naath will be there, always. You are good to this—to me.”

“And you to me.” Dany took the girl by the hand. “Come help me dress.”

Jhiqui helped Missandei bathe her while Irri was laying out her clothes. Today she wore a robe of purple samite and a silver sash, and on her head the three-headed dragon crown the Tourmaline Brotherhood had given her in Qarth. Her slippers were silver as well, with heels so high that she was always half afraid she was about to topple over. When she was dressed, Missandei brought her a polished silver glass so she could see how she looked. Dany stared at herself in silence. *Is this the face of a conqueror?* So far as she could tell, she still looked like a little girl.

No one was calling her Daenerys the Conqueror yet, but perhaps they would. Aegon the Conqueror had won Westeros with three dragons, but she had taken Meereen with sewer rats and a wooden cock, in less than a day.

Poor Groleo. He still grieved for his ship, she knew. If a war galley could ram another ship, why not a gate? That had been her thought when she commanded the captains to drive their ships ashore. Their masts had become her battering rams, and swarms of freedmen had torn their hulls apart to build mantlets, turtles, catapults, and ladders. The sellswords had given each ram a bawdy name, and it had been the mainmast of *Meraxes*—formerly *Joso’s Prank*—that had broken the eastern gate. *Joso’s Cock*, they called it. The fighting had raged bitter and bloody for most of a day and well into the night before the wood began to splinter and *Meraxes’* iron figurehead, a laughing jester’s face, came crashing through.

Dany had wanted to lead the attack herself, but to a man her captains said that would be madness, and her captains never agreed on anything. Instead she remained in the rear, sitting atop her silver in a long shirt of mail. She *heard* the city fall from half a league away, though, when the defenders’ shouts of defiance changed to cries of fear. Her dragons had roared as one in that moment, filling the night with flame. *The slaves are rising*, she knew at once. *My sewer rats have gnawed off their chains.*

When the last resistance had been crushed by the Unsullied and the sack had run its course, Dany entered her city. The dead were heaped so high before the broken gate that it took her freedmen near an hour to make a path for her silver. *Joso’s Cock* and the great wooden turtle that had protected it, covered with horsehides, lay abandoned within. She rode past burned buildings and broken windows, through brick streets where the gutters were choked with the stiff and swollen dead. Cheering slaves lifted bloodstained hands to her as she went by, and called her “Mother.”

In the plaza before the Great Pyramid, the Meereenese huddled forlorn. The Great Masters had looked anything but great in the morning light. Stripped of their jewels and their fringed *tokars*, they were contemptible; a herd of old men with shriveled balls and spotted skin and young men with ridiculous hair. Their women were either soft and fleshy or as dry as old sticks, their face paint streaked by tears. “I want your leaders,” Dany told them. “Give them up, and the rest of you shall be spared.”

“How many?” one old woman had asked, sobbing. “How many must you have to spare us?”

“One hundred and sixty-three,” she answered.

She had them nailed to wooden posts around the plaza, each man pointing at the next. The anger was fierce and hot inside her when she gave the command; it made her feel like an avenging dragon. But later, when she passed the men dying on the posts, when she heard their moans and smelled their bowels and blood . . .

Dany put the glass aside, frowning. *It was just. It was. I did it for the children.*

Her audience chamber was on the level below, an echoing high-ceilinged room with walls of purple marble. It was a chilly place for all its grandeur. There had been a throne there, a fantastic thing of carved and gilded wood in the shape of a savage harpy. She had taken one long look and commanded it be broken up for firewood. “I will not sit in the harpy’s lap,” she told them. Instead she sat upon a simple ebony bench. It served, though she had heard the Meereenese muttering that it did not befit a queen.

Her bloodriders were waiting for her. Silver bells tinkled in their oiled braids, and they wore the gold and jewels of dead men. Meereen had been rich beyond imagining. Even her sellswords seemed sated, at least for now. Across the room, Grey Worm wore the plain uniform of the Unsullied, his spiked bronze cap beneath one arm. These at least she could rely on, or so she hoped . . . and Brown Ben Plumm as well, solid Ben with his grey-white hair and weathered face, so beloved of her dragons. And Daario beside him, glittering in gold. Daario and Ben Plumm, Grey Worm, Irri, Jhiqui, Missandei . . . as she looked at them Dany found herself wondering which of them would betray her next.

The dragon has three heads. There are two men in the world who I can trust, if I can find them. I will not be alone then. We will be three against the world, like Aegon and his sisters.

“Was the night as quiet as it seemed?” Dany asked.

“It seems it was, Your Grace,” said Brown Ben Plumm.

She was pleased. Meereen had been sacked savagely, as new-fallen cities always were, but Dany was determined that should end now that the city was hers. She had decreed that murderers were to be hanged, that looters were to lose a hand, and rapists their manhood. Eight killers swung from the

walls, and the Unsullied had filled a bushel basket with bloody hands and soft red worms, but Meereen was calm again. *But for how long?*

A fly buzzed her head. Dany waved it off, irritated, but it returned almost at once. “There are too many flies in this city.”

Ben Plumm gave a bark of laughter. “There were flies in my ale this morning. I swallowed one of them.”

“Flies are the dead man’s revenge.” Daario smiled, and stroked the center prong of his beard. “Corpses breed maggots, and maggots breed flies.”

“We will rid ourselves of the corpses, then. Starting with those in the plaza below. Grey Worm, will you see to it?”

“The queen commands, these ones obey.”

“Best bring sacks as well as shovels, Worm,” Brown Ben counseled. “Well past ripe, those ones. Falling off those poles in bits and pieces, and crawling with . . .”

“He knows. So do I.” Dany remembered the horror she had felt when she had seen the Plaza of Punishment in Astapor. *I made a horror just as great, but surely they deserved it. Harsh justice is still justice.*

“Your Grace,” said Missandei, “Ghiscari inter their honored dead in crypts below their manses. If you would boil the bones clean and return them to their kin, it would be a kindness.”

The widows will curse me all the same. “Let it be done.” Dany beckoned to Daario. “How many seek audience this morning?”

“Two have presented themselves to bask in your radiance.”

Daario had plundered himself a whole new wardrobe in Meereen, and to match it he had redyed his trident beard and curly hair a deep rich purple. It made his eyes look almost purple too, as if he were some lost Valyrian. “They arrived in the night on the *Indigo Star*, a trading galley out of Qarth.”

A slaver, you mean. Dany frowned. “Who are they?”

“The *Star*’s master and one who claims to speak for Astapor.”

“I will see the envoy first.”

He proved to be a pale ferret-faced man with ropes of pearls and spun gold hanging heavy about his neck. “Your Worship!” he cried. “My name is

Ghael. I bring greetings to the Mother of Dragons from King Cleon of Astapor, Cleon the Great.”

Dany stiffened. “I left a council to rule Astapor. A healer, a scholar, and a priest.”

“Your Worship, those sly rogues betrayed your trust. It was revealed that they were scheming to restore the Good Masters to power and the people to chains. Great Cleon exposed their plots and hacked their heads off with a cleaver, and the grateful folk of Astapor have crowned him for his valor.”

“Noble Ghael,” said Missandei, in the dialect of Astapor, “is this the same Cleon once owned by Grazdan mo Ullhor?”

Her voice was guileless, yet the question plainly made the envoy anxious. “The same,” he admitted. “A great man.”

Missandei leaned close to Dany. “He was a butcher in Grazdan’s kitchen,” the girl whispered in her ear. “It was said he could slaughter a pig faster than any man in Astapor.”

I have given Astapor a butcher king. Dany felt ill, but she knew she must not let the envoy see it. “I will pray that King Cleon rules well and wisely. What would he have of me?”

Ghael rubbed his mouth. “Perhaps we should speak more privily, Your Grace?”

“I have no secrets from my captains and commanders.”

“As you wish. Great Cleon bids me declare his devotion to the Mother of Dragons. Your enemies are his enemies, he says, and chief among them are the Wise Masters of Yunkai. He proposes a pact between Astapor and Meereen, against the Yunkai’i.”

“I swore no harm would come to Yunkai if they released their slaves,” said Dany.

“These Yunkish dogs cannot be trusted, Your Worship. Even now they plot against you. New levies have been raised and can be seen drilling outside the city walls, warships are being built, envoys have been sent to New Ghis and Volantis in the west, to make alliances and hire sellswords. They have even dispatched riders to Vaes Dothrak to bring a *khalasar* down upon you. Great Cleon bid me tell you not to be afraid. Astapor remembers.

Astapor will not forsake you. To prove his faith, Great Cleon offers to seal your alliance with a marriage.”

“A marriage? To me?”

Ghael smiled. His teeth were brown and rotten. “Great Cleon will give you many strong sons.”

Dany found herself bereft of words, but little Missandei came to her rescue. “Did his first wife give him sons?”

The envoy looked at her unhappily. “Great Cleon has three daughters by his first wife. Two of his newer wives are with child. But he means to put all of them aside if the Mother of Dragons will consent to wed him.”

“How noble of him,” said Dany. “I will consider all you’ve said, my lord.” She gave orders that Ghael be given chambers for the night, somewhere lower in the pyramid.

All my victories turn to dross in my hands, she thought. Whatever I do, all I make is death and horror. When word of what had befallen Astapor reached the streets, as it surely would, tens of thousands of newly freed Meereenese slaves would doubtless decide to follow her when she went west, for fear of what awaited them if they stayed . . . yet it might well be that worse would await them on the march. Even if she emptied every granary in the city and left Meereen to starve, how could she feed so many? The way before her was fraught with hardship, bloodshed, and danger. Ser Jorah had warned her of that. He’d warned her of so many things . . . he’d . . . *No, I will not think of Jorah Mormont. Let him keep a little longer.* “I shall see this trader captain,” she announced. Perhaps he would have some better tidings.

That proved to be a forlorn hope. The master of the *Indigo Star* was Qartheen, so he wept copiously when asked about Astapor. “The city bleeds. Dead men rot unburied in the streets, each pyramid is an armed camp, and the markets have neither food nor slaves for sale. And the poor children! King Cleaver’s thugs have seized every highborn boy in Astapor to make new Unsullied for the trade, though it will be years before they are trained.”

The thing that surprised Dany most was how unsurprised she was. She found herself remembering Eroeh, the Lhazarene girl she had once tried to

protect, and what had happened to her. *It will be the same in Meereen once I march*, she thought. The slaves from the fighting pits, bred and trained to slaughter, were already proving themselves unruly and quarrelsome. They seemed to think they owned the city now, and every man and woman in it. Two of them had been among the eight she'd hanged. *There is no more I can do*, she told herself. "What do you want of me, Captain?"

"Slaves," he said. "My holds are full to bursting with ivory, ambergris, zorse hides, and other fine goods. I would trade them here for slaves, to sell in Lys and Volantis."

"We have no slaves for sale," said Dany.

"My queen?" Daario stepped forward. "The riverside is full of Meereenese, begging leave to be allowed to sell themselves to this Qartheen. They are thicker than the flies."

Dany was shocked. "They *want* to be slaves?"

"The ones who come are well spoken and gently born, sweet queen. Such slaves are prized. In the Free Cities they will be tutors, scribes, bed slaves, even healers and priests. They will sleep in soft beds, eat rich foods, and dwell in manses. Here they have lost all, and live in fear and squalor."

"I see." Perhaps it was not so shocking, if these tales of Astapor were true. Dany thought a moment. "Any man who wishes to sell *himself* into slavery may do so. Or woman." She raised a hand. "But they may not sell their children, nor a man his wife."

"In Astapor the city took a tenth part of the price, each time a slave changed hands," Missandei told her.

"We'll do the same," Dany decided. Wars were won with gold as much as swords. "A tenth part. In gold or silver coin, or ivory. Meereen has no need of saffron, cloves, or zorse hides."

"It shall be done as you command, glorious queen," said Daario. "My Stormcrows will collect your tenth."

If the Stormcrows saw to the collections at least half the gold would somehow go astray, Dany knew. But the Second Sons were just as bad, and the Unsullied were as unlettered as they were incorruptible. "Records must

be kept,” she said. “Seek among the freedmen for men who can read, write, and do sums.”

His business done, the captain of the *Indigo Star* bowed and took his leave. Dany shifted uncomfortably on the ebony bench. She dreaded what must come next, yet she knew she had put it off too long already. Yunkai and Astapor, threats of war, marriage proposals, the march west looming over all . . . *I need my knights. I need their swords, and I need their counsel.* Yet the thought of seeing Jorah Mormont again made her feel as if she’d swallowed a spoonful of flies; angry, agitated, sick. She could almost feel them buzzing round her belly. *I am the blood of the dragon. I must be strong. I must have fire in my eyes when I face them, not tears.* “Tell Belwas to bring my knights,” Dany commanded, before she could change her mind. “My good knights.”

Strong Belwas was puffing from the climb when he marched them through the doors, one meaty hand wrapped tight around each man’s arm. Ser Barristan walked with his head held high, but Ser Jorah stared at the marble floor as he approached. *The one is proud, the other guilty.* The old man had shaved off his white beard. He looked ten years younger without it. But her balding bear looked older than he had. They halted before the bench. Strong Belwas stepped back and stood with his arms crossed across his scarred chest. Ser Jorah cleared his throat. “*Khaleesi . . .*”

She had missed his voice so much, but she had to be stern. “Be quiet. I will tell you when to speak.” She stood. “When I sent you down into the sewers, part of me hoped I’d seen the last of you. It seemed a fitting end for liars, to drown in slavers’ filth. I thought the gods would deal with you, but instead you returned to me. My gallant knights of Westeros, an informer and a turncloak. My brother would have hanged you both.” Viserys would have, anyway. She did not know what Rhaegar would have done. “I will admit you helped win me this city . . .”

Ser Jorah’s mouth tightened. “We won you this city. We sewer rats.”

“Be quiet,” she said again . . . though there *was* truth to what he said. While Joso’s Cock and the other rams were battering the city gates and her archers were firing flights of flaming arrows over the walls, Dany had sent two hundred men along the river under cover of darkness to fire the hulks in

the harbor. But that was only to hide their true purpose. As the flaming ships drew the eyes of the defenders on the walls, a few half-mad swimmers found the sewer mouths and pried loose a rusted iron grating. Ser Jorah, Ser Barristan, Strong Belwas, and twenty brave fools slipped beneath the brown water and up the brick tunnel, a mixed force of sellswords, Unsullied, and freedmen. Dany had told them to choose only men who had no families . . . and preferably no sense of smell.

They had been lucky as well as brave. It had been a moon's turn since the last good rain, and the sewers were only thigh-high. The oilcloth they'd wrapped around their torches kept them dry, so they had light. A few of the freedmen were frightened of the huge rats until Strong Belwas caught one and bit it in two. One man was killed by a great pale lizard that reared up out of the dark water to drag him off by the leg, but when next ripples were spied Ser Jorah butchered the beast with his blade. They took some wrong turnings, but once they found the surface Strong Belwas led them to the nearest fighting pit, where they surprised a few guards and struck the chains off the slaves. Within an hour, half the fighting slaves in Meereen had risen.

"You *helped* win this city," she repeated stubbornly. "And you have served me well in the past. Ser Barristan saved me from the Titan's Bastard, and from the Sorrowful Man in Qarth. Ser Jorah saved me from the poisoner in Vaes Dothrak, and again from Drogo's bloodriders after my sun-and-stars had died." So many people wanted her dead, sometimes she lost count. "And yet you lied, deceived me, betrayed me." She turned to Ser Barristan. "You protected my father for many years, fought beside my brother on the Trident, but you abandoned Viserys in his exile and bent your knee to the Usurper instead. Why? And tell it *true*."

"Some truths are hard to hear. Robert was a . . . a good knight . . . chivalrous, brave . . . he spared my life, and the lives of many others . . . Prince Viserys was only a boy, it would have been years before he was fit to rule, and . . . forgive me, my queen, but you asked for truth . . . even as a child, your brother Viserys oft seemed to be his father's son, in ways that Rhaegar never did."

"His father's son?" Dany frowned. "What does that mean?"

The old knight did not blink. “Your father is called ‘the Mad King’ in Westeros. Has no one ever told you?”

“Viserys did.” *The Mad King*. “The *Usurper* called him that, the Usurper and his dogs.” *The Mad King*. “It was a lie.”

“Why ask for truth,” Ser Barristan said softly, “if you close your ears to it?” He hesitated, then continued. “I told you before that I used a false name so the Lannisters would not know that I’d joined you. That was less than half of it, Your Grace. The truth is, I wanted to watch you for a time before pledging you my sword. To make certain that you were not . . .”

“. . . my father’s daughter?” If she was not her father’s daughter, who was she?

“. . . mad,” he finished. “But I see no taint in you.”

“*Taint?*” Dany bristled.

“I am no maester to quote history at you, Your Grace. Swords have been my life, not books. But every child knows that the Targaryens have always danced too close to madness. Your father was not the first. King Jaehaerys once told me that madness and greatness are two sides of the same coin. Every time a new Targaryen is born, he said, the gods toss the coin in the air and the world holds its breath to see how it will land.”

Jaehaerys. This old man knew my grandfather. The thought gave her pause. Most of what she knew of Westeros had come from her brother, and the rest from Ser Jorah. Ser Barristan would have forgotten more than the two of them had ever known. *This man can tell me what I came from.* “So I am a coin in the hands of some god, is that what you are saying, ser?”

“No,” Ser Barristan replied. “You are the trueborn heir of Westeros. To the end of my days I shall remain your faithful knight, should you find me worthy to bear a sword again. If not, I am content to serve Strong Belwas as his squire.”

“What if I decide you’re only worthy to be my fool?” Dany asked scornfully. “Or perhaps my cook?”

“I would be honored, Your Grace,” Selmy said with quiet dignity. “I can bake apples and boil beef as well as any man, and I’ve roasted many a duck

over a campfire. I hope you like them greasy, with charred skin and bloody bones.”

That made her smile. “I’d have to be mad to eat such fare. Ben Plumm, come give Ser Barristan your longsword.”

But Whitebeard would not take it. “I flung my sword at Joffrey’s feet and have not touched one since. Only from the hand of my queen will I accept a sword again.”

“As you wish.” Dany took the sword from Brown Ben and offered it hilt first. The old man took it reverently. “Now kneel,” she told him, “and swear it to my service.”

He went to one knee and lay the blade before her as he said the words. Dany scarcely heard them. *He was the easy one*, she thought. *The other will be harder*. When Ser Barristan was done, she turned to Jorah Mormont. “And now you, ser. Tell me true.”

The big man’s neck was red; whether from anger or shame she did not know. “I have tried to tell you true, half a hundred times. I told you Arstan was more than he seemed. I warned you that Xaro and Pyat Pree were not to be trusted. I warned you—”

“You warned me against everyone except yourself.” His insolence angered her. *He should be humbler. He should beg for my forgiveness*. “Trust no one but Jorah Mormont, you said . . . and all the time you were the Spider’s creature!”

“I am no man’s *creature*. I took the eunuch’s gold, yes. I learned some ciphers and wrote some letters, but that was all—”

“*All*? You spied on me and sold me to my enemies!”

“For a time.” He said it grudgingly. “I stopped.”

“When? When did you stop?”

“I made one report from Qarth, but—”

“From *Qarth*?” Dany had been hoping it had ended much earlier. “What did you write from Quarth? That you were my man now, that you wanted no more of their schemes?” Ser Jorah could not meet her eyes. “When Khal Drogo died, you asked me to go with you to Yi Ti and the Jade Sea. Was that your wish or Robert’s?”

“That was to protect you,” he insisted. “To keep you away from them. I knew what snakes they were . . .”

“*Snakes?* And what are you, ser?” Something unspeakable occurred to her. “You told them I was carrying Drogo’s child . . .”

“*Khaleesi . . .*”

“Do not think to deny it, ser,” Ser Barristan said sharply. “I was there when the eunuch told the council, and Robert decreed that Her Grace and her child must die. You were the source, ser. There was even talk that you might do the deed, for a pardon.”

“A lie.” Ser Jorah’s face darkened. “I would never . . . Daenerys, it was me who *stopped* you from drinking the wine.”

“Yes. And how was it you knew the wine was poisoned?”

“I . . . I but suspected . . . the caravan brought a letter from Varys, he warned me there would be attempts. He wanted you watched, yes, but not harmed.” He went to his knees. “If I had not told them someone else would have. You *know* that.”

“I know you betrayed me.” She touched her belly, where her son Rhaego had perished. “I know a poisoner tried to kill my son, because of you. That’s what I *know*.”

“No . . . no.” He shook his head. “I never meant . . . forgive me. You have to forgive me.”

“*Have to?*” It was too late. *He should have begun by begging forgiveness.* She could not pardon him as she’d intended. She had dragged the wineseller behind her horse until there was nothing left of him. Didn’t the man who brought him deserve the same? *This is Jorah, my fierce bear, the right arm that never failed me. I would be dead without him, but . . .* “I can’t forgive you,” she said. “I can’t.”

“You forgave the old man . . .”

“He lied to me about his name. You sold my secrets to the men who killed my father and stole my brother’s throne.”

“I protected you. I fought for you. Killed for you.”

Kissed me, she thought, betrayed me.

“I went down into the sewers like a rat. For you.”

It might have been kinder if you'd died there. Dany said nothing. There was nothing to say.

“Daenerys,” he said, “I have loved you.”

And there it was. *Three treasons will you know. Once for blood and once for gold and once for love.* “The gods do nothing without a purpose, they say. You did not die in battle, so it must be they still have some use for you. But I don't. I will not have you near me. You are banished, ser. Go back to your masters in King's Landing and collect your pardon, if you can. Or to Astapor. No doubt the butcher king needs knights.”

“No.” He reached for her. “Daenerys, please, hear me . . .”

She slapped his hand away. “Do not ever presume to touch me again, or to speak my name. You have until dawn to collect your things and leave this city. If you're found in Meereen past break of day, I will have Strong Belwas twist your head off. I will. Believe that.” She turned her back on him, her skirts swirling. *I cannot bear to see his face.* “Remove this liar from my sight,” she commanded. *I must not weep. I must not. If I weep I will forgive him.* Strong Belwas seized Ser Jorah by the arm and dragged him out. When Dany glanced back, the knight was walking as if drunk, stumbling and slow. She looked away until she heard the doors open and close. Then she sank back onto the ebony bench. *He's gone, then. My father and my mother, my brothers, Ser Willem Darry, Drogo who was my sun-and-stars, his son who died inside me, and now Ser Jorah . . .*

“The queen has a good heart,” Daario purred through his deep purple whiskers, “but that one is more dangerous than all the Oznaks and Meros rolled up in one.” His strong hands caressed the hilts of his matched blades, those wanton golden women. “You need not even say the word, my radiance. Only give the tiniest nod, and your Daario shall fetch you back his ugly head.”

“Leave him be. The scales are balanced now. Let him go home.” Dany pictured Jorah moving amongst old gnarled oaks and tall pines, past flowering thornbushes, grey stones bearded with moss, and little creeks running icy down steep hillsides. She saw him entering a hall built of huge

logs, where dogs slept by the hearth and the smell of meat and mead hung thick in the smoky air. “We are done for now,” she told her captains.

It was all she could do not to run back up the wide marble stairs. Irri helped her slip from her court clothes and into more comfortable garb; baggy woolen breeches, a loose felted tunic, a painted Dothraki vest. “You are trembling, *Khaleesi*,” the girl said as she knelt to lace up Dany’s sandals.

“I’m cold,” Dany lied. “Bring me the book I was reading last night.” She wanted to lose herself in the words, in other times and other places. The fat leather-bound volume was full of songs and stories from the Seven Kingdoms. Children’s stories, if truth be told; too simple and fanciful to be true history. All the heroes were tall and handsome, and you could tell the traitors by their shifty eyes. Yet she loved them all the same. Last night she had been reading of the three princesses in the red tower, locked away by the king for the crime of being beautiful.

When her handmaid brought the book, Dany had no trouble finding the page where she had left off, but it was no good. She found herself reading the same passage half a dozen times. *Ser Jorah gave me this book as a bride’s gift, the day I wed Khal Drogo. But Daario is right, I shouldn’t have banished him. I should have kept him, or I should have killed him.* She played at being a queen, yet sometimes she still felt like a scared little girl. *Viserys always said what a dolt I was. Was he truly mad?* She closed the book. She could still recall Ser Jorah, if she wished. Or send Daario to kill him.

Dany fled from the choice, out onto the terrace. She found Rhaegal asleep beside the pool, a green and bronze coil basking in the sun. Drogon was perched up atop the pyramid, in the place where the huge bronze harpy had stood before she had commanded it to be pulled down. He spread his wings and roared when he spied her. There was no sign of Viserion, but when she went to the parapet and scanned the horizon she saw pale wings in the far distance, sweeping above the river. *He is hunting. They grow bolder every day.* Yet it still made her anxious when they flew too far away. *One day one of them may not return,* she thought.

“Your Grace?”

She turned to find Ser Barristan behind her. “What more would you have of me, ser? I spared you, I took you into my service, now give me some peace.”

“Forgive me, Your Grace. It was only . . . now that you know who I am . . .” The old man hesitated. “A knight of the Kingsguard is in the king’s presence day and night. For that reason, our vows require us to protect his secrets as we would his life. But your father’s secrets by rights belong to you now, along with his throne, and . . . I thought perhaps you might have questions for me.”

Questions? She had a hundred questions, a thousand, ten thousand. Why couldn’t she think of one? “Was my father truly mad?” she blurted out. *Why do I ask that?* “Viserys said this talk of madness was a ploy of the Usurper’s . . .”

“Viserys was a child, and the queen sheltered him as much as she could. Your father always had a little madness in him, I now believe. Yet he was charming and generous as well, so his lapses were forgiven. His reign began with such promise . . . but as the years passed, the lapses grew more frequent, until . . .”

Dany stopped him. “Do I want to hear this now?”

Ser Barristan considered a moment. “Perhaps not. Not now.”

“Not now,” she agreed. “One day. One day you must tell me all. The good and the bad. There is *some* good to be said of my father, surely?”

“There is, Your Grace. Of him, and those who came before him. Your grandfather Jaehaerys and his brother, their father Aegon, your mother . . . and Rhaegar. Him most of all.”

“I wish I could have known him.” Her voice was wistful.

“I wish he could have known you,” the old knight said. “When you are ready, I will tell you all.”

Dany kissed him on the cheek and sent him on his way.

That night her handmaids brought her lamb, with a salad of raisins and carrots soaked in wine, and a hot flaky bread dripping with honey. She could eat none of it. *Did Rhaegar ever grow so weary?* she wondered. *Did Aegon, after his conquest?*

Later, when the time came for sleep, Dany took Irri into bed with her, for the first time since the ship. But even as she shuddered in release and wound her fingers through her handmaid's thick black hair, she pretended it was Drogo holding her . . . only somehow his face kept turning into Daario's. *If I want Daario I need only say so.* She lay with Irri's legs entangled in her own. *His eyes looked almost purple today . . .*

Dany's dreams were dark that night, and she woke three times from half-remembered nightmares. After the third time she was too restless to return to sleep. Moonlight streamed through the slanting windows, silvering the marble floors. A cool breeze was blowing through the open terrace doors. Irri slept soundly beside her, her lips slightly parted, one dark brown nipple peeping out above the sleeping silks. For a moment Dany was tempted, but it was Drogo she wanted, or perhaps Daario. Not Irri. The maid was sweet and skillful, but all her kisses tasted of duty.

She rose, leaving Irri asleep in the moonlight. Jhiqui and Missandei slept in their own beds. Dany slipped on a robe and padded barefoot across the marble floor, out onto the terrace. The air was chilly, but she liked the feel of grass between her toes and the sound of the leaves whispering to one another. Wind ripples chased each other across the surface of the little bathing pool and made the moon's reflection dance and shimmer.

She leaned against a low brick parapet to look down upon the city. Meereen was sleeping too. *Lost in dreams of kinder days, perhaps.* Night covered the streets like a black blanket, hiding the corpses and the grey rats that came up from the sewers to feast on them, the swarms of stinging flies. Distant torches glimmered red and yellow where her sentries walked their rounds, and here and there she saw the faint glow of lanterns bobbing down an alley. Perhaps one was Ser Jorah, leading his horse slowly toward the gate. *Farewell, old bear. Farewell, betrayer.*

She was Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, *khaleesi* and queen, Mother of Dragons, slayer of warlocks, breaker of chains, and there was no one in the world that she could trust.

"Your Grace?" Missandei stood at her elbow wrapped in a bedrobe, wooden sandals on her feet. "I woke, and saw that you were gone. Did you sleep well? What are you looking at?"

“My city,” said Dany. “I was looking for a house with a red door, but by night all the doors are black.”

“A red door?” Missandei was puzzled. “What house is this?”

“No house. It does not matter.” Dany took the younger girl by the hand. “Never lie to me, Missandei. Never betray me.”

“I never would,” Missandei promised. “Look, dawn comes.”

The sky had turned a cobalt blue from the horizon to the zenith, and behind the line of low hills to the east a glow could be seen, pale gold and oyster pink. Dany held Missandei’s hand as they watched the sun come up. All the grey bricks became red and yellow and blue and green and orange. The scarlet sands of the fighting pits transformed them into bleeding sores before her eyes. Elsewhere the golden dome of the Temple of the Graces blazed bright, and bronze stars winked along the walls where the light of the rising sun touched the spikes on the helms of the Unsullied. On the terrace, a few flies stirred sluggishly. A bird began to chirp in the persimmon tree, and then two more. Dany cocked her head to hear their song, but it was not long before the sounds of the waking city drowned them out.

The sounds of my city.

That morning she summoned her captains and commanders to the garden, rather than descending to the audience chamber. “Aegon the Conqueror brought fire and blood to Westeros, but afterward he gave them peace, prosperity, and justice. But all I have brought to Slaver’s Bay is death and ruin. I have been more *khal* than queen, smashing and plundering, then moving on.”

“There is nothing to stay for,” said Brown Ben Plumm.

“Your Grace, the slavers brought their doom on themselves,” said Daario Naharis.

“You have brought freedom as well,” Missandei pointed out.

“Freedom to starve?” asked Dany sharply. “Freedom to die? Am I a dragon, or a harpy?” *Am I mad? Do I have the taint?*

“A dragon,” Ser Barristan said with certainty. “Meereen is not Westeros, Your Grace.”

“But how can I rule seven kingdoms if I cannot rule a single city?” He had no answer to that. Dany turned away from them, to gaze out over the city once again. “My children need time to heal and learn. My dragons need time to grow and test their wings. And I need the same. I will not let this city go the way of Astapor. I will not let the harpy of Yunkai chain up those I’ve freed all over again.” She turned back to look at their faces. “I will not march.”

“What will you do then, *Khaleesi*?” asked Rakharo.

“Stay,” she said. “Rule. And be a queen.”