

Sweat poured down from Jon's brow, the heat of the forge seeming uniquely sweltering that day, and yet he paid it no mind, bringing his hammer down on the blade again and again. It took shape before his eyes, every blow altering it just a bit, not lengthening at this point, as he'd finished that work, but refining it. Symon watched in silence, his calculating dark eyes taking in every detail as his apprentice worked on one of the most ambitious projects he'd given him yet.

The steel he was working with was exquisite; the blade it would form was a commission for a wealthy Pentoshi merchant whose son had lost his sword to the sea during a bad storm they'd been hit by. He should have done it himself, in truth, and only after inspecting it as closely as he'd ever inspected anything would he even think of giving it to the merchant, but it was specifically the quality called for here that made it a great test.

"It would be utter lunacy to suggest giving a commission of this importance to an apprentice with less than two years' experience to complete, but most apprentices with that little training would still be small boys, and Jon is anything but," he thought to himself as he watched Jon return the blade to the forge to heat back up.

"It's nearly done," the dragonrider said as he worked the billows. "I don't think I've made any mistakes with it so far."

"We'll see when it's quenched," Symon murmured. "Never give thought to what you might or might have messed up while you're working. Pay careful attention to it as you work, but don't question yourself in moments like this."

Jon nodded and took the blade out of the fire with his tongs, smiling when he saw it was again the color of straw. Returning it to the anvil, he went back to work, striking it hard enough to make it sing. His aim was perfect, though it had never been as bad as that of the average apprentice starting out, his prior experience with combat having given him coordination that he'd not necessarily have had otherwise. Symon watched as he finished, pleased with how the blade looked, and when Jon finally put the hammer down and inspected the burning hot blade himself, he looked over questioningly.

"It looks ready to me," the blacksmith said. "Come outside when you're done quenching it."

"Aye," Jon nodded, and Symon walked out into the cool air, sighing as he felt his sweat turn cold on his skin almost instantly.

It wasn't winter yet, and he doubted it would be for a while still, but it was definitely cooling down, and he already missed summer. Working a forge in the heat of a sunbaked summer day wasn't the most pleasant thing in the world, but even that was better than dealing with frost. He'd lived through his share of winters, and they were never pleasant, but this one was going to be worse, he knew. He had young children to worry about this time, and he dearly hoped that the frigid season wouldn't be a long or particularly brutal one.

"It's finished," Jon murmured as he joined him, looking out at the setting sun. "It looks good so far."

"I'll look it over later," Symon said. "From what I saw, though, you did well. My old master, Hullen, would never have given me an assignment like that, much less after so little time serving under him."

"I'm honored by your trust," Jon nodded, and Symon chuckled.

“It wasn’t trust so much as a test,” he replied. “If you pulled that off as well as I think you did, it doesn’t mean you’re finished with your lessons, but it does mean you should be good enough to attempt what you want to.”

“I...really?” Jon asked, and the blacksmith reached into a pouch at his belt and pulled out a rolled-up piece of parchment.

“I’ve been giving some thought to what you want to accomplish, and it occurred to me that you’re going to need a rather different sort of forge than mine for it,” Symon replied. As Jon unfurled the scroll and his eyebrows shot towards his hairline as he saw what was on it, the blacksmith continued, saying, “It’s going to need to be out in the open, since that beast of yours will likely burn the structure around it otherwise, but you can’t just leave it at the mercy of the elements, particularly with winter coming, so I was thinking a tightly woven tarp of some sort might be your best bet there.”

“Perhaps covered in a wax of sorts if possible,” Jon nodded. “I don’t want to rust my anvil or need to wait for everything to dry out to be able to use it, but if it’s enclosed, Morghul won’t be able to provide me with fire, at least not safely.”

“How, by all the gods, you’re going to do that safely at all, I can’t imagine,” Symon chuckled, shaking his head. “I know his fire can melt stone but not as easily as it can burn wood, so you’ll need to stick to stone exclusively here and build it out on an area isolated enough that Morghul won’t break anything else in the process. The design I sketched out there is about as dragon-proof as I could think of. It’s a pity you didn’t find any diagrams of the forges the ancient Valyrians used.”

“I hate to say I hadn’t put nearly enough thought into the practicalities I’d need to think of for this,” Jon muttered as he stared down at the sketch.

“So long as you knew you weren’t using my forge,” Symon chuckled, and Jon laughed.

“I don’t think Morghul would fit,” he quipped. “I...”

“Jon,” Will, one of the Dragonstone guards, said. “The princess requests that you meet her in the keep.”

“Is something wrong?” Jon asked, instantly on edge. Rhaenyra never summoned him in the day like this, and while it was nearly over, it was still strange enough to be disconcerting.

“I don’t know,” the guard replied.

“Go, the day’s nearly done, and I can finish the sword myself,” Symon said, and Jon nodded, rolling up the parchment as he followed the guard back to the keep.

He barely paid any attention to where he was going on the short journey, fear for Rhaenyra and the twins consuming him, and when he finally spotted Ser Harwin guarding the door to her solar, he rushed over.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, and his friend looked at him in confusion.

“No, why?” Ser Harwin asked. “The princess mentioned that she summoned you to discuss the letter from Blackhaven but...”

“Oh,” Jon breathed, looking around to glare at Will, only to realize that he’d already left. “I wasn’t informed of why she wanted to speak to me.”

“Oh,” Ser Harwin chuckled. “She might not have mentioned it in her excitement.”

“It’s fine,” Jon sighed as he opened the door and stepped inside, feeling relief wash over him at the sight of Rhaenyra sitting behind her desk, looking perfectly well and relaxed. Alys was there as well, leaning against the wall next to Rhaenyra, and the dark-haired beauty nodded as she spotted him, though Rhaenyra’s beatific smile stole his attention at once.

“Jon,” she beamed. “Close the door.”

“What’s this about Blackhaven?” Jon asked as he did so.

“I’ve long since realized that my ladies-in-waiting aren’t from a wide enough selection of kingdoms, and I’ve decided to do something about that,” Rhaenyra replied. “With the addition of Victaria, I finally have one from the Reach, but other than that, they’re all either Riverlanders or from the Crownlands.”

“That’s what she’s telling the king anyway,” Alys whispered, and Rhaenyra glared at her.

“This is about the Dornish,” Jon guessed at once, and she nodded.

“Alys here thinks that they’re preparing to make their move,” Rhaenyra replied.

“I saw what appeared to be the sun rising in the south and heading north earlier as I gazed into a basin of water,” Alys replied. “It lacked a spear, but I still think that signifies the Martells well enough.”

“It’s been less than two moons,” Jon murmured. “I highly doubt that the Dornish have mounted a sufficient force already.”

“Oh, I doubt all their banners have been assembled, but a sufficiently furious, impatient prince could easily have force marched everyone he could gather quickly to the Red Mountains by now,” Rhaenyra replied. “Having spent weeks not that long ago dealing with a different impatient prince, I know well how they can be.”

“When exactly did you see this vision, Alys?” Jon asked.

“A couple days ago,” Alys replied, and Jon gave Rhaenyra a pointed look.

“We’ve barely seen each other over the past couple days, and you’ve seemed so busy lately that I didn’t want to bother you until I either knew more or had the workings of a plan,” the princess replied.

“What exactly are you planning?” Jon asked. “If you want to see the Dornish Marches for yourself and ask about their defenses, I guess we could, but until the Dornish attack, doing more than basic reconnaissance would only anger your father. This is far earlier than we expected them to move, and I doubt that they’re going to strike until they’ve gathered all their forces.”

“That would be unwise, yes,” Rhaenyra replied with a slight grin. “Of course, if they had some incentive to move more quickly, perhaps a very tempting target...”

“Rhaenyra,” Jon muttered, and she rolled her eyes.

“Jon, you’ll be with me, and Morghul will be waiting nearby, to say nothing of Syrax,” Rhaenyra replied. “Daemon figures that their opening move will be to besiege and attempt to raid one of the Marcher castles, making it look like the work of a Vulture King. They know that they can’t defeat us in open war, but they could make a serious nuisance of themselves.”

“They likely know of my involvement in the Battle of Bloodstone, and this ‘vulture king’ could easily demand my head in exchange for ending the raids,” Jon mused. “Your father wouldn’t agree to that, of course, but the Stormlanders would likely be infuriated by the idea of their lands being beset by conflict on account of a simple bastard.”

“You’re no simple bastard,” Rhaenyra said fervently. “Of course, they could do that easily enough, and if the Hightowers took advantage of it, subtly expressing condolences that they’re being attacked because of you...”

“It could gain them more allies among the Stormlanders,” Jon muttered. “We don’t plan to let it get to that, though.”

“And we won’t,” Rhaenyra said, “but if we can lure them into an attack before they’re ready, we could crush them before they get a chance to cause much damage. I’ll make a very tempting target, after all, and if they could capture me, they could easily try to exchange me for you.”

“I don’t like this,” Jon muttered, and she smiled softly.

“I’d be staying back behind the castle walls, tempted as I might be to join you,” Rhaenyra replied, standing up and grasping his bicep. “This is to be your fight, your glory, and soon enough, the cause of your legitimization.”

Jon looked at Alys for a moment, so used to avoiding even looking at Rhaenyra for too long when they weren’t alone that even with those few who knew about them, he was wary, though he quickly relaxed.

“Do you have any reason to think that she won’t be safe?” he asked.

“I see no pain in her immediate future that isn’t the result of childbirth,” Alys replied, and Rhaenyra whipped around.

“Childbirth?” she asked pointedly.

“You’re not with child now, clearly, but soon, I think,” Alys replied. “I saw a swarm of ravens flying towards the island as I gazed at clouds the other day and genuinely thought they were real for a moment.”

“They will be soon enough,” Rhaenyra scowled. “My mourning period is over, and by now even the most dim-witted lord is aware of it.”

“Please tell me that this plan to fly off to Blackhaven isn’t just a way of escaping marriage proposals,” Jon sighed.

“I’m not flying all the way to the Dornish Marches to avoid marriage proposals,” Rhaenyra replied primly. “We’re riding there.”

“Nyr...” Jon muttered.

“Don’t ‘Nyra’ me,” Rhaenyra scowled. “Father won’t get insistent for quite a while yet, especially with my succession being secured, but I still don’t want to have to deal with any of this. You are the man I plan to wed, and should our plan work, even Father won’t have cause to object anymore. One way or another, we’re going to deal with the thorn in our side that is Dorne and, quite potentially, force the Triarchy to finally bugger off too, and when the dust settles, it will be you who enjoys the credit for all of that. It will earn you your legitimacy and, alongside that, me.”

“It isn’t as though you aren’t actually legitimate,” Alys murmured, and Jon snorted.

“Sadly ‘I’m a legitimate prince, but my parents can’t verify that because they won’t be born for more than a century’ isn’t something I can tell people,” he snarked. “You’re sure that you want to do this?”

“Desperately,” Rhaenyra sighed. “If Prince Qoren is as impatient about striking at us as I believe he is, he isn’t the only one. We’ve been plotting this out for moons, and I’m tired of waiting.”

“Planning military operations takes time, even for young, hot-blooded princes,” Jon murmured. “We still haven’t managed to get spies into Dorne?”

“None of us have any experience operating spy networks,” Rhaenyra muttered as Alys stiffened.

“The next time you go to the capital, if I could accompany you, I could try to observe how my brother operates up close,” she suggested. “I doubt he’d tell me much if I tried to question him, so that would be ill-advised, but I can try to learn as much as possible otherwise.”

“If we could trust Larys at all, that would simplify things so much,” Rhaenyra huffed.

“Larys isn’t Harwin,” Alys murmured. “That one’s as loyal as a well-trained dog, but Larys, well, I suppose he’s also rather dog-like, but life has beaten him repeatedly, and that has had its effects.”

“From what I read of him, I was never able to get a sense of who, if anyone, he was actually loyal to,” Jon said, and Rhaenyra sighed.

“I know, it’s just annoying,” she muttered.

“Will we be going to the capital?” Jon asked.

“No,” Rhaenyra replied. “We’re going to sail up the Wendwater and then continue on from there to Blackhaven. Lord Borros is in the capital at the moment, which means I can visit his lands without my failure to meet with him being construed as an insult. Alys, take this note to Maester Gerardys. You don’t need to await a reply.”

Alys took the note from her outstretched hand, recognizing the dismissal for what it was, and nodded before leaving.

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask to go sooner,” Jon murmured once she was out of earshot.

“She knew our most pressing secret before we ever spoke to her,” Rhaenyra replied. “Next to that, what’s a little extra knowledge about a plan she actively helped me with?”

“It’s a pity she doesn’t know more about our enemies,” Jon muttered, and Rhaenyra sighed, leaning back in her chair.

“We know that the Dornish are on the move, and that’s enough,” she replied. “If this prince has any sense, he’s going to try, as the Vulture Kings did before, to lure our forces into the mountains where they can be ambushed and whittled down bit by bit. We’ll prevail in the end, but it will be costly and give them the opportunity to inflict severe casualties on us if they get lucky.”

“Where do Syrax and Morghul play into this?” Jon asked.

“Syrax will be coming with me, though I won’t simply be flying there,” Rhaenyra replied. “My guards, including you, will accompany me on the journey, and I’ve informed Lord Marcus that my little lady will stay in the woods near his keep.”

“I must say, I know very little of House Dondarrion,” Jon murmured. “It took me a moment to remember the name of their house.”

“They’re not a wealthy family, but they, like the other Marchers, are great warriors, at least by reputation,” Rhaenyra said, her eyes dimming slightly as she looked away.

“What is it?” Jon asked.

“Cole’s father was Lord Marcus’ steward for many years,” Rhaenyra replied. “I heard many stories about Blackhaven as a girl, so many that I wanted to visit it for quite some time, though I never bothered.”

“Ah,” Jon nodded, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I trust that won’t be a problem now.”

“No, his father died years ago, and the current steward has no connection to him,” Rhaenyra replied. “Lord Marcus was reasonably fond of him, so he said, but it isn’t as though they remained in communication after he joined the Kingsguard. He has a granddaughter my age, and as I reached out to the Marcher lords to discuss a tour of the region, he was less than subtle in suggesting that the two of us could get along.”

“So we go to Blackhaven, wait to see if the Dornish strike, and then if they don’t, go to Nightsong and Harvest Hall?” Jon asked.

“And Starpike,” Rhaenyra nodded, and he cocked an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“For one thing, I forgot that Starpike was in the Dornish Marches, but more than that...House Peake isn’t exactly trustworthy,” Jon replied, and she furrowed her brow.

“What makes you say that?” Rhaenyra asked.

“They betrayed the crown so many times in the years following the Dance of Dragons that its a wonder they still existed by the time I was born,” Jon replied. “I know they were stripped of two of their castles over it.”

“What did they do?” Rhaenyra asked incredulously.

“It’s actually quite the list,” Jon replied. “The Lord Peake during the reign of your son was a conniving cunt who probably murdered your niece in an attempt to wed him to his daughter. I know that at least one Peake rose up on his own in rebellion, but beyond that, they supported the Blackfyres repeatedly. I remember genuinely wondering as Maester Luwin explained it all why they hadn’t all been killed.”

“Well, that’s...disturbing, but I can’t hold the actions of men not yet born against those alive today,” Rhaenyra replied. “If I visit all the keeps of the Dornish Marches but avoid one of the truly prominent ones within the Reach portion of the shared region, the Hightowers will make note of it. If the Dornish strike while I’m at Blackhaven, though, that will be the end of the tour, so we just have to hope we get lucky.”

“I can’t believe the idea of having an army come for us is luck in this scenario,” Jon drawled, and she giggled.

“I know you’ll protect me,” Rhaenyra beamed. “There was one thing that I wanted to suggest, though.”

“What is it?” Jon asked.

“Your ability to gaze through Morghul’s eyes is invaluable,” Rhaenyra replied. “It allows you to be bonded to him on a greater level than any dragonlord has ever bonded with a dragon, but...there are things you can’t do with him. He’s not exactly capable of stealth, for one thing.”

“He is a mite large,” Jon chuckled.

“Could you warg into another animal without disrupting your connection to him?” Rhaenyra asked, and his eyebrows slowly rose towards his hairline.

“I...probably could,” Jon murmured. “Morghul isn’t the first animal I’ve bonded with like that, and I did meet a skinchanger north of the Wall who ended up with six animals he could control.”

“Six?” Rhaenyra asked.

“Varamyr was his name,” Jon replied. “This ability of mine, it’s not one that I trained properly during my first life.”

“Though you have with Morghul,” Rhaenyra said. “If you could slip inside the mind of a bird of some sort, you could scout over the Red Mountains without drawing suspicion.”

“We could see what they’ve built up and potentially what they’re planning,” Jon nodded. “A raven would likely work; they’re ubiquitous in Westeros.”

“They’re also shot down during sieges,” Rhaenyra fretted. “If you died in the body of one...”

“It would hurt, but I’ve live, most like,” Jon replied. “Varamyr claimed to have died in the bodies of multiple animals, and the mad cunt still lived. It’s something to consider, and I wouldn’t exactly use the raven during the siege if we failed to deal with the Dornish before they reached us anyway. Morghul can follow a fair distance behind us so he can be called on as needed but won’t be spotted by any potential Dornish spies in the area.”

“So do you this is a good idea?” Rhaenyra asked as she stood up and gazed into his eyes. “I had you summoned because I wanted your advice on this. I want to be your wife, to be yours openly, and this could be what finally makes that possible, but...I so far, all I’ve done is inquire with the Marcher lords about possibly visiting, and if you don’t think it’s wise, I could still call it off.”

“I hate the idea of using you as bait but with a castle full of warriors and a dragon to defend you...” Jon murmured as he mulled it over. “If we succeed in drawing the Dornish out and get the justification we need to strike back...”

“It will be the moment we’re waiting for,” Rhaenyra grinned.

“Princess, Prince Daemon is here to see you,” one of her guards called out, and Rhaenyra nodded.

“Send him in,” she replied, sitting down, and a moment later, Daemon strode in, his windswept hair suggesting that he’d flown right over.

“Rhaenyra, what’s going on?” he asked at once, barely sparing Jon a glance. “Your letter said that you’re traveling to the Stormlands and, for some bizarre reason, want me to command Dragonstone while you’re gone.”

“That’s precisely what’s happening,” Rhaenyra replied. “I’m touring the Dornish Marches, and, while I’m gone, I want Laena to oversee the nursery. Having you sit my throne just makes sense.”

“You...want to tour the Dornish Marches at a time when the Dornish are doubtlessly plotting against us?” Daemon asked, blinking slowly at her.

“The Dornish are always plotting,” Rhaenyra replied. “You’ve said that to me numerous times.”

“Don’t be obtuse,” Daemon scowled. “You know what I mean. You’re going with her, I assume?”

“I am,” Jon nodded.

“What exactly is your plan here, and why am I not involved in it?” Daemon asked. “I figured I’d be brought in when the Martells finally made their move.”

“If you’re involved, they won’t,” Rhaenyra replied. “I’ll explain everything but only if you promise not to interfere in any way.”

“Provided I don’t think you’re doing anything stupid or needlessly reckless, I can promise that,” Daemon said, and Rhaenyra’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m going to have, alongside Syrax, Jon and Morghul with me, though the latter will be well hidden,” Rhaenyra replied. “I’m going to be perfectly safe, I assure you.”

“Well, go on then,” Daemon drawled, sitting down and looking back and forth between them. “Explain.”

Rhaenyra took a breath and launched into an explanation she'd been working on for a few weeks at that point.

"...and with the last of the rubble having been cleared away moons ago, work on the foundation of this grand sept has progressed well," Gorman Massey concluded. "I suspect it will take more than a decade to conclude, as the princess' plans are quite...extensive, but we have the funds for it and I am personally overseeing the project."

"Splendid," Viserys beamed. "I cannot wait to see my daughter's vision made real. This sept will be a marvel, possibly on par with the wonders described by Lomas Longstrider."

"It will be marvelous, I assure you," Gorman said. "I was most honored that the princess wanted me to oversee it."

"She wrote to me about that some time ago," Viserys nodded. "I'd have arranged for someone myself, working with the Small Council on it, but she was insistent on it being you."

"As I said, an honor," Gorman smiled.

"Of course she wanted one of her loyalists on it," Alicent thought to herself, suppressing a scowl as she sat next to Viserys at the feast. "The paranoid fool probably thought I'd sabotage it somehow otherwise."

If it were anything other than a sept, she'd have been tempted, admittedly, but she couldn't afford for anything to go wrong with this particular project, lest her family be suspected. Between her own mutual enmity with Rhaenyra and the fact that, if this new sept became the center of the faith as her father feared, it would diminish their family's influence, it wouldn't be hard for the little bitch to make people suspect them, and her father had already made it clear that that was something they couldn't allow.

"Between how things are progressing with the sept and the latest report we received from the men in charge of the canal, the princess' plans seem to be progressing quite well," Lyman said softly, and Viserys chuckled.

"It sounds like Lord Matthos has arranged for half the men in the Reach to come work on that," he laughed.

"He wants to make...what progress he can...before winter comes...and freezes the ground," Lyonel explained.

"Quite right," Viserys nodded. "I do hope this one doesn't last too long."

"As do we all, my love," Alicent smiled.

"Your daughter surprised me, your Grace," Borros Baratheon boomed from his nearby seat. "I've never known a woman to care so much about construction projects."

"She gets it from my grandmother," Viserys said proudly. "All through her life the good queen busied herself trying to make the lives of our people better."

“She was a remarkable woman, Your Grace,” Lyman smiled. “I see hints of her and the old king in your daughter.”

“*What is it about a big pair of tits that makes such fools of men?*” Alicent wondered, downing the rest of her cup of wine and glaring at a nearby servant until he refilled it. “*Thank the gods I can drink freely again.*”

She would, to the end of her days, never understand what it was about Rhaenyra that so bewitched the men around her. Even ones as old as Lyman Beesbury, who should have known better, seemed utterly taken in. It wasn't true of everyone, of course, and, in fact, most of the council seemed to understand what a vain, unserious girl she was, but Viserys, Lyonel Strong, and that old fool were utterly under her spell, and the king, the hand, and the master of coin gave her more than enough influence even outside her title.

“I do hope she enjoys the Marches,” Viserys murmured, and almost everyone there went silent.

“I'm sorry, Your Grace, you mean the Dornish Marches?” Borros asked. “Why would the princess be going there?”

“I've long thought that she should try to find ladies-in-waiting from more of the kingdoms,” Viserys explained. “Almost all of them are from the Riverlands, you see.”

“She's hardly the first woman to, as a young girl, develop early fondnesses and see little reason to explore elsewhere,” Tyland said neutrally. “My niece, Cerelle, is much the same, according to my brother.”

“But Rhaenyra isn't a young girl anymore, and I'm glad that she's finally seen cause to look further afield,” Viserys murmured. “I've informed her that you're not at home at the moment, my lord.”

“It will be a shame to miss her,” Borros murmured. “I'd suggest my own daughters but, alas, they are too young.”

“Is this entirely wise, your Grace?” Jasper asked. “The risk...”

“What risk?” Borros demanded, his face reddening slightly. “You're not suggesting my lands are unsafe, surely.”

“Of course not, my lord,” Jasper replied, nodding to his suzerain lord, “but the Dornish are, just now, furious with us and the Marches...”

“I had the same concern,” Viserys nodded, “but not only will Rhaenyra be bringing a sizable retinue and Syrax, but the Dornish seem to be rather distracted at the moment.”

“Distracted?” Jasper asked, and Viserys gestured to Larys, who nodded.

“It seems that some among the Dornish lords blame Prince Qoren for the disaster that unfolded at the Stepstones,” the master of whispers replied. “Edmund Wyl, Lord Wyland's cousin, has apparently captured him and is leading his men in an uprising against Sunspear, one that the Yronwoods and the Fowlers appear to have joined into.”

“That...when did we learn this?” Jasper asked in shock.

“My spies have been hearing rumors of unrest in Dorne for weeks, though only today did I receive anything substantiated,” Larys replied. “The entire council would have been briefed during tomorrow’s meeting, of course.”

“Are you sure it’s true?” Borros asked. “The Dornish are thieving, conniving, dishonest cunts at the best of time...apologies for the language, my queen. My father always said you could trust the average Dornishman as far as, well, not that we could throw them, but perhaps as far as the average woman could.”

He chuckled at that, only to redden slightly as no one else found it that funny.

“I’m doing everything I can to ascertain the truth of the matter, my lord, but for the moment, it does appear to be true,” Larys replied.

“Rhaenyra’s wanted to see the Dornish Marches since she was a girl,” Viserys said, failing to notice how Cole, standing guard near his chair, stiffened, “and when she expressed a desire to tour the area, I wrote back to say that she shouldn’t unless a number of precautions were taken, all of which she’s agreed to. The Marcher lords have increased patrols near the mountain passes, and with her having a dragon on hand, that should be more than enough for her to remain safe.”

“I’ll send some of my own men to accompany her as well, Your Grace,” Borros nodded, fully aware that under no circumstances could he allow the Princess of Dragonstone to be wounded or worse in his lands. There was precedent for that already, and it was one of the most wretched moments in the history of the Stormlands.

“What in the world are you doing, Rhaenyra?” Alicent thought to herself, trying to figure out just what could motivate the girl to travel now. “She’s not taking the princes with her, surely?”

“No, they’re staying at Dragonstone, and she’s getting Daemon to watch over them while she’s away,” Viserys replied. “I did question the timing, but she pointed out that she’d wanted to do this for years and that, as she’s looking to expand her household just now, it probably wouldn’t be the only short trip she took in the next little while, something that I think is quite good. I regret not seeing more of the kingdoms before I became king, in truth.”

“You and the queen could do as the old king and the good queen did,” Lyman murmured, and Viserys chuckled.

“Perhaps when the children are older,” he replied, not outright wanting to say that he felt like he had too many responsibilities to be away from the keep for any extended period of time.

“That’s why Viserys isn’t questioning this too much,” Alicent thought to herself. *“He’s expressed before that he wished he’d taken tours of the kingdoms when he was younger, and seeing Rhaenyra do that would make sense to him even if he was almost physically incapable of seeing anything wrong with her actions generally. It doesn’t make sense, though. Her sons are mere moons old and while they’ll be well looked after by her household, I can’t fathom a mother parting from children as young as they are. She’s up to something, but what?”*

She sat back in her chair, letting the conversation around her drone on as the subject changed, and decided to write to her father on the matter later that evening.

“Gods, I had forgotten how tedious and infuriating it can be listening to peasants,” Daemon muttered a couple days later as he entered the chambers Rhaenyra had let him and Laena use and found his wife lying on the bed, holding a scroll in her hands. “If I have to listen to one more cunt complain about something that happened to his sheep, I’m feeding it and him to Caraxes.”

“Just let Gerardys handle the petitions,” Laena said without looking up from the scroll. “Nyra usually entrusts him with overseeing things here anyway.”

“Oh, I plan to, but I figure it would be best to make a show of putting in the work here for at least the first week,” Daemon sighed as he sat down next to her and removed his boots. “The man has a capable mind, I’ll grant you, but he lacks the spine and balls of a warrior, and I want to make clear to the people here that if they try to take advantage of his lack of fire, they’ll have to contend with mine. Did I age into a man too wizened to look at overnight, or is that the most interesting thing ever written?”

“You barely look any older than I am,” Laena chuckled, looking over at him. “I found a scroll in Rhaenyra’s collection that I don’t think she or Jon had looked at before.”

“They’ve had the damn things for the better part of two years,” Daemon muttered. “How could that be possible?”

“They do largely look alike rolled up,” Laena shrugged. “Perhaps it just got moved about and overlooked. Look at it.”

“Very...what the fuck?” Daemon asked as he took it from her and started reading.

“An apt description,” Laena quipped, and he barely heard her, becoming instantly engrossed. “Rather fanciful, no?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Daemon said.

“Do you think it could possibly be real?” Laena asked. “I mean, it seems so...bizarre.”

“Our people created wonders the likes of which no one alive today can comprehend,” Daemon replied. “How’d you find this anyway?”

“Rhaenyra might not have let us stay in her chambers if she’d known how quickly I’d find the hidden room she keeps these in,” Laena chuckled. “I don’t know why she hasn’t shown us the whole collection yet anyway. It’s not like she can’t trust us. This flesh magic, though, it’s all fanciful, surely, right?”

“Tell me what’s really bothering you,” Daemon rumbled, and she sighed, looking down.

“Laenor,” Laena replied. “If we’d had this, could we have saved him?”

“No,” Daemon said, shaking his head. “Granted, I haven’t read through the entire scroll yet, but by the time we found Laenor, he’d been gone for a while. No magic I’ve ever heard of can bring people back from that. This seems to be about changing the body in physical ways, and I’d be utterly shocked if Rhaenyra hadn’t tried it out, vain little thing that she is.”

“Oh, please,” Laena chuckled, “as if someone that perfect would have any use for...”

She trailed off, her eyes going wide as a thought occurred to her.

“Laena?” Daemon asked.

“Daemon, do you remember how weirdly quickly both Rhaenyra and I gave birth?” Laena asked.

“I do,” Daemon nodded. “It seemed like remarkable good fortune.”

“What if it wasn’t?” Laena asked.

“What, you think Rhaenyra Targaryen used ancient Valyrian magic to make your births go more quickly?” Daemon asked.

“There was a moment during her birth where we thought she’d passed out,” Laena replied. “She closed her eyes and went utterly still to the point that we all started to worry about her. When she opened them, she seemed perfectly fine, and then, almost immediately afterward, she was ready to push.”

“I won’t pretend to know enough about the process of childbirth to be able to say much, but I assume that was more than a little odd, yes?” Daemon asked.

“Both births were odd,” Laena replied. “When it starts out, the woman experiences this agonizing, burning pain that comes and goes in waves, and as the waves come closer and closer together, it means that you’re getting closer to being able to safely push the babe out. That whole process usually takes hours; it can even take...longer than I want to contemplate.”

“Aemma’s final birth was like that,” Daemon murmured, “as was Mother’s.”

“Ours were over and done with so quickly, and while I wasn’t about to question my good fortune then, I do have to wonder now if it wasn’t her doing,” Laena said. “I don’t know why she wouldn’t just tell me.”

“Rhaenyra’s become rather accustomed to keeping things to herself,” Daemon replied. “*Such as the fact she’s been fucking my supposed son since almost the moment she met him and your nephews are actually his.*”

“I suppose I can understand not wanting to openly discuss using magic, but this...if half the scrolls we haven’t seen so far contain things as fascinating as this...” Laena breathed and Daemon chuckled.

“She’s likely going to be away for at least a moon, so we could help her better organize them,” he smirked, and Laena grinned.

“We’d be doing her a service, really,” she replied. “They can’t leave her chambers at all, of course.”

“Of course,” Daemon nodded. “I might wish my niece had been more forthcoming with us about these things than she was, but I can understand her wanting to make sure that no one outside of the family found them.”

“What a wonder she and Jon found,” Laena murmured, getting out of bed and walking over to the nearest wall. “This stone here proved to be loose, and...”

She trailed off as she pulled it out, making a section of the wall next to her shift open.

“I suddenly realize that I really haven’t explored this castle thoroughly enough,” Daemon said, and Laena giggled.

“Want to make a project of it?” she asked, grabbing a nearby torch as he opened up the hidden door and pushing it in to light up the room.

“Fucking hells,” Daemon breathed as he saw just how many scrolls were in the room. “Maybe I should just let Gerardys handle the grunt work here.”

“I think we’re going to be rather busy,” Laena grinned.

“Fuck!” Elia shrieked as she came, falling forward onto her belly, and Qoren groaned, letting go and filling her up with what he swore was every lost drop of seed in his balls.

The two of them fell together onto the simple bed below, panting for breath, and the prince chuckled, leaning in and inhaling deeply of her scent.

“I missed you too,” Qoren sighed, making her snort.

“Clearly,” Elia said, sighing in relief as he pulled out of her and rolled over. “Even knowing where it was, this place was annoying to find.”

“Isn’t it great?” Qoren asked. “It might not be a grand and opulent palace, but this fortress is going to benefit us greatly over the coming moons and years.”

The Vulture’s Roost had fallen into disrepair after the death of the second Vulture King, and it had been in this state that some of Qoren’s father’s men found it years ago. Deciding to build it up again, just in case it would ever become necessary, the man had invested quite a bit of coin into the reconstruction, the results of which were plainly evident. The sandstone walls gleamed in the sun when it actually managed to reach through the gaps in the mountains all around them.

Sitting near the source of the River Wyl, it wasn’t huge, but it was strong, with a keep built into the side of the mountain, in which they’d carved numerous tunnels to funnel men and resources in and out. Its few towers were constructed so close to the peaks that while they allowed their sentries to gaze out at the valleys below, they themselves enjoyed a degree of obscurity, something that he was sure was going to prove itself useful soon enough.

“As much as I have always enjoyed your company, and as sure as I am that you enjoy mine too, I am not so arrogant as to think you came all this way just for this,” Qoren grinned. “Has our plan worked?”

“Word has spread to King’s Landing of this supposed Wyl Uprising,” Elia nodded. “I know for certain that Viserys’ spymaster has heard the rumors by now, and as Borros Baratheon is in the capital at the moment, I should know soon enough if the court believes them.”

“He truly is as much of a fool as they say?” Qoren asked, and his first lover chuckled.

“If it had been he and not Roger Baratheon that the last Vulture King faced, I’m confident the result would have been quite different,” Elia replied. “He’s a warrior, but not a man of strategy or cunning...or letters, if rumor is to be believed.”

“He cannot read?” Qoren asked in disbelief. “Is he a lackwit?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but suffice it to say he is not the sort of man I would expect to keep himself from blurting out something he’d find as amusing as the idea of a Dornish civil war to the first whore he beds,” Elia replied, “and if he does, I will learn of it soon enough.”

“Good,” Qoren muttered, standing up and walking over to the map he had spread out on a nearby table. “Talk of traitorous lords and bloody battles fought in the sands of Dorne should make every lord north of the Red Mountains breathe a sigh of relief, and that is precisely what I want them to do.”

“It’s a sound strategy,” Elia smiled as she stood up, and he licked his lips at the sight of her.

With lightly tanned skin, ebony hair, and purple eyes, Elia Dayne would have been a great beauty even if she wasn’t as voluptuous as she was. He’d thought she was beautiful from the time he was a boy, and when he finally learned just what beauty could rouse in a man, he knew he had to have her. She was his mother’s friend, barely any younger than she’d been, and that had presented its challenges, but Qoren was nothing if not persistent, and in time he’d gained his heart’s desire.

“Fuck, you’re still as beautiful as the first time I laid eyes on you,” he sighed, and she smiled.

“Flatterer,” Elia whispered. “Time has taken its toll on me; this I know.”

“It’s only enhanced you,” Qoren murmured, reaching out and digging his fingers into the soft flesh of her left hip as he cupped one of her large, full breasts.

“There will be time for that again later,” Elia chuckled, playfully slapping his hands away. “I would hear your plans if you’ve finished them. Once I know your first target, I can better focus my efforts.”

“Blackhaven is the nearest keep, and it’s been sacked before, but it could prove a difficult nut to crack,” Qoren said, pointing to the mark on his map. “Tall black basalt walls and towers sit on a sharp peak surrounded by chasms so deep that any who fell into them would be lost forever. Some castles have moats, which can be incredibly dangerous, but Blackhaven has something even worse, and if they managed to fill it all in with water, it would actually make it less hazardous.”

“What of Stonehelm?” Elia asked.

“The location is better, but the keep is larger and stronger,” Qoren replied. “The Wyls want to strike it, of course, after what happened the last time, but I wonder if Harvest Hall wouldn’t be a better first target. It’s more out of the way, I’ll allow, but it’s a simpler keep than the other two and would be easier to sack. This is to look like the work of overly well-organized and equipped bandits, a banished lordling who set himself up as a vulture king and decided to attack the nearby keeps. It wouldn’t do to hit one of the stronger targets first.”

“So Horn Hill is out,” Elia chuckled, and he shook his head.

“As if I need to answer that,” Qoren murmured, eyeing the location of the most difficult target of the bunch. “I need to give the Targaryens cause to think that this is a big enough threat to require a response, but not so great a threat that they’d need to see to it themselves just yet.”

“You think they’d chase you all the way in here?” Elia asked.

“If I give them reason to and if this Borros is as much a fool as you say, that should be simple enough,” Qoren replied. “I need to cause just the right amount of damage to lure in the Stormlanders and then deliver them a crushing enough defeat to make the dragons want to intervene themselves lest they appear unable to protect their own people.”

“I saw a few of the scorpions still being constructed as I arrived,” Elia said, and he nodded.

“You only saw a few of them, I’m sure,” Qoren nodded. “These mountains will be lethal to them by the time I’m done. The largest dragons, like the black beast that slaughtered so many of our people, might be impervious to their bolts, but their riders aren’t, and while this Jon Snow could fly about freely above the water while all the people trying to kill him were too low down to have any hope of hitting him, here in the mountains, with a hundred or more hidden scorpions built on ledges high up and near to the level he’ll be flying at, that will be a different story.”

“If he comes,” Elia murmured, and Qoren nodded.

“I’ll need to make him come,” he replied. “If we cause enough damage to the Marches to make both the Baratheons and the Tyrells unhappy and make it clear that we’re doing it because of the actions of a bastard, that will make this Targaryen king squirm. He won’t hand Jon Snow over; he’s his nephew, but his refusal will anger them and cause strife in his lands, all while we build up here in the mountains where their advantage in numbers will do them no favors.”

“And maintain the fiction that it’s Edmund Wyl acting on his own account,” Elia grinned.

“A brigand and a traitor who I drove off after he rose up against me?” Qoren asked with a grin. “How could I possibly answer for such a man?”

“Will he be able to carry out this task once you leave him here?” Elia asked.

“He’s a capable commander and a most motivated one,” Qoren replied.

“His father,” Elia nodded.

“Most of the men here lost someone to the dragon’s fire,” Qoren scowled.

“I’ll continue to feed the dragon’s tantalizing little rumors of battles being fought in this region,” Elia murmured. “The last few I had our people spread spoke of the Fowlers and the Yronwoods joining him.”

“Wait, what?” Qoren asked, looking suddenly cross. “If they learn about that, they’re not going to be pleased that we’re calling their honor and loyalty into question.”

“They’ll get over it,” Elia said flatly. “Tales grow with the telling, my prince. When you wish to spread false rumors to your enemies, it often pays to make them seem larger than what you actually want them to believe first and then scale things down from there. Having the first account be wildly exaggerated actually makes it seem more realistic.”

“That...that makes sense,” Qoren said as he realized she was right, and she chuckled.

“I’ve been doing this for a while, Qoren,” Elia said softly, “and so has Larys Strong. I know what I look for in reports, and thus I know what to make sure he sees. How much longer do you think it will be before you’ve ‘driven Edmund Wyl off?’”

“Probably another couple moons,” Qoren replied. “I’m not leaving here until I’m sure that everything is prepared for the battles to come, and you saw yourself that our preparations are far from finished, not to mention that half my bannermen haven’t arrived yet.”

“You’ve still moved remarkably quickly,” Elia said, and he smiled grimly.

“That’s what Father and Uncle Moran wanted to ensure that we could do after what happened the last time our people tangled with the dragons,” Qoren replied. “The Fourth Dornish War, the pricks call it, as if it actually counted as one. Not a single living warrior made it to their shores.”

“I do wish we could figure out how the Targaryens learned ahead of time of what Prince Morion was doing,” Elia muttered.

“It matters not,” Qoren sighed. “All that matters is that they don’t learn what we’re doing here this time, not until it’s too late for them.”

“Our spies are actively working to keep us abreast of what they do know,” Elia said, turning as a knock came to the door.

“A letter arrived for Lady Elia, my prince,” one of his guards said. “I...figured you might know where she is.”

Elia rolled her eyes and walked over, not caring in the slightest about her nudity, and opened the door just enough to stick her arm out of, chuckling as the guard handed her the letter without a word. She opened it up and moved to the window for light, her eyes going wide as she saw what was written.

“They knew you’d be here?” Qoren asked.

“They knew you’d read this letter if I didn’t,” Elia replied. “The court in King’s Landing does believe that you’re fighting against rebel lords right now, but that’s not all.”

“What is it?” Qoren asked.

“Princess Rhaenyra is traveling to Blackhaven,” Elia replied, and Qoren’s jaw dropped. “She’s apparently wanted to tour this region for a while and decided that now was as good a time as any.”

“That...really?” Qoren asked, barely able to believe his luck.

“I never believe anything until I hear it from at least three different agents, but it’s entirely possible,” Elia replied, handing him the letter.

“Coming with a large retinue and...only her dragon,” Qoren said, slowly blinking repeatedly as he considered the implications of that. “Oh, how very interesting.”

“My prince?” Elia asked. “I’d advise you to wait until we’ve gotten any confirmation about this to start making plans based on it.”

“Of course,” Qoren replied, but even as he said that, he couldn’t help but let his eyes be drawn to the mark on his map for Blackhaven.

“You know, I probably should have figured out sooner that the Stormlands are really fucking wet!” Harwin shouted to be heard over the rain barreling down on them as they rode through the muddy pathway away from the source of the Wendwater.

“You’ll get used to it, Strong,” Thoros Fell called out, making him laugh. “Are you well, Princess?”

“I just want to get out of this,” Rhaenyra hissed, soaked to the bone and livid. The skies had seemed perfectly clear as they departed from her ship, having already moved the horses onto dry land, much to their joy, and yet what seemed like mere moments later, it had turned black and began to loose what felt like half the ocean onto her. “How far away is this inn you mentioned?”

“Not much further, Princess,” Ser Thoros replied.

“I think I see light in the distance,” Jon called out.

“How the fuck are they keeping it lit?” Harwin grumbled as he spotted the same thing.

It turned out to be a lantern well-shielded by the mostly open structure above it, which turned out to be kept by the very inn that their escort had mentioned. Rhaenyra nearly jumped from her horse, trusting the men behind her to see her settled in the stable, and tore into the inn so quickly that Ser Harwin and Jon had to run after her.

“Princess,” the heir of Harrenhal whispered. “I know you’re uncomfortable, but please don’t escape us like that.”

“Pri...by the gods,” the innkeeper breathed. “I...I am honored...”

“I’m freezing,” Rhaenyra muttered. “I need a room, as nice as you have, and a bath, as hot as you can manage.”

“I’ll have towels brought as well and a dry robe you can wear to warm up,” the man nodded before practically running off to order the others about.

Rhaenyra removed the scarf she’d hastily draped over her head as she tried in vain to keep her hair dry in the ridiculous rain, only to finally notice that every single person in the room was staring at her. Jon rested his hand on Bloodletter’s hilt, giving them the most steely glance he could in his hilariously soaked state, and looked over as the innkeeper returned and slammed his fist on the nearest table.

“Mind your fucking business,” he barked, and the others finally looked away. “Sorry about that, Princess; we rarely see nobles in here, much less, well... My name’s Daryn, and welcome to the Three Fingers. Our finest room is being prepared, as is your bath, and my daughter Ilda here can show you to it as soon as it’s ready.”

“Thank you,” Rhaenyra nodded, feeling more grateful than she had in her entire life. “We needn’t stay the night or anything...I dearly hope, but until this wretched storm passes, we cannot go on.”

“Understood,” Daryn said. “How many men should I...dear gods...”

“We don’t need rooms for them all if we won’t need to stay that long,” Jon said as their men started to pile in, “but if you have warm food, that would be appreciated.”

“Right,” Daryn nodded. “I’ll get right on that.”

“Your lands are well named,” Ser Harwin chuckled as he spotted Ser Thoros, who laughed.

“I’ve often joked that we have to be the least creative people in all of Westeros,” the man chuckled, removing his helmet and letting his long brown hair tumble out. “Imagine if the others chose names the way we had. The Reach would be the Foodlands, the Riverlands would be the Warlands, Dorne would be the Whorelands...”

Despite herself and her mood, Rhaenyra giggled at that.

“What would the Westerlands be?” Jon asked.

“The Richcuntlands,” one of the other patrons called out, making them all burst out laughing.

Rhaenyra bit down gently on her cheek to stop from smiling at that, not wanting word of her agreeing with the sentiment spreading.

“Show some bloody respect around royalty, you boor,” his friend next to him chuckled, slapping his shoulder and making him look sheepish.

“I swear, despite the name, the Stormlands aren’t always like this, and a storm this intense should wear itself out quickly,” Ser Thoros said. “Storms are a lot like fire in that regard.”

“I’m no stranger to them, living on an island as I do, but that caught me off guard,” Rhaenyra sighed. “I didn’t get a chance to ask before the sky decided to drown us; who are you to Ser Willis?”

“His cousin,” Ser Thoros replied. “My brother is Lord Oryn, and when Lord Borros wrote to us about your imminent arrival, he sent me and a company of our men to see you safely on.”

“I appreciate it,” Rhaenyra smiled.

“Princess,” Ilda said. “Your room is ready.”

“Thank the gods,” Rhaenyra muttered. “Ser Jon, Ser Harwin?”

They both nodded and moved to follow just as a loud thump outside made everyone jump.

“Relax,” Rhaenyra called out. “That’s just Syrax.”

“You...your dragon is here, princess?” Daryn asked, paling slightly, and she chuckled.

“She doesn’t need a room, I assure you,” Rhaenyra quipped, “nor does she need feeding, and she will keep her distance while I’m here since I’m certain I’m not going to be threatened.”

“Of course,” Daryn nodded, and more than a few of the others looked away at the sudden reminder of just why it was that the Targaryens ruled over them all.

“Do...er, sorry, Princess, don’t mind me,” Ilda stammered, looking away, and, feeling rather generous just then, Rhaenyra smiled at her.

“Ask your question,” the princess said. “The worst I’ll say is no, I assure you.”

“Do you think I might be able to see your dragon before you leave?” she asked.

“If you manage to get my riding leathers even slightly wearable before then, I’ll be more than happy to let you catch a glimpse,” Rhaenyra replied, scowling at the sight of her soaked clothing.

“I’ll do all that I can,” Ilda smiled. “This is the room, Princess. It’s not much, but...”

“So long as it’s dry and the bath is warm, it will be fine,” Rhaenyra replied, trying not to let her disappointment show when she saw the wooden tub waiting for her. “*Needs must.*”

“Call if you need anything, Princess,” Jon murmured after he and Harwin finished looking around the room, just to be safe.

“I will,” Rhaenyra replied, nodding to them as they left her alone. She sighed and started undressing, hoping that this wasn’t a portent of how this trip was going to be. The water was warm, at least, and as she finished undressing and sank into it, she thought about just why she was there.

“*A little rain will be a small price to pay if this gets me Jon,*” she thought to herself, and no sooner did that thought cross her mind than a small, very familiar raven flew in and landed nearby, eyeing her with small, dark, entirely too intelligent eyes.

“My stalwart protector,” she whispered, grinning teasingly and sitting up just enough to let her large breasts rise out of the water. “You won’t let me go so much as a moment alone, will you?”

“No,” the raven croaked, and she giggled.

“I can’t believe it didn’t occur to either us of until you had done it that ravens are capable of speech,” she murmured softly. “Watch if you will, *Laenor*; you know I don’t mind.”

The bird her lover had named after their late friend nodded, and she grinned, washing up as best she could in simple water and, more than that, letting the warmth of it cure her of the chill she’d gotten out in the rain.

“*Now I just need to know if the young prince is going to take the bait,*” she thought to herself, her mind on the potential combat to come.