

“Oh dear,” Rhaenyra sighed as she finished reading her cousin Jeyne’s letter from within the comfortable confines of her solar.

“Is something wrong, Princess?” Carellen asked.

“Oh, just news from the Vale,” Rhaenyra replied. “Members of House Belmore were waylaid by mountain men on their way to the Eyrie. They fought them off, but Lord Belmore’s son was wounded, and they’re not sure if he’s going to recover.”

“That’s horrid,” Carellen shuddered. “I feel so bad for those poor people.”

“I don’t know how they stand it,” Elinda Massey murmured. “I don’t think I’d have ever left Stonedance if there were just entire clans of murderous bandits skulking through the Crownlands.”

“I’m surprised that your uncle didn’t kill them all,” Carellen commented. When Rhaenyra cocked an eyebrow at her, she explained, “I mean, it does sound like something he both would and could do with the Blood Wurm, and he was notoriously...bored in the Vale.”

“Bored is putting it mildly,” Rhaenyra thought to herself. “In truth, that does sound like something that he’d do to amuse himself, but it would have required him to do something to benefit the people of the Vale, which he’d have sooner gouged out his eyes than attempt.”

Her handmaiden did raise an interesting point, though. The people of the Vale loved her for her mother and would readily support her against the Hightowers if it came to war, but that didn’t mean that there wouldn’t be some benefit in strengthening her ties there. If she found a way to deal with the problem of the hill tribes, they’d probably build statues of her in every holdfast in the region.

“It would probably improve their agricultural output too,” she thought to herself, tapping her long nails on her desk. “Something to consider for another time.”

She certainly wasn’t about to gallivant off on some adventure in her state, even if she didn’t think doing so would infuriate her father, and she rested a hand on her still-flat belly with a warm smile.

“Did you feel him kick, Princess?” Elinda asked, her eyes widening with excitement.

“She’s not far enough along for that yet,” Carellen muttered.

“No, I haven’t even begun to show yet,” Rhaenyra smiled, setting her cousin’s letter down on her desk and grabbing her cup of water.

“Thank you again for agreeing to bring Ella into your service, Princess,” Carellen beamed. “She should arrive today.”

“You’ve been a wonderful companion and friend, Carellen,” Rhaenyra murmured. “I’m sure your sister will be just as lovely. She’s the only Strong left that I haven’t met.”

“Right, the only one,” Carellen muttered, looking down.

Just as Rhaenyra was about to ask what that was about, Ser Harwin knocked on the door.

“Your lord husband has arrived, Princess,” his deep, gruff voice boomed, and Rhaenyra stood up.

“Excellent,” she smiled, genuinely happy to have Laenor back.

For one thing, she had come to actually appreciate his company, but beyond that, the past moon, had been torture. Having to keep her voice, as she and Jon made love was deeply annoying. The fact that he had consistently been so tired at the end of the day that she’d spent most of her time on top had only made it worse.

“Shall we go?” Carellen asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Rhaenyra nodded. “Send him in, Ser Harwin.”

Laenor entered a moment later, barely even glancing at her ladies, and plopped himself unceremoniously down in the first chair he came across.

“Thank the bloody gods that’s over,” he sighed, pointing towards the pitcher of wine kept in the corner.

With an amused smile on her lips, Carellen poured him a cup of wine and handed it to him before turning to leave.

“You’re a dear,” Laenor complimented, drinking deeply.

“Is something wrong?” Rhaenyra asked as Ser Harwin closed the door behind his sister.

“The waters were less than pleasant on our way back,” Laenor replied. “The ships all made it, and the last of the treasure is being unloaded as we speak, but fuck, I’m glad that’s over. Father would kill me if he heard these words leave my lips, but I don’t want to even look at another ship for at least a moon.”

“Thank you for overseeing all this personally,” Rhaenyra chuckled, wincing at his obvious discomfort.

“Transferring a king’s ransom in loot isn’t a job you entrust to just anyone,” Laenor scoffed. “I was more suited to it than your lovely sworn shield, and you could hardly do it in your condition. How’s that...going anyway?”

“You’d swear I’ve eaten rotten meat for dinner nightly for weeks now from how I am when I wake,” Rhaenyra swore, “but Maester Gerardys assures me that that should taper off soon, and it hasn’t been quite as bad the last couple days.”

“I’d apologize, but it isn’t actually my fault,” Laenor quipped so quietly she just barely heard him, and she laughed. “How are things around here?”

“Going well,” Rhaenyra replied. “Dragonstone has been effectively managed for quite some time, so I didn’t have any fires to put out when we first arrived, and I’ve taken well to the business of ruling it.”

“You have a talent for it, it would seem,” Laenor murmured. “Where’s Jon? I haven’t seen him once in my short return trips over the past few weeks.”

“He’s...busy,” Rhaenyra replied, taking a moment to choose her words carefully. “He’s begun learning from the local blacksmith.”

“What?” Laenor asked. “Why? You keep him comfortable enough here, and his talent for violence is all he really needs to justify why you’re doing so.”

“Among the things that we took from the Dothraki were some scrolls,” Rhaenyra replied. “They were very old, written in Valyrian, and detailing the process of making Valyrian Steel.”

“What?” Laenor asked, his eyes going wide. “That...”

“Is something we’re keeping between us,” Rhaenyra cut him off. “If those techniques could be mastered again, it could be a tremendous boon for our family, but, for obvious reasons, we cannot entrust them to just anyone.”

“Right,” Laenor breathed. “How in the seven hells did they get their hands on something like this?”

“I have no idea,” Rhaenyra lied. “It came as a shock to us as well. I’m telling you about it because you have more reason than most to think that him becoming an apprentice blacksmith is odd. His age is all that makes it unusual to the rest of those around here, and few will really give it much thought at all. I don’t want this knowledge getting out, though. I’m not telling my father or my uncle for the time being, and I want your assurances that none of your family will learn either.”

“I swear,” Laenor nodded. “I understand you not wanting to tell your father, as the Hightowers would surely learn of it then, but why do you not want your uncle, Laena, or my parents to know?”

“I once overheard Ser Harrold say that three people could keep a secret perfectly well, provided two of them were dead,” Rhaenyra replied, swallowing thickly as she recalled the old Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. She’d liked him well enough, and certainly more than she liked his successor. “The more people that know, the greater the chance becomes of word spreading. I’d prefer that no one ever learn of the scrolls at all. If Jon becomes capable of producing actual Valyrian steel, I want people to think that he learned how to do so through experimentation.”

“That would give you plenty of reason to keep him close,” Laenor grinned. “Well, I’ll keep mum about it. Speaking of, my parents are going to be visiting us in the coming days.”

“Yes, your mother’s been around a couple times now,” Rhaenyra said, keeping her face blank, though Laenor sighed anyway.

“I swear she means well,” he muttered.

“She hasn’t been too bad,” Rhaenyra chuckled. “She’s just been rather...insistent in giving advice.”

“As I said before, she misses Laena,” Laenor muttered. “Has any word come from her or your uncle?”

“No,” Rhaenyra replied. “It takes quite a bit of time to get letters from a place as far away as Volantis.”

“Prince Nevio had heard from a contact of his that they arrived some weeks back,” Laenor murmured. “He sends his warmest regards, by the way.”

“That man,” Rhaenyra scowled, making him chuckle.

“Another one who means well,” Laenor said, his voice laced with amusement. “Anyway, I feel like I could eat the better part of a stag just now, so I’m going to go to the kitchens.”

“Right,” Rhaenyra nodded. “I have something to take care of as well. I am glad that the Pentoshi business is finally concluded.”

“You do still need to see that manse at some point,” Laenor reminded her. “We’re flying the next time we go, though.”

“We’ll see,” Rhaenyra murmured. “It probably won’t be until after I’ve given birth.”

“The last thing you’ll want to do with a newborn babe around is leave him or her here to go look at a house in a city you don’t care for,” Laenor chuckled. “It might be better to do it while you’re with child but before you start to...swell.”

“I’ll think about it,” Rhaenyra shrugged as he left.

“That’s it,” Symon nodded, carefully placing the thin strips of iron inside the fire to heat up.

“I’m getting better at gauging the heat,” Jon murmured as he worked the bellows.

“It’s the kind of thing you can eventually tell by eye,” Symon said. “Dirk, go refill that barrel.”

“Will do,” Dirk, Symon’s young apprentice, nodded, rushing off to get fresh water.

Jon had been deeply amused when he first arrived to learn that the blacksmith’s current apprentice was named after a weapon, or at least he assumed that was the thought behind the name. Symon pulled the iron pieces out of the fire and brought them to the anvil as Jon picked up a pair of hammers and gave him one.

“Alright, just like before,” Symon said gruffly. “Don’t fuck it up, and nails will be your job going forward.”

“Joy,” Jon thought to himself as he grabbed a pair of tongs and secured one of the strips of iron in place.

The sound of hammers striking hot metal filled the smoky room as the pair of them got to work. It had been a couple of weeks since he’d even been invited to touch a hammer. It had taken three days after that point for Symon to stop barking at him each time he struck anything. He had known that blacksmithing was a difficult profession, but he hadn’t grasped just how much so.

Even the simple act of hammering metal out was a task requiring as much precision as archery. One couldn’t hit the iron or steel they were working with too hard or too softly, and missing the mark even a little could ruin things depending on how far into a job you were. It would apparently be years before he’d be trusted to touch actual steel, as it was far more expensive than iron, but then, Symon didn’t think that he’d be trusted to try his hand at even this for several moons, and he’d proven himself adequately so far.

“Well, you’re a big bugger at least,” Symon muttered gruffly as Jon introduced himself.

“That will come in handy, I’m sure,” Jon remarked, not sure what else to say.

“There’s more to this job than strength,” Symon muttered, “though it will be nice not to have to toughen up a scrawny cunt for once. Come in.”

Jon entered the hot, humid workshop, and his eyes watered at the thick smoke around.

“You get used to that,” Symon chuckled as he heard Jon cough. “Dirk, get your ass out here!”

A short, yet strong-looking boy with sandy hair and dark eyes emerged from the other room and looked up at Jon with interest.

“Are you a knight?” he asked.

“No,” Symon replied before he could. “This is Jon. Jon, this is Dirk. Jon’s going to be apprenticing here for a while.”

“But he’s...” Dirk went to ask, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Never mind what he is,” Symon ordered. “Has that iron shipment arrived yet?”

“Not yet,” Dirk replied, and Symon grumbled.

“Run along and ask that prick Mychal what’s keeping him,” Symon ordered, and Dirk ran off. “Now, Jon, I’ll be honest with you. If this request hadn’t come right from the princess, I’d never have taken you on.”

“Why is that?” Jon asked. “I know apprentices are generally boys, but I figured that was more because it would be a waste of time to not get them started early.”

“This is a hard profession, Jon,” Symon replied. “Every smith’s got only so many years in him before it starts to take too great a toll. Apprentices generally last at least seven years too, so taking apprentices as young as we generally do means that by the time he has a good grasp of what he’s doing, he’s still got a lot of good years left in him. By the time you reach the journeyman stage of your career, you’ll be past the point where you’ll really want to take a wife and start a family. I don’t really see the point in this.”

“I won’t be taking a wife,” Jon replied. “I’m a bastard whose noble family was kind enough not to kick me out into the cold but whose prospects are slim. I was going to join the Night’s Watch, to be honest, but...”

“You learned that it was nothing but a bunch of thieving, raping, murdering cunts?” Symon guessed.

“Something like that,” Jon nodded, not bothering to point out that there were good men among all the crud at the wall. “I have a talent with the blade and could fight in tourneys but I’ve always been fascinating by smithing and wanted to learn what I could. When I expressed this to the Lord Laenor, pointing out that it was likely too late for me to start, he mentioned it to the princess, who took it upon herself to inquire.”

“She’s a wonder that one,” Symon chuckled. “I figured they called her the realm’s delight because of her beauty, particularly after I got a look at her, but she’s surprisingly sweet for one so highborn.”

“She’s incredible,” Jon agreed. “I can see why his grace is so insistent on her remaining his heir instead of her brothers.”

Symon just cleared his throat and nodded, looking uncomfortable at the prospect of even discussing such matters.

“Now, the bellows here will be what takes up much of your time here starting out, since fetching heavy things for me is part of what’s going to put meat on Dirk’s scrawny bones,” he said, changing the subject. “Each day I expect you here bright and early. If the fire hasn’t been lit yet, you’ll do so and tend to it as I get started with the day’s first jobs. Try them out; they’re pretty self-explanatory.”

Jon grasped the handles of the bellows and squeezed them tight, getting a feel for them. It wasn’t difficult, but he understood how it could grow tiring over time. A rush of air pushed into the forge, causing the flames to flare higher.

“That’s it,” Symon nodded. “Keep that up until I say so.”

Jon did as he said, steadily increasing the heat of the fire. Symon watched the flames like a hawk, waiting for the exact moment when they’d be where he wanted them, and after a time, he held up his hand. Jon stopped and watched him pick up his tongs and use them to place a solid piece of iron in the fire. He kept it there for a while in silence, waiting, and when was sufficiently heated, he removed the iron and brought it to his anvil.

“Watch closely,” Symon said, grabbing a hammer.

Jon did, watching the molten metal lengthen and thin out with each loud strike. He didn’t know what the man was working on and figured that he wouldn’t appreciate being asked just then, so he watched in silence as it got longer and longer, tapering out near the end. Once it was the shape that Symon was looking for, he brought it to the thinnest section of the anvil and, holding it steadily with his tongs, started striking the thin end. It curled around the narrow piece of cold iron, forming a hook shape. With that done, he picked up a long, sharp instrument and set about hammering it into the thicker end of it until he’d punched a hole clean through.

“This is going to hold my new hammer,” Symon explained once he was done. As he carefully moved the hook to the barrel of water nearby, he added, “Every apprentice I’ve ever taught has been a boy who came in convinced that I spent all my time making weapons for knights to wield. I do that, and armor too, as I’m currently doing for the princess, but most of my time, just like that of any smith, is spent on making things like this or fixing simple tools.”

“That makes sense,” Jon murmured.

“Good enough,” Symon muttered as he plucked the finished nail out of the water it had been quenched in. “I’m going to need a lot of these in the coming weeks, so get as many done as you can today before you head out.”

“Alright,” Jon nodded before getting to work.

The fact that Jon returned to the castle each night was something that the two of them hadn't discussed at all. He knew that a more curious man might have raised the subject, but Symon seemed to be the sort more than willing to keep his nose out of others' business, which Jon appreciated. Part of that lack of curiosity might have stemmed from how distracted the man had been for the last week. His wife had successfully given birth to a pair of twins, and all three of them seemed to be doing well, despite how close they had come to dying. The reminder of what had happened with them made Jon think about Harra, and Jon wondered if Rhaenyra had been to see the prisoner yet.

Harra glared balefully at Rhaenyra as she stepped into view, securely bound to her chair. The guards who watched her normally nodded respectfully at the princess and left, more than used to the routine by now. Ser Harwin left as well, and Rhaenyra smiled as she watched him go. He really was the ideal sworn shield, loyal, capable, and more than willing to keep his mouth shut and give no thought to something odd done by his charge. She imagined that his time with the gold cloaks had taught him that when a Targaryen wanted a moment with a criminal, you were best off leaving them be.

Harra screamed at her from behind her gag, the most she could do just then. Ser Harwin's one objection after the first time had been that Harra could move her head around and there was a possibility that she could try to bite the princess. Realizing that he was right, she'd ordered an additional precaution to be taken and was pleased that she had. She walked around the chair, seeing Harra's furious dark eyes follow her as she went, and placed a hand on the woman's shoulder.

“She's stopped struggling at least,” she thought to herself, grateful for the fact.

Her prisoner had been confused and terrified the second time Rhaenyra showed up to see her but had relaxed when she realized that the reason for it wasn't to torment her more. After that, she'd taken to struggling fruitlessly in her chair, which Rhaenyra had found annoying but not something worth doing anything about. She'd tire herself out while the princess focused on clearing her mind and relaxing, and then she'd be able to try to do what all of the scrolls she'd read said that she should.

“Not that it's worked yet,” she grumbled mentally.

It was frustrating to try something day in and day out without seeing any progress at all. Jon was finally starting to get a basic grasp of Valyrian, enough so that she'd taught him the basic dragon commands. It was still slow going, and it would be quite a while yet before he could converse in the language, but it was something, and while she was thrilled, seeing him learn it made her own failures even more annoying.

“Being with child is likely not helping,” she thought to herself before huffing.

The more she thought, the less likely she'd be to accomplish anything today. She wished for a moment that she could be more like Alicent's ladies, whom she was sure seldom had any thoughts pass through their heads, and that made her smile for a moment. Letting her face fall, she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing.

Long, slow breaths in and out were helpful for inducing the blank state of mind she was going for, or so she'd read, and so she did her best to keep them steady. As she'd done so many times before, she felt herself calm down, her heart rate slowing and her mind stilling. After the first few times, she reached a point where she could genuinely make her mind go blank, focusing on nothing at all just as she relaxed completely. With that achieved, she focused on the hand resting on Harra's shoulder and tried to feel, through that connection, the other woman's form.

"*Nothing*," she hissed mentally, growing frustrated as all she could feel was the physical sensation of the clothed skin under her fingers and palm.

She didn't know what she was even supposed to feel. The scrolls spoke as though she'd enter a state where she could see every bone, muscle, and organ inside the other woman in her mind's eye or something like that, and she had no idea how she was supposed to, if she even did see anything like that, know that she wasn't just imagining it.

Harra was of very slightly above-average height, with a slim, unremarkable figure. She had small hands, slightly oversized feet, sort of stubby legs, and a plain, round face framed by straight brown hair. She could picture the woman clearly, but that wasn't the same as what she was trying to achieve, and she had no clue how she'd even know the difference.

"*Just relax and try again*," she thought to herself, trying to push away her irritation.

She focused again on her breathing, working to empty her mind of all distracting thoughts so she could give it another try. Bit by bit she felt herself calm down again until she was in a state of pure mental serenity. Maester Gerardys had warned her that stress was bad for the babe, and if the opposite was true, then her regular visits to the dungeons should be doing wonders for her little boy or girl. She smirked and put that errant thought aside, letting the others go too until all that there was in her mind was an endless expanse of inky darkness...

And water.

She furrowed her brow in confusion and focused on the odd, intrusive thought. She could hear the distinct sound of rushing water in her mind. She'd spent enough time by the sea or on a ship in her life to know what that sounded like. There was even a strangely rhythmic beating too, as though waves were crashing against the side of a ship with bizarre regularity. Just as she was beginning to wonder if being wed to a Velaryan could have this effect, she realized that the strange sound was coming from her left hand, and her eyes opened wide in shock.

"Blood," she breathed, her own heartbeat quickening in excitement as she realized what she'd heard.

Harra reacted to her word, and started struggling to look around, see her more clearly.

"I didn't mean yours," Rhaenyra assured her. She had meant her blood, but not in the sense that she seemed to fear.

Harra continued to struggle anyway, yelling into the gag, and Rhaenyra rolled her eyes and decided to wait her out. She was given enough food and water to survive, but she wasn't exactly brimming with energy, and she grew tired quickly, going still in her chair. The princess closed her eyes and calmed her mind again, feeling far better than she had before.

She knew that the scroll warned about it being possible to let your imagination get the better of you while you worked at this first step, but she was confident that that wasn't the case. For one thing, she'd expected to have an image pop into her head, not hear things as she had, and beyond that, blood hadn't been the first thing on her mind. As she let her thoughts slip away, she focused on that sound again and was able to conjure it back up quickly.

It was blood, rushing through the tight confines of a narrow vein as it was pumped through the body with great force and speed. The more Rhaenyra focused on the rushing blood, the more she was able to attune her senses to it, and soon, in her mind's eye, she saw what looked like a dark, tight tunnel. She raced through it at a rate of speed that even her little lady couldn't manage, and the feeling was exhilarating.

She had no idea where in Harra's body she was, so to speak, but she got the distinct sense that she was moving towards something important. Following it alone in silence, she smiled, letting herself fall even more deeply into the trance. She had nowhere to be anytime soon and was more than happy to see whatever she could with this bit of magical success she'd had. She kept moving along, farther and farther, getting progressively closer to the destination she sensed, and then...there was a loud burst all around her.

"Her heart," she realized as the drop of blood she was following suddenly felt like it had somehow taken a breath before being pushed through a much wider tunnel.

The pressure was, if anything, even greater, though, and she raced along this new winding path with a wide grin. She stayed there for several minutes, mapping out the entire labyrinth of blood vessels through Harra's body. It was fascinating, but more than that, it was a step forward; the first bit of actual progress she had made since she first started this.

"I can actually do this," she thought to herself, utterly jubilant. *"I can master this and use it to save my family."*

With a wide smile, she continued to follow the blood through Harra's body, already eager to take the next step.

"Why do we need so many bloody nails anyway?" Jon grumbled mentally as he trudged back to the castle.

The guards nodded at him as he passed, more than used to his presence by now, and he'd barely gotten inside when he was stopped by someone he hadn't even known was on the island.

"Jon, good evening," Laenor piped up as he spotted him. "You look exhausted.

"I often am these days," Jon chuckled. "I didn't realize you were back."

"Done, finally," Laenor sighed. "I liked Pentos more than Rhaenyra did, but I'll still be happy not to see it for a bit."

Jon chuckled at that.

"Walk with me," Laenor murmured. "I'm dining in my chambers, and there's more than enough for two."

“That sounds nice,” Jon sighed. “I am going to need to wash up a little, though.”

“Yes, your hands look awful,” Laenor murmured, peering down at them.

“Let’s just say that I’m really glad the castle has a fair supply of soap,” Jon muttered, making him laugh.

“I heard about your little undertaking,” Laenor said, giving him a knowing look. “You think it has much promise?”

“I do,” Jon replied.

He and Rhaenyra had discussed the need to tell Laenor something since he would absolutely think it odd that the man she was keeping around to give her children suddenly wanted to be a smith. Letting him know about a few of the scrolls without risking him learning and disapproving of some of the other ones seemed like the most viable idea.

“Well, that would be extraordinary,” Laenor murmured quietly.

“At the moment, it’s just really tiring,” Jon chuckled.

They reached his chambers quickly enough, and Jon found nothing but the remnants of what he assumed was some kind of hearty stew and a little buttered bread sitting on the nearby table.

“Rhaenyra awaits,” Laenor grinned, pointing towards the spot where he knew the hidden door was. “I daresay your new hobby is doing nice things for your shoulders.”

“Agree to disagree there,” Jon grunted, rolling his sore shoulders.

He realized what the man meant a moment later and looked over to find him looking amused. Shaking his head, he thanked him for both bringing him over and he opened the hidden doorway. More than anything, the three of them wanted people to assume that he was just a good friend of Laenor’s who happened to also get on well with his wife. If anyone was going to spread salacious rumors, though, it would be better for those rumors to be that he was fucking the heir to Driftmark than Rhaenyra, though. That would just go together with the other rumors about him, and, provided his and Rhaenyra’s children came out looking Valyrian, that alone would be enough to quiet most people.

He passed through his own chambers and took a moment to wash his hands in the nearby basin, scrubbing them until the last of the soot was gone. Once that was done, he continued on into Rhaenyra’s and gave her a happy, tired smile as he saw her light up at his arrival. She rushed over and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his muscular chest.

“You seem happy,” Jon grinned, ghosting his fingers over her scalp without ruining her braid.

“I’ll tell you why in a moment,” Rhaenyra murmured, looking up at him. He swore her purple eyes were glowing; she looked so happy, though he swore she glowed in general lately. “Did you see Laenor?”

“I did,” Jon nodded. “You told him that we found a few scrolls among the Dothraki’s things?”

“Mmhhh,” Rhaenyra replied. “Come, you must be famished.”

“I am,” Jon admitted, sitting down and helping himself to a roasted turkey leg. “So what has you so chipper?”

“I made progress!” Rhaenyra exclaimed, her voice bubbly, and Jon paused an inch from the leg, looking at her in surprise.

“Really?” he asked.

“I managed to feel her blood coursing through her veins,” Rhaenyra explained. “It was like I was following it along.”

“You’re sure?” Jon asked. “You’re sure that you were actually feeling her?”

“I am,” Rhaenyra nodded. “My imagination isn’t nearly that good. The winding paths that I felt it rush through over and over again were more complex than I could have imagined.”

“That’s incredible,” Jon marveled.

“It’s a great first step,” Rhaenyra smiled. “It will be quite some time before I can actually do anything of note, but I finally have proof that this is real. Part of me was beginning to wonder if I was wasting my time on nonsense.”

“Really?” Jon asked. “It had only been a moon.”

“Flesh magic isn’t like Valyrian steel or the stone that makes up this castle,” Rhaenyra explained. “We have real examples of this still in existence, while everything written about in the scrolls I’ve been going over is about concepts that haven’t even been attempted since the doom, as far as I know. I’m just happy to have some indication that it’s real.”

“I was hesitant at first when you brought this up, but the potential benefits are extraordinary,” Jon admitted.

“The downfall of our family has to be prevented,” Rhaenyra declared. “Ensuring that there is no massive war between us and Alicent’s faction is one part of that, but anything else we can do to strengthen our position and anything we can do to make sure that this little one and all that come after him or her can thrive is worthwhile.”

She placed a hand on her belly, and Jon smiled at her.

“How did your day go?” Rhaenyra asked.

“I made nails,” Jon replied dryly. “It’s going to be years before my days are anywhere near as exciting as yours. Still, if I can pull this off...”

“It will be yet another way to strengthen our line,” Rhaenyra smiled, placing a hand over his.

He dug into his meal, picking the turkey leg clean remarkably quickly and helping himself to fresh bread and some vegetable soup. Rhaenyra poured him a cup of wine, and he thanked her happily before asking, “Did anything else of note happen?”

“There was one thing,” she replied. “Carellen’s sister Ella will be arriving tomorrow, and as we spoke about her, I made a comment about meeting the final Strong sibling, and she reacted...oddly. I was going to question her about it when Laenor arrived, and I bade them give us privacy so we could speak. I’ll have to ask her why she reacted so another day.”

“I think I know,” Jon murmured. “If I recall correctly, Lord Lyonel has a bastard daughter.”

“Really?” Rhaenyra asked. “That’s...not something that any noble would react to with pride, but her reaction was still decidedly odd.”

“Well, and keep in mind my recollection of this is imperfect, but there were rumors in the histories I read that she was a witch of some sort,” Jon continued.

“A witch?” Rhaenyra asked.

“I don’t recall what kind of magic she was purportedly capable of, nor do I remember her name, but I do know that she ended up as a paramour to Aemond,” Jon explained. “The only reason I remember her at all is that she was there when he and your uncle had their final battle over the God’s Eye.”

“She bedded Aemond?” Rhaenyra asked, mildly revolted at the thought, given how much older than him this woman would have to be. “Not Aegon?”

“No, it was definitely Aemond,” Jon confirmed. “If I recall correctly, she was older than you too, though she was apparently still rather youthful. There were claims that she ended up carrying his child and ruled Harrenhal for a while, but I never did read how her life ended. All I know is that by the reign of your grandson, Aegon IV, it was in the hands of House Lothston.”

“I like not the idea of a witch being on the side of the Greens,” Rhaenyra huffed.

“We have no idea what, if any, magic she was actually capable of,” Jon argued. “It very likely wasn’t anything on par with what we’ve found here, and at any rate, so long as we ensure that he doesn’t bond with Vhagar, Aemond will be far less of a threat than he would have been.”

“The Strongs are First Men, like the Starks,” Rhaenyra reminded him. “You’re certainly capable of magic. Your ability to look through Morghul’s eyes is nothing short of extraordinary.”

“What would you propose we do then?” Jon asked.

“Perhaps we could make an asset of her,” Rhaenyra suggested. “Keeping Laena alive ensures that Vhagar will remain out of Aemond’s reach, but she is not the only large, old dragon around here. Vermithor would be almost as much of a nightmare, and even Silverwing, though smaller than him, could be a terrible problem. I would deny my enemies every possible advantage over me, as, while I will attempt to befriend my siblings, there’s no guarantee that we won’t end up enemies anyway.”

“You’re going to have to ask Ser Harwin and his sisters about her because I really don’t recall enough to be able to say if it would be a good idea to try to enlist her into our service or not,” Jon said. “I am highly reluctant to bring a possible witch around our child, though.”

“I’ll talk to them and see what they say,” Rhaenyra nodded. “How are you feeling?”

“Getting some food in me helped,” Jon replied as he finished up.

“Get your tunic off and sit on the bed,” Rhaenyra smiled.

“You really don’t have to do this every night,” Jon chuckled as he removed his tunic and watched her heat some oil in a small bowl under the flame of a candle.

“I actually like it,” Rhaenyra murmured, pointing towards the bed.

She wouldn’t have expected to, but taking care of Jon after a long day filled her with a joy she couldn’t explain. It wasn’t just that he always seemed so appreciative, or that his soft little groans of pleasure inflamed her passion, or even that getting to run her hands over his delectable muscles was fun in itself, but the simple act of helping him relax was deeply enjoyable to her. She climbed onto the bed behind him and coated her hands in the oil, which smelled vaguely of the forest, before running them over his broad shoulders.

“Gods,” Jon sighed, and Rhaenyra giggled.

“You say that every time,” she murmured, sounding amused.

She had gotten progressively better at massaging him over the past few weeks, learning how much pressure was needed to knead his aching muscles and how to do so without pricking him with her nails. Jon leaned his head back against her, smiling as he felt her soft skin under his hair and inhaled her ever-alluring scent.

“*Kirimvose*,” he sighed, making her smile at his use of the Valyian word for thank you.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Rhaenyra chuckled. “We still need to go through your lesson for the day.”

Jon nodded, and she began testing him with various phrases in her mother tongue and getting him to first tell her what they meant in Common and then try to reply in Valyrian. He’d already learned the Valyrian alphabet, and a few nights a week he worked on Maester Gerardys’ lessons on the basic mechanics of the language beyond it, but other nights were spent like this, learning from Rhaenyra’s pouty lips. Between the maester’s more formal lessons and Rhaenyra’s attempt to teach him through conversation, he was making progress, though he had less time to dedicate to it in recent weeks.

Each day he rose and went to the training yard for a couple hours, broke his fast, cleaned up, and headed down to work with Symon, which he would do for most of the day. He’d then return late, have dinner, and work on his Valyrian before going to bed, where Rhaenyra joined him nightly, sometimes riding him until he’d filled her up and sometimes just snuggling into his chest and helping lure him to sleep with her warm, comforting presence. It was a grueling schedule, but one that he was adapting to, and it still wasn’t nearly as bad as living at the Wall had been, so there was that.

“I think your work as a smith is already having a positive effect,” Rhaenyra purred a while later after they’d finished his lesson. “I swear your shoulders are getting bigger.”

“So I’ve been told,” Jon sighed, in too relaxed a state to realize that saying that was unwise. He felt Rhaenyra grow tense and winced at his own stupidity.

“Who, pray tell, said that?” she asked, her voice tight. “Was it Elinda? I saw how she was looking at you the other day.”

“Has that girl even flowered yet?” Jon scoffed. “It wasn’t a woman, I swear. Your husband made an offhand remark as he led me to his chambers.”

“Ah,” Rhaenyra replied, relaxing noticeably.

“You can retract the claws, my love,” Jon chuckled, bringing one of her hands around to kiss her knuckles. “Laenor’s far too pretty for my tastes.”

She laughed at that and grabbed a nearby pillow to smack him over the head with, making him laugh in turn. Whipping around, he grabbed her gently and started tickling her sides, making her drop the pillow and laugh uproariously.

“St...stop!” Rhaenyra cried, still laughing. When Jon did so and hovered over her, peering down into her beautiful eyes, she added, “I could have you hanged for that vicious assault.”

“You could,” Jon agreed with a grin, “but you love me too much.”

“I do,” Rhaenyra said softly, reaching up to run her fingers through his long brown hair.

“How are you doing?” Jon asked, reaching down to place a hand over her belly. “Have there been any other effects from the babe?”

“Just the persistent sickness most mornings,” Rhaenyra replied. “My feet are rather sore, but I don’t think that’s related.”

“You need merely ask for my help,” Jon murmured with a grin, sitting down on the bed and putting her feet in his lap.

“Ahh, fuck,” Rhaenyra groaned as he started pressing his thumbs up against her sole.

Jon smiled as she lay her head back and closed her eyes while sighing in obvious pleasure and continued to rub her feet.

“I was a fucking idiot for choosing to deny myself this,” he thought to himself.

Ygritte had said more than once that he knew nothing, and he couldn’t help but agree with his late lover. His uncle Benjen had warned him that he didn’t know what he was giving up when he tried to convince him not to join him at the Wall, and at the time he’d thought that he really only meant the pleasures of a woman’s body, as abstract a concept as that that had been to him then. Sex was incredible, and if he’d experienced it as a boy, he probably would have been a little less willing to freeze his balls off at the Wall, but even it wasn’t what he would miss most if he was suddenly transported back to his old life now.

It was the quiet little domestic moments like this that made his heart sing. Sharing Rhaenyra’s bed was an unparalleled pleasure, but it was things like this that were even greater joys. No matter how exhausted he became during the day, the knowledge that this was what he would return to helped drive him forward. Her soft touches, warm smiles, and sweet voice were intoxicating to him and every bit as enthralling as her perfect cunt and the fact that his child was growing inside her.

“If you think white isn’t your color, this could work instead of the cloak,” Rhaenyra sighed. “You could be my royal foot rubber.”

Jon snorted at that, saying, “A very important role in the court, to be sure.”

“A member of the council, surely,” Rhaenyra giggled. “Help me out of this.”

“Gladly,” Jon rumbled as she got out of bed.

He helped her undress quickly, his eyes eagerly taking in every inch of exposed skin as her pink gown came undone. She stepped out of it the moment she could, and her small clothes quickly followed. Jon felt his cock harden rapidly in his breeches, and his breath hitched when she ran her palm over his obvious bulge.

“I want to see you, Jon,” Rhaenyra whispered in his ear, nipping at the lobe, “feel you, taste you.”

“Fucking hells,” Jon groaned, ripping his belt off so quickly it nearly tore.

He stood up, and his breeches fell, exposing his turgid length to the air. Rhaenyra quickly pushed him back down and wrapped her small hand around his girth as he sat on the edge of the bed. She stroked him gently, teasingly, and sank to her knees with a wicked grin on her face.

“You’ve been working so hard,” she purred, “pushing yourself so much. You deserve a reward, my love.”

She leaned in and gave his bulbous head a wet kiss, making him gasp. With her eyes locked onto his, she started peppering his length with kisses, looking utterly amused each time his breath hitched. His cock was so big, so thick, and felt so very good inside her. Even just feeling it under her fingers was enough to make her wet, most of them after having been with him for as long as she had, and as she licked a long, slow trail from the base to the tip, she felt her cunt drool.

“Gods, I’ll never be able to believe how happy you are to do this,” Jon sighed, resting a large hand on her head.

“It’s more fun than I would have expected,” Rhaenyra murmured, “particularly because of how clearly you love it.”

She swirled her tongue around his sensitive glans, giggling when he moaned, and took the first few inches of him inside her mouth. Caving her cheeks in, she started bobbing her head up and down along half of his shaft, using her hand to stroke the rest. Her grip was firm but gentle, and she smiled widely as she felt his racing heartbeat through his throbbing length. It wasn’t the same as what she’d felt in her trance earlier, and it would be a long time before she attempted to use even the most seemingly innocuous aspects of flesh magic on anyone other than Harra. It was proof of his excitement, though not that his throbbing hardness wasn’t enough on its own.

“Just like that,” Jon groaned, wrapping his empty hand around her braid and holding it gently.

Rhaenyra went further, taking him deep into her throat, and Jon groaned loudly at the feeling. She moaned in response, sending the reverberations all through his shaft and he swore that his eyes might cross. Letting him go with an audible pop, she blew over his slick length, and he hissed.

“I’d say you’re enjoying yourself,” Rhaenyra smirked.

“Your mouth is heaven,” Jon sighed.

“If forced to choose between it, my cunt, and my ass, which would be your favorite?” Rhaenyra asked.

“Your cunt,” Jon replied without hesitation. “I adore every inch of you, but your cunt is perfection itself. Come lie down here; it’s been too long since I tasted you.”

“It’s been two days,” Rhaenyra laughed, crawling into bed and kissing him softly.

“As I said, too long,” Jon grinned before burying his face in the crook of her neck.

She gasped and moaned as he started kissing a trail down along the slender column. He nipped at her pulse point, making her squeak, and continued onward towards her chest. Her large, full breasts were as spectacular as ever, and he grinned as he palmed them both, kneading the sensitive mounds happily.

“Just think, Jon,” Rhaenyra whispered. “They’re going to get larger soon enough.”

“Fucking hells, I don’t think I’m ready for that,” Jon groaned, making her laugh. “They’re already incredible.”

“They’ll...ahh...fill with milk,” Rhaenyra moaned as he worshiped her breasts, kissing, licking, and nipping all along her sensitive skin. “Milk for our babe.”

Jon felt his cock throb at the reminder that the goddess under him was carrying his child and wrapped his lips around one of her dark pink nipples, grinning as she gasped. He grazed the hard nub with his teeth and soothed it with his tongue before switching to the other one. Rhaenyra held his head tenderly, hugging him to her chest and moaning in pleasure.

“Will you nurse our babe?” Jon asked.

“The first few times, perhaps,” Rhaenyra replied. “I’m not opposed to the idea per se and like the idea of holding my little one to my chest and feeding them myself, but hiring a wet nurse who has fed other healthy babes and can be ready constantly to respond to their every need will put my mind at ease.”

“You’re going to be a wonderful mother,” Jon murmured, and Rhaenyra felt her eyes grow misty at the sheer affection in his voice.

He moved down from her breasts, peppering her belly with kisses as he continued towards her silvery curls. He could smell her arousal and felt his mouth water as he neared her sex. She spread her legs wide, and he looked up at her, feeling his cock throb at how lust-darkened her beautiful eyes were. Parting her curls, he looked at her fleshy pink lips and licked his lips before burying his face between her thighs.

“Yes!” Rhaenyra moaned as she felt his tongue part her already slick nether lips.

She snaked her fingers into his hair and ground her heated cunt against his mouth, throwing back her head and sighing in delight. He moved her legs onto his shoulders, eager to feel her thighs around his head, and started teasing her sensitive folds with his tongue. He had pleased her like

this countless times since he first bedded her and knew very well what she liked. His tongue glided over her rapidly, driving her wild without touching her clit just yet. She ground herself against him harder, trying to move the little nub closer to his tongue, but he moved away with ease, his eyes looking up at her in amusement.

“Higher, please!” Rhaenyra cried, and she growled in annoyance when he moved lower, only to cry out as his nose brushed against her clit.

He pushed his long, dexterous tongue inside her as far as it could go, wiggling it around and tasting her deeply. She wouldn’t cum from that, but it felt lovely anyway, and together with the way his nose would occasionally brush against her little nub, it did make the tension inside her build. He kept at that for a moment before moving higher and pushing two fingers inside her.

“Fuck, you taste good,” Jon groaned before flicking his tongue across her engorged clit.

“More, more!” Rhaenyra moaned.

“Such a greedy princess,” Jon chuckled.

Before she could reply, he swirled the tip of his tongue around the taut little pearl and grinned at the loud cry that spilled from her lips. He pumped his fingers in and out of her, curling them upward to brush against the little rough patch near her entrance. Finding it with practiced ease, he grinned as he felt her tight inner walls clench around him the moment he stroked the sensitive spot.

“You’re so wet, Nyra,” Jon murmured, looking up at her. “I’m going to be able to slip every inch of my cock right inside you.”

“Do it!” Rhaenyra gasped. “I want you inside me. I want to feel every inch.”

“I will once you cum,” Jon promised, grinning wickedly up at her.

Moving up along her body, he started grinding the palm of his hand against her clit as he continued to stroke that sensitive spot hard and fast. Her breathy moans turned to sharp cries, and she stared at him with wide eyes.

“Can you do that for me?” Jon asked, licking a trail up along her throat and staring deeply into her eyes. “Can you be a good girl for me and cum?”

“Fucking hells!” Rhaenyra almost screamed as a shudder ran through her whole body.

She felt like she was on fire; she was so hot, and when he stroked that spot particularly firmly, she saw stars. She clung to him, drawing him close until their faces were barely an inch apart, and held onto him for dear life as he did his best to make her go mad. The wet, squelching sound his fingers inside her were making would have embarrassed her if she could have thought clearly in that moment, but all she could focus on was the pleasure.

Jon started kissing her neck again, and she cried out. It was too good, too intense, and the pressure inside her was maddening. Already right on the edge, she clenched her eyes shut as she felt him kiss her pulse point and screamed as she came hard. Jon pulled his hand back as he felt her cum and grinned as a gush of fluid erupted from her cunt, splashing against the floor. She writhed in pleasure, thrashing about the bed as it wracked through her entire body in sinful waves, and he held her tightly.

“Such a good girl,” he whispered in her ear as she came down from her peak, and she swore she felt her cunt clench again.

It was decidedly bizarre being spoken to like that as a princess and someone who ruled their own fiefdom, and if anyone else had tried it she’d have reacted very poorly, but hearing those words come from Jon made them decidedly less vexing and more arousing than she could have imagined. Her eyes fluttered open just in time to see him move between her legs, and she cried out in bliss when he sank inside her in one long, slow thrust.

“Oh, fuck,” Jon groaned, wrapping an arm around her neck and holding her tightly. “I’ll never get used to just how bloody good you feel.”

“I understand...completely,” Rhaenyra panted, wrapping her legs around his waist as she weaved her fingers into his hair.

Shifting her weight, she rolled them both and smiled down at him as he grunted in surprise.

“I’m not completely dead on my feet, you know,” Jon chuckled. “It isn’t like the first couple weeks.”

“I know, and if I tire, I’ll be more than happy to have you roll me onto my back and fuck me hard, but I’ve found over the last little while that I rather like being on top,” Rhaenyra replied with a grin.

“I’m not about to complain,” Jon chuckled, ghosting his hands up along her sides and cupping her heavy breasts. “It is appropriate; after all, you will be queen some day.”

“Yes, I will,” Rhaenyra chuckled, “and as your future queen, I command you to lie here and let me ride you like a horse.”

“I think you’ve been riding horses wrong,” Jon quipped, and she rolled her eyes before silencing him with a kiss.

The more comfortable they’d become together, the more willing he had become to joke and jape with her, which she adored, both because she found him genuinely funny most of the time and because it was proof to her that he’d truly settled in with her. He deepened the kiss, and she moaned into his mouth as she responded in kind. Their tongues danced together as she lifted herself up along his shaft, whimpering into his mouth as she felt a few inches of him leave her. She sank back down quickly and smiled at the familiar feeling of being stretched wide by him.

Jon dug his fingers into her hips and held her steady as she started bouncing on his shaft, enveloping him again and again in her tight, warm, wet heat. His gaze locked onto hers as she rode him slowly and sensually to start with, her hips rising and falling languidly. Her purple eyes were dark with lust and lidded, and her face was flushed with desire. Though she’d just cum hard, her passions were easily roused where he was concerned, and she quickly felt another coil of pressure tightening in her core.

“Gods, I love your cock,” Rhaenyra moaned, breaking the kiss. “Every inch is bloody perfect.”

“You take it so well,” Jon grunted, craning his head down and capturing one of her pebbled nipples with his lips.

She pushed herself back, steadying herself on his muscular shoulders, and sped up, riding him harder and faster. The force of her movements caused her breasts to bounce and jiggle on her chest, drawing his gaze, and he reached up to cup the mounds with his large hands. Rhaenyra's breath hitched at the feeling of his touch as he started kneading them just the way she liked, and she let out a low, breathy moan.

"Just like that," she sighed in pleasure.

Jon grinned and rolled her nipples between his thumbs and fingers just as he started thrusting up into her in time with her movements. Rhaenyra cried out in pleasure at the sudden change and fell forward in surprise. He changed the angle of his thrusts slightly and brushed against something that made her see stars.

"Yes!" Rhaenyra moaned.

"We don't have to be quiet tonight," Jon grinned. "You can scream as loudly as you like, as loudly as I make you scream without fear."

"Oh gods!" Rhaenyra whimpered, her eyes scrunching shut for a moment as she felt herself soar towards her peak.

Jon grinned as he felt her flutter around him, and he rolled them onto her back, earning a mock glare from his lover, as he said, "I know you're not tired yet, but you are close, and so am I."

"Then fuck me," Rhaenyra whispered. "Fuck me into this bed until I scream and then fill me with your seed again."

"I want you on your hands and knees," Jon rumbled, and she clenched around him involuntarily. "The gods know how much longer we'll be able to fuck in that position."

"Would it be so dangerous?" Rhaenyra asked, frowning her brow curiously. "My rounded belly wouldn't be touching the bed, surely."

"No, but you have a habit of collapsing when you cum really hard," Jon replied. "Once you're far enough along, I don't think it will be safe except on your side with me behind you."

"That does sound nice," Rhaenyra smiled, whimpering as he pulled his cock out of her.

She rolled back over and pushed herself up before wiggling her arse at him enticingly. He pushed a finger inside her, and she looked back at him in confusion.

"At the risk of offending you, I was hoping for something a little larger," she quipped, and she smacked her ass, making her shriek.

"You'll get everything you want and then some," Jon whispered in her ear.

He took a moment to line himself up before pushing inside to the hilt. Rhaenyra cried out in pleasure and started rocking against him, fucking herself on his cock. Jon smirked at her obvious desire and started fucking her hard and fast. Both of them were close to their orgasms at that point, and he didn't really have the energy just then to tease her. Taking his slick finger, he rubbed a little circle over her puckered asshole, and she went still.

“It’s been a little while since we did anything like this,” Jon murmured in her ear. “Do you want to feel me stretch both of your holes?”

“Yes,” Rhaenyra moaned, her eyes wide as saucers. “Fuck, yes.”

He pushed inside with ease, and she cried out in pleasure. His hands were as large as the rest of him, and his thick digits were more than big enough to be felt, especially in her tightest hole. Reaching forward, he grabbed onto her braid near her scalp and tugged gently as he started pounding her hard. Her moans and cries turned to screams and shrieks as pleasure consumed her.

She enjoyed riding him for multiple reasons. He felt no less massive in that position than in any other, and being able to run her hands over his muscles and see every little look of pleasure that crossed his face while she fucked him was a true delight. That said, she really liked when he fucked her like this.

It certainly wasn’t what she pictured when she was younger, even after she gained some understanding of what a man and wife actually did together, but being taken hard on her hands and knees by a strong, gorgeous man with a huge cock made her legs shake like nothing else. The fact that he was fingering her ass and pulling on her hair while he did it only added to the sinful, taboo pleasure, and within no time at all, she was screaming for him, hovering right at the edge of ecstasy.

“Harder, harder!” she shrieked. “Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t you dare...AHHH!”

“Oh, gods,” Jon groaned as he felt her start to cum.

Her already tight tunnel, made even more so by the added pressure from her arse, started squeezing him rhythmically as the pleasure thundered through her in waves. If he’d wanted to, he could have slowed down and held on, continuing to fuck her through at least one more orgasm afterward, but he was tired and so let go with a strangled groan. The two of them rode out the waves of pleasure together, and Jon made sure to pull out of her as soon as he was done so he could lie down next to her safely.

“Gods,” Rhaenyra panted, pressing herself up against him as she tried to catch her breath.

He wrapped an arm around her instinctively, and she pulled it up between her breasts, pressing her back more firmly against his chest. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled her scent, sighing in pure contentment. Her braid had come partly undone while they fucked, and he’d help her undo it once he’d washed his hands.

“We should try it like this next time,” Rhaenyra murmured once her breathing slowed.

“Aye,” Jon nodded, feeling like he could pass out right there.

“*No matter how exhausting things get, I’ll be fine so long as I can come back home to you,*” he thought to himself, smiling at the thought as he nuzzled her neck.