

Two days, that was how long it took Prince Qoren to agree to her terms, and incidentally, it was also how long it took her father to learn the full extent of what had happened and demand that she come to the capital. He hadn't gone quite as far as to threaten to send men to retrieve her if she didn't, but from his letter, he was clearly upset, and Rhaenyra elected to not push him any further than she already had.

"He really didn't ask for me?" Daemon asked yet again as she and Jon mounted Syrax.

"I think he realized that you weren't involved in any of this," Rhaenyra replied, brushing her little lady's yellow scales with her hand. "You're in charge of Dragonstone again until I return, and I swear we'll discuss everything I missed while I was in the Dornish Marches when I return."

"You've been rather busy over the past couple days," Daemon said, sounding amused. "Best of luck with Viserys."

"Thank you," Rhaenyra replied, grasping Syrax's reins. "*Soves.*"

Her dragon beat her wings against the air and took flight, soaring into the air and then flying over Dragonstone. Rhaenyra looked down at her castle, as proud of it as she'd been since she first took command, and sighed happily once it was well behind her. She waited until they were well and truly out of sight before leaning back in the saddle, pressing herself against Jon's broad chest.

"You've been quiet all morning," she murmured.

"This is it," Jon said, sounding as tense as he felt. "Moons of plotting and scheming, and it all comes down to this conversation with a king we already know is angry."

"I'll handle my father," Rhaenyra promised. "He's angry, yes, worried about me as he always is, but what I have to offer him is far too great a prize to not soothe him at least a little. Dorne has been a thorn in our side since the conquest, and with this, we may actually be able to end our recurring conflict with them."

"I'm honestly amazed the prince agreed as quickly as he did," Jon murmured.

"I think the guilt started to get to him," Rhaenyra replied. "He was the one who sent his fleet to Bloodstone and brought much of his army to Blackhaven. If not for his ludicrous fantasy of bringing us low, thousands of his people would still live. Between that, how easily he was beaten, and our display of power, I think it finally dawned on him that fighting us was pointless at best and fatal at worst. When I saw him yesterday he was more withdrawn than anything, and today all he wanted to know was what my intentions were for his daughter."

"What did you say?" Jon asked.

"I swore on our children's lives that I meant her no harm and would treat her as my own, which seemed to help quite a bit," Rhaenyra replied. "The heiress of Dorne will grow up in our halls. The possibilities that could come of such a connection are endless."

"Do remember that even if you treat a hostage well, they can still turn on you for their family down the line," Jon said grimly, and Rhaenyra sighed, looking back at him.

"Your Greyjoy was a boy when he was sent to Winterfell," she reminded him. "Aliandra is a babe; she will come to see me as her own mother in time, and, the gods be good, we will be able to tie her directly to our house when the time comes."

Jon smiled at that, recalling well that, in the end, it had been marriage and not war that had finally bound Dorne to the rest of Westeros. The circumstances would be different, of course, and the transition not nearly as smooth as it had been in the other timeline, but if they managed to ensure that she wed one of their sons, albeit one they'd need to make first, that would go a long way towards bringing eventual lasting peace between them.

"How did Morghul seem?" Rhaenyra asked. "You wondered if he'd miss you."

"He appreciated the battle quite a bit," Jon replied. "He also ate exceptionally well the other day and I honestly expect him to spend the rest of today in his cave resting."

"Good for him," Rhaenyra smiled, tensing up as she saw the capital in the near distance.

For as confident as she'd made herself sound every time Jon expressed his own concerns about this, she knew that there was no guarantee she'd manage to get through to her father. If he'd just done as he seemed like he was going to all those moons ago on Dragonstone and let her wed Jon, none of this would have happened, but he'd had second thoughts, and so there they were. If things didn't go as she needed them to, she honestly didn't know what she was going to do.

"I will take none other as my husband," she swore to herself in her mind. "Don't fight me on this, Father, for my sake and the sake of my children; just don't."

It was in silence that the pair of them landed in the Dragonpit, being met almost immediately by Cole, who stood by the entrance.

"His Grace commanded me to escort you directly to the Red Keep," he scowled. Spotting Jon, he sneered and said, "Perhaps I should demand that blade of yours first. His Grace is in a terrible mood just now, and we wouldn't want anything unfortunate to happen."

"You're welcome to step inside and try," Jon replied dryly, and the knight froze as Syrax looked right at him, her yellow eyes narrowing.

"Did my father command you to disarm him?" Rhaenyra asked. Before Cole could even respond, she added, "Then be silent and lead us to the carriage you brought."

Cole turned around without a word, and they followed him out of the Dragonpit. Sure enough, there was a carriage waiting for them, and Rhaenyra couldn't help but wonder if her father had sent Cole when Syrax was spotted in the sky, clearly having instructed the guards to watch for her, or, more amusingly, sent him there hours ago to wait for her. Either way, she doubted that her former sworn shield was lying about his mood, and she sighed as they started along. The ride to the Red Keep was a quiet and tense one, none of them particularly wanting to speak in front of the others, and when she finally saw the

keep she'd grown up in up close and spotted Lyonel Strong waiting for her by the main doors, she felt genuine relief despite her lingering concerns.

"Princess," her father's Hand said as greeting, bowing his head. "His Grace awaits you...in the small council chambers."

"Who is with him?" Rhaenyra asked.

"The entire council...save for myself and Ser Criston...and the queen is there as well," Lyonel replied, and Rhaenyra barely resisted the urge to grimace.

"I had hoped to speak with him alone," Rhaenyra muttered.

"His Grace was most insistent," Lyonel replied, and she nodded, knowing there was no point in saying anything more.

As they made their way to the small council chambers, more than a few of the servants looked at her in clear interest, and she wondered just how vocal her father had been about his displeasure since he first learned that she'd fought against the Dornish.

When they reached the chambers and Cole turned to Jon, she figured she knew what he was going to say and hissed, "Jon is coming in too. My father will have questions for him as well."

"It is as the princess says," Lyonel nodded, and Cole looked away, opening the door and letting them in.

The entire council was assembled, each man there looking tense and wary, while Alicent, who sat by the king's side, looked utterly gleeful. Her father, meanwhile, just looked tired, though as he looked at her, that tiredness was swiftly replaced by rage the likes of which she'd only ever seen him direct at her uncle.

"Rhaenyra," Viserys said, his voice low and warning.

"Father," Rhaenyra nodded. "My lords...Alicent."

"You have been called here to give a full account of your actions in and near the castle of Blackhaven a few days ago," Viserys said. "I expect both of you to leave nothing out, and the consequences of this will be determined once I'm certain that I've heard everything."

Rhaenyra nodded and waited until Cole and Lyonel sat down to begin. "Our conflict with the Dornish goes back, as you know, to when Aegon and his sisters attempted and failed to..."

"We can, perhaps, leave out what you were not alive for," Alicent said dryly.

"Oh, but I'm afraid we can't," Rhaenyra replied. "Since the failed conquest of Dorne, they have attacked us no fewer than four times, supported our other enemies every chance that they got, and generally been our most pressing irritant."

"That cannot be denied," Lyman murmured.

"One does have to wonder why you're bringing it up, however, Princess," Jasper said.

"I'm bringing it up because when we learned some moons ago that the Triarchy was amassing a fleet to attack the Stepstones with, I wondered if the Dornish weren't involved," Rhaenyra replied. "I raised the issue with my uncle and Jon here, and we devised a plan for what to do if..."

"That was intentional!?" Viserys exclaimed as Alicent looked utterly gleeful.

"They knowingly attacked our people, Father," Rhaenyra replied. "I didn't bring the idea to you because there was no guarantee that the Dornish were involved, and you have traditionally preferred to stay out of matters regarding the Stepstones."

He grimaced at that, saying, "Go on."

"Jon here argued that if the Dornish were so willing to risk the dragon's flames, we should give them what they want," Rhaenyra replied, "and that's exactly what happened. He, Daemon, and Rhaenys wiped out their fleet, with him handling the Dornish half of it and allowing a single ship to escape and inform Prince Qoren. To our fortune, it turned out that the prince's uncle was leading their forces there, and when he learned what happened, he was infuriated."

"I'm sorry, you said that was fortunate?" Tyland, asked and Rhaenyra looked to Jon.

"The prince is of an age with me," he explained. "He is young, his blood runs hot, and in this case, that heat muted his good sense. He gathered an army, spreading rumors to us of a rebellion forming in his lands that he needed to put down, and ventured into the mountains, hoping to create the lie of a new vulture king who would harass our people. His plan was to claim that it was the rebel lord he defeated, that he was hardly responsible for what some brigand wanted by his own people did outside his lands, while said brigand would demand my head in exchange for ceasing the attacks."

"That does explain the fiction," Larys murmured. "The rebel lord would say that he wanted your head to buy his freedom back from his prince, while our lords would wonder why they're being attacked in defense of a bastard. That's actually kind of clever."

"Why did you go to Blackhaven?" Viserys asked.

"Jon's idea was to make the Dornish believe that I had gone there in the hopes that Qoren, believing that you would trade him your bastard nephew for your daughter, would attack," Rhaenyra continued.

"Wait, you weren't actually in Blackhaven?" Viserys asked, looking like he was calming down for a moment.

"No, I did go," Rhaenyra replied, keeping her face blank as his eyes hardened again.

"There were too many ways that that farce could be revealed, and I could hardly bait the

Dornish into attacking the keep of a family that will one day serve me while staying back away from the danger. What would they have thought of me?"

"What happened next?" Lyonel asked before Viserys could say a word.

"The Dornish attacked, and Jon rode out on Morghul, wiping out half their forces and capturing Prince Qoren," Rhaenyra replied, and their eyes all went wide.

"You...actually have him?" Larys asked as Viserys looked stunned. "I thought that was a deception on your part to keep the Dornish from launching a quick counterattack."

"Father, the last time we spoke, you mentioned that you were hoping to work out some sort of peace with the Dornish," Rhaenyra replied, pulling out a scroll she'd shoved into the right sleeve of the riding leathers. "I think you'll find this interesting. I took the liberty of devising the framework of a potential treaty, one that Prince Qoren has already expressed a willingness to agree to."

"You have no authority to..." Alicent went to say when Viserys silenced her with a look.

Without unfurling the scroll, he set it down on the table, took a deep breath, and said, "Why did you not come to me with any of this?"

"There was no guarantee that any of it would work," Rhaenyra replied.

"And yet you endangered yourself anyway," Viserys growled.

"The danger was minimal," Rhaenyra replied. "I was in full plate and sitting atop a rather large dragon while Jon took care of the fighting. By the time I joined the Marchers in sallying forth to hunt down the remaining forces, their siege equipment had already been destroyed."

"That's true, your Grace," Jon piped up. "My original plan would have seen the princess in no danger at all, and even with her alterations, she was still kept as safe as possible."

"As for my authority, Alicent, I agreed to nothing," Rhaenyra said flatly, smiling slightly as she saw Viserys unfurl the scroll. "I merely put together a proposal for my father and the prince to agree to."

"The...he's agreed to this?" Viserys stammered, his eyes going wide as saucers when he reached the end of it.

"He knows he has no real choice, Your Grace," Jon replied. "He has no siblings and his only children are a babe who might have seen her first full year and another one still in his wife's womb. His uncle could have led them in his absence but, well..."

"What terms did you suggest?" Jasper asked.

"Dorne will cease all trade with the Triarchy, with us and Pentos becoming their new primary trading partners," Rhaenyra began.

"Our people may be less than enthused at the idea of doing much trade with Dorne," Lyman pointed out.

"I don't care," Rhaenyra replied flatly. "That part is non-negotiable, as cutting Dorne off from the Triarchy will deprive them a key trading partner as well, weakening our other enemy significantly. Dorne is not a place rich in farmland like the Reach; they have long required extensive trade to sustain themselves, and no matter how hopeless their situation against us might seem, they will not agree to cease trading with the nearest friendly power they have if we don't give them something to replace that trade with."

"What's this about a scorpion nest in the mountains?" Viserys asked.

"My spies found out that they'd planned to try and lure dragonriders into a trap in the mountains," Rhaenyra replied. "It's near the mountain fortress from which they planned to launch their raids against our people. Part of the agreement is that we will destroy all of it."

"That could remain a trap," Tyland pointed out.

"Not if they want their prince to live," Jon replied. "I will handle it personally atop Morghul and ensure that by the end, that fortress will never be repaired again, even if I have to melt the mountains to do it."

"The other terms are more normal," Rhaenyra said. "We both agree to keep our armies out of each other's lands, and the great houses of Dorne provide us with hostages to keep them in line. I'm thinking that our most loyal knights will take the sons of Dornish lords as squires and train them, thereby establishing other lasting connections between us that could prove useful down the line."

"This is the part I cannot quite believe," Viserys murmured. "Prince Qoren is willing to allow his heir to be given to you as a hostage?"

"What?!" Alicent and most of the lords exclaimed at once.

"I made it clear that he had no choice," Rhaenyra replied. "He led half his forces against Blackhaven, and they were destroyed by Jon. I impressed upon him the fact that Morghul was not the only dragon that size that we had under our control and that between Jon, Laena, Daemon, Rhaenys, and myself, Sunspear would not last an hour if we moved on it."

"I think it finally dawned on the prince that Dorne has been nipping at the heels of a power more than capable of destroying them outright," Jon added.

"Could this work, Lyonel?" Viserys asked, and Alicent closed her eyes slowly, disappointment creeping in as she heard the anger leave his voice by the moment. He had been livid in a way she'd never seen before just that morning when Larys finally confirmed that Rhaenyra had fought against the Dornish, and yet, she could already tell that he was going to forget that it ever happened.

"She could do anything at all, and his anger at her would disappear at a few short words from the spoiled little bitch," she thought to herself, trying to think of how she could still use this to her advantage.

"Why would the Dornish princess be given to you?" Alicent asked. "Would it not make more sense for her to be kept as a hostage here?"

"No, it wouldn't," Rhaenyra replied. "The Dornish are going to be bitterly angry about all of this, and I think that having their prince's heir kept in the capital would be taken worse than having her kept a step away from it. I also want her to grow up with my children, given that Aegon will be my heir. Having the future Princess of Dorne become good friends with the future king, his brother, and any other children I might have after I wed would be an undeniable boon."

"There's a possibility here that I think you're overlooking, Princess," Cole said, looking thoughtful in a way she hadn't seen him look in her presence in quite a while. "The Dornish despise us, and they'll despise the idea of being ruled by someone who grew up here even more. You said that she has a sibling on the way. It would not be difficult for anyone to suggest having that sibling take over in her stead."

"Especially if it turns out to be a boy," Jasper added.

"With luck it will be a boy, my lord," Jon said, grinning slightly as he furrowed his brow in confusion at him. "The Dornish are not like us, Lord Jasper. There, the eldest is always considered the heir without question regardless of their sex, and it has been that way since Princess Nymeria first conquered the rest of the land alongside Mors Martell. If Princess Aliandra ends up with a brother and a group of Dornish lords try to install him in her stead after Prince Qoren dies, there will be those who argue that doing so betrays one of the most basic and distinct principles that their Rhoynish culture gives them."

"It would lead to war, a war between Dornish factions, and that would be a war we would happily intervene in," Rhaenyra added. "Conquering Dorne would be a long and, I think, ultimately fruitless endeavor, but if we helped a faction of their own ruling houses to assert themselves and fought alongside them, that could create the sort of ties that could, in time, bind them to us outright."

"We would win too," Jon said. "If it came to a war of succession between the rightful heiress of her father's throne and her usurper brother, the side supported by the riders of Morghul, Vhagar, Caraxes, Meleys, and Syrax would prevail. Her brother's supporters might even realize ahead of time that pressing their false claim would be folly, for against such a force, they would have no hope. Whole houses could be wiped out in the conflagration."

You could have heard a pin drop in that room as Jon finished, with Jasper, Tyland, Alicent, and Cole all realizing what he was really saying. The queen went white as a sheet, and her sworn shield's hand twitched towards the pommel of his sword while the two lords swallowed thickly and looked to the king, who hadn't noticed anything at all, engrossed as he was in conversation with Lyonel.

"Alicent, are you quite alright?" he asked as he looked as saw how sickly she looked.

"I'm perfectly well, my love," Alicent replied, knowing that trying to tell him that Jon had pretty much just threatened to wipe out any house that supported their son's claim to the throne would be pointless.

"I think the proposal has merit," Lyonel said slowly, "though to what extent...we can trust the Dornish...is hard to say."

"They'll be far more trustworthy when every major lord in the region knows that they have a child in our custody," Rhaenyra replied. "My hope is that the relationships forged during their squirings and the greater ties created by us trading with each other will eventually lead to some actual lasting peace. We can't just let all the future generations to come deal with the fact that every twenty years these perpetual annoyances are going to launch an attack against us, even if they are usually laughably ineffective. It's bad enough that we can't put a stop to the attacks the people of the Vale suffer."

"Viserys, I feel I must remind you that you were...you felt very differently an hour ago," Alicent said, and Viserys sighed.

"I've not forgotten my vexation, my love, and that is something that I should discuss with Rhaenyra and Jon in private," Viserys replied. "My lords, study the terms agreed to here together, and we will discuss them at length in an hour."

"Yes, Your Grace," they all said, recognizing the clear dismissal and rising from their seats.

Alicent did as well, keeping her eyes down as she passed by Jon and Rhaenyra, and once Lyonel and Larys, whom he waited for, had left, Viserys gestured for the guards to close the door.

"Sit down, both of you," he commanded, and Rhaenyra nodded. Once they were seated, he said, "You're both going to tell me what this is really about, and if I think for a moment that I'm being deceived, I'm going to go with what I was contemplating doing before you told your tale and strip you of your seat, Rhaenyra."

"Father!" Rhaenyra explained.

"Enough," Viserys scowled. "Between you two, you have, on three separate occasions now, undertaken acts of war without even consulting with me, much less receiving permission. Repelling the attack on Blackhaven would have been fine, but by your own admission, you deliberately set out to provoke it. I know this wasn't just about the Dornish, Rhaenyra."

"When we met for Laenor's funeral, Alicent proposed something that, at the time, took us all aback," Rhaenyra replied. "Wedding me to Jon."

"I remem..." Viserys went to say, blinking slowly as he caught on. "That's what this was about? What did you do to convince my daughter..."

"It wasn't Jon's plotting, it was mine," Rhaenyra said before Jon could. Taking a deep breath and sighing, she added, "Father, I am going to remarry, I know this, and whoever I

take as my husband is going to have direct influence over my sons. I'm a mother now, and I must think of my children before myself. I don't want to fight about it, certainly not right now, but I have seen what bringing another ambitious family into the royal fold can do..."

"You are not seriously using your unfortunate feud with Alicent to..." Viserys glared.

"You had to dismiss your own goodfather because of it!" Rhaenyra hissed, and he winced. "He was your friend and a...relatively competent Hand, and you had to get rid of him anyway because he kept bringing up the matter of succession."

"This is not a conversation to be had in front of..." Viserys went to say.

"Do you really think Daemon didn't tell his son all about Otto Hightower?" Rhaenyra asked dryly.

"For the record, he has said quite a bit," Jon piped up.

"My point is if I were to wed a Lannister, or a Tyrell, or whoever, I would be bringing that family and all their ambitions for the throne into my family," Rhaenyra sighed.

"The matter of your succession is unquestionable, though," Viserys muttered. "You have two sons."

"I do, but there are other ways that ambitious lords can use their influence over the heir to the throne to their advantage," Rhaenyra said.

"And you have miraculously no ambition whatsoever?" Viserys scoffed, looking at Jon.

"I wish to serve my family as any son does," Jon replied. "It just so happens that my family is yours."

"His only living direct blood relative is a man whose daughters are already betrothed to my sons," Rhaenyra replied. "I would have nothing, absolutely nothing to fear where they're concerned by wedding him. Jon is a dragonrider, a highly skilled warrior, and a good and honorable man, and I...I am certain that I could grow to love him. Even Rhaenys likes the idea."

"You discussed this with her?" Viserys asked, surprised.

"She discussed it with me, actually," Jon replied. "Like Rhaenyra, she worries for the princes, her grandsons, and Lae...Laenor was a friend to me. His trust means a lot to her."

"It means a lot to me too," Rhaenyra sighed, and Viserys' expression softened. "I miss him and I hate that Aegon and Aemon are never going to know their father, but he's gone and I can't change that. All I can do is move forward in a way that I think will be good for them."

"You're your mother's daughter," Viserys sniffed, blinking rapidly as he felt his eyes grow misty.

"I know you're concerned about his status as a bastard and what the lords would think, but when they learn about the pivotal role he played in crushing the Dornish and allowing us to reach this peace agreement with them, when the singers start telling the tale of 'Prince Jon's War,' and when they see Morghul at the wedding, those objections will die off," Rhaenyra replied.

"Prince Jon's War?" Viserys asked dryly, looking at him.

"Also her idea, Your Grace," Jon replied.

"Say yes, Father," Rhaenyra breathed, taking his hand in hers. "Say you'll legitimize my cousin and let me wed the one man in Westeros I feel I could trust around your grandsons."

Viserys took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair at that, mulling it over. *"This is my fault. If I had tried harder to get Rhaenyra and Alicent to grow close after I wed her, she wouldn't be terrified of remarrying."*

"My daughter has said quite a bit in making her argument," the king murmured, looking at Jon. "Make your case. Not a word, Nyra."

"Your Grace...all my life, I wondered about my parentage, not truly knowing where I came from," Jon began. "At far too young an age, I was made an orphan, as far as I knew, and I never thought I'd get to lay eyes ever again on anyone who was my kin. Serving the princess has been the honor of my life, and meeting...my father, getting to know him and Lady Laena, as well as...it's been wonderful. Whether you do as she wishes today or not, I will spend the rest of my days keeping her safe, and if you do let us wed, I will be good and true and love her as she deserves. On my honor as a knight and the noble blood in my veins, I swear it."

"I don't like this," Viserys murmured, "but, it is clear that this is what you want, Rhaenyra, and you have gone to frankly insane lengths to make it happen. If I agree to this, it will be on one condition."

"Name it," Rhaenyra replied.

"This Dornish adventure will be the very last of its kind that you undertake without my knowledge," Viserys said firmly. "You have demonstrated a surprising acumen where matters of war are concerned, something you got from my father, I suspect, but I never again want to be informed by Larys that you took the skies and burned our enemies; am I clear?"

"You are," Rhaenyra nodded.

"I will also ask, though how successful you might be in this, I cannot say, that you try to rein in Daemon, given that he and Laena seem to be staying with you permanently," Viserys replied. "Matthis Flowers is dead."

"What?" Rhaenyra asked, blinking in confusion. "I actually didn't know that."

"We've been told that he accidentally slit his throat while shaving," Viserys muttered. "The sad thing is that Daemon might not have even needed to order that; he does inspire loyalty. I should have seen it coming."

"He didn't mention it to me," Rhaenyra replied. "I also haven't seen him look inordinately pleased with himself recently, so he might not know."

"The point of providing a royal overseer to the lands was to prevent him and Corlys from making a mess of anything else without me being warned first, though it would seem that the Triarchy was weakened in the way I hoped for, so that's not as much of a concern now," Viserys said. "Losing the trade they did with Dorne will be a great blow to them."

"And one coming at a time when they're undoubtedly still reeling from their defeat at Bloodstone," Jon added. "With luck, this will mark the end of their union."

"We are seldom that lucky," Viserys sighed. "The small council and I will discuss the terms you suggested at length, but once I'm fully convinced of them, I will want to meet Prince Qoren and finalize things with him in person."

"I could fly you over to Dragonstone," Rhaenyra suggested, earning a flat look. "Anything can happen to a man on the road or sea, and if he dies in my custody, this will all have been for nothing. I want Princess Aliandra, Father. I want to shape the mind of the next ruler of Dorne myself and, the gods be good, wed her to a son of mine."

"You want to tie the Martells to us?" Viserys asked incredulously.

"It would potentially go a long way towards improving relations between us," Jon replied, "especially if the next couple decades are peaceful."

"You've been contemplating this for a while," Viserys said.

"I've barely thought of anything else since Laenor died," Rhaenyra replied. "I needed to figure out a way to wed a man I could trust, and arranging for Jon to crush the forces of Dorne seemed to be the option with the most potential benefits."

"You should be on my council," Viserys chuckled, and she preened.

"Well, I do still want to succeed Lord Lyonel as your Hand...years from now, of course," Rhaenyra replied, and he nodded.

"That would be one way to keep her from her trying to conquer Essos next, or whatever she'll think up," Viserys thought to himself. "Though I'm rewarding her enough as is for something I was planning to punish her for an hour ago."

"You really weren't in danger?" he asked and sighed, smiling at him.

"I was perfectly safe," Rhaenyra promised, "between my armor, Syrax, and the fact that the bulk of the fighting was done by Jon and Morghul, I was fine."

"I see," Viserys sighed, believing that she was being honest with him despite everything. "I don't want you worrying me anymore, Rhaenyra."

"Soon enough, I'll be wed and, the gods be good, round with child," Rhaenyra said, and Viserys noticed the momentary look of longing that Jon gave her. "After the wedding, I might go a full year without leaving Dragonstone again."

"Well, I wouldn't want you to go that far," her father smiled. "I don't see nearly enough of you."

"You'll see plenty of me leading up to the wedding," Rhaenyra murmured, and Viserys nodded.

"You're both to stay here for the night," he said, "and I'm going to summon Daemon and Laena as well."

"Oh?" Rhaenyra asked.

"Daemon will want to be present when I legitimize his son, I'm sure," Viserys replied, and both Rhaenyra's and Jon's eyes widened.

"You're doing it already?" she asked, pleasantly surprised, and he nodded.

"Your chambers are ready, and the chambers next to them are free at the moment, so I'll have the servants prepare them for you, Jon," Viserys said. "Now, I need to go write a letter. Excuse me."

"Of course," Rhaenyra nodded. "Thank you, Father. You have no idea how happy you've made me."

"I got to wed who I wished to after your mother died," Viserys sighed. "As my heir, you should have the same privilege."

He left then, and Rhaenyra waited until a moment after the door closed behind him to jump into Jon's arms, squealing in joy and triumph. He held her tightly, feeling a sense of absolute relief wash over him as he realized that they'd finally managed it. Since Laenor died, the question of how they were going to live the rest of their lives together without the shield he had been, had plagued them both, and in that moment, it seemed like they'd finally managed to arrange what they wanted most of all.

"We should probably still not do this here until we're wed," Jon whispered, and Rhaenyra shook her head.

"I'm not suggesting we fuck on this table," she whispered in his ear, "but right now, all I want is to feel your arms around me."

He smiled at that and continued to hold her, letting go of a breath that he swore he felt like he'd been holding for moons.

"What is to be done?" Alicent asked as she entered Viserys' solar a few minutes later, and he sighed, not looking up from the letter he had just penned and was waiting to dry. "Viserys, I'm worried about you. You were more upset this morning, than I had seen you since...since Aemma died."

She pursed her lips at that, not liking to think of the woman she'd replaced and who, she'd thought over the years, might still hold her husband's heart.

"That's why I was upset," Viserys sighed, looking up at her. "When I received the initial reports of the Battle of Blackhaven, I...my mind was filled with images of Rhaenyra and Syrax leading the charge against an entire Dornish army. Rhaenys' fate is one I've thought about more than once since she started riding her dragon. It turns out that she wasn't in quite as much danger as I feared, and she had the sense to deploy Jon and Morghul for most of it."

"So they say," Alicent muttered, sitting down.

"I believe them, and that's not the only thing they said that I believe," Viserys replied, making her furrow her brow at him. "Rhaenyra and Jon both said that he tried to talk her out of joining the fray at all, knowing that he could handle it, and she refused."

"I don't want to upset you, my love, but your daughter can be quite stubborn," Alicent said.

"She gets it from her grandmother, I'm sure," Viserys smiled. "My mother, not Aunt Daella."

"Of course," Alicent nodded, barely resisting the urge to sigh.

"I've come to a decision, one that I'm of mixed feelings about," Viserys said, and she looked at him warily. "Later today, I'm going to legitimize Jon as a Targaryen."

"You...why?" Alicent asked, her blood going cold as she realized the answer to that before he even spoke.

"Rhaenyra wishes to wed him, and I'm going to allow it," Viserys said, making her pale.

"You...you decided against that moons ago," Alicent reminded him.

"I did but I honestly think it will be for the best," Viserys replied. "Rhaenyra is every inch the dragon, as fierce as my mother, as proud and capable as my father, and with a penchant for violence not unlike Daemon's. Her temperament is better than his and I don't need to fear what she'll do nearly as much, but the dragon's blood in her veins runs hot and she needs someone to temper her in moments like this."

"But a bastard..." Alicent said.

"I know, I know, but let's face it, Alicent, he's the only unwed man in Westeros that she couldn't intimidate, and once he has our name and is her husband, I think she might actually listen to him," Viserys replied. "She asked to wed him because she felt she could trust him around the boys and didn't know of anyone else she'd feel that comfortable with."

"They are his, after all," Alicent thought to herself, fury growing in her heart the more he spoke. Rhaenyra had openly defied her father, flaunted her absolute independence, and gone to war against a neighboring kingdom of her own initiative, and her punishment for that was going to be getting wedded to the father of her bastards, a man who had openly threatened half the small council earlier that day. "I need to speak to Father about this and in person. How, though?"

"If you think it's for the best, then it is," she said. "There is something I wanted to discuss with you, though."

"What is it?" Viserys asked.

"Aegon's nameday is coming up, and I was hoping that my father might be allowed to visit for it," Alicent said, sighing as his gaze hardened. "I know he angered you, my love, but he is our children's grandfather, and it would just be for the occasion. Please, it would mean so much to me and to them."

Viserys sighed and, after a quiet moment, said, "Very well."

"Thank you," Alicent smiled, kissing him softly. "I'll leave you to your correspondence."

"Actually, this is done and can be sent to Dragonstone now," Viserys replied, looking over the letter to make sure it was dry. "I'll walk you out."

Alicent nodded at that, her mind racing as she tried to think of how to stop this nightmare wedding from happening. Under no circumstances could that spoiled bitch be allowed to wed Daemon Targaryen's son, for between his temperament, which was clearly much like his father's and the monstrous dragon he rode, not even his status as a bastard would negate the benefits of the union for her.

"Father will have ideas about how to proceed," she thought to herself. "He always does."

Praying to the gods for guidance, she followed Viserys out of his solar in silence, wondering how her day, which had seemed to start off so well, could get any worse.

"Luthor," Daemon grinned as he spotted his old friend waiting for him outside the Dragonpit. "How in the hells did you know I was coming?"

"Lord Commander," Ser Luthor nodded. "I happened to be in this part of the city when one of my men said he'd overheard palace guards speaking of your impending arrival and decided to greet you personally. My Lady."

"Ser Luthor," Laena smiled, letting him lead her and Daemon to their carriage. "How fares the city?"

"Same as it has been for the past few years, though the sept project has given quite a few of the wastrels in Flea Bottom to do, and that has helped some," Ser Luthor replied. "Idle hands are far more likely to end up needing to be lopped off, after all."

Daemon laughed at that as he sat next to Laena, and Luthor slapped the side of the carriage, looking up at him.

"If you have a moment to spare later, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, Prince Daemon," he said, and the dragonrider looked down at him curiously, knowing that his successor with the Gold Cloaks seldom referred to him by anything but the title he now bore.

"I'll likely be staying the night, so I should be able to come find you later," Daemon replied. "Get us to the Red Keep."

The driver nodded and bade the horses to get moving as Laena leaned in and said, "Do you have any idea what that might be about?"

"None at all," Daemon replied, just curious as she was.

The carriage took them to the keep quickly, and the first thing the prince noticed as he walked into the halls of the keep he'd grown up in was what he didn't see. Not seeing Alicent immediately was as unsurprising as it was welcome, but he didn't see a single one of her allies as he walked in. None of her ladies, nor the council members he knew favored her side over Rhaenyra's, nor her idiot brother were anywhere in sight. It didn't necessarily mean anything, but he couldn't help but wonder if their universal absences were related to the reason that Viserys had summoned him.

"Laena!" Helaena exclaimed as she rushed over to them. "Uncle Daemon. Papa didn't say you were coming."

"It was a sudden thing," Laena replied, smiling down at the young girl as Daemon looked at her flatly. "You've grown since I last saw you."

"Still not big enough to ride Dreamfyre," Helaena sighed as Ser Arryk caught up to her.

"Princess, your mother said you were to stay in my sight," the knight chastized.

"You couldn't keep an eye on one tiny girl?" Daemon scoffed, and the knight glared at him.

"The royal children were left in my care, and Prince Aemond was having a...spirited discussion with the grand maester about the importance of..." Ser Arryk went to explain.

"I don't care," Daemon said dryly.

"I'm sorry, Ser Arryk, but I knew I was right about seeing Vhagar," Helaena murmured. "I don't know what Aegon thought he was..."

"Daemon," Rhaenyra beamed as she joined them and immediately hugged Laena. "Laena, welcome. I trust the twins are alright."

“Both sets,” the other Valyrian woman replied with a smile. “The servants are keeping an eye on them.”

“We’re also not likely to be here terribly long,” Daemon replied.

“Father’s throwing a feast, and we’ll all be staying the night, but we can go come the morrow,” Rhaenyra said. “It will be during the feast that he’ll...”

“Why is he throwing a feast?” Helaena asked, confused. “Is it Uncle Daemon’s nameday?”

“A good guess, but no,” Rhaenyra replied. “Father’s going to be honoring our cousin, Jon, for his valor against the Dornish.”

“We invaded Dorne again?” Helaena asked, furrowing her brow.

“No, but the Dornish have never forgiven us for failing the one time and keep trying to get us to come back,” Daemon drawled, confusing the poor girl further.

“The Dornish want to be invaded?” Helaena asked.

“It’s the only explanation I can think for why the dumb cunts keep...” Daemon went to say.

“We should get back to your brothers, princess,” Ser Arryk cut in. “You’ll see more of your uncle and his wife at the feast tonight.”

“It was nice seeing you both again,” Helaena beamed as the knight led her away.

“She really is a sweet little thing,” Laena murmured, and Daemon rolled his eyes.

“Remarkably tolerable for someone half-Hightower,” he had to admit.

“It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if you spoiled her a little like you used to spoil me,” Rhaenyra murmured. “I know who her grandfather is, but still...”

“It would annoy her mother deeply,” Laena whispered, chuckling when Daemon started looking contemplative.

“Come,” Rhaenyra smiled. “We can speak in my chambers.”

“I take it things went well,” Daemon murmured as she led them further in.

“Father was...displeased with the whole thing, but the terms of the deal Prince Qoren agreed to helped soothe him, as did my assurances that Jon did almost all of the fighting,” Rhaenyra replied quietly.

“Where is he?” Daemon asked.

“Guarding the door to my chambers,” Rhaenyra replied. “I hardly need to fear for my safety here.”

"Yes," Daemon drawled. "When has anyone ever been harmed in a viper's nest?"

Rhaenyra rolled her eyes at that, smiling when she saw Jon waiting for her. The look he gave her was so full of longing and desire that it made her insides quiver, and she wished dearly that she could have him take her right there. She gestured for him to open the door and join them, and a moment later, all four were standing within her chambers.

"I know you've presumably gotten what you hoped to out of this entire episode, but you might want to wait until you're actually wed to eye-fuck each other that openly," Daemon said quietly, and Rhaenyra glared at him.

"Daemon!" she exclaimed, making Laena giggle.

"Relax," she said softly. "I'm fully supportive of your presumably upcoming union."

"Really?" Jon asked.

"Rhaenyra's going to wed again, and I would rather it be to someone we're related to," Laena replied. "Fewer outside influences that way."

"Your mother said much the same," Jon murmured, earning a look of surprise from the silver-haired beauty.

"I suppose I could see that," Laena murmured, smiling at Daemon as he poured four cups of wine for them from the jug in the corner.

"So what exactly did happen?" he asked as they each took one.

"We told Father what happened and what came of it, and once he'd calmed down and dismissed the rest of the council, I told him that I wanted to wed Jon," Rhaenyra replied. "He dithered a bit, but, in the end, he saw things our way. When it will happen, we haven't yet begun to consider, but we know that it will. He has also agreed to legitimize him."

"That much he said in his letter," Daemon replied. "I got the strangest sense from it that he was upset with me. You did make it clear that I had no real part in this scheme of yours, yes?"

"Apparently Matthis Flowers is dead," Rhaenyra replied, her eyes narrowing when Daemon burst out laughing. "You didn't order that, did you?"

"No, I didn't, but I'm hardly surprised," Daemon replied. "It wasn't the noblest men in Westeros that I took with me when I warred against the Triarchy, and it wasn't the noblest of that lot that agreed to stay behind. The idea that they'd take orders from a prancing flower who didn't bleed and kill alongside them was always stupid, but Viserys didn't see fit to consult me, so I didn't see fit to warn him. How'd he die?"

"Slit his throat while shaving, apparently," Jon replied, making the older man chuckle again.

"I will be sure to let Father know that you clearly didn't know what had happened," Rhaenyra sighed. "I'm going to need to do something to limit the damage from this."

"What damage?" Daemon asked.

"Lord Patrek is an ally of Matthos Tyrell, not the Hightowers, but as your men killed his bastard son, Otto and his brother could use that to their advantage," Rhaenyra fretted.

"That whole thing was the queen's idea," Laena pointed out.

"A point I will need to stress," Rhaenyra replied. "At the moment, I don't know who all knows about his death."

"Perhaps you could deliver his remains in person," Jon murmured. When she cocked an eyebrow at him, he said, "You could frame it as House Targaryen apologizing for what happened and stress that while Alicent means well, she can be somewhat naive about matters involving less-than-honorable men."

"Given my own connection to what happened with the Dornish, I could then use that to make clear that my judgment on such matters is better," Rhaenyra mused. "Father took some bad advice and wanted to do a favor for his wife, who didn't truly know what she was doing. I could make that work and potentially develop ties with another house in the Reach."

"That is assuming that they still have his remains," Daemon murmured, and Rhaenyra rolled her eyes.

"I'm sure if the two of us flew over there and impressed upon them the need to produce the body, they would," she replied. "Weakening the Hightowers' influence in what would normally be the kingdom where their support would be the strongest was one of the reasons I undertook the sept project in the first place, and I won't have the success I achieved there undermined because the borderline bandits you left in the Stepstones decided to murder a man."

Daemon looked surprised for a moment before smiling slightly, genuinely impressed by her fire.

"While we're all together, there is a matter we should discuss, but it's somewhat delicate," Daemon replied. "I assume you know how to access Maegor's tunnels from your chambers."

"I've known that since I was a child," Rhaenyra replied primly. "Is this about the children?"

"No," Laena replied, "but it is important."

"There's a hidden room far below my chambers that we can speak freely in," Rhaenyra whispered, making her way over to the far wall and pulling on one of the sconces there. The door next to it opened the next moment and, grabbing a torch, Daemon led them inside.

"I know which one you mean," he replied, navigating Maegor's tunnels with the ease of someone who had spent his youth. "I'm surprised you found it."

"Like you, I was rather bored as a child," Rhaenyra smiled.

Jon closed the hidden door behind them, following behind all of them as they made their way through the dark, dusty tunnels, and as they moved further away from Rhaenyra's chambers, he asked, "Is this about another problem we're going to have to deal with?"

"Not as such, though it is going to take a bit of work," Daemon replied, coming to a halt as he found the room he was sure Rhaenyra had meant and pulled the lever there.

The door into it opened, and he went inside, quickly pushing the false stone that he knew would reveal the nearby spiral staircase. As the hidden door to it opened, he led them downstairs, eventually finding a room that Maegor had clearly had built just in case he ever needed to hide anything truly valuable. To his knowledge, he was the first Targaryen to find the room since those days, and aside from Rhaenyra, he doubted that anyone else had, something that the sheer number of cobwebs he had to burn with his torch as he looked around. They could speak freely in this space, something that was likely true of no other spot within the Red Keep, and that was good, given what they were going to be discussing. Reaching into his coin purse, he pulled out a letter and handed it to Rhaenyra.

"It's a little dark," she muttered, nodding when he moved the torch closer. The faint light was still only barely enough to make out anything on the page, but she managed to strain her eyes a bit, reading aloud, "Maegor, with luck, you'll never need to read this letter, but as I told you on your tenth nameday..."

She trailed off, a chill going down her spine and her heart skipping a beat in excitement as she realized what she was holding in her hands.

"A letter from Visenya to Maegor written while he was dying and left in a chamber he clearly never found," Daemon replied.

"You...you found a hidden chamber of hers?" Rhaenyra asked.

"What was in there?" Jon asked.

"Everything that she hid from Alyssa Velaryon when she feared that she wasn't going to live much longer and quite a bit else besides," Laena replied. "The hidden door that led to it is in the hidden room where you keep your entire scroll collection."

Rhaenyra froze, looking at the two of them with a mixture of shock and annoyance.

"You..."

"Were you ever going to tell us that you'd taken to using magic?" Daemon asked, and Jon took a deep breath.

"Nyra?" he asked.

"I was," Rhaenyra sighed, looking down. "When Laenor, Jon, and I found those scrolls in Essos, you were still in Volantis, and when you returned, I was so heavy with the twins that I could hardly focus on anything else. I told you about the other scrolls the day I gave birth, and I was going to show you all of them, but..."

"Laenor was killed," Laena sighed.

"I've been focused on the twins and trying to arrange this entire Dornish adventure ever since that day," Rhaenyra replied. "I should finally be able to breathe again, with the matter of my upcoming wedding settled, and I would have told you about the rest of the scrolls in the coming weeks, but I've just been so...overwhelmed lately."

"When we found them, I figured that the primary benefit would be the secret of Valyrian steel," Jon replied. "My Valyrian was still not yet good then, so I barely looked at any of the others."

"You did, though," Laena breathed, looking at Rhaenyra. "You helped me give birth to the twins, didn't you? That's why our births were so quick and easy. You've mastered flesh magic."

Rhaenyra stood, stunned by that, unsure of what she should say.

"If that's true, you have our appreciation," Daemon murmured. "What I don't know, though, is why you didn't tell us. I understand that you've come to rely on your own council, but we are family and allies besides. Your sons are betrothed to my daughters for fuck's sake. Why tell us so little?"

Rhaenyra and Jon looked at each other, managing, even in the very, very faint light, to communicate with their eyes alone. They'd both wanted someone else to speak to about the future and what they knew of it since Laenor died and Daemon and Laena were the most obvious choices there, so after a moment they both sighed and looked back at the other couple.

"There's a reason why we told you so little about the magic and why I felt the need to interfere with your birth, Laena," the princess said, "though you're unlikely to believe us."

"We've accepted that flesh magic is real," Daemon drawled. "What could be stranger than that?"

"I was born two hundred and eighty-three years after the conquest," Jon replied, earning looks of confusion from both of them. "I grew up in Winterfell, knowing nothing of my parentage and believing that Lord Eddard Stark, my uncle, as it turns out, was my father. When I was four and ten, I joined the Night's Watch, where I quickly managed to rise to the rank of Lord Commander, but there was a mutiny, and I was stabbed a dozen times by my men. I bled out and found myself floating in a dark void where a powerful entity of some kind yelled at me for failing the world and sent me hurtling through time and space. The next thing I knew, I was falling through the sky, my wounds healed and my clothing nowhere to be found, where I was saved by Rhaenyra, who happened to be flying nearby."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Daemon asked harshly.

"It's true, Uncle," Rhaenyra sighed. "There was no wild dragon that picked Jon up and hurled him through the air. I saw a flash of light in the sky, one in many different colors, and out of that light emerged a naked man who began to fall towards the sea. I moved Syrax in and caught him, but then I had a naked man in my saddle, something I could not let others see, so I went to Laenor for help."

"This doesn't make any sense," Laena breathed, looking between them like they were all mad. "Daemon, you said Jon was your son..."

"That was a fiction I agreed to go along with in exchange for our daughters being betrothed to your nephews," Daemon sighed. "Who the fuck are you, then?"

"I am, as it turns out, the son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, and Lyanna Stark, who died in childbirth and whom I always thought was my aunt," Jon replied. "Alys helped us figure that out."

"Alys knows?!" Laena exclaimed, and Rhaenyra blinked at her in confusion.

"Alys knows much and more," Jon replied. "More than she should, more often than not. The whole reason we brought her here was because I knew of her abilities and that she was going to end up being an ally of Aemond's when the Targaryens went to war with each other after Viserys died."

"Alright, now I know you're taking the piss," Daemon scowled. "I could believe you traveled through time before I believed that the Hightowers would be stupid enough to try to wage war with us? How exactly do you imagine they dealt with Vhagar, much less the others? Their largest dragon is Dreamfyre, and Caraxes could kill her with his eyes closed."

Rhaenyra and Jon looked at each other for a moment before she said, "They believed they could win the war and steal my throne because Aemond was Vhagar's rider by then."

"Aem...what happened to me?" Laena asked, feeling a pit form in her stomach.

"In the other timeline, you died in childbirth a few years from now," Jon replied.

"Boy, I will..." Daemon snarled.

"That's why I sought to master flesh magic," Rhaenyra hissed, looking mournfully at Laena, who was clutching her stomach then, looking down at it in horror. "I figured that if your first birth went well, it would make it less likely that the next one would kill you, but with my abilities as they are now, there's virtually no chance of..."

"When?" Laena asked. "When did I die?"

"I think it was five or six years from now, but I'm not sure," Jon sighed, and her eyes went wide as saucers before narrowing as she glared at him.

"Laenor..." Laena breathed, her eyes flashing dangerously as Jon grimaced. "Did you know..."

“Laena...” he went to say.

“Did you know?!” Laena screamed.

“Laena, we would have...” Rhaenyra went to say.

“No,” Jon sighed, looking down as his eyes grew misty. “I didn’t, and I will regret that for the rest of my life.”

“You’re actually believing all of this?” Daemon asked.

“His first test was Helaena,” Rhaenyra said. “He remembered that she bonded with Dreamfyre and told us that weeks before it happened. There’s no way that he could have known that.”

“How did you not know?” Laena asked mournfully, and Jon gave her a stricken look.

“Because I learned the history of this period as an impatient boy who only wanted to hear about great battles,” Jon replied. “I knew that Laenor died as did you, and I might not have even remembered how you did if...he wasn’t one of my favorite historical figures from this time.”

Daemon sneered at that, though he had to admit that the absolute certainty in both their voices was starting to disturb him a lot.

“If I had had the faintest memory that Qarl killed him, I’d have gutted the cunt,” Jon replied. “Laenor...Laenor was a good and dear friend, and I will regret that I failed to save him for the rest of my days.”

Laena swallowed thickly, her eyes wet and her heart alight with a fury she’d managed to suppress for a while by then, and yet she couldn’t deny that he sounded sincere and she had seen how deeply he mourned her brother.

“Why interfere like this?” Daemon asked, slowly realizing that, at minimum, his niece actually believed this madness. “You said yourself you didn’t know who your parents were until Alys helped you, and you were here for moons before she arrived.”

“Did that entity order you to?” Laena asked.

“No,” Jon replied, closing his eyes as he prepared himself for the next part. “North of the Wall, in the frozen plains of the Lands of Always Winter, a great and terrible evil slumbers. When it awakens, more than a century and a half from now, it will attempt to extinguish all life in Westeros and potentially the world. It is weak to fire and...”

“You speak of the Others?” Daemon scoffed. “Did you both drink something poisoned earlier?”

“They’re real,” Jon sighed, “and if, when they rise, as was the case in my time, there are no living dragons left to kill them, we are all fucked.”

"There were none left?" Laena asked, aghast.

"Most of them were killed in what came to be known as the Dance of Dragons after Viserys died," Jon replied. "That's why I initially sought to help you, because I knew that if the Greens didn't get their hands on Vhagar, they'd have no hope of rebelling against Rhaenyra. You, Laena, are the most important person in the realm, and your safety is paramount."

"That's not going to keep me up at night for the rest of my life," Laena snarked, her heart racing in her chest.

"How did it end?" Daemon asked. "Tell me the Hightowers didn't win in the end."

"They did and they didn't," Jon replied. "All of Alicent's line was wiped out, as were almost all the dragons, and in the end, Rhaenyra's fourth son took the throne as a boy, succeeding his uncle, who managed to kill her before being poisoned himself. It was the bloodiest war in the history of Westeros and, by far, the most costly. When I was born, there hadn't been living dragons in the world for a century and a half, and House Targaryen was so weakened that they were ultimately deposed after the last king of the line went mad and started burning people alive for his amusement. His youngest children survived and fled to Essos, and a Queen named Daenerys Targaryen had managed to somehow hatch dragons a couple years before I was murdered, but she made her kingdom in Slaver's Bay."

Daemon sat down heavily, staring out at the wall in horror at what he was hearing. The very idea of his family, the last line of Dragonlords in all the world, being brought so low made him furious in a way he'd never been in his entire life.

"I should have supported Rhaenys," he muttered.

"What?" Rhaenyra asked.

"This is all Viserys' fault," Daemon growled. "If the blithering idiot had just stayed a widower, or better yet, stopped trying to breed his obviously frail wife, we wouldn't be in this position."

"The fault lies with Alicent and her scheming father," Rhaenyra glared.

"We could kill her," Daemon murmured, "her and her spawn. That would make sure that..."

"No, Daemon," Rhaenyra glared. "I'm not doing that to my father!"

"Your father..." Daemon went to shout.

"Murdering his nephews didn't work out well for Maegor, you'll recall," Jon piped up, "and it's wholly unnecessary now. In the other timeline, Laena's death made it easy for the Greens to grow stronger, and Morghul remained the Cannibal, an unclaimed dragon who flew eastward after the Dance."

"I was also a fool who weakened her own position at every turn," Rhaenyra muttered, earning a look of surprise from him. "I'd rather not get into it, but let's just say that the woman I've become is repulsed by the vain, shortsighted figure I became in the other timeline. The Stormlanders and half the Reachers will adore Jon and me for what's happened with the Dornish; my influence in the Reach grows by the moon, and the Great Sept will secure my image as one of piety with the people at large. By the time my father passes, my position will be so unassailable that Otto and Alicent will give up, and, should things go as I hope, my siblings won't want to rebel against me anyway."

"Their mother will continue to spew poison into their ears for as long as she lives," Daemon countered.

"And I will deal with it," Rhaenyra replied. "Swear to me on your daughters' lives that you will not move against them without my say."

"You can't..." Daemon went to say.

"Swear to me, Daemon," Rhaenyra glared. "I did not tell you this so House Targaryen could tear itself apart years earlier than it did in the other timeline."

Daemon met her glare with equal fire, and Jon and Laena looked at each other warily, neither one used to seeing the other two quarrel like this.

"As long as Laena lives, I'll not touch them," Daemon finally promised after a tense few moments, and she nodded, sighing in relief as she found she believed him.

"It won't be necessary, I promise," Rhaenyra assured him, her expression softening as she saw him relax a little. "We truly have been working all this time to ensure that."

"The only thing that made them threatening was Vhagar," Jon murmured. "That's why Rhaenyra keeps sending eggs along to see if one of them will take to Aemond. If we can ensure that he never touches Vhagar, they truly will have no hope against us."

"So long as we work to strengthen our position and weaken theirs, we will ensure that the war never even happens," Rhaenyra promised. "Otto and Alicent are conniving cunts, but they're not delusional."

"She also genuinely loves her children," Jon replied. "By the end, she was so broken by what happened to them that she died half-mad. If they come to believe that they couldn't possibly win, which is the case, as things stand..."

"They'll back off," Laena nodded.

"Soon I will be wed to a man who rides the second-largest dragon in Westeros, and my closest ally is the most feared warrior in the lands, who happens to be wed to a woman who rides the only dragon larger than Jon's," Rhaenyra breathed. "I'm in a better position here than I ever was in the other timeline."

Daemon nodded at that, thinking, *"I'll do things your way for now, little dragon, but if something happens to Laena and I come to think that the only way to prevent the house of my father, a house that stood strong and proud in the greatest civilization to ever exist, is to kill them all, I will not hesitate."*

"We should get back," he murmured. "I imagine the feast is going to be starting soon."

Rhaenyra and Jon nodded at that, hoping that bringing the other two fully into their confidence had been a good idea.