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"The whore on Dragonstone is not the threat. No more than Rowan and those traitors in the Reach. The danger is my uncle. Once Daemon is dead, all those fools flying our sister's banners will run back to their castles and trouble us no more."

-Aemond Targaryen

The Greens gained momentum after the Sacking of Tumbleton. It was said that Maelor's brutal death had awoken a terrible anger in the young Prince Daeron, for he had ordered the inhabitants of the market town put to the sword—even the women and children were not spared, leaving only the sept unmolested. Lord Footly and his whole family were hanged like common brigands, and none of the Reachlords spoke in their defence. It was said that Ser Criston Cole and Lord Hightower advised mercy, but Daeron had famously said, "They support my treacherous sister and showed my young nephew no mercy, why would I grant them any in return?"

Now, only the army of ten thousand Valemens stood between the Green host and King's Landing.

While significant and devastating, the Sack of Tumbleton did not shift the tides of war, for the Blacks still had the advantage. The true change came with the Great Betrayal—a turning point in the Dance of the Dragons where Silver Denys turned his cloak and attacked Maidenpool and the Rogue Prince with Prince Aemond. It was a surprising betrayal, but one that was likely long in the making, given the smooth cooperation.

The fear of Prince Daemon was so great that it was said that Vhagar and Seasmoke bathed the seat of House Mooton in dragonfire for hours until it was reduced to a lake of molten stone.

None survived the Destruction of Maidenpool to tell the tale, but a few shepherds living in a nearby village were the only witnesses. They claimed Seasmoke and Vhagar first swooped from the sky, attacking Caraxes while the Blood Wurm had been feasting on their sheep at night before turning to torch Maidenpool, bathing it in dragonfire for hours until it became a pool of molten rock. House Mooton and the Rogue Prince perished that night, but Daemon's dragon survived, even though he had been ambushed first.

The Blood Wurm's reputation was so fierce that neither Silver Denys nor Aemond dared to approach the dragon and were content to leave it on the ground, having burned the flesh of its wings, crippling the beast. It is said that Caraxes' furious howls and roars rang out for miles and could be heard for days, beating what remained of his skeletal wings in an attempt to fly. On the second day, he crawled to Maidenpool's ruins as though he mourned the passing of his rider.

All who approached the dragon were killed by its deadly flame, and over twenty brave knights perished in the attempt to become a lauded dragonslayer. Caraxes lingered for forty days before dying. Some said he died from fury, some said he died from hunger, and Mushroom writes that the Blood Wyrms were slain by a young, cunning shepherd by the name of Pate, who had sent a poisoned sheep to the fallen dragon. Another tale says the sheep was already roasted, and its innards filled with caltrops. According to Munkun's accounts, however, the dragon's insides were torn from eating the knights with their arms and armaments, the sharp steel slowly shredding Caraxes from the inside.

Regardless, a shepherd by the name of Pate did claim to be a Dragonslayer but did not live long to enjoy his fame. The daring youth had gathered a crowd and danced on top of the dragon's corpse while a motley band of his friends stopped anyone from laying claim to the carcass. Then the reckless shepherd drank Caraxes' blood, hoping to gain its strength, only to suffer a slow, agonising death as his innards burned and his body was roasted from within. In the end, the Green force of fifty lancers rode forth from Harrenhal, dispersing the looters and retrieving any plundered dragonbone.

Mushroom writes that Silver Denys was insulted when the Rogue Prince spurned his daughter for a paramour, leading to the betrayal. Eustace, however, reasons that it was the promise of the Trident that had won Silver Denys to Aegon's side. The offer to become the next lord of the Riverlands was many times more generous than the paltry knighthood gained from Rhaenyra...

Excerpt from 'When Dragons Danced' by Archmaester Abalon

Middle of 130 AC

King's Landing was a city plagued by numerous woes. They festered beneath the glamorous surface like a bad wound, growing worse with time. And of course, in a true time-tested fashion, the Iron Throne ignored such issues until it couldn't.

During Aegon's ascension to the Iron Throne, the city had been first purged of Rhaenyra's supporters, and many a crook used the chance to get rid of their foes in the chaos, claiming they were members of the Blacks. With the Sea Snake's blockade of Blackwater Bay that cut off trade from the Narrow Sea, and the Riverlords halting the flow of food down the Blackwater Rush, the city saw itself forced to ration.

War taxes were further raised by the Lord Hand, Otto Hightower, turning Aegon into a deeply unpopular king.

This was why Rhaenyra was welcomed into the city with much jubilation, the merchants and craftsmen and smallfolk thinking their fortunes would turn for the better now. But another purge, this time of the Greens and their supporters, came first.

The new ruler needed gold just as direly as the old one. The new master of coin, Lord Bartimos Celtigar, put forth ruinous taxes to fill the empty royal coffers. Taxation on wine and ale was doubled, and port fees were tripled. Shopkeepers were assessed a fee to keep their doors open, and even the stall owners had to pay to use the streets. Innkeepers were required to pay a silver stag for each bed in their inn, and entering and leaving the city imposed another fee of fifteen silver stags per head. A property tax was

levied that smallfolk and the wealthy alike were obliged to pay, depending on how much space they took in the city.

All that taxation was enforced by the gold cloaks, who often went door to door to collect the fees, though most referred to it as *'royal extortion'* and *'naked robbery'*. Those who refused to comply were hanged for treason as an example, and all of their wealth was seized. Even executions became a source of coin, for they were held in the Dragonpit, and those who wished to see the spectacle were charged three pennies.

That was beside the knight inquisitors who were tasked with searching for Rhaenyra's escaped half-brother and his missing children, given orders to do whatever it takes to even find a single trace. The searches were forceful and numerous and never truly stopped—bodies piled up, but neither Aegon the Elder nor his children were found.

"Maegor with Teats", many smallfolk called Rhaenyra by the fourth moon of her rule, but never loudly and always far away from the ears of the gold cloaks and the knight inquisitors. Rhaenyra finally had the coin she had so sorely lacked, but had lost the support of the very people she wanted to rule.

The shadow of gloom lingered over the city like a grim veil as discontent festered underneath. It was like an old pot of wildfire, waiting for the slightest spark to explode.

Then came the Great Betrayal and the Sack of Tumbleton—happening within the same sennight. The city panicked, and many wanted to leave, fearing that they would be the next burned to death like in Maidenpool or put to the sword by the merciless Hightowers. But Lord Bartimos Celtigar closed the city gates shut, raising the fee for leaving the city to two golden dragons. Few had the coin to pay after being wrung dry by the master of coin the previous months.

From that moment on, knight inquisitors and bands of gold cloaks would not return alive if they ventured deep into the city at night without sufficient numbers. But another problem loomed over the Queen. With Daemon's demise, Rhaenyra's control over the men sworn to her began to slip. Knights and men-at-arms grumbled at the woman's indecision, and only the Sea Snake's experienced hand kept the forces in the city reined in.

A begging fellow by the name of the Shepherd had started preaching through Cobbler's Square, claiming that *"Maegor with Teats is a curse upon us all. Dragons are demons, spawns of godless Valyria, and the doom of men!"*

The Shepherd had gathered a sizeable following, something that earned him the attention of the vengeful queen.

Already paranoid after her husband's death, Rhaenyra grew angered at the slander the moment Mysaria reported such a gathering, and ordered the death of the begging brother at the same breath she ordered the arrest of Ser Alyn Velaryon—against Lord Corlys' protests, who tried to assure her that his heir was a loyal man. A trueborn Velaryon.

It was the same day that Queen Helaena had learned of her last son's cruel demise, and had thrown herself out of the window of her chambers in Maegor's Holdfast, impaling herself on the spikes of the moat below.

The simmering discontent could no longer be suppressed, and the city erupted in riots. Ser Alyn Velaryon was arrested but managed to escape the Black Cells after the men guarding him deserted their posts. The dragonseed was last seen ahorse in the riots, and a reward of ten thousand golden dragons was placed on his head.

The already paranoid queen Rhaenyra ordered Corlys arrested and even his granddaughters at Dragonstone detained in their quarters, thinking he had arranged for the release of Alyn, an accusation the Velaryon Lord did not deny. But when the Sea Snake's arrest became known to his men, they began deserting Rhaenyra in the hundreds, some even joining the riots.

A force of fifteen hundred battle-hardened knights, gold cloaks, and men-at-arms led by Ser Luthor Largent, Ser Lorent Marbrand of the kingsguard, and Ser Torrhen Manderly ventured out of the Red Keep to quell the unrest in the city. The sound of steel and cries of pain and death rang out through half the city in the dark night, and by the morning, the streets ran red with blood. Only a third of the men returned to the Red Keep in the morning, battered and covered in guts and death from head to toe, completely unsuccessful. The riots continued, even stronger than before.

It was said that the Shepherd had been killed in the fighting, and so had Lord Celtigar, whose manse had been stormed by an angry crowd, forcing him to pay the 'cock tax' by chopping off his manhood.

The Sea Snake

He sat in the Black Cells, irons clasped around his limbs like some wretched outlaw. The roughspun rug beneath his back stank of piss, and the air was cold, wet, and grated on his lungs, but that was the least of his worries. Alyn had been arrested in the Dragonpit and dragged back to those very same cells. Corlys had managed to bribe the guard to release his heir and help him escape, at the cost of his own freedom.

When had things gone so wrong?

When Daemon had died from treachery?

When his wife perished in an ambush?

Or perhaps earlier, when Laena and Laenor had met their untimely end in the same year, and with them died his own pride?

Or perhaps things had gone wrong earlier... when he had chosen to play the Great Game by marrying Laenor to Rhaenyra.

Corlys knew his own son. How could he not? He knew that Laenor held no interest in maidens, no matter how beautiful they were. Even the Realm's Delight failed to bring him to the marriage bed.

The things he had to do for his own ambition... Corlys was not proud of them. He did not even dare speak them out loud.

At seven and seventy, he was old. Too old for war. Too old for treachery. Too old to start anew. House Velaryon had seen its greatest rise under his rule, and now, it was seeing its greatest fall. From three dragonriders in Driftmark, there were now none.

The gods were cruel, Corlys decided.

Alyn was his last hope, but Corlys knew it was over. The betrayal at Maidenpool and Daemon's death would forever hang over his head like a blemish that could never be washed away. Worse still, Rhaenyra's paranoia had grown too strong, especially with her advisors whispering doubts into her ears out of envy for their betters, trying to weaken Corlys further.

Did Alyn flee successfully?

Corlys wanted to say yes, but the city was boiling over with hatred, anger, and suspicion, and it was a question of whether Alyn could escape the chaos unscathed. The guards at the Dragonpit would not let a traitor enter, and Corlys could hardly bribe or threaten them from the damp, cold cell in the nethers of Aegon's Hill. His mariners would help the boy escape on a ship, but Alyn would have to cross a part of the city and pass the River Gate to reach the harbour. And the city gates were all well guarded.

Even now, in the darkness of the black cells, Corlys prayed for his success, but he knew that prayer did not stop swords and arrows.

Here he was, the wealthiest and second most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms, stuck in the nethers of the Red Keep where no light shone, awaiting trial and execution. He had played the Great Game, and he had lost it all. They barely brought him porridge and bread once a day, and his old bones started to ache from the cold. Corlys was beginning to think he'd die before seeing the sun again. But what rankled him was not his terrible situation but the future of House Velaryon, which hung in uncertainty. Even his requests to meet with Rhaenyra had been met with silence, his pleas only serving to turn his throat raw.

On the fifth day of his imprisonment, something shifted. Or at least he thought five days had passed, but it was hard to tell in the gloomy darkness of the Black Cells.

To his surprise, the door to his cell creaked open, and a cloaked figure limped inside, bringing in an oil lamp that forced Corlys to squint.

"Clubfoot?" His voice came out hoarse.

"Sea Snake," the man returned, lowering his hood to reveal Larys Strong's face. It was an unassuming face, holding no distinguishing traits with its mop of short brown hair and dark eyes—probably one of the reasons why Larys Strong could linger in the city undetected for so long, despite his distinctive clubfoot.

"Have you come here to gloat?"

"Gloat?" Larys shook his head, his voice as unhurried as always. "I have come here to make you an offer, Lord Corlys, for the sake of our old friendship. The white raven arrived from the Citadel two days ago. Winter is here, and we must band together to weather the cold."

"And I take it the men guarding the dungeons just let you come through?" Corlys drawled with some derision. He had never been friends with an ungainly torturer like Larys.

"Most of them had already deserted because they think the queen has gone mad with desperation and grief, you see. Of course, the men guarding the postern gate had to be *motivated* to let the deserters flee. The remaining sentries are asleep now, after overindulging in sweet dreamwine served by one of

the pages I bribed. Half of the swords in this city are loyal to you, Corlys. And the other half was loyal to Daemon.”

But he was now imprisoned, and Daemon was dead.

“If you’re not here to gloat, you’re here to ask me to turn my cloak, then?”

Larys clapped theatrically, nodding eagerly. “As expected from someone as sharp as Lord Velaryon. Rhaenyra is done, you should know. Her defeat is imminent, merely a question of time.”

“She still has Syrax and Joffrey’s Tyraxes,” Corlys said, not quite believing his own words.

“That she does. Yet during the course of this unfortunate war, I’ve found that Rhaenyra has *many* things, but she lacks the spine to use them. With two sons left, she would rather die than risk something happening to one of them. A Queen she might style herself, but she is not the make of kings.”

“And Aegon is?”

“Aegon might be far from perfect, but aren’t we all?” Larys chortled. “At least he knows when to delegate to loyal and capable men without creating enemies when there were none. That alone puts him a cut above your dear queen.”

Corlys sighed, knowing the man was right.

“Come now, Rhaenyra’s days are numbered without Daemon.” A sly smile tugged at Clubfoot’s face as he dangled a keychain with his free hand. “Already, the rioters have broken through three of the gates and have fled into the Crownlands and the kingswood, and Rhaenyra is too afraid to move. Your queen has discarded you at the first opportunity, and she now clings to the Red Keep with barely three hundred men, and dozens still desert her by the day. Can Rhaenyra mount Syrax and defeat Vhagar or Seasmoke on her lonesome? What about Tesseract? Or do you think she will send my dear bastard nephew Joffrey with his drakeling Tyrax to fight instead? The bold Valemens march to meet Prince Daeron and the Hightower host, but they are outnumbered and lack a dragon.”

The words hung in the air. Without a dragon, the Valemens were just sitting ducks for Tesseract. Even if they wished to build scorpions, the Hightowers would be upon them before they ever finished. Their defeat was merely a matter of time.

Rhaenyra’s cause was utterly finished.

Treason. Could Corlys turn his cloak?

A wise man does not stay on a sinking ship. It would be the easy thing to desert now. He had nothing left but House Velaryon.

“Do you know what happened to Alyn?”

“Your bastard boy?” Larys cocked his head, and Corlys was too tired to offer a rebuttal. “They found his head in Flea Bottom two days prior. It was barely recognisable after they dug it out from the pile of corpses after the riot.”

His heart clenched. Another loss. The final dragonrider lost for House Velaryon, and now he had no heir.

“You’re a cunning man, Lord Strong,” Corlys uttered reluctantly, lifting his arms to show the irons that bound them. “You have made a turncloak out of me. What now?”

“Now we get you to your men, and we strike first,” Larys said, plugging the key in Corlys’s manacles and unlocking them with a rusty click. “It’s still dark, and I have some of the deserters recruited with the promises of pardons and rewards. Come, there is no time to dally. We must move before Rhaenyra has a chance to mount Syrax and escape. Haste is paramount.”

The Battle for the Red Keep or the Second Betrayal was a bloody battle that saw Rhaenyra betrayed by the escaped Lord Corlys Velaryon and Ser Garth the Harelip, the knight entrusted with the defence of the Red Keep.

Rhaenyra’s kingsguard fought off the attackers valiantly, slaying over twenty of them, but in the end, they were defeated. Crown Prince Joffrey Velaryon awoke to the commotion and rushed into the fray with his arming sword, but was impaled by a spear to the neck.

Queen Rhaenyra was ultimately dragged out of her chambers and beheaded, her head placed upon a spike in front of the Red Keep’s gate.

It was said that Queen Alicent was there when the stone-faced Corlys inspected Joffrey’s corpse and mocked, “You should not mourn for the death of the bastard, but rejoice, for your cuckolded son is finally avenged!”

Alicent wanted to have Aegon the Younger killed, too. “A son for a son, Daemon said when he sent those crooks to kill little Jae. Now, my other grandson is dead, and I must have this boy’s head.”

Corlys, however, commanded the most swords in the Red Keep and took Aegon into his custody, declaring that the king would decide the young prince’s fate.

Syrax, who had been chained in the outer ward in a stable emptied for her, had sensed her rider’s death and went mad, but the now plump dragon’s waning strength couldn’t break off the heavy chains holding her down. She burned the surrounding stable and yard and killed over a hundred people until Corlys’ marksmen managed to put scores of crossbow bolts into the eyes of the mad dragon from the walls above, finally slaying the beast.

Meanwhile, Aemond and Silver Denys had joined the Hightower host to deal with the brave Valemen who tried to deny Hightower entry to King’s Landing by the Golden Bridge.

It was said that the Valemen and the Clawmen fought for half an hour to satisfy their oaths before surrendering at the first sight of dragons.

One moon after Daemon perished, Aemond was finally sitting on the Iron Throne as the Prince Regent, and the Hightower vanguard entered the city, killing any remaining rioters that Corlys had lacked the men and the daring to deal with.

Once he saw Maelor's head, Aemond merely had Aegon the Younger brought to him and personally lopped his head off, declaring that the Blacks were all dead and the war was finally over, now that the Black lords had nobody to rally behind. Yet Lord Dalton Greyjoy refused to dip the banners and was harrying the western shores after burning Lannisport, while most of the Riverlords had yet to bend the knee.

Meanwhile, from the Citadel to the Wall, the white ravens flew, and like the herald of winter, Lord Cregan Stark passed the Neck with fifteen thousand Northmen eager for a glorious death at his back...

Excerpt from 'When Dragons Danced' by Archmaester Abelon

Rhaena

Watching Aegon the Usurper ride into Dragonstone and be welcomed by Ser Robert Quince was sobering. A moon earlier, their half-Hightower cousin would have been met with swords and spears and arrows, not with genial subservience and a feast. Yet here he was, the man responsible for all the woe in her family, flanked by three white cloaks Rhaena did not recognise and a dozen of his own knights.

He had been hiding on Dragonstone, Rhaena realised, to be here so quickly and not be found by Rhaenyra's men. For once, she was glad she and her sister were confined in the Sea Dragon Tower again because it gave her an excuse not to look at that puffy, sullen face and eyes filled with gloating as he limped around on his crutch. According to Alyssa, Aegon had already bedded one of the younger maids his first night here, proving himself a lecher who would not even mourn the death of his sister-wife.

Just like the cripple rider, the crippled dragon came over too. Sunfyre shakily flew over, nestling in the same yard where Caraxes and Syrax used to stay. One of its wings was bent at its base after Meleys had nearly ripped it off, healing as poorly as the Usurper's broken legs, but it could still fly, albeit slowly.

Rhaena loathed it. She loathed the Usurper and everything he stood for.

"What will happen to us now?" Baela asked morosely the next evening. "Everyone is dead."

"Everyone but grandfather," Rhaena said, hiccuping. She wanted to cry, but her tears had gone dry after her father had died. Now only anger remained, coiled tightly in her chest like a serpent. "They died to treason most vile."

"I hate them!" her sister hissed. "I wish they all died."

Rhaena wished for it too, but if words could kill, Aegon and his ilk would have died a thousand times.

Closing her eyes, she sighed. "Knowing grandfather, he'll see us wed to Alicent's sons now."

"Why?"

"Because they will want to keep dragons in the family. Because Alicent has three sons, and only one has his hand promised after Helaena has perished." Her voice thickened with disdain. "And because

grandfather will have to prove his loyalty, since he already turned his cloak. One of us will probably take Driftmark and Daeron, and the other will suffer the *affections* of this craven lecher calling himself king and bear his children.”

“I’m not—” Rhaena put a hand over her sister’s mouth.

“Shh. Don’t yell,” she urged. “The sentries guarding the floor will hear you, so calm down. I’m not going to suffer these usurpers and traitors either, Baela.”

Once Rhaena was sure her sister would not yowl and scream like an angry cat, she removed her hand.

Taking a deep breath, Baela shook her face and whispered furiously, “But Rhae, our own grandfather is a traitor. A *turncloak*! There’s nothing we can do against them, especially Vhagar and Seasmoke, when our own father died. Moondancer is still young and small, barely a fifth the size of Seasmoke. We can insist on a double wedding if Grandfather is really that eager to appease the Usurpers, and just slice their throats on our wedding nights.”

“And where will you hide a dagger?” Rhaena asked lightly.

“Under the wedding gown, of course.”

“Baela, Westerosi weddings see us carried to the bedding naked,” she deadpanned. “All garments are torn off by the guests as we’re carried to the newlyweds’ chambers.”

“That’s not how Father wedded Rhaenyra, though,” Baela objected. “I was young, but I still remember...”

“It was a secret wedding, and they weren’t following the customs of Westeros,” Rhaena said, rubbing her face tiredly. “Something you would know if you didn’t sleep through most of your lessons.”

Of course, that little slip-up did not deter her sister. “We’ll hide the daggers in the pillows, then. Slice their throats and see how they rule from the grave.”

“Assuming we get the chance and the serving maids don’t find the daggers, there’s still the kinslayer and the betrayer. He’ll see our heads chopped off the next day. No, sister, we’ll do something else.” Rhaena looked at her hands. They were pale, small, and dainty. “We’ll escape.”

Baela frowned. “And do what?”

Was she ready to kill? The anger in her chest surged; now was not the time for cowardice and hesitation.

You want to claim a dragon, the ultimate purveyor of destruction and death across the land, regardless of whether the rider is a man or not, yet you lack the spine to wield it

“I’ll claim Silverwing,” Rhaena declared with far more boldness than she felt. “We’ll ambush Aegon and his golden worm here, then strike at King’s Landing while they think they’ve won, while their dragons are in the Dragonpit. Burn the Red Keep with the Hightowers in it. Prove to them that we’re Daemon’s daughters, not some prized mares to be doled out like some reward.”

The plan had more holes than Pentoshi cheese, Rhaena knew. But she feared that if she gave up and started thinking of how hard it was, she would lose the courage to act.

"You'll claim Silverwing?" Baela asked suspiciously. "I thought you didn't dare approach the she-dragon."

"It's Vermithor that scared me, not Silverwing," she said defensively. "And I have a way—trust me, please. We can plan and do this right."

Her sister squinted. "You're keeping a secret," she said, jabbing a finger at her chest. "Something to do with that mule of a man."

Rhaena groaned, tugging on her silver-gold locks in frustration. "Now is not the time to talk about him—trust me."

"Reckon the Northman would be willing to help us?" Baela asked, face growing fierce. "He still hasn't repaid us for making you cry."

"No," Rhaena said bitterly. "Let the churl live his peaceful life as a fisherman."

Jon was unwilling to fight for her then, so why would anything change now? But she prayed he would not be petty enough to go back on his promise to help her claim Silverwing.

"Fine," Baela allowed through gritted teeth. "Reckon I can set his little house on fire after you claim Silverwing?"

"Baela!"

"C'mon, sister. Don't be such a killjoy." Her sister rubbed her hands, eyes lighting up with mischief. "Jon's pretty handsome, now that I remember. Reckon he'd be willing to make a proper woman out of me—ow-ow, I'm sorry, let go of my ear, damn it."

"Stop with this nonsense," Rhaena said grimly, finally releasing her sister's ear. "Our father and brother just died, and all you can think of is salacious filth!"

"I thought you gave up on him?" Baela frowned, her face growing suspicious. "Look, I'd rather give my maidenhead to him than the Usurper or his brothers. A fisherman should be honoured to take the virtue of a dragonrider like me!"

Rhaena could still... run to Jon. She could wed him there and become a fisherman's wife. For a heartbeat, she was tempted.

And then she remembered how her father had died, and the dream shattered. Fallen to vile treachery. How her brother had ended. Beheaded by the kinslayer without even blinking. No, Rhaena told herself. She, too, was a daughter of Daemon Targaryen. The blood of Old Valyria and the masters of the skies. Swords and fighting were far beyond her, but if she had a dragon...

"Do you want to avenge our father and brother or not?" Rhaena asked icily.

The playfulness finally drained out of her sister's face, and she nodded. "What are we going to do, then?"

"Do you think you can outfly Sunfyre with Moondancer if Aegon takes flight?"

"That crippled yellow worm that hobbles in the air like a drunken duck? Definitely." Baela patted her chest. "But we're still confined to this floor, and Moondancer is chained at the stable."

"I have a plan," Rhaena began, lowering her voice further. "Listen up... I will get Alyssa to slip a message to Ser Lyonel, and..."

The next day, Ser Robert Quince came to check up on them, with a letter from King's Landing, confirming Rhaena's suspicions.

"Your lord grandfather has made an arrangement for the two of you," he said. "Lady Baela will wed His Grace Aegon, and Lady Rhaena will become the next lady of Driftmark and shall take Prince Daeron as her husband."

"So, grandfather is surrendering Driftmark to the Hightowers," Rhaena concluded glumly, while gently pinching her sister to remind her not to speak. "The price of turning his cloak and bending his knee, no doubt."

"Turning his cloak?" Ser Robert Quince blustered, plump face shaking, yet his eyes would not meet hers. "Don't speak such nonsense, my ladies. I would advise you to hold your tongue from now on. With the Princess Rhaenyra and her sons dead, the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms is His Grace Aegon, the eldest son of King Viserys."

The knight had called Rhaenyra queen just a moon prior, yet she was merely a princess now, Rhaena noticed.

"The eldest son of Uncle Viserys is Jon Stark," Baela drawled out, her voice catty. "It is known."

"Unfounded rumours. I came here to warn you two, not to find trouble with you." The knight's meaty jowls jostled with frustration as he cleared his throat. "I've watched you grow since you were small, so take my words to heart and don't do anything foolish. Your grandfather is truly thinking of you. You were going to be the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and the Lady of Driftmark before, and that remains unchanged. Many others would kill to be in your position."

Honoured to be wed to the murderers of her father, brothers, and cousins and bear their wretched children?

The gall!

Rhaena really wanted to reach out and strangle the fat old knight, but it would jeopardise their plans. *Courtesies are a lady's armour.*

She elbowed Baela before she could erupt and gave the castellan a sweet smile, though it came out brittle instead. "Thank you for telling us, Ser Robert. But we're feeling tired as of late and shall retire to our chambers to grieve."

Sympathy flashed in the knight's eyes. "Understandable. I'll let you two mourn properly."

As soon as the door closed behind Ser Robert Quince and his footsteps dwindled in the distance, Baela spat on the floor. "The audacity of that man. To think that I liked him before... Look at him now, licking Aegon's boots as if they're made out of gold!"

"He's not wrong, though," Rhaena said sadly. "With Rhaenyra and our brothers dead... Alicent's spawn are next in line to the throne."

"Not for long," Baela vowed, fists balled. Then, her face grew uncharacteristically serious. "Hey, if we make it, what will happen to us?"

Rhaena was not sure they would make it. Sunfyre could be killed. Maybe even Tessarion and Seasmoke, but Vhagar?

"We'll travel the world," she lied with a sigh. "Maybe even visit the Summer Islands. Travel to Volantis and beyond, see the Far East and everything it has to offer. But focus first. We should go to sleep now to have strength in the evening."

Baela caught her earlier lie, judging by the grim frown, but did not speak of it and just nodded. "If we kill them all, we can be queens," she said. "We'll rule the kingdoms together."

"Queens? It's dangerous to be a queen these days," Rhaena said with a laugh. "Off to bed now."

Rhaena could barely get a wink of sleep, tossing and turning in her bed, and only by late afternoon was she finally able to close her eyes. But it felt like only a few moments had passed when Alyssa awoke her.

"It's the hour of the eel, my lady," she whispered furiously, her face looking eerie under the candlelight. "I've already helped your sister up."

"Dress me," Rhaena commanded, trying to rub away the sleep from her eyes. Her handmaid quickly busied herself with thick, warm clothes and helped her pull on the riding gown over her thick undergarments. Last was a heavy black cloak of thick wool lined with fur in an unassuming brown colour.

"I take it you passed the message to Ser Lyonel, and he agreed?" she asked, trying to soothe her frayed nerves.

"I did," Alyssa said with a frown. "I think you should reconsider, m'lady. It's beginning to snow. Winter is here, and the cold does not forgive, whether you're a washerwoman or a lady."

"Would you be able to forgive those who killed your siblings and your parents?" Rhaena asked, sharper than she intended.

"My father and uncles died fighting for Prince Daemon in the Stepstones," was the quiet reply. "I had two brothers, three cousins, and even a husband; they died in the Red Keep for your stepmother."

"Don't you want revenge?"

"Revenge?" Alyssa sighed, looking at her with pity. "It sounds good, but who do I take revenge on? I don't even know who killed them. I don't even have the strength to do it if I did. And even if I could take revenge, would that bring any of them back? I have two daughters to think of first."

Rhaena found no words to respond, and her handmaid sighed as she quickly left.

Baela slipped through the door, wrapped in so many layers of garments that she looked like one giant barrel of fur and wool.

"Father always said flying in winter is terrible," she said defensively.

The two of them sneaked into the hallway and down the stairs, holding the small oil lantern Alyssa had brought. This was the riskier part. If Ser Lyonel betrayed them, they would be caught here; the Usurper and Ser Robert Quince would grow more vigilant, and any further plans to escape would be foiled. As the handmaid had claimed earlier, the man-at-arms who was supposed to stay guard outside was in the small room by the entrance, wrapped up in a heavy cloak while snoozing on the chair.

Rhaena didn't blame the man—it looked cold outside. The sisters went through the small servant entrance that Alyssa had shown them.

They saw him, then. Ser Lyonel Bentley was wrapped in a travel cloak of grey wool, but the heavy suit of plate gleamed from underneath in the ruddy lamplight.

"Are you truly willing to help us, Ser?" Rhaena asked. "It is possible that you will risk your life here."

"I am a proud knight of House Bentley, and I shall not falter again," he said simply, his coifed fists tightening. "Your father made me swear to follow and protect you, not question you."

It seemed that his escape from Cannibal still weighed on him even after half a year. Ser Lyonel was one of the finest swordsmen in Dragonstone despite his youth, but he had foregone the honour of accompanying Rhaenyra to King's Landing out of shame. But that very shame had probably saved his life, for if he had gone to the city, he would have died with her stepmother.

Rhaena shook her head. "Let us go, then."

It was cold and dark outside, with snowflakes dancing in the air. Her breath misted into a cloud as soon as it left her lips, and the chill scratched at her throat.

Was it truly a good idea to escape late at night?

She steeled herself; it was now or never.

The darkness was quiet—the cold had chased away everyone to their beds early, even the most dutiful of servants, and only two sentries stood guard at the gatehouse tower, probably half-asleep according to Ser Lyonel. The castle was nearly empty since her father and stepmother had made it to King's Landing, but it wouldn't hurt to play it safe.

"A pity we don't know which room Aegon is staying in—I would have given him a warm gift before I left." Baela snorted confidently. "I'll go first."

Her sister snatched one of the ration bags Ser Lyonel had prepared, then rushed with a lantern in hand into the darkness towards the stable where Moondancer was chained.

Ser Lyonel led her to one of the empty soldier quarters hewn into the curtain wall by the stables, and they hid there, peeking through the shutter. It wasn't long before Baela acted. Moondancer's roar echoed in the night, and the drake began spewing a torrent of vibrant green flames, setting the small barn that had housed it aflame.

"KISS MY ARSE, AEGON!" Baela's shriek made Rhaena cringe with embarrassment, and the telltale drumming of dragonwings grew further and further away.

Rhaena's heart began to race. Her sister had already disappeared past the curtain walls, but if things went wrong here, she could be caught. She kept staring at the burning barn. There was something soothing to the dancing flames, even as they slowly darkened before turning yellow.

Sure enough, the castle quickly roused itself from its sleep, and the courtyard filled with grumpy, half-sleepy servants and knights, carrying torches and lanterns in the cold. Then one of Aegon's kingsguard came out, barking out orders.

"It's the middle of the night, Ser Marston," a man complained. "And it's snowing. Are we really going to give chase now?"

"It's the king's bride who escaped—of course, we're chasing her, you dolt!"

For a few painfully long minutes, the yard was filled with men and horses, and the gate groaned open, as a score of men slipped out in haste.

Rhaena breathed a sigh of relief as the nightly chill had seen many of the servants and the men-at-arms remain indoors, content to let the barn burn as there was no other structure but the dragonstone wall beside it.

"Now," Ser Lyonel urged. Rhaena's heart thundered as the two of them went into the stable that housed Chestnut and his steed. "Quickly before they close the gate and the portcullis."

As the knight quickly saddled the horses, Rhaena almost screamed in fright when she saw a stableboy stare at her wide-eyed from the haystack. She knew him—Erol, the son of one of the washerwomen who wanted to be a knight but was too scrawny to catch the eyes of the master-at-arms, let alone anyone of importance. He could scream, the ruse would be up, and the guardsmen would be upon them before they could leave.

She shushed him with her finger, and the boy nodded eagerly, but Rhaena remained tense.

The horses were saddled, and Rhaena quickly hopped on Chestnut and followed after Ser Lyonel.

"Don't close yet," he yelled at the sentries at the gate. "Ser Marston ordered us to join the search, too!"

Rhaena's heart thundered with fright as one of the sentries came over, and she tried to look nonchalant under her thick cloak. She prayed that the layers of garments and her cloak were enough of a disguise.

"Poor sods," the sentry replied, pulling his cloak tighter. It was a familiar round face peeking from underneath the helmet—Belis. "Well, I can't say I envy you."

The two of them slipped out of the gate unopposed. Rhaena couldn't believe it worked!

She wanted to laugh. The guardsman had not even spared her a glance.

If she were lucky, they would not discover her disappearance until morning. However, the snowfall was thickening, and there was barely any light from the stars peeking through the clouds above.

"Be careful, Lady Rhaena," Ser Lyonel cautioned. "The ground will be either slippery or muddy now."

The pretty snowfall continued with relentless surety, choking the air more and more as they cautiously rode towards Ashcove. The knight seemed unbothered by the cold, but Rhaena was shivering despite her

thick garments and travel cloak. The chill thickened, too. As soon as they rode into the open hills on the outskirts of the Dragonmont, a violent wind so vicious that it seemed to seep into her skin struck them, and her jaws rattled along from the cold.

'I underestimated the coldness of the winter night,' she realised to her dread. She already felt so cold that the seven hells would have frozen over, but she was certain they were not even halfway there. In fact, the surroundings were shrouded in a veil of white, and Rhaena was certain they would be lost if the road did not run along the coast.

There was no turning back now, even if she wanted to. The only way was forward. The knowledge brought her some peace, even as she felt like her teeth would crack from how she clenched them. Even Ser Lyonel looked like one of those gargoyles as his cloak turned white by the thick snowfall.

She just hoped Jon wouldn't turn her away so late at night, or she'd freeze to death.

Jon Stark

His larders were full, hay filled his barn all the way to the roof, and he had so many salted and smoked fish hanging in one of the rooms that the smell could sometimes be felt even with the door closed. With some trade and fishing, he and his household would not starve in the five-year winter that was coming, though his cellar could have used more variety than the swill brewed nearby—with the war raging on, good dark Northern ale had become scarce.

Even Ashcove was secured with the granary for a good while, and the growth of the fishing village and the trade coming through the pier would ensure opportunities that would have been otherwise absent. A part of him missed Saltbeak's squawking.

Would he fly to Dorne?

Or perhaps he would make it to the Summer Islands?

The pelican was doing well enough, but that was all Jon could infer from the connection. Large swathes of distance were nearly an insurmountable obstacle to skinchanging—he could barely sense Saltbeak's presence at the far edge of his mind, and trying to slip into his eyes was impossible.

Jon tried not to think of that too hard.

A part of him wondered if he was doing the right thing. Kings and queens would come and go regardless of his actions.

Things had gone differently, unlike what was inked in the history books, and it was all because of him. He had barely done anything, yet the war had ended more quickly and with a far different result than before. House Tully had been turned to cinders under Vhagar's flame.

Lady Catelyn, Edmure Tully, Robb, Bran, Sansa, Arya, and little Rickon—none of them would ever be born. Perhaps even Jon wouldn't be born.

Even Aegon the Younger, who was supposed to be the next king, perished. Was Viserys II also killed by the Essosi instead of merely taken hostage?

This had to be because of his claim on Vermithor and crushing the Silent Five. Or maybe something else that he had done. A part of Jon felt guilty. Guilty that so many people who should have lived had died because of him. But then, some who would have died lived instead. The butcher's bill was smaller too, for Aemond spent less than half a year burning the Riverlands, and the war ended nearly a whole year earlier.

Fewer people had died now than in what was inked in history books. The war ending earlier meant that the folk across the realm could better prepare for the vicious five-year winter that had already started.

Rhaenyra had proven herself a terrible queen for all the realm to see. Maegor with Teats, they called her again—and openly this time. Mother of two kings and grandmother to three more, but not one of her descendants had cared to legitimise her or acknowledge her 'claim' even in history. Aegon the Elder was scarcely better, from what Jon saw. That was why when Tom Tanglebeard came to his home a moon prior, trying to subtly grope for his opinion about Rhaenyra and Aegon the Elder, Jon had chased him away.

Aegon was hiding on Dragonstone now, for Vermithor had spotted his golden drake hiding on the northern side of the Dragonmont.

He was tempted to report it to Dragonstone, but that would have changed things even more than they already had. What harm had Aegon the Elder done to Jon beyond trying to recruit him? If anything, Jon even contemplated joining, for he still remembered when Corlys and Rhaenyra tried to see him killed.

But that would see him on the other side of the Starks and even Rhaena and Baela. He had grown fond of the twin sisters. Breaking Rhaena's heart once was enough, and he had no desire to do so again. Declaring for someone—anyone—would mean that Vermithor would follow him, exposing his ruse. Now, the Bronze Fury was content to snatch his goats in the night and fly to his corner of Dragonstone without raising much scrutiny. It would have been troublesome if Jon had chosen a dwelling in the village proper, but he was a whole mile away, giving him a measure of privacy. And his servants would keep quiet.

But if he went to King's Landing, it wouldn't be just Vermithor following. Where the Bronze Fury went, Silverwing was not far behind.

Regardless of where he departed after leaving Dragonstone, two great dragons would shadow in his wake. Sooner or later, someone would connect his presence with the titanic beasts that flew above him. It would have been easier if the Bronze Fury had not claimed him. If the dragon had minded his own business, Jon would have simply made for Pentos, or even the Summer Islands, to see the wonders of Essos and the rest of the world.

A fiery snort rumbled in his mind, as if to tell him, *'I claimed you anyway.'* There was a willingness in Vermithor when Jon thought of travel. The Bronze Fury did not mind travelling around together, but Jon was reluctant. Would Aegon and his brothers let a dragon and a dragonrider slip from their grasp when they had just fought a war because of dragons?

Thankfully, Vermithor seemed woefully unconcerned about human affairs so long as they did not affect Jon. No matter how intelligent, dragons were still beasts, with the instinct of a beast. Hierarchies, birthrights, and other ways humans did things were incomprehensible to them.

Would Aegon the Elder be a good king?

"Many good men have been bad kings," Maester Aemon used to say, "and some bad men have been good kings."

'Good for who?' Jon asked himself. He had no answer.

The Dance had ended, and the Dragons were still alive, as far as he knew. Vhagar ruled the skies above King's Landing, and the Blue Queen had not yet been killed. No crowd had stormed the Dragonpit to kill the remaining dragons, incited by the words of a madman, and Silverwing and Vermithor were still here on Dragonstone.

The future had changed irrevocably.

'A kingdom and a princess,' the words echoed in his mind. It was like a ritual at this point.

Was it greedy? Perhaps it was. At this point, he didn't even care about it. It was just an excuse, a memory of what could have been. He had wanted Winterfell so badly back then, and he had wanted Val too, but neither had been his to take.

The Wall, fighting for the Flaming Stag, clashing with the cold blue eyes lurking in the gathering darkness, and a sky on fire.

It was another life, distant. A war that Jon would never live to fight. A battle that might not ever come, not in his lifetime. Would the Others dare to stir with the dragons still soaring the skies of the Seven Kingdoms?

Or perhaps the House of the Dragon would turn sibling against sibling again, and they would lose their dragons in another clash for a crown. Dragons or not, the struggles for the Iron Throne never seemed to cease, and men with ambition were never lacking.

It was none of Jon's concern. He could live out his life here peacefully. Maybe even mount Vermithor if he grew bored of fishing and the quiet, and fly across the world, consequences be damned. But he would need a dragon's saddle for that.

Jon's days were spent in contemplation and swinging his sword. But with his newfound strength, even Ser Alfred Broome was not his opponent anymore. In fact, he had to greatly hold back to not cripple the man by striking too hard—it had taken Jon over two moons to get a proper hang of his newfound strength.

One night, he was awakened by Shaggy's barking in the middle of a cold, snowy night, and soon the other four hounds were also awake and barking up a storm. A glance through the hound's eyes saw two familiar figures emerging from the blizzard, covered in snow from head to toe, their steeds included. Sensing his thoughts, Shaggy and the other hounds quickly calmed.

Jon grabbed Skyfall and pulled on a tunic before rushing downstairs and opening the front door. The faces of Ser Lyonel and Lady Rhaena greeted him, both reddened by the cold.

"Not the visitors I expected late at night," he said cautiously. But Jon was not one to send away those in need in the middle of a blizzard. "Come in, I suppose. There's room for your horses in the stable. And shake off your cloaks before you enter—I don't want any snow inside."

He went to the kitchen, grabbed a platter of bread and salt, and offered it to Rhaena.

Daemon's daughter looked terrible. Her face had grown gaunter than before, but there was steel in her eyes now, accompanied by grief. Worse, her skin remained reddened, and she shivered like a leaf in the wind despite her thick riding gown.

"Take this," Jon said, pushing the small plate with a piece of bread to his visitors.

Rhaena's gloved hand trembled as she grabbed the piece, dipped it in the salt and swallowed heavily.

Ser Lyonel entered again—probably having stabled the horses—just as Ser Alfred and Aethan came up, woken from the commotion, their gazes lingering on the bread and salt before silently standing behind Jon.

"What made you brave a blizzard on a cold winter night to come to me so urgently?" Jon asked softly.

"I..." Rhaena's voice was weak, and she sniffed, her nose growing runny. "Silverwing. I... don't feel so well—"

She collapsed on the table, and Ser Lyonel almost drew his sword, but Jon was already at the fallen noblewoman, his hand reaching for her brow.

"She's burning," he said, sighing. "The winter cold is not something to be underestimated even on a calm day, let alone at night. I'm sure she's been rather stressed as of late, and probably not eating well. I've seen this happen more than once back North."

"I..." Ser Lyonel Bentley looked lost. "Can she be saved?"

"Some rest and warmth will hopefully see her recover since she is not starved and her body is strong. Colin, butcher a hen to make a warm soup out of it," he ordered at the cook, who was peeking from his room. "Aethan, draw me a pot of boiling water here."

"I thought the House of the Dragon could not catch diseases," Colin murmured from the side, shaking his head.

Jon snorted as he gently picked up Damon's daughter. "Diseases and the cold care little whether your ancestors come from the Freehold or not."

Rhaena was as light as a feather in his hands, but nowadays, few things could make him feel burdened.

Sighing, Jon carried her into the free bedroom and left her on the bed, wrapped in heavy covers and furs. He placed a few heated clay bricks wrapped in wool and leather to keep the warmth underneath the blankets. Then, he lit up the hearth, filling it to the brim and quickly heating up the room.

"Wouldn't it have been more prudent to turn her away?" Ser Alfred asked sourly after Lyonel went to sleep in one of the cellars. The young knight had dutifully remained silent, and Jon did not question him, for he did not need to.

"To freeze to death?" Jon snorted. "I am not so cruel."

"You know what I speak of, Jon."

"It would have been easy to turn her away," he agreed with a sigh. "But I did promise her help with that one thing. I shall not break my word simply because things are hard. And... I might be a Northman, but

I'm not so heartless to turn away a guest in the middle of a snowstorm. No, it's precisely because I am from the North and know the bite of the cold that I would not turn them away, since they have not come with ill intentions to me and mine."

Foolish, foolish girl. Jon could take a good guess at why she had come in the darkness of the night, asking for Silverwing when she had lacked the courage before. Her father was dead, and so was her younger brother. Only revenge could have driven her here like this.

But did the white winds and the snow care about revenge?

Ser Alfred rubbed his face. But in the end, he was a loyal man and sighed. "If the king's men come looking for her, what will we do?"

"We can hide her," Jon mused, before quickly shaking his head. "No, that would not work. We don't have anywhere to hide the horses, and a warhorse and a well-bred mare will stand out in our stable. Don't think too much about it. I'm not one to run away from a challenge."

"Aye," Ser Alfred said. "Worst come, we'll just fight it out and rush across the Narrow Sea and hide in Essos."

But could he run across the Narrow Sea? Vermithor would be pretty conspicuous. The ruse would eventually fall. Would the Hightowers be willing to let a dragon and someone they probably consider a dragon thief slip from their fingers?

Perhaps he was worrying for nought, and Aegon's men wouldn't come this way for days.

Things, however, grew worse when morning came, and the blizzard stopped. While Clayton and Harrold marvelled at the meagre snow barely reaching their knee caps and childishly thought it was aplenty, Ser Lyonel grew gloomy. Rhaena did not awake, and her fever did not seem to be receding, so Jon sent Aethan to fetch the hedge-wizard before noon.

Alas, Jon knew trouble had come when he peered through Vermithor's eyes as the Bronze Fury lazily circled above.

"Harrold, to me," Jon ordered sternly. "Bring me my arms and armour."

"Are we expecting a fight?" the Pyne heir asked, face flushed from excitement and playing around in the snow.

"It remains to be seen," Jon said, already stretching out the stiffness from his body and warming up his joints and muscles. "But it won't hurt to be prepared."

The two squires hastily scuttled around the cellar to bring out the arms and armour, and within minutes, Ser Alfred Broome was clad in his plate, carrying one of the repainted Velaryon shields. Jon was also garbed in his half-plate, with the padded surcoat depicting Ghost's white wolfhead on black that one of the tailors had gifted him. Even the cloak bore the same coat of arms, depicting him as a member of House Stark, to remind anyone who came here that they were not dealing with a mere fisherman.

Aethan came first in haste, bringing in the old hedge-wizard called Mollen the Mossway, who had returned to Ashcove after Spicetown had been sacked. But both of their faces were worried.

"The king's men are in Ashcove," the greybeard said breathlessly, "looking for Daemon's daughters."

Mollen scoffed, barely sparing a glance at their armour. "More like acting like brigands, beating those who speak back, breaking into houses and looting anything they take a liking to, calling it taxation."

"Surely, the king's men would realise the villagers can't know where the lady Rhaena is," Harrold muttered from the side, frowning heavily.

Clayon laughed from the side. "Come on, dolt—think. Even if they say they don't know where Prince Daemon's daughter is, would the knights believe them? Aegon stole a whole throne and the whole realm, why would his men not dare to plunder a few houses?"

"Enough of this chatter, lead me in to treat the lady," Mollen said, irritated. "And don't worry, I won't say a word."

'It seemed that the villagers of Ashcove respected Lady Rhaena deeply for lowering their taxes,' Jon mused as Aethan led the healer into the house.

"How would they know Rhaena is here?" Ser Alfred asked, frowning fiercely. "The snowstorm should have erased traces to the point where even wolfhounds would struggle to catch a scent."

"It's not a secret that Rhaena only went to one place when she left the castle last year," Jon said. "They would be lackwits not to check Ashcove first."

He almost regretted promising Rhaena to help her claim Silverwing. But his word was already given. He was not looking for a fight, but he would not run from it now that it was upon him.

The next ten minutes were spent in tense silence, and even Vermithor sensed his tension and started circling above his house. Jon could feel the dragon's presence in his mind, observing through his eyes, curious how he would handle this coming challenge. And ready to swoop in if he were ever in danger.

What a worrywart.

Even Ser Bentley seemed to have noticed something and arrived fully armed and armoured. He did not seem to have taken off his armour when he went to sleep. The young knight did not ask any questions when he saw Jon armed and merely stood by Rhaena's door.

After a few minutes, Shaggy barked once, announcing the new unwelcome visitors.

Over fifteen men, Jon counted, all of them mounted. Three of them looked to be knights, wearing heraldry on their surcoats, and the one at the very front wore a cloak of white and plate polished so well that it gleamed like silver. A kingsguard.

They first frowned at the weirwood that had grown as thick as a maiden's waist, and then at the two piles of snow that flanked it.

"I am Ser Marston Waters," he announced, his voice rough and grating. "I am here on orders of His Grace King Aegon to bring Lady Rhaena and Lady Baela back to Dragonstone."

A pair of the men-at-arms at the back had already dismounted and started cleaning the piles of snow by the weirwood, uncovering what was left of the more unwieldy dragon bones and dragon scales. The brazen brigands did not even blink and started pulling them away, piling them by value near the horses.

“The Lady Rhaena is my guest,” Jon said coldly, not bothered to lie. “And those are my spoils of the hunt that your men are so blatantly pilfering.”

The rest of the unwelcome visitors dismounted now, looking eager for a fight as two boys, probably squires at the back, took care of the horses.

“We are the king’s men.” One of the looters puffed up his chest like a peacock. “The king has issued a new tax on dragonbone, so we’re merely taking the royal due.”

Somehow, Jon doubted it.

“So Rhaena is indeed here.” The kingsguard smiled, slowly walking towards the house. “We’ll bring her back.”

“She’s my *guest*,” Jon repeated slowly. “Under my roof. *Under my protection*. She will leave when she wants to, and no sooner.”

“You would defy a royal order?” Ser Marston barked, face full of righteous indignation, yet Jon caught a hint of wariness in his eyes. It did not stop the men behind him from drawing their swords and warhammers and levying their spears. “We’ll just take her and leave you in peace. I have no quarrel with you, Stark.”

Ser Alfred Broome picked a spiked war-axe, while Harrold Cave squeezed his poleaxe, Clayton twirled his bludgeon, and Colin the cook notched an arrow on his dragonbone bow.

Jon sighed. So it had come to this. Was this what Jon Arryn had thought when a Mad King had demanded the head of his two wards?

“The laws of hospitality are sacred,” he said, testily appealing to reason one last time. “You can escort Lady Rhaena back when she leaves if you desire. But you will not drag her out from under my roof using steel.”

“There won’t be any steel used if you just let us in.” Ser Marston’s smile returned, colder and full of condescension. “Come now, dragonslayer. We don’t want to fight, but we have our orders, and we must follow them. Resisting the king’s command is treason, you should know.”

Rhaena was sick, and dragging her out might see her fever grow worse, and possibly kill her. But stubborn mules like the knight before him would not care even if he explained. The shameless men-at-arms behind him had not stopped inspecting the remaining dragonbone and dragonscales, as if it were a foregone conclusion that they would take it.

“Dunno why you bother negotiating with this savage who worships trees,” one of the knights scoffed. From House Horpe, judging by the three death-moths on his surcoat. “The Starks have yet to bend the knee. I heard he has a small treasure somewhere here. We follow the king’s decree—why waste your breath when we can just take Lady Rhaena and the gold anyway?”

“He’s a dangerous warrior with a dragonsteel sword,” Ser Marston said calmly, nodding his head. “His only choice is to obey royal command or become an outlaw and a dead man, and none shall fault us for it.”

Jon’s face darkened. So this was it. “You tread upon my land unannounced,” he growled, “uninvited, steal my hoard, and spit on my declaration of Hospitality and Guest Rights? It seems I must teach you to respect the Old Ways.

His fingers coiled tight around the shaft of a spear looted from the Silent Five.

“You dare speak treason? Out of pride and stubbornness, even?!” asked another knight bearing the colours of House Farring.

“Treason?” Jon tasted the word in his mouth.

He had seen men like the ones before him. No respect for laws and rites, thinking themselves above custom because they were the king’s men.

Did the fool think they could scare him with their craven king? Or that he would be cowed by their numbers? Maybe before he had slain the Cannibal, he would have hesitated to take them on directly.

How many times had he heard House Stark being called a House of Traitors? How many times had he been called a traitor? But did not Eddard Stark raise his banners in treason against Aerys? Did he not do the same by raising Jon underneath his roof in secret? Did not Robb turn traitor against the Iron Throne?

Treason came easily when you had the cause. And those fools had given Jon plenty of cause.

Suddenly, Jon spun, hurling the spear like a javelin with all his considerable might. Faster than a scorpion bolt, it whistled through the air, impaling the Horpe knight through the mail coif all the way through, piercing through the shield of one of the men-at-arms and lodging into his brigandine.

“Treason it is, then!” Jon roared, drawing Skyfall and leaping into the snow.

Author’s Endnote: Whoops, that’s a doozy. Accidental cliffhanger, I swear. I wanted to write more, but I realised I couldn’t give the next scene justice in under 1k words, and this is a good place to end it. Mostly.

Rhaenyra’s power crumbled without Daemon, and neither side seemed to be particularly forgiving. In canon, it crumbled even with Daemon alive, but after she had alienated him under the words of her ‘advisors’. Bartimos’ insane taxation is F&B canon too, and I knew it was bad; I was about to write out a few things from my mind, but none were nearly as bad as what George had him concoct for the people of King's Landing.