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130 AC

Rhaena Targaryen

Visenya's crown was a small, delicate circle of gold, otherwise plain and unadorned. The crown of the most notorious queen in the realm—until Rhaenyra, at least.

Visenya was whispered to be a dangerous sorceress at best and, at worst, a kinslayer and kingslayer for killing her royal nephew. Her support for Maegor was not something Jaehaerys the Conciliator had forgotten, nor was it something he had forgiven. Thus, Visenya was a dangerous name. The eldest sister and wife to the Conqueror himself, the one who had ruled the Seven Kingdoms in all but name for a time, and the first rider of Vhagar. To this day, no one named their children after Visenya. Only Rhaena's half-sister had been graced with the name, but the little Visenya had never had the chance to live. She had caught a glimpse of the body before Father had buried her—the stillborn babe was a malformed little thing with a baby's limbs and a scaly tail. To this day, Rhaena was unsure if the name Visenya was given to her unfortunate half-sister as a curse or something else.

Regardless, just like the name Visenya, Visenya's crown had remained on Dragonstone, deep in the castle's treasury and untouched by any of the queens that graced the realm, covered in dust after nearly a century.

Rhaena was unsure why she had chosen the crown for herself. Was it because she was also laying claim to the Iron Throne through strength like Visenya's notorious son had done? Or perhaps it was the crown of a woman who had shaped the Seven Kingdoms, aiding her husband and son in a way no other queen had managed.

It felt uncomfortable, sometimes even heavy, to wear it on her head, but she never entertained the thought of discarding it for another.

Was this the burden of a crown?

Rhaena was beginning to believe it.

The war had been won, but she did not feel lighter or happier for it. Her father's and brother's killers were all dead now, but it brought her no joy. Silver Denys and Aemond's demise would not bring back her father and little Egg. But at least they were now avenged, and their souls would rest easy in the afterlife—or so she hoped.

Then, there was the uncomfortable chair she sat on. Even the armrests were sharp and pointed, and the countless blades jutting out from the sides threatened to cut her arms should she relax them. Even a crude plank or a mossy rock was better than this, yet all the kings had ruled the realm from here.

It would be impossible to sit on the Iron Throne without her husband's permission.

Alicent Hightower had never sat here. Nor had Aemma Arryn or Alysanne Targaryen.

Even the Hand and her grandfather protested, saying, "Your Grace has her own throne."

"I would not call a gilded wooden chair a throne," Rhaena had countered. "But I did not see either of you object to my husband's orders."

In the end, they couldn't do anything but let her sit on the Iron Throne. Lord Commander Broome and the other three white cloaks all obeyed her in the absence of Jon, hovering over her person like white shadows, afraid she would break at the slightest tumble and ready to cut down any attackers.

It was not that Rhaena wanted to sit here, but she had grown curious, and when the king was gone, the queen *had* to be seen and heard.

Jon was too new a face. He lacked deeper connections with the nobility in the Crownlands, he lacked backing, and their standing inside the city felt shaky, like a sandcastle that could crumble under the first gust of wind. Sure, the love of the common folk was assured; even the bards were singing him songs in praise, and Rhaena had taken in Jon's household and those who could be trusted from Dragonstone's castle.

It was not enough.

Rhaena could see the lords and even Jon's councillors scheme and vie for more power and to earn the royal favour. Gunthor Royce had already appointed his second son as the Lord Commander of the City Watch and a nephew as the master-at-arms in the Red Keep while Jon was gone.

Corlys Velaryon had his own ambitions, but was more cunning and held his plots and schemes close to his heart. The harbourmaster was already a Velaryon man, and he attempted to appoint a royal steward in a bid to dismiss old man Aethan, forcing Rhaena to intervene.

"You have no right to dictate what happens in the royal household, Lord Velaryon," she warned him then, voice harsh and laced with anger. "Royal Steward Aethan is His Grace's first and most loyal servant."

"Loyal he might be, an old fisherman is only so capable," her grandfather's reply was soft—the same tone he used to speak to her when she was still a child. "He cannot handle royal affairs properly. This is for you, Rhae. Ser Jeffory Gaunt is the finest quartermaster in the realm, and he'll be your most able helper, I assure you—"

"Then keep him for yourself," Rhaena bit back coldly. "Whether Aethan is capable enough to serve the king or not is not for you to decide. And it's *Your Grace* to you, Lord Velaryon."

The Sea Snake lowered his head stiffly, offering no retort and limping away.

Rhaena loved her grandfather; she really did. But she was not blind or deaf. Or foolish. Attempting to replace Aethan so blatantly meant not only eyes and ears in the royal household, but power over it too.

She had not forgotten his betrayal, either—the Sea Snake had a lot of blood on his hands, and too many blemishes on his good name. Rhaena had easily forgiven Rhaenyra's betrayal—her stepmother had

ushered in her own demise. But she had not forgotten Corlys Velaryon's overeager backing for Alyn Waters, and raising him as an heir to Driftmark. Her grandfather had other faults to his name, of course. As a renowned seafarer and naval commander, he had not done much of anything in the war aside from offering advice. It was not the lack of ability but the lack of will to truly commit, serving himself first and his liege second, even in the smallest things.

More lords had a similar attitude, and few would fault them for it, but the Sea Snake had gone to the point where he had infringed upon the crown's interests more than once or twice.

He had done so in Jaehaerys's reign, he had done so during Viserys's and Rhaenyra's rule, and now, he would doubtlessly do the same if Rhaena allowed him. Whether it was ambition or appetite, Corlys Velaryon was no less than House Hightower, even if he was kin.

Being a queen was lonely. It felt cruel. She saw it now, how deep the ambition of men and women ran. Brother could turn against brother for a pot of gold, grandfather would discard his granddaughter the moment he saw a male heir, and even the closest sisters could go sour over a man they fancied...

Trust. If you lost it once, it was gone forever, and Rhaena now struggled to trust anyone besides her husband. Jon was simple to understand, and most importantly, he was honest. He was never afraid to speak his mind, even when he had been but a mere fisherman.

'Jon, come back quicker!' she thought morosely. *'I can't deal with this mess for too long alone.'*

When the king was gone, and the throne was empty, all the cravens and liars seemed to crawl out of the shadows. They smiled in her face and schemed behind her back. Nothing could have prepared Rhaena for such a challenge. Seven above, dealing with them was harder than herding cats.

Rhaena was no longer surprised when the Baratheon Lord emerged with a small retinue from the kingswood, probably because he had heard of Aemond's defeat and demise. And what was Lord Baratheon but another craven who had sat out the war by spending over a year dancing around some Dornish brigand?

It irked her when he rode into the city, with horns and drums and fanfare, as if he were a victorious lord, returning from a great battle on behalf of the crown. The stag lord had ensured he was seen and heard on his way to the Red Keep.

Rhaena was of half a mind to order the gates closed and have him wait outside for a few days, but Ser Alfred Broome quietly advised her otherwise. "He only brought seven knights and twenty-one men-at-arms, Your Grace, and most are left in the city."

It wasn't long before the man came into the Throne Room, dressed in enough gold to be confused for a Lannister and just as proud.

"I, Lord Borros Baratheon of Storm's End, swear myself to His Grace..." The bearded bear of a man paused, as if uncertain if he should swear to House Stark or House Targaryen. "King Jon the First of His Name, King of the Andals, Rhoynar, and the First Men—"

He was not the first, nor the last, to be uncertain how to approach having a Stark for a king. Some looked disgruntled, unwilling even when swearing the vows, but none had the bravery to oppose the dragons

openly. Not after her kinslaying cousin had shown the ruin an angry dragonrider could bring forth in the Riverlands.

Rhaena's lips curled, but she schooled her face and accepted the otherwise enthusiastic vows. She would have almost mistaken the eagerness for loyalty if she hadn't known better. One of Lord Baratheon's daughters had been betrothed to Aemond and had been so dangerously close to being a queen.

The stag lord was quick to come to swear fealty to her after the Kinslayer's defeat. Perhaps some men disdained kneeling or giving vows to a former bastard like Jon, or perhaps because he was a Stark... Regardless, Rhaena had been the one to receive a large collection of vows in the name of her husband to the point that her ears grew numb.

Lord Baratheon's audacity did not stop at the Throne Room, of course. Before the evening had passed, he had even requested a private audience with her, and this time, Rhaena made him wait for two days.

Up close, he indeed looked like a bear, with his rough beard and mane of dark hair. Taller than most men and barrel-chested with arms thicker than most men's thighs, Borros Baratheon looked as dangerous as his reputation in tourneys and the battlefield suggested.

But there was no trace of his supposed belligerence. Before her, Borros Baratheon was all obedience and courtesy, showing not even a sliver of dissatisfaction after two days of waiting for a personal audience.

Even his bow was the deepest Rhaena had seen. "Your Grace."

Was it because Ser Alfred Broome and Ser Willam Royce were standing right behind her, hands on the hilts of Skyfall and Lamentation? Or perhaps he feared the dragons?

"Lord Baratheon," she greeted coolly. "Let us speak frankly—Silverwing demands my attention."

"A woman much like my own daughters," Borros chortled. "Truth be told, I came to speak for my little storms. They're of suitable age to be wed and well-versed in the womanly arts, if a little proud. And stubborn. I wonder if Your Grace is in need of some ladies-in-waiting to attend to your needs?"

"Lord Baratheon's daughters are famous through the land," Rhaena said with a thoughtful nod. "I will invite them to accompany me and see their needlework tomorrow." And their character.

Did Baratheon want to curry favour? Or perhaps he held an aspiration to the Throne? Not directly, but through his daughters.

Rhaena was most wary of ladies-in-waiting after her own sister had shown designs on Jon. It was a cynical thing to think, but Floris Baratheon had been half a queen for a while. The crown had all but been in her grasp. Could Floris Baratheon forget it after she had gotten a taste?

No, Rhaena still had to take one of the Four Storms as her lady-in-waiting. After Baratheon had come to swear fealty so eagerly, he had to be properly tied to the Iron Throne, regardless of whether one of his daughters would become a hostage, a confidante, or a close friend. As for which one she would pick, she would judge in person tomorrow. Not Floris, though.

"Thank you, Your Grace!" Borros then hesitated for a long moment and cleared his throat. "I'm also here to request aid from the crown."

“Aid from the crown?”

“The brigand calling himself Vulture King had thousands of men at his disposal, Your Grace.” His face twisted in a snarl, and his voice thickened with anger as his black beard bristled. “It was a whole host, at least five thousand strong, from what I could gather, maybe more, scattered about the caves and the mountain valleys. It was no mere raiding. The scum burned and killed their way through the Marches, even defeating Dondarrion and Peake in battle. All the Dornish were skilled, and nearly a third were armed with castle-forged steel.”

Was it an excuse he used to sit out the war?

No, the stormy rage in those blue eyes was real, Rhaena could tell. If true, this would not be the first time the Dornish had tried to fish in troubled waters.

As dreadful as it seemed, she felt gladdened by it. Baratheon came to *her* in the king’s absence, not Gunthor Royce, not Corlys Velaryon or Lady Jeyne Arryn, but her. In his eyes, Rhaena was the second in command in the realm, beyond the Royce Hand.

“That is quite concerning, Lord Baratheon,” she said, voice measured. “Do you perhaps believe some of the Dornish noblemen have given assistance to this Vulture King?”

Borros scoffed. “I think they were all noblemen! I took the Vulture’s King’s head myself, and he looked much like the late Lord Blackmont. Probably his bastard or his hidden fourth son. They all doubtlessly moved at the behest of the late Prince Qoren Martell, or at least with his blessing.”

“It’s his daughter who rules Dorne now,” Rhaena mused. “Princess Aliandra Martell, was it?”

Borros’s face darkened like a stormy cloud.

“Aye, and she’s worse than her fox of a father. I heard Aliandra openly encourages her bannermen to raid the Marches. Merchants sailing to Tarth say much the same thing. I came here for justice, Your Grace. This is an attack on the King’s Peace and His Grace’s dignity!”

Rhaena rested her chin on her knuckles—a most unqueenly posture, but one that helped her think. Borros wanted more war. Or perhaps he wanted to end the brewing trouble with the Dornish? It was hard to say so swiftly.

Dealing with ambitious courtiers and ladies was not a great struggle; she had been taught how to do it. War was different. Talks of fighting and bloodshed still unnerved her. One misstep could easily see hundreds die, success could see thousands perish, and the looming decision alone made the dread pool in her belly. How had Jon led men so confidently, deciding the lives of countless souls or more so swiftly?

“Ser Alfred, what do you think?” Rhaena turned to the Lord Commander. “Are Dornish riders a threat to the kingdom?”

“An attack that breaks the fragile King’s Peace cannot be ignored,” Ser Alfred said, voice hoarse. “But it’s best to wait for His Grace for a proper plan. Campaigns in the midst of winter are... a difficult matter.”

And the royal treasury was still empty, too.

"I promise this will be brought to my husband's attention with utmost urgency, Lord Baratheon," Rhaena said at last, and quickly excused herself.

She made her way through the courtyards to the godswood, where Jaehaera came after the maester's lessons.

A pang of guilt stabbed through her heart as she watched the young girl happily run through the grove, gathering snow for what looked to be one giant snowball. Or perhaps a snow snark. Amidst the trees, Ser Willis Fell watched his charge attentively, though more at ease than at first.

To this day, Rhaena felt... a storm of emotions at the sight of the Usurper's daughter. *'No, Jon's foster daughter,'* she repeated.

Then, Jaehaera spotted her, and her flushed face lit up as she ran through the snow to meet her.

"Sister Rhaena!"

Aegon's daughter hugged her thigh, and a pair of watery purple eyes blinked at Rhaena. Rhaena wanted to hate her, then—she was the blood of usurpers and kinslayers. Targaryen blood, Jon would say. Rhaena's own cousin.

Seven forgive her, Jaehaera was hard to hate.

The embers of fury at the sight of the little girl had long since melted, and only reluctance now remained. Or perhaps it was the stubbornness she had inherited from her father.

The truth was, after Rhaena had failed to grasp Blackfyre and kill the girl, most of her animosity and anger had drained away. But suspicion remained, lingering like a rot upon a festering wound. Jaehaera was still Alicent's granddaughter. The daughter of Aegon the Elder, the niece of Aemond and Daeron.

Baela had killed her father, Jon had killed her uncles, and banished her grandmother. Who knew if the little princess would harbour a grudge?

"...Sister Rhaena!" Jaehaera was tugging on her cloak, her little face filled with the slightest hint of irritation.

Rhaena swallowed, schooling her expression. Jaehaera was still a child, and a very clingy one at that.

"Yes, little Hae?" she asked.

"Maester Orwyle was talking badly about King Jon today," the girl whispered, looking around warily.

"Oh, what did he say?"

Jaehaera's brow scrunched up adorably. "Something about bastards being no good and calling a Great Co-Cowcels?"

"A Great Council?" Rhaena's eyes narrowed.

"Mhm." Little Hae rubbed her eyes. "Lady Arryn and a lord with a wreath of flowers came visiting too, asking me if I wanted to sit on the ugly Iron Chair."

Lord with a wreath of flowers. Meadows? Or perhaps a Florent? Both were in King's Landing and had worn tabards with a wreath of flowers.

Rhaena's hands were already combing Jaehaera's silver-gold hair.

"Why tell me?"

"They seemed bad," she said, looking irritated. "They spoke unkindly of King Jon."

A Great Council. They wanted to dislodge Jon from the Iron Throne, probably even Rhaena. In favour of either Baela or Jaehaera in front of her. Clever and dangerously ambitious.

Great Council or not, the Red Keep was not too well-defended, and very few of the men inside were sworn to her or Jon directly. They had all eased up after word of Aemond's demise came, and an attack would be unexpected. A coup could see her hostage... or worse.

And if they could slay Jon by surprise after he returned, before he even knew enemies awaited him in King's Landing, would they still need a Great Council?

Rhaena took a really good look at little Jaehaera. She beamed back at her, as if expecting praise—her purple eyes were clear, without any signs of deception.

"Ser Willis," Rhaena waved over Jaehaera's knight, who approached while cautiously eyeing Ser Alfred Broome, who had already drawn Skyfall and looked ready to fight. "Is this true?"

"I was standing guard outside the library's door, Your Grace," he said curtly. "Lady Arryn and Lord Meadows did come to visit while the young princess had lessons, though I barely overheard her ask about the king."

"Ser Alfred Broome and Ser Androw Hardy," Rhaena spoke, raising her voice. "Muster the clawmen in the city and Lord Royce, arrest Lady Arryn and Lord Meadows for high treason, and kill all who resist. Move swiftly, before they realise their duplicity has been uncovered."

"It shall be done, Your Grace!" Ser Alfred Broome slammed a gauntlet fist at his plate. "But what is to be done to that rat, Orwyle?"

"Break his legs," she sneered. "Brand his face with the word traitor, and send him to the Wall on the fastest ship. Jon showed him mercy and patience, but the Grand Maester was too foolish to appreciate the clemency. Let him scheme against wildlings and snow, if he's so ambitious."

Rhaena watched as the two white cloaks rushed out of the godswood, feeling half-numb. This could have been dangerous.

Lady Arryn, that proud bitch had acted all submissive the moment Jon had bared his fangs, smiling and bowing. Now that he wasn't here, she was already plotting and scheming. Rhaena now better understood her husband's preference for fishing.

"Sister Rhaena. Did I do well?" Jaehaera was tugging at the hem of her cloak again, blinking at her like a puppy expecting praise. "Can... can I go flying with Morghul?"

Perhaps... perhaps Jon had the right of it. Give fire and steel to the treasonous and mercy to the innocent. The last resistance against Aegon's daughter in her heart melted.

"Morghul is too young to be flown," Rhaena declined softly as she reached out to pinch Jaehaera's reddened cheek. "You're too young to fly a dragon, too. Perhaps in a few years."

The young girl only pouted. "Please!"

"Moghul is too young to fly," the queen repeated patiently. Those pitiful purple eyes stared at her without blinking. "...But I'll take you to fly with me on Silverwing."

Rhaena felt lighter as the two of them trudged through the snowy grove to the clearing where the she-dragon preferred to rest. Even holding Jaehaera's hand on the way felt oddly... right.

In the end, Rhaena took Ellyn Baratheon as her lady-in-waiting, the youngest of the Four Storms. The girl was not as cunning or ambitious as her sisters, but still had the stag's temper when provoked.

Then came other troubles.

"You want my second son to be your heir?" Rhaena repeated with disbelief as she looked at her grandfather's shameless face.

"Yes, Your Grace," he confirmed, bobbing his wizened head.

"Denied," she returned flatly. "Wasn't Alyn the bastard your last heir?"

Corlys Velaryon had the decency to blush. "Your Grace—"

Rhaena scoffed. "Spare me the excuses. If you want an heir that badly, I heard Alyn whelped his maid. Nettles was her name, was it not?"

"She is indeed with child," her grandfather admitted softly. "But she never wed Alyn. The child will be a bastard."

"Interesting," Rhaena drawled, giving a smile full of teeth. "That did not stop you from making Alyn Waters your heir. Fret not—if you are so greatly troubled by the unborn child's bastardry, I shall convince Jon to legitimise it at birth."

"That won't be necessary, Your Grace," was the stiff answer. "It is not wise to bet a future on unborn children."

"Yet you don't seem to have a problem betting it on mine own?"

He let out a sad sigh. "Nettles is just a whore, and the next Lord of the Tides cannot be the son of a whore. Your Grace, I know I made a mistake with Alyn, and I now beg your forgiveness. The matter of the heir of Driftmark is most important to me."

But he did not seem to care about Baela, the eldest twin. Her blood claim to Driftmark was stronger... but her grandfather was overlooking her. Was it because she was to be the next Lady of Winterfell?

No, that was not it. Bastardry did not bother Corlys Velaryon either; if he could accept Rhaenyra's strong sons, then he would accept a byblow of Alyn Waters.

Why, then?

It was not the whore or bastardry that bothered Corlys Velaryon as much as the lack of dragons.

The Sea Snake was trying to scheme against her now. Against her husband and children!

What a grandfather!

"Words are wind," Rhaena said coldly. "I have forgiven you, but I have not forgotten. All my children will bear the Targaryen name and will have nothing to do with Driftmark. And stop plotting about dragons. This terrible war has taught me one thing—there can be only one House of the Dragon. Lord Commander Broome, escort Lord Velaryon out—I don't want to see him in Maegor's Holdfast again."

Her grandfather tried to meet her at least a dozen times since then, but Rhaena refused his audience and threatened to have him thrown out of the Red Keep for the whole court to see. He stopped after that.

Jon returned after a moon's turn atop Vermithor, and half the city cheered at the sight of the dragon. Even Silverwing rose from the godswood to greet her draconic companion. The battle against Aemond had not been easy, Rhaena could see. There were slight burn marks upon her husband's face, and Vermithor's belly sported four jagged scars, and the scales there were still small and pale.

Her husband had not come alone. It was a coincidence, but later that day, Cregan Stark and Baela arrived with a sizeable host of Northmen by ship from the Saltpans, and more and more lords streamed in from every corner of the realm to see the new Stark king for themselves and swear fealty.

Baela's face had deeper burns, running down her neck. Even her side and arms were covered with them—the former beauty that could rival Rhaena was gone. Many courtiers pointed at her sister, laughed at her back, or even gazed at her with pity.

But Baela did not explode as Rhaena expected.

Her sister had changed. The fire in her was still there, but was more subdued after the loss of her dragon. The previously unrestrained wildness was tempered by loss, and her sister was now solemn. Rhaena had not met her for over two months, and she now felt like half a stranger. But she had not entertained the Sea Snake either.

"Well done," Jon said as soon as Rhaena explained what had happened in his absence. His face, however, was terrifyingly cold, and even Rhaena couldn't help but feel trepidation, even if the ire was not aimed at her. "It seems certain fools have mistaken my generosity and mercy for weakness."

The trial was promptly held, four lords from the Crownlands and the Reach were beheaded by Jon, and the rest had been sent to the Wall—including Ser Tyland Lannister, who had not taken part in the planned coup, but had known of it—much to the loud cheers of the crowd and the fright of the newly arrived lords. Lady Jeyne Arryn was stripped of her titles and lands and tongue and sent to the Silent Sisters in White Harbour to keep Queen Alicent company.

Jeyne Arryn had not even summoned her preferred heir, as Jon had strongly suggested, and had even ordered her cousin and rightful heir thrown through the infamous Moon Door. Perhaps, she had always intended to rebel.

In the end, the shrewd Ser Eldric Arryn had been appointed the next Lord of the Vale, the next in line by blood.

“Why spare Hightower?” the twin sisters asked Jon in private later.

“Because this Lord Hightower has broken no vows,” was the curt reply. “Neither has his father. They have broken no laws either. If you must blame someone, blame King Viserys, for he never dared to disinherit his sons, and sons come before the daughter. I cannot punish those who have not opposed me without good reason. The young Lord Lyonel is wise enough to know when to retreat, unlike the foolish falcon, and cannot be punished as traitors or as oathbreakers, for Aegon the Elder was King Viserys’s trueborn son.”

“That makes you a usurper, though,” Baela snorted, her voice thick with irritation.

“I *am* a usurper,” Jon said flatly. “With sword and dragon, I took Rhaena for a wife, and then wrenched away the throne from Viserys’s trueborn sons. Of course, now that they are dead, the Iron Throne is rightfully mine. By right of conquest.”

Baela reeled, and even Rhaena swallowed at those words. Deep down, she had known of it, but hearing it spoken so bluntly was jarring.

Jon cleared his throat and continued, “I know some of the Lords would forever be reluctant to kneel to a bastard-born, but with Lady Arryn sent to the Silent Sisters and Lord Meadows to the Wall, the rest will fall in line and at least appear obedient. Aye, I sit on the Iron Throne, but the real fight has now begun.”

“Is this why you recruited three hundred Northern clansmen as our household guard?” Rhaena asked softly. “Or why you have granted the rest of the Northern warriors a quarter in the city?”

“Aye.” Smiling, he gathered her into his arms, holding her just the way she liked. “I mean to fill the rest of the court with Northmen and Riverlanders.”

“You don’t have much to fear,” Baela said, looking at them oddly. “I heard that in every inn from the Neck to the Blackwater Rush, bards sing songs of your generosity, fairness, and love of peace and beauty. King Jon Stark the Just.”

“The support of the smallfolk is appreciated but too fleeting to be relied upon,” said Jon, waving his hand. “It comes and goes with the wind. But aye, I mean to be a just king, even if some might not like it. Justice is not always popular, nor without blood. They might still call me Usurper for another three decades. But with time, Alicent’s sons will be forgotten—only fools cling to old ghosts, after all.”

“Are you truly going to let the Hightowers go without even a slap on the wrist?” Rhaena pressed, feeling a tad unwilling.

For a good half a minute, her husband remained silent. Then, he sighed.

"If it were not a Hightower, it would be a Tyrell, or a Florent, or someone else," Jon said at last. "If I am to be a just king, I cannot let petty vengeance affect the start of my rule. Of course, the Hightowers will be humbled in other ways."

"How?" Baela asked, eyes shining.

"You'll see," her husband promised, refusing to give further details.

Rhaena turned to her sister after Jon left.

"So... you're willing to leave your right to flight just to marry Lord Stark?"

"I..." Baela swallowed heavily. "Moondancer was crippled by the fight," she said, her voice small. "His wing was torn off, and he would never fly again. Gods, he was in so much pain and was slowly dying. And even if he lived, wouldn't it just be torture? He would look up at the sky forever, unable to take flight again. It was too much. I had to... I had to spare him the agony. It was mercy."

Rhaena wrapped her arms around her sobbing twin, stroking her back gently, whispering to her kindly.

But Baela brushed away her tears, stepped aside, and gave her a grateful nod. "I thought of claiming a new dragon," she rasped, her voice hoarse. "But Moondancer... replacing him would feel like a betrayal. He was so wounded only because he protected me from Seasmoke's rage—otherwise, he wouldn't have been caught. I... I don't deserve another dragon. And I know that if I claim one, Jon won't let me wed..."

The queen wanted to console her sister and tell her it would be a lie. But she couldn't. Jon would keep all the dragons inside the royal family, one way or the other—a notion Rhaena had agreed on. Perhaps it was petty to deny her sister a second dragon. But she still remembered that morning after the wedding night, and she had not forgotten the Dance either.

For good or for ill, she knew things would never be the same again between them.

"I'll come visit in Winterfell often," Rhaena promised, pushing away the guilt. "If Lord Stark treats you poorly, I'll burn his castle."

That finally pried a laugh out of Baela. It felt like a lifetime had passed since her own sister had threatened to burn Jon's little house.

"There's no need," she said, tittering with amusement. "Cregan Stark is painfully honest, much like Jon, but he is not cruel or callous. In the end, my children will probably return to King's Landing to help you and yours in court. Perhaps if I have a daughter, she'll marry one of your sons."

Rhaena blinked, giving her sister a careful glance. Was she replaced by a Faceless Man?

No, the mischievousness was still there. And this did not seem to be her own idea—Baela rarely thought about the future, preferring to live in the moment. Perhaps this was Lord Stark's arrangement?

It was not too bad, either.

For a small period, the realm was at peace. Retinues from Casterly Rock and the Hightower came, bringing parts of the royal treasury that they had been 'entrusted to guard' during the war.

“Lady Lannister brought triple the amount sent to Casterly Rock,” said Torrhen Manderly, the new master of coin. “And Lord Hightower, twice what he was given—the treasury is now full, with more gold at the crown’s disposal than before the war.”

Rumour had come along with the Lannister gold, speaking of Alys Rivers. The lion’s widow had intended to get rid of the woman and *worse*, but Aemond’s pregnant paramour had escaped, vanished gods know where.

“Peace and honesty pay more than war,” Jon murmured, looking at the numbers on the scroll.

The plump Manderly knight smiled wryly. “Only because neither Casterly Rock nor Oldtown lack for coin, Your Grace. I suspect the coming Braavosi delegation will also return the share they were given to safeguard, but the amount will be far more precise.”

He was indeed right. Some weeks later, three keyholders from the Iron Bank sailed into the harbour on a great galley escorted by three warships, bringing over four hundred thousand golden dragons and plenty of gifts. Thousands of crates with silk from as far as Yi-Ti, imperial jade, Norvoshi wool, white shark leather, Myrish lace, and even earrings and a necklace of Valyrian steel. Countless luxuries, only allowed to her grandmother and her royal stepmother, were now laid before Rhaena for the picking.

Then came a delegation from the Prince of Pentos, the Council of Lorath, the Bearded Priests of Norvos, and even the Triarchs of Volantis, with congratulations—also accompanied by no less generous gifts—for the rise of King Jon the Generous. Rhaena suspected she might see someone from as far as Slaver’s Bay and even beyond, given enough time.

“So much Valyrian steel in jewellery,” Baela said, blinking tightly at the royal vault that was now threatening to overflow—piles of rare curiosities and precious materials stacked all the way to the ceiling. “There must be nearly a thousand pieces of the stuff.”

Jon looked at the table laden with hundreds of ornaments for half an hour and then said, “I’ll remelt half of it to forge three more swords.”

“Wait, you can do that?”

“Qohorik master smiths should know the secret of reforging dragonsteel,” said Jon, eyes growing distant. “Acquiring the services of one should not be difficult with the reach of the Iron Throne. Regardless, the crown won’t want for coin now.”

A grand wedding was held in the city a moon’s turn later, where Baela officially wed Lord Cregan Stark, the ceremony held before the heart tree by an old septon from White Harbour.

“This is a direct insult to the High Septon, Your Grace,” Lord Royce said cautiously. “The Most Devout won’t stand for it either.”

Jon scoffed. “He could have presided over the wedding if he had not dragged his feet for so long.”

Another month passed, and the High Septon arrived in King’s Landing with a retinue of forty-nine Most Devout, all carrying weirwood staffs, white robes trimmed with gold, and crystalline crowns demanding a meeting with the king.

They were turned away at the Red Keep's gate, as Jon said he was too busy to entertain traitors coming to beg. He said it loudly and in front of his whole court.

Rumours erupted through the city, then, speaking of how the Faith of the Seven had plotted to overthrow the dragons by using an old begging brother by the name of the Shepherd a few months earlier, claiming the Targaryens and their dragons to be demons from the Seventh Circle of Hell.

The whispers only grew darker and more slanderous by the day, to the point where it was said that the Faith itself had grown fat and corrupt on gold and old glory, forgetting the teachings of the Seven from excessive pride, and now plotted treason against the king with Hightower. Each of the Most Devout was met with jeers and hatred, and it was a small miracle that no crowds rioted.

It had happened too swiftly, and the hearsay was too... specific, all of it casting the clergymen in the worst light possible. They were old, corrupt, and set in their ways, but not half the demons the rumours made them out to be.

"It is indeed my doing," Jon said when she had confronted him. "Foes like these old, overproud priests can not be fought with fire and sword. But even clergymen must bend their knees before the king. So I used sharp words and hearsay, tearing the veneer of pioussness, and revealing the rot underneath. It helps that most of it is the truth."

And it worked. The young Hightower lord had said he had nothing to do with the High Septon, some feud about a refusal to marry his father's widow, and thus, the Faith's strongest ally abandoned them without hesitation.

The High Septon and his devout retinue remained hidden in the sept atop Visenya's Hill, not daring to come out even when smallfolk pelted the walls with filth. On her husband's advice, Rhaena set out from the Red Keep to hand out food to the hungry in the city twice a week.

At first, Rhaena had been hesitant, but seeing the gaunt faces littering the streets, her reluctance melted.

Then, on the northern slopes of Aegon's High Hill, between the Red Keep, the Street of Looms, the Rose Road, and the Iron Gate, all the houses were purchased by the crown—some even at twice the original price. A whole quarter of the city was cleared for the Northmen to settle, most of whom volunteered to fill in the ranks of the gold cloaks. Even a heart tree was planted in what was now called Snow's Square.

It was a naked threat—if the High Septon did not bow his head, the old gods were ready to welcome the royal family into the fold.

After forty-nine days, Jeor Wull and a hundred mountain clansmen—now all wearing the split royal livery of the three-headed dragon and white wolf head and clad in half-plate—came to the sept atop Visenya's Hill to politely 'escort' the High Septon to meet with the king.

The High Septon, an old, shrivelled thing with a wrinkled face, reluctantly agreed.

The message was clear for all to see; the Faith was at the king's mercy, and putting on airs would win them no favours.

Even Rhaena did not know what Jon and the High Septon discussed, but in the end, the ancient man left the meeting looking even older than before.

A Grand Ecclesiastical Council of the Faith was called in King's Landing, and all the septons in the realm were invited.

First, the High Septon announced that the Faith would sponsor the building of a Grand Sept on Visenya's Hill, all the coin from their own coffers. All future High Septons would reside there, serving as spiritual leaders of the Faith and removed from secular affairs.

A figurehead.

"Did you know that the first High Septon was appointed by Hightower?" Rhaena overheard the courtiers' murmur.

"Really? I thought the High Septon came with the Andals from Andalos?"

"I thought so too, but when I consulted the old scrolls, I found it was an ambitious Septon who served as a regent for a young Hightower lord thousands of years ago—"

Surely enough, after checking the royal library, Rhaena confirmed that the rumour was true. Why was she not surprised that the Hightowers had been ambitious long before the Conquest?

This had to be her husband's doing.

When did Jon figure it out?

Regardless, Jon had a talent for pulling out seemingly inane but very dangerous truths and using them as spears to stab those who opposed them. A very dangerous skill that would have greatly frightened Rhaena if the one possessing it had not been her husband.

So this was how he intended to curb the Hightower power. It was novel, but effective.

The rumours made their way from the Red Keep to Flea Bottom in a single day, and Rhaena knew the Faith was now powerless to resist, and even the most pious of lords were eager to deliver a blow that would see the clergy's influence over their own affairs weaken.

Then, the gathered septons debated for seven days and seven nights, finally accepting the Doctrine of Austerity.

To repent for previous sins and avoid corruption and worldly temptation, the Faith agreed to henceforth forgo the gathering and lending of gold and other precious items. They could only purchase food and clothing to aid the poor and the needy. Their current wealth would be used to build a proper sept in the city and to sponsor new cisterns and drains for King's Landing to improve public health and keep the streets clean of filth and disease, following in Septon Barth's footsteps.

Furthermore, each kingdom would have its branch of the clergy, headed by an archsepton, who would answer only to the king and the gods and would be tasked with supervising the local septs and septries and clearing them of corruption.

Finally, the Faith's dwindling reputation stabilised. In the end, most septons and septas were merely men and women devoted to the gods, content to follow in their teachings, save for a handful of bad apples. It was the upper echelons of the Faith that had started hoarding wealth and power and were eager to vie for influence and prestige.

The end of Year 130 of Aegon's Conquest slowly approached, and the winter grew fiercer. It often snowed for days to no end, and her sister finally left for the North, leaving Rhaena feeling melancholic as they parted again. At least this farewell was not as painful or filled with... turmoil as the previous one.

A Qohorik master smith was found, and three Valyrian steel swords joined the royal collection. A greatsword named Frostfyre with dark blue ripples was given to Jeor Wull to wield. Ser Lyonel Bentley was awarded a pink bastard sword by the name of Last Kiss, and an unassuming dark longsword by the name of Ashclaw that remained with Jon.

"Four kingsguard with a dragonsteel sword are enough for now," he said. "This one shall be for my heir." Like Skyfall, Last Kiss and Frostfyre would forever remain sacred heirlooms of the royal family, but Jon had preferred to put them to use—it would be long before a new warrior worthy of wielding dragonsteel would rise from the House of the Dragon.

The Dance had trimmed the royal family dreadfully thin, and restoring it fell on her shoulders. But even that would not come swiftly.

But the troubles did not end.

New tension appeared inside King's Landing. Many lordships along the Reach and the Riverlands lay empty as the Dance had extinguished more than a dozen noble houses. A few distant cousins came forth to lay claim to said houses, but they were promptly dismissed by the king.

"I have neither seen you fight for me, nor did you swear me vows when I needed them the most, to entertain such easily dismissed claims," was his cool response. "Begone from my sight."

Lord Dustin's second son was rewarded with Maidenpool and given the task of retrieving Dark Sister from the tons of remelted rock. The lands of Harrenhal were to be split amongst Robb Rivers, Lord Royce's second son, and Alfred Broome's elder brother. Harren's castle was to be demolished, the stones used to build the new keeps, the remaining rock to be sold, and the coin split in three between the new lords.

Though many continued asking questions about the Riverlands with dogged stubbornness.

With the Greyjoys and Tullys all dead, the last of the great lords of the realm to come and swear fealty before the Iron Throne was Tyrell. Of course, Lord Tyrell was but a babe that could barely walk, so it was his mother, Melinda Tyrell, who had come to swear vows.

"House Tyrell's vows are rather useless," Jon said bluntly, neither accepting nor declining her fealty.

"Your Grace, there must be a mistake." Pale-faced, Lady Melinda shuffled, her fingers twisting in her skirts. The king merely stared down at the woman, and she started trembling before long.

"When His Grace King Viserys perished, he had two legal heirs in dispute," her husband began blandly. "If you were loyal to King Viserys, you should have supported one or the other. But by supporting neither, your loyalty is put into doubt. Perhaps you were never loyal to King Viserys. You're something just as damned as a traitor—a fence-sitter. You betrayed Viserys, you betrayed Aegon, and you betrayed Rhaenyra."

"I assure you—"

“Even if you were loyal,” Jon forcefully continued. “You could not even command your own bannermen to stand out of the fight. Either treason or incompetence, or both. The way I see it, there’s no need for House Tyrell to remain lords of the Reach when they cannot rule it well.”

Melinda Tyrell's face paled like chalk. Whispers rippled through the throne room. Lyonel Hightower was looking at him oddly, and the young Peake and Florent lords looked so excited they could grow wings and fly.

The woman hastily knelt, prostrating herself before the Iron Throne. “Please, mercy, Your Grace! Little Lyonel is merely a babe, and could hardly rule the vast Reach, and this woman is incompetent...”

Rhaena watched the flicker of displeasure pass through her husband’s eyes. He hated grovelling. But he would not be too harsh on the woman, she knew. There had to be some other plot afoot here, again.

“You are right,” Jon said at last. “A Tyrell could hardly rule the whole Reach alone. What the Conqueror was thinking in allowing a mere steward to rule such vast lands, I know not. Perhaps the time has come to rectify that mistake. So, I will alleviate some of your burden. Henceforth, all the lords and knights from Appleton to the Gold Road shall swear to the Iron Throne directly. In perpetuity. Fewer bannermen should be easier to manage, I believe.”

The silence was so deep you could hear a needle drop. Rhaena gasped as the words sank in. This was easily a third of the Reach, and her husband meant to fold it into the Crownlands. No, he had already done it.

The murmurs rose through the gathered lords and courtiers. Her ear caught some disbelief, some fear, and something else. But Rhaena knew Jon had succeeded when she saw the lords whose fealty would turn to the Iron Throne looked more excited than reluctant.

The new Lord Arryn looked thoughtful, Lord Borros Baratheon was sweating like a pig, and the Lannister widow was as still as a statue behind her black veil. Was it fear, Rhaena wondered, or perhaps disbelief at her husband’s daring?

In the end, all gazes fell on the prostrated Melinda Tyrell.

“Your Grace is most gracious,” she said, her voice hollow.

“There is no need for flatteries,” Jon said mildly. “Since you already admitted you’re incompetent, you can retire to White Harbour, keeping Queen Alicent and Lady Jeyne Arryn company. I’ll find someone to raise your son into a proper lord.”

Lady Tyrell looked like she wanted to object. In the end, she thought better of it and bowed her head reluctantly.

“As Your Grace commands.”

Unlike Jeyne Arryn or Alicent Hightower, Melinda Tyrell had the dignity to curtsy and walk out with her head held high, even if her legs trembled with each step. She would get to keep her tongue, too.

“Since the opportunity has arrived, I shall announce the last change,” Jon continued, his voice silencing the whispers in the throne room. “With Houses Greyjoy and Tully extinct, the Riverlands and the Iron

Islands will be folded into the direct royal domain, with all the privileges afforded to the smallfolk and the lords.”

Now, Baratheon and Arryn looked frightened. Jon had just turned the Crownlands into the most populous kingdom, second only to the North in size.

And Rhaena knew this would work. The Riverlords would welcome the protection and the firm hand of the crown, especially when half their kingdom lay in ruin. Even the handful of surviving reaver lords would consider this a blessing.

But no matter how the rest of the highlords disliked the sudden increase of royal power, they could only watch and obediently acknowledge the change. The war had seen many lose kin and their power and influence, and had reminded the Seven Kingdoms of the might of Dragons.

“Your Grace, now, the kingdoms under your domain are only six,” Royce said later at a royal council. “It seems... improper to call yourself king of the Seven Kingdoms. And folding so many lords directly under the Iron Throne will be a great burden—”

“You’re all cunning, skilled, and bold.” Jon reached out, patting Gunthor’s shoulder. “With your help, we’ll overcome all obstacles that arise.”

Jon had received a new moniker that day. Widow-Slayer, they called him, for this was the second widow he had ‘defeated’. Some called him Lady’s Bane, much to Rhaena’s amusement.

The more sordid whispers insinuated that he had bedded even the pretty Lannister widow, earning her favour and loyalty and conquering her heart and her womb in a single night. Rhaena scoffed at those rumours. Her husband was deeply loyal, and she slept by his side every night despite having their own apartments.

She had been tempted to have the tongues removed from all those insulting Jon’s dignity.

But there was no need to. Ser Alfred and the other white cloaks had acted first, challenging the gossipers to duels and winning, protecting the royal dignity, and taking the sword hands of more than one. Nobody dared gossip after that.

By the end of the year, all the fighting across the realm had halted, and even the most stubborn lords had dipped their banners after realising where the winds blew, with the exception of the skirmishes and sieges along the Iron Islands.

Tensions in the Dornish Marches increased as raids intensified. Each week, word arrived from the Marcher Lords of a new incursion, a new bandit attack, and Jon’s face slowly grew grimmer.

“Princess Martell tries my patience too much,” he said after the thirteenth complaint, tone glacial.

The next day, the court was opened with a new royal decree, giving royal sanctioning on attacks across the Red Mountain to *‘remove bandits and clean up brigands and their hideouts’*. Even if the said brigands were Dornish lords and the hideouts were Dornish castles and holdfasts.

On the first day of Year 131 of Aegon’s Conquest, the docks welcomed an inconspicuous galley from Lys. Rhaena had heard of the tension threatening to break apart the Triarchy—on paper, the Three Daughters were still enemies with the Iron Throne if no further fighting had come to pass after the Gullet, for no

peace had been agreed upon, even. But oddly enough, this ship was welcomed cordially, and even Jon paid attention.

The plump Lyseni magister, Bambarro Bazzane, who had a sly smile on his meaty face, was an odd sight. Odder still was the swiftness with which he was granted a private audience with her husband—within an hour of docking, he was standing before the king, whereas many had to wait for days or weeks for their turn to petition court. A private audience was out of the question unless it was some highlord. Even Rhaena had been summoned to attend in a private audience chamber.

“I have brought him here, Your Grace,” the man said, his words rich with the mellow accent of the Lyseni.

Jon inclined. “I assume you want a reward since you’ve come in person?”

Magister Bambarro’s face stiffened.

“Your Grace, how can I show such an uncouth, lowly thing like greed before a man of your generosity?!” He cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably. “Though... if I must accept a boon, there is one thing.”

“Speak.”

The sly smile returned to Bambarro’s face. “I have only one son and too many daughters. My boy, Barro, is two and ten, and his mother coddles him too much, and I’m afraid he’ll go too soft. It would be... desirable if a teacher could be found to toughen him up and instil him with some martial skills and discipline.”

“I’ll take him as my squire,” Jon promised. “But it will be up to him if he can truly learn how to fight.”

Why was Jon promising some irrelevant magister such a precious position as a royal squire?

“Truly, Your Grace is a man of unmatched munificence,” Bambarro beamed. “I will be in the city if you ever need this servant, my king. Alandro, bring them in!”

Then, the door opened, and Rhaena saw a familiar face enter, cautiously looking around.

“Vis?” she croaked out, her voice hoarse as her vision began to swim.

The round face of her brother was just as she remembered, but sharper—he had lost much of his baby fat. Deep, dark bags were settled under his purple eyes, and he looked half-scared, half-hopeful.

“...Sister?”

She didn’t remember rushing over, but her hands had already wrapped around her brother. Viserys Targaryen, youngest child of Daemon and Rhaenyra, latched onto her like a monkey, refusing to let go, and he started crying into her gown.

Her gaze flicked to Jon in askance, but the question was stuck in her throat. *What happens to my brother now?*

“He’ll be my page,” her husband said, as if he had read her mind. “From this day forth, he’ll be betrothed to Jaehaera. He’ll grow and learn by my side and become my Hand once he’s old enough. If he earns his spurs, Viserys will be allowed to claim a dragon.”

Rhaena breathed out a sigh of relief. Of course, her husband was merciful. He would not harm her brother because he had a better claim. And yet...

"What of those seeking to support him in court?" she challenged. "Or even push his claim forward after he claims a dragon? All those unhappy with you will whisper in his ears how the Throne should have been his, you know this, Jon."

Jon's lips curled into a sneer. "Our children will marry his, then. Matters of succession do not need to be all murder and mayhem." He crouched by the red-eyed Viserys, who looked fidgety and ready to bolt. "Viserys. Do you want to be my page and learn from me?"

"Yes, good-brother," he said, nodding eagerly despite snot running down his nose.

"Then, wipe your tears," her husband said firmly. "Princes of the Blood and future knights are not allowed to cry."

Her brother quickly wiped his face, straightening his spine.

It would have been easy to send Viserys to the Citadel, have him forge a chain and swear away his name and claim with vows. Or perhaps turn him to the Night's Watch, doing much of the same.

Many others would have easily done it, without blinking, and one would blame them for it, as it was a mercy. Jon did not, and Rhaena loved him more for it.

Old challenges and new woes loomed on the horizon; the uncertainty of winter had taken hold of the realm, but she felt safe and content, knowing that all troubles could be handled side by side with her husband.

Author's Endnote: Starring: Jon the 'Widow's Wail' Stark. Jaehaera 'who are those pesky guys trying to be bad?' Targaryen and Corlys 'I'm an old thing, so it's okay to be shameless,' Velaryon.