

Corlys Velayron

Lord Corlys Velaryon found the man he was looking for on the serpentine terrace overlooking the Blackwater. The wind was whipping up from the bay, but Daeron stood near the stone railing, looking out at the horizon with the stillness of a statue.

The Sea Snake paused for a moment, studying his quarry. He had spent a lifetime judging men—by the set of their shoulders, the calluses on their hands, the way they stood against a gale. Daeron, this "Northern" mystery, stood like a man who had weathered winters that would freeze the blood of lesser men.

"The air is clearer out here," Corlys said, announcing his presence. "Though the smell of the city is harder to escape than the politics."

Daeron turned. He didn't jump or reach for his blade; he simply pivoted gracefully. "Lord Corlys." He offered a respectful nod. "The city has a unique scent, it is true. Gold and rot."

"A fitting description," Corlys agreed, moving to stand beside him. He rested his hands on the stone balustrade. "I wanted to speak with you, Daeron. Away from the ears of the court."

"I am at your disposal, my lord."

Corlys looked at the younger man. Up close, the Valyrian features were undeniable—the eyes were a deep, striking violet, not unlike Laenor's or Rhaenys's, and the silver streak of hair.

"I wished to thank you," Corlys said, for a moment, he sounded like a father. "For what you did in the melee. My son... Laenor was reckless. He let grief cloud his judgment. Ser Criston would not have stopped. You saved his life."

"I did what any man would do," Daeron replied quietly. "There is no honor in butchering a man who has already lost the will to defend himself."

"Perhaps," Corlys said. "But honor is a rare currency in King's Landing. Most men would have let the Sea Snake's heir be crippled or killed simply to remove a piece from the board." He paused, studying Daeron's profile. "You have skill, lad. I have sailed from Ibben to Asshai, and I have seen water dancers, pit fighters, and Westerosi knights. I have never seen anyone move quite like you. You defeated Prince Daemon. That is no small feat."

"The Prince is a formidable opponent," Daeron said diplomatically.

"He is," Corlys agreed. "Which makes you exceptional." He turned fully toward Daeron. "House Velaryon values exceptional men. I am building a new fleet to patrol the trade routes near the Stepstones. I need captains. Men who can command respect and wield a sword. Or, if the sea does not call to you, High Tide always has room for a master-at-arms who knows the difference between fighting and killing."

It was a generous offer. A position in the wealthiest house in the realm, away from the viper pit of the Red Keep, with gold and glory for the taking.

Daeron looked at him, and for a moment, Corlys thought he saw a flicker of regret in those purple eyes.

"You honor me, Lord Corlys," Daeron said, his voice sincere. "Truly. To serve the Sea Snake would be a tale worth telling."

"But?" Corlys prompted, hearing the refusal before it was spoken.

"But I have already accepted a position," Daeron said. "Just now. The King has appointed me Sworn Shield to Princess Rhaenyra."

Corlys felt his eyebrows rise. He kept his face impassive, masking the jolt of surprise; he knew what this meant.

Rhaenyra, he thought. *Clever girl. Or perhaps, dangerous girl.*

He looked at Daeron—the man who had killed the Queen's brother three days ago. For Rhaenyra to elevate him now, to place him at her right hand... it was a declaration of war. She was figuratively stepping over Gwayne Hightower's corpse and smiling directly into Alicent's face. It was spite. It was a reminder to the Greens that she was the Heir, and she could honor whom she pleased.

But as Corlys looked at the handsome, dark-haired man with the eyes of old Valyria, he suspected there was a second current pulling beneath the surface.

Laenor, Corlys thought with a pang of bitterness. *She knows.*

Rhaenyra was no fool. She knew Laenor's nature. She knew that her marriage bed would likely be cold, that the duty of producing heirs would be a chore her husband would struggle to perform. And here stood a man who looked like a warrior from the Age of Heroes, a man who had already proven he would bleed for her. Was she looking for a protector, or was she looking for a proxy? A man to give her the happiness, and perhaps the children, that Laenor could not?

Corlys studied Daeron's face again. The young man stood tall, his expression serious, his gaze steady. He didn't look like a man plotting to cuckold a future

King Consort. He looked... dutiful. And he spoke of his wife, that silver-haired beauty Daenerys, with a devotion that seemed unshakeable.

She is chasing a fantasy, Corlys decided. Rhaenyra wants him, that much is clear. She wants to flaunt him at Alicent and keep him for herself. But this one... this one has too much Northern honor in him. He won't stray.

"I see," Corlys said finally, breaking the silence. "Sworn Shield to the Heir. That is a high honor indeed. And a dangerous one."

"I am accustomed to danger, my lord."

"I believe you are," Corlys said. He extended his hand. "My offer stands, Daeron. Should you ever tire of the Red Keep—and believe me, the shine of this place wears off quickly—House Velaryon will have a place for you."

Daeron grasped his forearm. "Thank you, my lord."

"And Daeron," Corlys added, holding the grip a moment longer. "My son is... complicated. But he is my blood. You saved him. House Velaryon pays its debts. Remember that."

"I will," Daeron promised.

Corlys watched him walk away, heading back toward the holdfast where the Princess awaited. The Sea Snake turned back to the sea, listening to the waves crash against the rocks below. The winds were changing, and Rhaenyra Targaryen was setting her sails for a storm. He just hoped his son wouldn't be the one to drown in it.

Rhaenys Targaryen

The guest chambers allocated to House Velaryon were draped in enough velvet to suffocate a dragon. The air here in the Red Keep was always stagnant, thick with the scent of beeswax, old stone, and the recycled breath of a thousand liars who had walked these halls before them. Rhaenys stood by the narrow window, longing for the sharp bite of salt spray and the open sky of Driftmark. Here, even the sunsets felt curated by the crown, the light filtering through the smog of King's Landing like gold struggling to shine through mud.

The heavy oak door groaned, much like her husband's current mood, as Corlys entered. He paced the Myrish carpet, his fingers twitching as if searching for a wheel to steer.

"He refused," Corlys said.

Rhaenys turned. "Refused the Sea Snake? That is a rare folly. The Northern boy has more pride than sense."

"He has a position," Corlys corrected, stopping his pacing to pour himself a cup of wine. He didn't offer her one; he knew she preferred her wits sharp when the sun went down in this viper pit. "King Viserys has just named Daeron as Princess Rhaenyra's Sworn Shield."

Rhaenys felt a cold smile touch her lips—not of joy, but of vindication. "Of course he did. Or rather, of course *she* made him do it."

She moved from the window, gliding toward the hearth. "So, it has begun. Rhaenyra isn't just looking for a protector, husband. She is looking to fill a void."

"You think she has bedded him?" Corlys asked.

"If she hasn't, she intends to before the week is out," Rhaenys said, staring into the embers. "Rhaenyra is a Targaryen. We do not pine; we take. She looks at that boy and sees everything Laenor cannot give her—strength, danger, and a desire that burns for women."

"It is not just lust," Corlys argued, taking a long drink. "It is spite. Think on it, Rhaenys. Daeron killed the Queen's brother three days ago. It is a political maneuver."

"Lust and spite are often bedfellows," Rhaenys countered.

"Perhaps. But I spoke with the man. Daeron... he has a certain rigidity to him. A Northern honor." Corlys set the cup down. "I do not believe he will stray. He speaks of his wife as if she hung the stars in the sky. Rhaenyra may be chasing a fantasy."

Rhaenys made a soft sound of disbelief in her throat. Men always underestimated the pull of the female Dragon when it wanted something. "Loyalty to a wife is a wall, Corlys. But Rhaenyra is a siege engine. Still... if he is her shield, he is in her shadow. Constantly."

"Should we intervene?" Corlys asked. "Viserys listens to you. If we raise concerns about the propriety..."

"And create a vacuum?" Rhaenys shook her head. "If we manage to have Daeron removed, who replaces him? Viserys is weak, Daeron destroyed Harwin's leg, and they say he won't be able to walk properly for six months; Viserys will let Alicent choose the next one to keep the peace. We would trade a Northern wild card for a Hightower spy. A Cole replacement who reports every breath Rhaenyra takes to the Queen."

Corlys nodded slowly, conceding the point. "Better the devil who killed a Hightower than a Hightower devout."

He looked at her then, his eyes searching. "Do you think they are loyal? To us? To Rhaenyra?"

"To us? No," Rhaenys said immediately. "To Rhaenyra? Only as far as it serves them." She walked over to him, placing a hand on his arm. "Daeron and that silver-haired wife of his... they are not players in Rhaenyra's game, Corlys. They are playing their own. They are loyal only to themselves. But they are enemies of Alicent, and for now, the enemy of my enemy is a shield for our son."

"They are dangerous," Corlys murmured.

"More than you know," Rhaenys said with a hushed tone. "There is a third reason Rhaenyra keeps them close. A reason she hasn't told you, perhaps hasn't even fully admitted to herself."

Corlys frowned. "Which is?"

"The dragons," Rhaenys said. "Vermithor. Silverwing. They vanished from the Dragonmont. And here we have two strangers with the blood of Old Valyria in their veins, appearing at the exact same moment."

"We have discussed this," Corlys said, waving a dismissive hand. "It makes no sense, Rhaenys. If they had tamed the Bronze Fury and Good Queen Alysanne's mount, why hide it? Why play at being sellswords and courtiers?"

"Possessing two dragons of that size... that is power, Rhaenys. Absolute power. It would make them more dangerous than Daemon. More dangerous

than the Crown itself. If they had that power, they would not be bowing to Viserys and asking for knighthoods. They would be dictating terms."

Rhaenys sighed. That was the knot she couldn't untie. "I know. It defies logic. Valyrians do not hide their dragons; we flaunt them. We burn our names into the sky." She looked back toward the window, toward the dark pit of the Dragonpit across the city. "And yet... my blood tells me otherwise. I feel it, Corlys. There are predators in the grass, and we are debating the color of their scales while they circle us."

She let the silence stretch for a moment, letting the unease settle, before she smoothed the front of her gown, composing herself. They had immediate problems to solve.

"Regardless of their secrets," she said, shifting her tone to one of practical matriarchy, "our son is the matter at hand."

Corlys stiffened. "Is he sober?"

"He is," Rhaenys said. "I spoke with him before I came here. He was... quiet. Hollowed out, perhaps, but the wine is gone." She recalled Laenor's face, pale and drawn, looking like a ghost in his own chambers. "He understands his duty, Corlys. He knows what must be done at the wedding and... afterwards. He will not shame us."

"He already has," Corlys grumbled.

"He is grieving," Rhaenys said firmly. "But Laena is with him now. She has a way of stitching him back together when the world tears him apart. She will get him to the altar, and she will get him to the bedding."

"Good," Corlys said. "Because if Rhaenyra is indeed looking elsewhere for comfort, we need to ensure she has a Velaryon heir in her belly before her eye wanders too far."

Rhaenys watched him go, but she remained by the fire. She thought of Daeron's purple eyes and the way Rhaenyra looked at him. She thought of the missing dragons.

We are building a castle on sand, she thought. And the tide is coming in fast.

Daeron Targaryen

He stood by the rack of tourney-blunted swords, but the blade in his hand was sharp enough to shear a hair floating on the wind.

"Go on, then," Daeron said softly. "Take it. It won't bite you unless I tell it to."

Young Cregan Stark reached out, his fingers trembling slightly, not from fear, but from a reverence that Daeron recognized. It was the same look Bran used to get when Old Nan told stories of the Age of Heroes. Cregan's hand closed around the grip of *Stormsong*, and he lifted the Valyrian steel from Daeron's palms.

"Gods," the boy breathed, his grey eyes widening. "It's... it's lighter than glass."

"Lighter than common steel," Daeron corrected, watching the boy test the weight. "But harder than dragonbone. It remembers the fire that forged it."

Around them, a knot of Northern lords had gathered to witness the sight of the Valyrian Steel Sword upon hearing that the Heir of Winterfell wanted to see it

up close. Lord Umber, massive and shaggy as a giant; Lord Cerwyn, and Lord Mormont, a bear of a man wrapped in furs despite the King's Landing heat.

Cregan swung the sword tentatively. The dark, rippled steel cut the air with a high, singing hiss—a sound distinct to the metal, the sword had its own song.

"Careful, lad," rumbled Lord Umber. "Don't cut your own ear off. That's a king's ransom you're holding."

"It balances perfectly," Cregan said, ignoring the jape. He looked up at Daeron, a grin splitting his long, solemn face—a Stark face, the face of Arya, of Ned, of his own mother. "I've never held anything like it. Ice... Father's sword is too heavy for me yet. Too massive. But this..."

"This is a weapon for war, not just executions," Daeron said.

"Aye," agreed a gruff voice. Lord Mormont stepped forward, the floorboards creaking under his weight. He was a man of Bear Island through and through. "Valyrian steel has a life of its own. It wants to cut."

Mormont reached down and drew his own blade. It slid from the scabbard with a dark whisper. The steel was dark as smoke, the ripples distinct and deep. The pommel was a bear's head, weathered silver, its eyes small rubies.

Daeron felt a ghost brush against his heart. He knew the weight of that sword. He knew how the hilt felt against a palm slick with blood in the freezing snow. He knew the bite of it against the White Walkers' ice.

"Longclaw," Daeron said before he could think. "It is quite beautiful, my lord. A blade to guard the realms of men."

Lord Mormont froze, his thumb resting on the bear's head pommel. He looked at Daeron, his bushy brows knitting together.

"I rarely say it's name," Mormont rumbled, his voice suspicious. "It is the ancestral blade of my house, aye, but I have not spoken its name in this city. How do you know it, sellsword?"

Daeron felt the eyes of the Northern lords on him—Rickon Stark's most of all. He forced a casual shrug, though his heart hammered a rhythm against his ribs.

"I am a student of steel, my lord," Daeron said. "I have made it my business to know the great weapons of Westeros. *Lady Forlorn*, *Blackfyre*, *Dark Sister*, *Brightroar*... and *Longclaw* of Bear Island. A sword does not need to be shouted about to be known. Its reputation travels on the wind."

Mormont grunted, seeming partially mollified but still wary. He slid the blade back into its sheath with a sharp *clack*. "You know much for a man who claims to be from nowhere."

"A man from nowhere must know everything to survive somewhere," Daeron countered.

He took *Stormsong* back from Cregan, sheathing it fluidly. As the other lords drifted back to their discussions of the upcoming joust and the price of horseflesh, Lord Rickon Stark remained.

The Warden of the North stood with his arms crossed over his chest, his wolf-grey doublet simple and unadorned. He had the Quiet Wolf's eyes, Lord Eddard's eyes.

"You have a way with the boy," Rickon said quietly, nodding toward where Cregan was now reenacting a parry for a younger squire.

"He has a good spirit," Daeron replied. "Wolf's blood."

"Aye. Wild, but true." Rickon turned his gaze fully onto Daeron. "And you? You move like a Northman. You speak with our cadence when you forget yourself. You treat a sword not as a jewel, like these southrons, but as a tool to keep the dark at bay."

Rickon paused, his voice dropping to a rumble that only Daeron could hear.

"If you ever tire of the South, Daeron... if the flowers and the perfumes and the lies begin to choke you..." Rickon looked him dead in the eye. "You and your lady wife are welcome at Winterfell. There is always a place at my hearth for... friends of the North."

The invitation made Daeron pause. A Great Lord did not invite a wandering sellsword, even a celebrated one, to be a guest at his high table without reason. Daeron had not expected this, he knew Lord Stark suspected...something, inviting him to Winterfell!

Nearby, Lord Cerwyn exchanged a baffled look with Lord Glover. They didn't understand. They saw a stranger with purple eyes. Sure, he was a Northern, that much was clear, but you don't invite a Northern to Winterfell.

Daeron felt a lump rise in his throat. To go home. To see Winterfell before the Boltons, before the fires, before the long defeat. To walk the battlements and see the wolf banner snapping in the clean, cold wind.

It was the one thing he wanted more than breath. And it was the one thing he could not do.

"You honor me, Lord Stark," Daeron said, his voice thick. He bowed low, hiding his face for a moment. "If the winds ever blow us North... we shall remember your kindness."

"See that you do," Rickon said. He clapped a hand on Daeron's shoulder and then turned to follow his bannermen.

Daeron watched him go, his hand resting on the hilt of *Stormsong*, feeling more like a bastard in that moment than he ever had as Jon Snow. The North remembered, yes. But sometimes, Daeron wished it didn't remember quite so well.

Alicent Hightower

The rumors had reached her ears in the nursery, whispered by a servant who hadn't realized the Queen was listening. *Sworn Shield. The Northern Bastard. Rhaenyra.*

It couldn't be true. Viserys was weak, yes, and sentimental to a fault, but he was not cruel. He would not spit on her brother's fresh grave.

She rounded the corner and found him there, just stepping out of his chambers, followed by two Kingsguard. He looked tired, his shoulders slumped, cradling his bandaged hand against his chest.

"Viserys," she called out.

The King froze. He turned slowly, and the guilt written across his face was a confession louder than any words.

"Alicent," he said, his voice weary. "I was just coming to find you."

"Is it true?" she demanded, stopping a few feet from him. Her chest heaved, the air in the corridor suddenly too thin to breathe. "Tell me the servants are lying. Tell me you did not name him—*him*—as Rhaenyra's protector."

Viserys winced, glancing at the Kingsguard. He waved a hand, dismissing them.

"Rhaenyra... she came to me," Viserys began, his eyes pleading for understanding that she did not possess. "She made a compelling case, Alicent. The times are dangerous. She needs the best protection available. Daeron is... he is undeniably skilled."

"He killed Gwayne!" The scream tore from her throat. "Three days ago! The earth isn't even settled on my brother's coffin, and you raise his murderer to a place of honor?"

"It was not murder," Viserys said automatically, a rote defense he had clearly repeated to himself a dozen times. "It was a tournament accident. Gwayne attacked him—"

"I don't care!" Alicent stepped closer, trembling. "He is the reason my brother is dead. He is the reason my father weeps. And you... you gave him a place of honor. You placed him at your daughter's side, to sneer at me every time I see him."

"It is only for a short while," Viserys tried to soothe her, reaching out with his good hand. "Rhaenyra is leaving for Dragonstone after the wedding. She will take him with her. You won't have to see him."

"That isn't the point!" She slapped his hand away. The sound echoed in the stone hall, shocking them both.

Viserys looked at his hand, then at her, his expression crumbling into misery.

"Alicent, please. I must ensure Rhaenyra's safety. She is my heir."

"And I am your wife!" Alicent stared at him, feeling something break inside her chest—a fragile strut that had been holding up the weight of her duty for years. "I have given you sons. I have nursed you through your illness. I have been loyal, and dutiful, and patient. And in return... you choose the man who slaughtered my blood."

Her voice dropped to a whisper, broken and small.

"Do you really hate me that much, Viserys?"

The King's face went slack. "Hate you? Alicent, no. I love you. You are my—"

"Do not lie to me," she said, backing away. "Not about this. I know I'm not *her* but I..."

"Alicent, wait. Let me explain—"

He took a step toward her, but she couldn't bear to let him touch her. She turned on her heel and fled.

She walked blindly, her vision blurring, and her eyes burned like fire. As she moved through the Red Keep, the stone walls seemed to warp.

She saw the tournament field again. She saw Daeron, his dark hair whipping in the wind. Gwayne fighting with honor like he always did, then the Bastard tricked him. She saw Gwayne fall.

She saw Daeron stand over her brother. She saw a smile curl his lips, a cruel, arrogant smirk that belonged to a monster. She saw him twist the blade, saw him lean down and whisper something hateful into Gwayne's dying ear while the crowd cheered.

He enjoyed it, the voice in her head whispered, sounding remarkably like her father. *He killed him for sport. For Rhaenyra.*

And Rhaenyra... Alicent recalled the funeral. Alicent saw Rhaenyra standing over the open grave. She saw the Princess smiling behind her hand, her violet eyes mocking, laughing at the Hightower grief.

They are laughing at us, Alicent thought, her pace quickening, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. *They kill us, and they laugh, and the King rewards them for it.*

She wasn't crying anymore. The tears had burned up in the heat of her rage. There was no room for sorrow. There was only room for fire.

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Larys Strong sat by a low table, carefully pruning the dead leaves from a potted poisonous plant with a small silver pair of shears.

The door burst open.

Alicent Hightower swept into the room like a gale force wind. Her hair was coming loose from its pins, her chest heaving, her eyes wild and bright.

Larys did not jump. He simply paused in his pruning, turning his head slowly to regard the Queen.

"Your Grace," he said, his voice mild. "To what do I owe the pleasure of such a... spirited visit?"

"Tonight," Alicent said. Her voice was unrecognizable.

Larys set the shears down. He reached for his cane and shifted in his seat, wincing slightly. "Tonight? I fear I do not follow. What is to happen tonight?"

"The deed," Alicent demanded, bracing her hands on his table and leaning over him. "The fire. I want it done tonight."

Larys blinked, his expression tightening with a flicker of displeasure. He did not like haste. Haste left footprints. Haste made messes.

"Your Grace," he said soothingly, "we spoke of a plan to reveal the truth. To force them to summon their dragons. To create a spectacle that would prove their treason to the King."

"I don't care," Alicent hissed. "I don't care about the dragons. I don't care about treason. I don't care about proof."

"But surely—"

"Viserys named him her Sworn Shield," she spat the words out. "The murderer. He stands at her door. He holds the King's favor. Proof will not matter to my husband. Nothing matters to him but Rhaenyra."

She stood up straight, smoothing her skirts with trembling hands.

"I want them gone, Larys. I want them ash. I want that smile burned off his face."

Larys frowned, tapping his fingers against the head of his cane. "Tonight is... precipitous. My little birds are not yet fully in position. The wind is coming from the Blackwater; smoke might behave unpredictably. If we wait until tomorrow, during the Joust when the Keep is empty..."

"No!" Alicent slammed her hand onto the table, sending the potted plant wobbling. "Tonight! While they sleep. While they feel safe in their bed. Burn them out."

"If they do have dragons," Larys warned softly, "fire may not kill them. It is said true dragons are resistant to flame."

"Then let the falling roof kill them," Alicent countered. "Let the smoke choke them. Or let them fly away in terror and never return. I do not care which. Just make it happen."

"Do this for me," she whispered, "and House Hightower will never forget it."

Larys Strong looked at the Queen. He saw the desperation, the grief, and the reckless hate. It was messy. It was dangerous. It was exactly the kind of chaos that created ladders for men with broken feet.

A slow, thin smile stretched across his face.

"As you command, my Queen," Larys said softly. "Let us hope they sleep soundly."

Alicent nodded once and turned to leave. She did not look back.

Larys watched her go, then picked up his shears. With a precise snip, he cut the head off a blooming flower.

"Tonight," he murmured to the empty room. "Sparks in the straw."

Note: The reason Alicent is misremembering how her brother died is that it's her POV, and in her mind, she is trying to dehumanize Daeron, to make him seem more like a monster, so she is trying to make herself believe a slightly different version of the events of the Tourney. The same is her memory of Rhaenyra smiling when Gwayne was being buried.