

"By the gods, you're both so perfect," Rhaenyra said, smiling as she gazed down at her sons despite her mood. "Perfect little Valyrian babes."

Twin toothless smiles were what she got in response, and she felt like her heart might burst as she took in the sight of the four purple eyes staring up at her. Those eyes had never held pain in them before, never cried for anything more than desire for food or touch, and she wished more than anything that she could keep them like that forever.

"Did my eyes ever radiate such perfect innocence?" she wondered to herself. "Maybe before Mother died; before I realized how complicated and cruel life generally is."

She shook her head and forced herself to put her maudlin thoughts out of her head, not wanting them to affect the babes in any way. Reaching out, she started tracing under their chins with her fingers, earning giggles from them both, and took the opportunity to peer inside them one by one.

"They seem perfectly healthy," she thought to herself, "and their hair will come in silver-gold just like their mother's."

Aemon already had a light dusting of hair across his head, while Aegon remained bald, but she was confident that they'd both look every inch the Valyrian warriors as they aged. There'd be no great campaign from Alicent and her lickspittles about how they were bastards; she'd make sure of that. Sadly, that was just about the only thing she was certain of just then.

"Laenor wasn't supposed to die for years," she thought to herself. "Jon never did remember how he died, but he knew that it wasn't for a long while, since my sons by Daemon were both too young during the war to come to fight in it. What changed? Was it really just jealousy?"

She shook her head at that and sighed. It was madness, simple madness, and something that she hadn't seen coming at all. Laenor had become a friend to her, one of few people in the world that she knew she could trust, and losing him was painful. On a more selfish note, it was also deeply inconvenient. Her father would leave her alone to grieve for a while, but eventually he was going to start bothering her to remarry, and she couldn't do that.

"What made him so unappealing to me at the start was what made him essential to me by the end," Rhaenyra thought to herself.

The likelihood of her finding a second man to marry with no interest in her was minuscule, and she would not take another man to bed other than Jon. He was all she wanted all she needed, and he was also unsuited to marriage. Even if Daemon did as she wished, he'd still be a bastard and wedding even a Targaryen bastard, would be seen as an insult by every other lord in the realm. Him being a dragonrider and riding such a large, terrifying dragon helped, but it would still lose her some support, and she wouldn't be able to do it at all unless she convinced her father to legitimize him and sign off on the marriage.

"I could force the matter, but Father would be furious, and it would give Alicent a powerful weapon against me," she thought to herself.

Whether she found a man to perform the ceremony and just told everyone afterward, or worse, had him impregnate her again and used that to force her father's hand, it would cause trouble and may well make him amenable to being convinced to remove her as his heir after all.

"I can finally understand at least a little of why Alicent is such a cunt to me," she thought to herself as she gazed down at her children. "The idea of my son's birthright being taken from him is enough to make me murderous, but the difference is that I was Father's confirmed heir before she ever had Aegon. I will not give my enemies anything to use against me now, but I absolutely refuse to wed anyone but Jon. Fuck, what am I to do?"

She clenched her eyes shut and shook her head, rising from her seat with only a slight wince. The way that she'd used flesh magic to assist with the twins' births had made it cause less damage to her body, but it had still been quite strained, and a lot of her muscles were still very sore. The mouth of her womb had also been slowly closing back up again, and she'd elected not to try and force it at all, figuring that she could live with the occasional unpleasant quiver she felt in her core and it would be better to observe this than try to assist it, lest she make a mistake.

"I envy them," Ser Harwin murmured, poking his head inside the nursery. "They don't know anything about what happened here."

"Ignorance truly is bliss in this case," Rhaenyra sighed. "Has something else happened?"

"That storm that hit us earlier hit the city as well, and his Grace's ship required a little work in the aftermath, so he's delayed his visit until tomorrow morning," Ser Harwin replied, and she nodded, more pleased than she ever thought she'd be to learn that her father was going to be arriving later than planned.

"That might be for the best, all things considered," Rhaenyra muttered. "Where are Rhaenys and Corlys?"

"In their chambers," Ser Harwin replied. "Prince Daemon and Lady Laena are similarly cloistered."

"I'm not delaying the funeral," Rhaenyra sighed. "He's rotted enough already, I'm sure."

"You haven't seen him?" Ser Harwin asked, and she glared. "I mean nothing by it; I just didn't know."

"I couldn't bring myself to look at my mother's body before she was on her pyre," Rhaenyra sighed, looking down at her sons. "I could scarcely understand what had happened then, young as I was, and I find myself no more understanding now. What do I even say to him? Sorry your friend turned out to be a mad cu...man."

"I don't think they can understand our words yet, Princess," Ser Harwin murmured.

"Perhaps not, but of all the words my sons could choose as their first, I'd rather they not go with that one," Rhaenyra replied, making his lips twitch upward.

"He was a good man, Laenor," Ser Harwin sighed, "and I think he'd have been a good father."

"Gods, that's another thing I need to consider," Rhaenyra thought to herself. "No, I'm not wedding again unless it's Jon. If Father doesn't like it, he can argue with Syrax."

She scowled at the thought of allowing any man near her darling boys, though another thought soon occurred to her.

"I had hoped to have more," she thought, shaking her head.

"Was there anything else?" Rhaenyra asked.

"I'm a little worried about Jon, to be honest," Ser Harwin replied.

"Why?" Rhaenyra asked.

"Saw him just sort of walking around aimlessly earlier," Ser Harwin replied. "His eyes looked almost blank. I think he's taking Laenor's...death pretty hard."

"They'd become friends," Rhaenyra sighed, "and Laenor did save his life. You're a warrior too, Ser Harwin. Not being able to repay such a debt would bother you too, surely."

"I didn't say I didn't understand it," Ser Harwin replied. "I just said I was worried. That smith is apparently still sick, so he also doesn't seem to have much to do."

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off then?" Rhaenyra smiled. "Tell Jon he's serving as my sworn shield for the day. If he needs a distraction, I'm sure I can find tasks for him to do."

"If you're sure," Ser Harwin murmured.

"I am," Rhaenyra replied. "You can make sure that the quarters set up for my father and the others are in good order. You can also do the same for your sister's quarters."

"Alys is finally close, then?" Ser Harwin asked.

"In the capital," Rhaenyra replied. "Your father arranged for her to travel with the servants my father is bringing."

"Right," Ser Harwin nodded. "Well, I'll get on that after I find Jon and let him know of his day's assignment."

"Thank you, Ser Harwin," Rhaenyra smiled. "It's good to know, especially in such difficult times, that I have men around I can rely on."

"You can always rely on me, Princess," Ser Harwin rumbled, his dark eyes boring into hers as he gave her a roguish grin, and Rhaenyra froze.

"Fucking hells," she thought to herself, keeping her expression neutral and pleasant.

"That is good to know. Please find Jon with haste. Once I'm done here, I want to visit Qarl again and get his statement."

"Did his jaw turn out to be unbroken?" Ser Harwin asked, unable to keep from wincing as he recalled what had happened to the condemned man the last time the Targaryens visited his cell.

"No, but he is apparently at least moderately literate, so Maester Gerardys suggested getting him to write his statement down," Rhaenyra replied. "I would delegate this particular task, but I want to see him write it with my own eyes."

"I also want to make sure that he doesn't include anything too damaging in it," she thought to herself. That was another reason why she was more than happy to bring Jon along.

"I'll find him at once, Princess," Ser Harwin nodded before turning to leave.

"He's tactful enough not to flirt, but his demeanor's already changed," she thought to herself. *"Wedding Laenor did not make men suddenly find me less attractive, but it did help shut their mouths. I can't even blame him, in truth, given that my father could hardly deny the son of the Hand my hand while he remains wed to the daughter of his predecessor."*

There was a time when she'd have found the prospect of bedding, even wedding, Harwin pleasing. He was tall, broad, and handsome, everything she liked in a man. She'd not have picked him over her uncle back in the day, but with him unavailable, she could understand why she'd have turned to the man for children. That had been a different lifetime, though, one where she hadn't met her Jon.

"There is no man for me but your father, my darling boys," Rhaenyra whispered down at her sons, who had fallen asleep while she spoke with Harwin. *"If I cannot have him, I'll have none at all."*

"Princess?" Jon asked, and she turned, her breath hitching as she spotted him standing in the doorway.

Her gorgeous lover, the one she would make her prince if she could, looked awful. His beard was uncombed, his eyes were listless, and the skin under them was dark and baggy, as though he hadn't slept at all. She'd not paid too much attention to him earlier, something not unusual when Rhaenys and Corlys were around, but seeing him plainly now, it was clear that he'd not slept much the night before.

"Come in," Rhaenyra said softly, and he hesitated.

"I...I shouldn't," Jon objected, and her eyes narrowed.

"That was a command from your princess," Rhaenyra said, her tone harsher than her expression, and he sighed, walking over.

"They're beautiful," Jon whispered, his eyes growing misty as he gazed down at his sons.

"Aegon and Aemon," Rhaenyra sighed, wishing desperately that she could hold him in her arms. "My beautiful boys."

'Ours' went unsaid, yet the word lingered between them anyway and after gazing behind herself to make sure no one was there, she brushed her fingers against his hand.

"I want to see Qarl again and get his written statement," Rhaenyra murmured. "Come with me?"

"Of course, Princess," Jon nodded. "Shall we go now?"

"Yes, thank you," Rhaenyra smiled, standing up.

"You're walking better," Jon commented as they left the nursery.

"I'm still sore, but it's not as bad as it was," Rhaenyra replied. "Having everything go as smoothly as it did was very helpful on that front."

"How long did it take?" Jon asked.

"Only a few hours," Rhaenyra replied. "Maester Gerardys says that it was the quickest first-time birth he's ever heard of."

He gave her a querying look, and she nodded.

"That was quite the risk," Jon murmured, and she glared at him.

"You saw how large they are," Rhaenyra huffed. "The worst part of it all wasn't even pushing them out; it was having my body open up to make that possible. There's nothing any woman wouldn't do to speed that process up, I assure you. We're all healthy, and I am on the mend; that's all that matters."

Jon nodded at that and was silent for the rest of their trip to the dungeon. Qarl had passed out from the pain not long after their last visit, and Rhaenyra had ordered him to be unbound from the wall and dumped on his bed. Maester Gerardys had checked him over afterward, wanting to make sure that he'd live long enough to have his trial, and the princess winced when she saw the small pillow between the man's legs.

"Wake him and leave us," she commanded, and the guards nodded. One of them grabbed a nearby bucket full of water and tossed it over Qarl's head, making him wake and begin to scream, clutching between his legs.

"Be silent, or I'll have the other one crushed!" Rhaenyra snarled, and he looked up at her, whimpering, his dark eyes looking like those of a wounded puppy in the faint light of the torch Jon carried. "You have no idea what you've done to us all, to the realm."

"Kull ee," Qarl begged, and she needed no translation to understand the request.

"You live at my pleasure, Qarl," Rhaenyra said coldly. "You'll die at it too. I understand that you cannot speak with your jaw in its state, but I also understand that you can read and write at at least the level of a noble child. Is this correct?"

He nodded, and she smiled, pulling a scroll of parchment from the sack at her hip alongside a well-sealed inkwell and a quill.

"You will write your confession in full, explaining why you and Laenor fought and how you killed him, without implicating him in anything unsavory, and if I like what I read, your execution will be moved up," Rhaenyra whispered, speaking just barely loudly enough for the condemned man to hear her. "Refuse or fail me, and I will let you rot here until your ruined stone festers and rots. Do you understand?"

Qarl nodded frantically, and she slid the parchments, ink, and quill through the bars of his cell with her foot before stepping back.

"Give him what light you can for his writing," Rhaenyra instructed, and Jon nodded, pushing the torch through the bars until it was above Qarl's seated form.

"I should have slit my throat when I had the chance," Qarl thought to himself, the agony in his groin beyond words.

He'd honestly hoped when consciousness left him that he was going to die there and then and was very unhappy to wake up again. He grabbed the parchment and quill with shaking hands and struggled to pull the cork from the inkwell for a moment before managing. When he did, he accidentally spilled a little ink on the bottom of the scroll and heard the princess growl.

"I should just say it was over coin," he thought to himself. *"If I wrote the truth, that would expose Laenor's secret plainly, and not only would the princess burn it, but...I can't do that to him. I pray he finds a way to forgive me someday as I rot in the hells. I had a debt, asked for his help, Laenor refused, and we fought. As he turned to leave, we struggled, and he slipped out of my grasp, hitting his head. Clean, simple, protective of him, and hopefully enough to get me released from this torment."*

His mind made up, he wrote his tale down, making clear that he regretted what had happened with all his being and wished only to die for his crime. Part of him wanted to rail against Jon, the man whose odd friendship with Laenor had spurred the trouble between them, but he couldn't do so without harming the man he'd loved, and he had already hurt him more than he could bear. He also contemplated telling them about Raylon Rivers, whose rumors had sparked his jealousy that final, fatal time, but he'd realized something as he waited in his cell the previous night, his aching jaw, courtesy of that man, keeping him awake.

"He'd wanted to provoke a conflict between us," he thought to himself. *"Him coming to me with those rumors was odd in itself, something I didn't see in my blind, jealous rage. We were openly friends, but if he didn't actually believe it, as he said, why wouldn't he have warned Laenor himself? He knew about us, or suspected, and wanted to provoke a fight between Jon and me. The man did ally himself with the Blackwoods during the tourney,*

after all, and those families are both mad when it comes to the others. Raylon Rivers is clearly a committed enemy to Jon, and I'll be damned if I help that man with my last act."

With that spiteful thought, he finished his confession and handed it over to Jon, who snatched it away and blew on the ink to dry it. He and Rhaenyra brought it to the end of the hall, where a pair of torches sticking out of the wall gave greater light, and the princess read it over before nodding and handing it back to Jon.

"Cork the inkwell and push both it and the quill out of your cell," she commanded, and he did so, whimpering in pain as he moved.

Jon picked them up and backed away, glaring down at Qarl.

"Your trial is in another hour or so," Rhaenyra said. "In light of your cooperation, your execution will take place a day earlier than I had planned."

"Aay!" Qarl shouted. "KULL EE! EEE!"

"I think that was supposed to be 'kill me, please,'" Jon murmured, and Rhaenyra nodded.

"You'll die, Qarl, but you will suffer first," the princess glared, and the two marched upstairs, ignoring the screaming, enraged man. "There, that makes things tidy at least."

"Eyewitnesses and a confession?" Jon said, glaring down at the dungeons as they reached the top of the stairs. "It doesn't get much clearer."

"I still can't believe he killed him," Rhaenyra scowled, and she heard Jon let out a shaky breath. Turning around, she saw his eyes growing damp and felt her heart lurch. "I...I'm going to spend a little time in my chambers. Return to yours until you're called on."

"Yes, Princess," Jon shuddered, blinking repeatedly as he tried to get ahold of himself.

She walked quickly to her chambers, knowing that this conversation was one that they'd need to have in private, and paused as she came across the door to Laenor's chambers. Staring at it for a moment, she sighed and continued on, letting herself into her chambers and closing the door behind her. She heard Jon's door slam a moment later and opened up the hidden passage connecting them, walking inside and finding Jon sitting on the edge of his bed, tears streaming down his face.

"I'm so sorry, my love," Rhaenyra said softly, her eyes growing wet. "I can't believe he's gone either."

"It's all my fault," Jon sobbed, and she furrowed her brow in confusion.

"What?" Rhaenyra asked.

"I remember..." Jon wept, trailing off as he felt like his throat was closing up.

Rhaenyra locked the door, pulled up her skirts, and climbed into his lap, pulling his face down between her large, milk-filled breasts.

"Shh," she soothed, scratching his scalp as he cried and feeling tears fall down her cheeks too. "Don't be silly, Jon. How could this be your fault?"

"I remember learning how he died," Jon whispered, looking up into her watery eyes. "I didn't before, but Qarl, he was said to have done it then too."

"What?" Rhaenyra asked.

"It just seemed so...irrelevant," Jon wept. "I wanted to learn about epic battles, about the Battles of Tumbleton, the Battles of Rook's Rest, and the Battle Above the God's Eye. Lae...I didn't care how your first husband died. Gods, why couldn't I just have paid more attention to Maester Luwin?!"

He sobbed as he hadn't since he learned about Robb's death, feeling like his guilt was going to eat him alive, and Rhaenyra held him, hugging his head to her breasts and scratching his scalp.

"You were just a boy," Rhaenyra whispered, kissing his crown as he clung to her with his strong arms. "Do you think I paid attention to every single lesson Grand Maester Runciter ever tried to teach me?"

"It's not the same," Jon wept.

"It is," Rhaenyra insisted, cupping his bearded cheeks and pressing her full lips against his forehead. "It is. You had no way of knowing that you would someday live through the times you learned about in your history lessons, and if you'd ever even suggested that such a thing might come to pass, they'd have thought you madder than Morion Martell."

"Aerys Targaryen in my time," Jon murmured, unable to deny that she was right.

"Your memory isn't going to be perfect, Jon, and even if it was, you still wouldn't know everything that happened during my life," Rhaenyra whispered. "The only one responsible for Laenor's death is Qarl Correy, and he will pay for his crime in full."

"I could strangle him with my bare hands," Jon growled. "Laenor was nothing but kind and patient with him, generous as he was with everyone, and loving. The worst part is that I think he did it because he thought we were fucking."

"Really?" Rhaenyra asked.

"Before Raylon Rivers broke his jaw, he said that my friendship with him was the root of their conflict," Jon sighed. "He blamed it on coin, here, but..."

"He couldn't write the real reason if that's it," Rhaenyra sighed. "I did tell him to make sure there was nothing in his confession that would reflect poorly on Laenor."

"What in the hells are we going to do?" Jon sighed. "Our old plan had its faults, and the idea of never being anything more to my own children than their guard was...painful, but it

worked. Now you're unwed, you can't have more children until that changes, and the gods know you can't wed me."

"Maybe I can," Rhaenyra murmured, and he scoffed.

"Rhaenyra, I'm a random bastard with no resources and no known lineage," Jon muttered. "I kicked Cole's arse, and that got me some recognition, but that's the sort of thing that can earn a man a white cloak, not the hand of a princess."

"I was going to surprise you with this, and gods, it feels like the conversation I had with my uncle happened moons ago now," Rhaenyra muttered.

"Prince Daemon?" Jon asked, confused.

"After I birthed the twins, I called him in to talk and made him a deal," Rhaenyra replied. "In exchange for betrothing Aegon and Aemon to Baela and Rhaena, something we were going to do anyway, he's going to claim that you're his son."

Jon blinked at her slowly, asking, "What?"

"It would make you not just a random bastard with a little Valyrian blood in his veins, but the nephew of the king" Rhaenyra replied. "Yes, that won't be quite enough to convince him to let me wed you, but between you taming Morghul, a dragon none had ever managed to tame, and your eventual work with Valyrian steel, you'll be too valuable an asset to let stay unbound to our family."

"You really think that making me Daemon's son will help your father think better of me?" Jon asked incredulously.

"Not at first, but I know my father, Jon, and I know that what happened to the child that died in that whore's womb weighs on him," Rhaenyra replied. "The secret of you being a dragonrider is out, and that will make you a threat in his eyes. Making you my uncle's son was my way of protecting you if word of this came out, since he would not seek to take another child from him, but with everything that's happened in the past couple days, it's especially vital now. Work on your smithing, master the secrets of an ancient Valyrian art form lost to time, and you will be as worthy of my hand in his eyes soon as you are in my own."

"The lords will still be furious at the elevation of a bastard to such heights," Jon pointed out.

"Bastardy isn't quite as vilified in this time as it seems to have been in yours," Rhaenyra said. "The Faith teaches us to look down on those born of lust, but the kind of suspicion that you described, as though every child born out of wedlock was a rabid dog waiting to bite, I think that was a product of those rebellions you told me about."

"I doubt Daemon Blackfyre did the rest of us any favors," Jon allowed, "but you'd still be disadvantaging yourself. Your support among the lords is tenuous as it is, and..."

"Fuck the lords," Rhaenyra hissed. "Father will grant me the grace of a mourning period, but within a year, I will once again be inundated with proposals and expected to wed again. Would you have me taken by some other lordling?"

"I'd slit the throat of any who tried," Jon growled, his purple eyes lighting with a fire she hadn't seen in them all day and she grinned.

"As I'd slit the throat of any whore you took to bed," Rhaenyra purred, kissing him hungrily. "You are mine and I am yours, now and forever. I won't find another man of sufficient breeding with both Laenor's nature and his willingness to pretend that another man's children were his. I'll not be that lucky, which means that if I want more children, which I do, I'll need to wed you. You do want me still, yes?"

"More than I could express in words," Jon rumbled, and she grinned, climbing out of his lap and stepping back.

"Are you sure?" Rhaenyra asked coyly. "My body isn't the same as it was, you know. My belly has grown, my arms and legs thickened, my ass..."

"If you ever tire of riding Syrax, my face is available as a seat," Jon grinned, and she giggled, feeling momentarily lighter.

"I can't fly on your face, love," Rhaenyra replied.

"I seem to recall you saying differently," Jon rumbled, standing up and walking towards her. He towered over her deliciously, and she winced as she felt her insides clench in anticipation. "Are you alright?"

"I'm not up to feeling arousal just yet," Rhaenyra sighed. "The mouth of my womb hasn't closed back up fully yet, though it already looks better than it did."

"You looked inside yourself during the process?" Jon asked.

"I manually opened my womb," Rhaenyra replied. "Once it was open enough, I was able to push Aegon out, and Aemon followed quickly after. I'm hoping that next time, I'll be able to get the babe to just slip out in less than half an hour. I'm not closing it back up manually because I want to be able to watch the process up close."

"This is going to be messy," Jon warned her. "Your position is already..."

"My current position is secure as long as my father lives," Rhaenyra replied. "We have years to work on strengthening it, and the good work we've already put in isn't going to be erased completely by my wedding you. We need to shore up our alliance with the Velaryons, which the betrothals will help with; I need to put more work into building alliances with other houses, and we need to undermine Alicent and the others whenever possible, but again, we have five and ten years to work on it."

"One thing that Laenor's murder has made clear to us is that my knowledge, limited as it is, will become less and less useful to us over time," Jon muttered. "I don't remember when exactly he died, but I'm fairly sure it was at least five years from now in the other

time. I think it was around when Harwin and his father died in the fire at Harrenhal because Mushroom suggested Daemon killed them all to take your hand after Laena died, and I'm fairly sure she died about ten years before the war started."

"Remind me to mount that little cretin somewhere on the throne after I take it," Rhaenyra scowled. "You do have a point, though. It was foolish of us to expect everything else to proceed as it did before while we went around changing things. Could the Greens have been involved in this?"

"I doubt it," Jon muttered. "Qarl did kill him in the other timeline, probably in a manner similar to this, where they got in a fight and things went tragically wrong. Fond as I was of Laenor, I have to admit he wasn't the strongest of men. Qarl was a festering wound in the body of our household, and one I failed to cut out in time."

"It wasn't your fault," Rhaenyra whispered, hugging him, and he wrapped his arms around her, letting her press her face into his doublet-covered chest.

"I hope I believe that someday," Jon sighed. "When Robb died, I wondered for moons if things might have gone differently had I been there. In this case, I know for certain that things would have happened differently if I'd just remembered that one lesson. I'd have warned you about Qarl not long after I got here and..."

"Do you think I didn't cry myself to sleep every night after I realized that Mother died because Father felt like he needed a son?" Rhaenyra asked, staring up at him. "That I didn't wonder if, had I just been a boy, would she have lived?"

"That's the work of the gods, Nyra," Jon muttered.

"As is this," Rhaenyra hissed. "You were flung through time and space to me, to help me, to prevent the war so our dragons could help destroy the threat that lurks north of the Wall. If the gods had made me a boy, my mother would still live, I'd probably be wed to Laena, and Alicent Hightower would never have become queen. Had they forced you to remember that lesson, you'd have dealt with Qarl long before now."

"Are we all just their playthings then?" Jon scowled.

"They play their games, and we play ours," Rhaenyra shrugged. "All we can do is match our enemies and reality itself move by move and hope to triumph in our endeavors before death takes us."

"You've grown wise, Nyra," Jon murmured, kissing the crown of her head.

"Thanks to you," Rhaenyra whispered, smiling up at him with misty eyes. "I am stronger and more capable now than I ever would have been without you entering my life. Laenor would have wanted us to do all we could to protect our family, his family, and we will, both for him and for our little ones."

"They're so beautiful," Jon whispered. "They have your eyes."

"I think Aegon has yours," Rhaenyra whispered. "They're a darker purple than mine. Aemon seems to already have a little silver hair coming in, but I checked, and they'll both be very fair-haired."

"Thank the gods," Jon sighed. "That alone will do a lot to strengthen your position compared to the other timeline. Having children that looked so much like Harwin gave the Hightowers so much to use against you."

"Would wedding Daemon's bastard cause me as much harm as that?" Rhaenyra asked coyly, and he considered it for a moment.

"No, probably not," he admitted. "The Greens might still try to claim that they're not Laenor's, and saying that I'm Daemon's son will give them an excuse to claim that they're mine."

"It won't be the same, though," Rhaenyra countered. "If they came out looking nothing like Laenor at all, that would have been obvious, but what are the chances that both children would look Valyrian if their parents were both pureblood Valyrians themselves?"

"I do want to be your husband," Jon rumbled. "To be able to hold you in my arms like this whenever I like, to not have to force myself to look away from you every time we're in the same room...I hope you were jesting earlier about thinking that your pregnancy had made you less appealing in my eyes, because if anything, it only enhanced your beauty."

"It certainly enhanced my tits," Rhaenyra grinned, sliding her hands under her bodice and pushing them up a little.

Her black gown only made the creamy expanse of her breasts stand out all the more, and Jon felt his mouth water at the sight. He hadn't had her in moons, and his cock leaked as it strained against his breeches.

"I was only joking," Rhaenyra replied. "The hunger in your eyes as you look at me has only grown, and, having used flesh magic on myself and lived to tell the tale, I can say confidently that I will use it to restore and even enhance my figure in the coming weeks."

"Enhance?" Jon asked, and she grinned.

"I rather like how much wider my hips have gotten over the past several moons and how much my breasts and my arse have swelled," Rhaenyra replied. "I think I'll keep the parts you like most as large as they've become while slimming down my waist and flattening my belly."

"Is there anything of me you'd like to change?" Jon asked. Leaning in, he whispered, "Or Enhance?"

"If I 'enhanced' you at all, you'd never fit inside me again," Rhaenyra giggled. "You're perfect in my eyes, my love. I wouldn't change a thing. If I figure out how to make you stronger or enhance your reflexes, I might do that just for your protection, but in terms of how you look, no, I wouldn't alter anything."

"I love you," Jon whispered.

"And I love you," Rhaenyra replied. "There isn't a man in the world I'd rather wed, not that that will stop half of them from bothering me."

"You sound annoyed," Jon commented, and she sighed.

"He didn't say anything, but I could tell that Harwin was even friendlier than normal lately, and I suspect that was because of my widowed status," Rhaenyra sighed, and he stiffened. "Oh, relax, darling. He's lovely, but he's not you, and any interest I had in him died the first night you took me. To be honest, I'm starting to wonder if he might make a good match for Helaena."

"Helaena?" Jon asked, surprised.

"Not now, obviously, but when she flowers, it wouldn't be the worst idea in the world," Rhaenyra replied. "I know I can trust him, and while there are a good many years between them, the gap in their ages is less than that between my good...between Corlys and Rhaenys. I know he's loyal to me, and I know he'd treat her well. I'm going to need to at least try to influence their matches down the line and see to it that as many of my siblings as possible are wed off to families loyal to me."

"That certainly wouldn't hurt," Jon admitted, "and in truth, so long as we keep Aemond from claiming Vhagar, there isn't much that Alicent and her allies could really do against us. Every lord in the realm could support them, and Vhagar and Morghul would just burn them all."

"It wouldn't come to that either," Rhaenyra nodded. "Anyway, I should..."

A knock came to the door, and she turned to look and was about to answer it when Jon silenced her with a look, reminding her that they were in his chambers.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Get out here," Daemon commanded. "We need a word, you and I."

"Oh, for the love of the gods," Rhaenyra muttered under her breath.

"Meet us in the hall," Jon said, and she nodded, slipping back through the hidden passageway.

He opened the door and saw Daemon standing there, clearly sizing him up. The prince was tall and lean, only a little shorter than Jon himself, and he looked years younger than he was. At three and thirty, he wasn't a young man anymore, but he still possessed youth, a factor of both his blood and his lifetime of training as a warrior, quite likely.

"I'm not used to calling on servants in person, but then, we're apparently more to each other, aren't we?" the prince asked.

"So I've been told, my prince," Jon replied, and he sneered.

“Daemon,” Rhaenyra hissed, having marched up to him. “What are you doing?”

“Laena is soaking in a warm bath and didn’t want company, so I decided to meet my apparent son,” Daemon replied. “Come to the courtyard. I would see for myself how you are with that blade at your hip.”

“He bested Cole when they fought,” Rhaenyra replied. “I hope for both your sakes you use training blades. We’ve lost more than enough these last few days.”

“I suppose we could,” Daemon murmured. “I so rarely get to test Dark Sister against Valyrian Steel, though. Viserys wouldn’t know which end of Blackfyre to hold, so he’s not an option, and I haven’t faced anyone else wielding such a blade in a tourney in far too long.”

“I…” Jon went to say when Ser Harwin approached them and interrupted him.

“Princess, the prisoner has been bound in the throne room and awaits your presence for the trial,” he said.

“Shit,” Rhaenyra muttered. “I lost track of time. You two can spar later. Jon, with me.”

“I’ll go get Laena as well,” Daemon sighed. “Neither of us realized just how late in the morning it was. We will spar later, though.”

“Indeed, my prince,” Jon nodded.

“That might not be the best idea while you’re visibly tired,” Rhaenyra muttered, and he chuckled.

“I’ve fought more dangerous battles with less sleep before,” Jon replied. “You have no idea how hard it can be to sleep while you’re worried and in the freezing cold. Plus, I’m fairly sure the prince doesn’t mean to kill me.”

“Certainly not,” Rhaenyra scowled.

The three of them made their way to the throne room, finding a growing audience waiting for them, and she nodded to Corlys and Rhaenys as she saw them. The latter didn’t notice, being too busy glaring down at the chained man kneeling on the ground before the empty throne, but Corlys did, and he approached her.

“Have you seen Laena or Daemon?” he asked.

“We saw my uncle upstairs and informed him of the time,” Rhaenyra replied. “He’s going to bring Laena down, and we can begin when they arrive. Excuse me.”

She approached her throne and sat down, turning to Maester Gerardys, to whom she handed Qarl’s confession.

"A simple matter at least," the older man sighed. "With his confession, we don't technically need to have the witnesses speak."

"I would hear from them anyway," Rhaenyra replied. "Let all witnesses here today be left with no doubt at all as to that cunt's guilt."

"Quite, Princess," Maester Gerardys replied. "Did Ser Harwin tell you about your father's letter as I asked him to?"

"He did," Rhaenyra nodded. "In truth, I am not disappointed that Father's not here for this, as I wanted to handle it personally, but it is unfortunate that he'll miss the funeral. I'm not leaving Laenor's body any longer, though."

"He'll understand, and Lord Corlys will understand well that ships are oft delayed," Maester Gerardys nodded. "Ah, Lady Laena and Prince Daemon."

"Then we can begin," Rhaenyra murmured, seeing them enter.

Laena glared down at Qarl, but Daemon had eyes only for Jon, and the princess dearly hoped he wasn't going to do something stupid. That, she could handle later, but for the moment, she had a different matter to attend to.

"Ser Qarl Correy, you kneel before us accused of a crime most dire, of the murder of Lord Laenor Velaryon, your own lord's son and my husband," Rhaenyra began, glaring down at the man, who stared at the floor. "Your jaw is broken, so getting you to speak in your defense would be both unduly painful for you and unduly tedious for us, so...look at me."

She growled those last three words, and the man whipped his head up so quickly that he must have moved in a way that made his shattered testicle move because he cried out in pain and curled up on his side as well as he could with his arms bound behind his back.

"Ser Harwin," Rhaenyra muttered, and the man nodded, walking over and positioning himself so he was staring up at her. "Ser Qarl, in my maester's hand is the scroll you wrote earlier this morning confessing to your crime. He's going to show it to you, and you will clearly nod or shake your head as to whether it is your true and full confession. Maester, Gerardys?"

The older man unfurled the scroll and held it before Qarl, who looked at it for just a moment before nodding. A host of murmurs went through the crowd that had assembled, not all of them having heard just who had been arrested for the crime and that he'd confessed.

"We'll read that aloud later, but first, I want to hear from the witnesses who saw you with Lord Laenor the day he was murdered, the witness who saw you running from the scene of that murder with bloodied hands, and the man who captured you as you attempted to flee from justice," Rhaenyra murmured. "Maester, call the first witness."

A host of people in the village had seen Qarl with Laenor that day, and she called on three of them to give their testimony. As Jon was the one who arrested him, she didn't want to rely on or even use his testimony on that matter. The whole point of bringing so many

people forward at all when Qarl had already confessed was to make clear to everyone present and all that they told about this later that the evidence had been so overwhelming that they could have convicted him anyway. After hearing from those who saw them together earlier that day, she called upon the young girl, Dancy, who had seen Qarl fleeing from the ship. She was a young thing, perhaps nine years old, and cowered as she stood before Rhaenyra, her father close at hand.

"You don't need to worry, girl," the princess said. "That man is well bound and can't hurt you. Is he the man you saw running along the docks that day? The one you told my guards about?"

"His jaw weren't swollen then, Princess, but I think so," Dancy replied.

"Look more closely and let me know if he is who you saw," Rhaenyra commanded softly, and the girl's father muttered something to her, pointing at him.

The girl looked more closely, trembling with fear at the sight of the wounded man, and said, "That's him."

"And when you saw him running that day, why did you take note of it?" Rhaenyra asked.

"Sorry?" Dancy asked, confused.

"What was odd about him?" Rhaenyra clarified.

"His hands were all red," Dancy replied. "Like Mummy's are sometimes when she cleans her smallclothes."

That provoked a chorus of snickers through the room that Rhaenys silenced by clearing her throat and glaring at them.

"That will be all," Rhaenyra nodded. "Jon Snow."

"Princess," Jon nodded.

"You were the one who tracked Ser Qarl down when he attempted to flee, yes?" Rhaenyra asked.

"I was," Jon nodded.

"How did you do so?" Rhaenyra asked.

"I fly on the back of Morghul, the dragon known around here as the Cannibal," Jon replied, and most of those gathered looked on in confusion.

"It's true!" one of them shouted out. "I saw him land, I did. Big fucking dragon, that one."

"Quiet," Rhaenyra called out. "Where was he when you found him?"

"Aboard a ship called the Blue Maid, somewhere near Claw Isle," Jon replied.

"Fleeing north, presumably towards Braavos," Rhaenyra nodded. "When you dropped him back here, what did he have to say for himself?"

"He said that he and Lord Laenor had gotten in a fight," Jon replied.

"I see," Rhaenyra replied. "That will be all."

She called on a couple of the guards who had been there the previous night when Qarl was brought back, getting them to confirm Jon's account, and then finally bade Maester Gerardys read the confession.

"I, Qarl Correy, did kill Laenor Velaryon," the maester called out, holding the scroll before him. "I had need of coin and went to him, as I often had before, but he was in a black mood and didn't want to hear it. I should have left it there and asked another time, but I didn't, and we argued. The subject of coin turned to other matters we'd argued about before, and soon it grew worse. By the time he turned to leave, I was furious and grabbed his arm, wanting to continue the conversation. We struggled, and he slipped out of my grasp, falling towards a nearby table. He hit his head on a sharp corner, and I tried to help him, but..."

"You left him there to rot!" Rhaenys screamed, glaring murderously down at Qarl, who cowered before her. Corlys took her in his arms and signaled for Gerardys to continue, looking just as eager to kill Qarl as he glared down at the man.

"...but it was too late, and, wanting to escape the fate that I knew awaited me, I fled," Maester Gerardys continued. "I didn't want to kill him, I didn't even want to hurt him, and all I want now is to die for my crime."

"In your own words, you did cause the death of my husband," Rhaenyra glared. "Had you not laid your hands on him, which you had no right to do, he would be standing by me now. To kill anyone is a grave crime in these lands, but to kill the son of your lord, the one you, as a knight, vowed to serve honorably, is one graver still. I have no choice but condemn you to the death you seek, and in three days' time, Meleys' flames will send you to the seven hells. Guards, drag him to the cells."

"Tie him to a pyre and light him slow!" one of the smallfolk called out.

"Let us stone him, Princess; we'll do him right!" another one did.

"Lord Laenor was such a kind man," a woman lamented. "A dragon's too good for you!"

The chorus of condemnations continued as Qarl was dragged off and Rhaenyra sighed, happy to know that word of that would spread throughout the island. Having Jon openly admit to flying a dragon was something she'd figured ahead of time would be a good idea, as it was already not a secret and that would ensure that the entire island would know within a couple hours. She'd made it clear that she wouldn't be hearing petitioners again today and that Maester Gerardys would hear them in her stead starting tomorrow, so the people quickly filed out, leaving her relatively alone.

"He seeks death as an escape from his torment, not to make amends," Rhaenys hissed.

"He will die soon and spend every moment until then in agony," Corlys said.

"As he deserves," Laena glowered.

"Yes," Rhaenyra sighed, wincing as she shifted in her throne.

"Are you alright?" Rhaenys asked. "I'm honestly amazed that you've recovered as well as you have thus far, but you shouldn't push yourself too much."

"I have no choice," Rhaenyra muttered. "Father comes on the morrow, and he's bringing his household, so I won't get much rest there, and I refused to leave that trial a moment longer than we needed to. There is one other thing that I thought you might want to handle before Alicent gets here."

"I'm not ready," Rhaenys whispered, her purple eyes growing misty. "No parent is ever ready for this."

"No, they're not," Corlys said, swallowing thickly, "but the gods can be cruel."

"The gods didn't do this," Laena scowled. "One man did. He's why we need to burn him now."

"Best do it before things go on too long," Daemon murmured. "Trust me there."

"How did Grandmother endure this so many times?" Rhaenys asked.

"She wasn't a tall woman, but the good queen was as strong as any I've met," Corlys replied, "and you do have her strength, Rhaenys."

"We're the blood of the dragon," Rhaenyra whispered, taking the older woman's hand as she paraphrased her words from the other day back at her, "the blood of the Conqueror. We endure, together."

"Have the servants...gods, I don't think I can get the words out," Rhaenys muttered.

"He loved the gardens here," Rhaenyra said. "We ordered the servants to set up his pyre in front of them, close enough not to be dangerous. I haven't gotten word of it being finished yet, but I'm sure they're quite close."

"I'd like to sit with the boys for a while then," Rhaenys said, and Rhaenyra nodded, watching her leave for the nursery.

"I'm worried about her," Laena fretted, watching her mother go.

"Worry about the little ones in your womb, child," Corlys sighed. "Let me worry about your mother."

"My cousin is strong, and as she said, our grandmother endured this pain more than anyone ought to and survived," Daemon said softly. "Shall I have the servants run you another bath?"

"No," Laena replied. "I think I'll join Mother in the nursery. The sight of smiling babes sounds heavenly just now."

"I'll check on the men building the pyre," Corlys said. "You can rest, Rhaenyra."

"Thank you," Rhaenyra nodded, watching him leave. Turning to Daemon, she said, "As a favor to me, hold off on sparring with anyone until tomorrow. I really don't need to think about that or anything else today of all days."

"As you say," Daemon murmured. Turning to Jon, he asked, "You actually did beat Cole?"

"Toughest cunt I ever fought," Jon replied. *"Of the human variety, anyway."*

"You should have seen it, my prince," Ser Harwin grinned. "The pair of them were evenly matched the whole way; Cole was clearly trying to kill him through it all, and in the end, as he wrapped that irritating weapon of his around Jon's blade, he grappled him to the ground, and the cunt fell on something that knocked his shoulder clean out of the socket."

"Truly?" Daemon asked, far more amused at hearing that. "I wonder if he can still wield his morningstar."

"I put his shoulder back in, and it is usable again, but it will be a lasting weakness for him, and wielding heavier, less balanced weapons like that might be harder than it once was."

"Why the fuck did *you* help him?" Daemon asked.

"His Grace sent for me, my prince," Maester Gerardys replied. "The Grand Maester is a most learned man, but he lacks my specialization in medicine. Excuse me."

"I must say, it was fun to watch," Ser Harwin grinned.

"More fun to do," Jon chuckled.

"I can imagine," Daemon scowled.

"Ah, look at them, bonding over something they most undoubtedly have in common: hatred of Criston Cole," Rhaenyra thought to herself, looking around at the man who she'd wanted to take her maidenhead as a girl, the man she had children with, and the man she would have had children with if he hadn't come into her life. *"Fucking hells, I don't have a type at all, do I?"*

She shook her head at that and sat back in her throne, something that she knew she shouldn't make a habit of, given the throne she'd someday sit on. Closing her eyes, she rested, knowing that the hardest part of her day was soon coming.

They gathered around the pyre nearly an hour later, watching as a pair of servants carried Laenor's body up to it. The structure of wood atop a platform of stones would serve as his final bed. What it lacked in linen, he made up for by being wrapped tightly in cloth. This was partially to help him burn better, but also to spare them having to see how he'd begun to decay. Rhaenyra stood, swallowing thickly and remembering the last funeral of this type she'd attended.

She'd been so young, so lost, standing next to her equally lost father as they watched her mother's body burn. Her father had had her order Syrax to light it, having no dragon of his own and already being furious with her uncle for reasons she'd learn much later. Tears streamed down her face both at the memory and at the loss, and yet she kept her composure. Turning to Rhaenys, she saw the older woman look almost stone-faced, her eyes hollow. She'd expected her to be weeping as openly as she had been on and off for the past day, but it seemed that her tears had run dry. Syrax landed atop the walls nearby, sensing her need, and she nodded up at her little lady.

"We come in water and go in fire," Daemon murmured behind her, Laena's hand in his. "This has long been our way."

"He was a dragon true," Rhaenys croaked, her voice raw. "Of the sea but also the sky, and his ashes we'll keep in our mausoleum at High Tide."

"I can see why he liked this part of the keep so much," Laena said. "It's beautiful. From the time he was a boy, he loved beauty."

"He did," Corlys sighed, his purple eyes misty.

"He wed the most beautiful woman in the realm," Laena smiled sadly, looking at Rhaenyra.

"And gave me two beautiful sons," the princess added, keeping eyes focused on the fire.

"He was your husband," Rhaenys whispered, not trusting her voice. "It falls to you to give the command."

Syrax stirred as Rhaenyra looked at her and craned her neck downward towards the pyre.

"Dracarys," the princess said, and plumes of yellow flame spilled forth from her little lady's maw, lighting the pyre aflame.

Rhaenys' breath hitched, and she closed her eyes, clenching her fist until her nails dug into her skin.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," she wept. "I'm sorry I didn't hold you in your last moment...as I did in your first...and tell you, as I did then, that everything would be alright."

"I don't think I ever really understood you," Corlys thought to himself, unable to speak the words aloud, "and I don't think you ever truly understood me. In both cases, those were failings on my part, and I'm so, so sorry for them. Despite that though, I loved you, son, and I'll pray until my dying day that you knew that."

"Vhagar can't frighten you anymore, Valonqar," Laena whispered, watching the flames take him. "Nothing can. I hope you find peace, and I hope that you don't need to hide yourself as you did in life. Give Joffrey my best."

"I hated the idea of wedding you," Rhaenyra thought to herself. "You had seemed so utterly disinterested in me, and I was, admittedly, a spoiled, vain little thing then. You'd probably laugh and ask, 'then?' and I'd tell you to be silent if you were still here. You weren't my husband in truth, not as it mattered, but you did become my friend, and I will dearly miss you. Farewell, Laenor, and thank you for letting me have Jon without a complaint. Aegon and Aemon will learn about you, I swear. They'll learn what a good and kind man their 'father' was."

The flames burned on as they all stood in silence. The immediate family stood closer, but a number of guards and servants stood a short distance behind them. Laenor had been well-liked by them and by the smallfolk as well. He was courteous, generous with his coin, and generally personable, and she knew plenty of them would miss him too. Looking behind her, she spotted Jon with Ser Harwin, his face stony but his eyes radiating pain, and she wished she could comfort him. Alas, if such a thing would ever be possible, it wouldn't be for some time.

"Father comes on the morrow, and he'll bring a host of troubles with him," she thought to herself. "He won't move against Jon while he's here; that I can be certain of, as he seldom does anything with such haste, but I will need to make sure that by the time he leaves, he's convinced that he's no threat. I thought I'd have years to plan for the revelation that Jon rode Morghul, perhaps even manage to keep it secret for the rest of Father's life."

That wasn't a luxury she was going to have, though, and she was going to need to lean on Daemon heavily in this. Luckily, while she did worry at times about him letting his passions and general Daemonness get him carried away, she knew that in this case, she truly could trust him to work with her. He wanted his blood on the throne, but more than that, he wanted to be able to say that his blood would end up on the throne someday, and he knew what he needed to do to accomplish that. She just had to hope that it would be enough.