Maegor Targaryen

The knock came just after midnight.

Maegor looked up from the map of the Stepstones he'd been studying, spreading his fingers across the parchment to keep it from rolling closed. Saera sat across from him in one of the high-backed chairs, a cup of Volantene wine in her hand, still dressed despite the late hour.

"Expecting someone?" she asked, sounding amused.

"No." He moved toward the door, one hand instinctively checking that his dagger was at his belt.

The knock came again, more urgent this time.

Maegor pulled the door open to find a guard standing at attention, and behind him, Jacaerys. The boy looked like he'd dressed in haste. His doublet was askew, his dark hair uncombed.

"Prince Maegor," the guard said formally. "Prince Jacaerys requests an audience."

"At midnight?" Maegor raised an eyebrow. "Have you developed a sudden interest in military history, cousin? I'm afraid my collection of treatises on the Stepstones isn't that fascinating."

Jacaerys's jaw tightened, but he kept his voice level. "It's urgent. Please."

The please carried weight. Maegor studied the younger man for a moment, then stepped aside. "Come in."

Jacaerys entered, his eyes immediately finding Saera.

"Prince Jacaerys," she greeted him, rising from her chair. "What an unexpected pleasure. Though I suppose midnight visits do run in your family." Her smile was poisonous honey. "Your mother was quite fond of them once, or so I hear."

Jacaerys's face flushed, but he said nothing.

"Saera," Maegor said quietly, a warning in his tone.

She turned her smile on him, completely unrepentant. "Of course. I should leave you to your discussion with the bastard prince." She moved toward the door, pausing beside Jacaerys just long enough to let her words land like knives. "Do try not to trip over your pride on the way out, boy. It's so very large for someone with such uncertain heritage."

Then she was gone.

Jacaerys stood very still, his hands clenched at his sides. Maegor could see him forcing himself to breathe, to let the insult wash over him rather than respond. It was impressive restraint for a boy of sixteen.

"Wine?" Maegor offered, moving to the table where a pitcher sat beside the maps.

"No. Thank you." Jacaerys's voice was tight. "This isn't a social call."

"Clearly." Maegor poured himself a cup anyway, taking his time. Let the boy sweat a little. Whatever brought him here at midnight, desperate enough to endure Saera's venom, was important enough to wait another minute. "So what crisis brings you to my door in the middle of the night? Has Rhaenyra finally decided to have me arrested? Should I be preparing for a trial?"

"My brother has been captured."

Maegor paused with the cup halfway to his lips, then slowly lowered it.

"Which brother?" he asked, though he already had an idea. Only two of Rhaenyra's sons were away from Dragonstone.

"Viserys." Jacaerys moved closer to the table. "The ship carrying him and Aegon to Pentos was attacked by the Triarchy. Aegon escaped on Stormcloud. Viserys didn't."

Maegor set the cup down. The Triarchy had no love for the Targaryens after the wars in the Stepstones. And they were perfectly positioned to intercept ships heading east through the Gullet.

"How long ago?"

"Aegon flew all night to reach us. He's not certain exactly when the attack happened, but it couldn't have been more than a day, maybe two." Jacaerys's knuckles were white against the dark wood. "They're sailing for King's Landing. To deliver Viserys to the Greens."

"Of course they are." Maegor looked at the map, tracing a finger along the waters of the Gullet. "The Triarchy doesn't take hostages for ransom. They take them for leverage, for politics. A prince of the blood is worth more to them in Alicent Hightower's hands than in their own." He looked up at Jacaerys. "Your mother must be beside herself."

"She's..." Jacaerys stopped, clearly struggling to find words. "She's planning to launch an immediate assault. Take every dragon we have and burn the Triarchy fleet before they reach King's Landing."

"That's risky," Maegor said bluntly. "The Triarchy has been fighting dragons for years. They know how to build ships that can withstand dragonfire, how to position scorpions for maximum effect. Sailing into their fleet without proper intelligence or strategy is how you lose dragons and riders both."

"I know that." Jacaerys's voice rose slightly, then he forced it back down. "That's why I'm here. We need Vermithor. We need you."

Maegor leaned back against the table, crossing his arms. This was it, then. The moment Rhaenyra's pride broke against necessity. She needed him, and they both knew it.

"Why should I risk Vermithor for Rhaenyra's son?" he asked quietly.

Jacaerys stared at him. "Because he's a child. Because he's your brother. Because he's innocent in all of this."

"Half-brother," Maegor corrected. "And a trueborn one at that, unlike some." He watched Jacaerys absorb the blow, saw the muscles in the boy's jaw work. "That matters, doesn't it? The truth of what someone is versus what they're called?"

"You son of a—" Jacaerys cut himself off, breathing hard through his nose. When he spoke again, his voice was calm. "You can insult me all you like. Call me bastard, question my birth, my legitimacy. I don't care. But Viserys is six years old. He's done nothing to you. He doesn't deserve to die because you hate his mother."

"I don't hate his mother," Maegor said. What he felt for Rhaenyra was colder than that. "I simply see her clearly. And seeing her clearly means understanding that she sent me to Volantis hoping I wouldn't return. That she views me as a threat to be managed rather than an ally to be trusted."

"She views everyone as a threat," Jacaerys shot back. "Can you blame her? She's surrounded by enemies. The Greens want her dead, half the realm has turned against her, and she's already lost one son." His voice cracked slightly on the last words. "Luke was my brother. We grew up together, trained together. I taught him to sail. And now he's dead because Aemond One-Eye decided family means nothing."

The pain in Jacaerys's voice was genuine. Maegor could hear it, could recognize it because he'd felt something similar when he heard his father fuck Rhaenyra. Family was complicated, messy, often painful. But it mattered. Even when you wished it didn't.

"What does Rhaenyra offer in exchange for my help?" he asked, shifting to practical matters.

"Your help?" Jacaerys looked at him incredulously. "This isn't a negotiation. This is family. Viserys is—"

"A valuable hostage who happens to share some of my blood," Maegor interrupted. "Don't pretend this is about pure altruism, Jacaerys. You came here because you need something from me. I'm asking what you're prepared to give in return."

Jacaerys's hands clenched into fists again. For a moment, Maegor thought the boy might actually swing at him. Instead, he took a breath and forced his hands to relax.

"What do you want?"

"Command." The word came out simple, direct. "I lead the aerial assault. I make the tactical decisions. Vermithor is the largest, most experienced dragon you have access to right now. I've fought in the Stepstones, I know the Triarchy's methods. If I'm risking my life and my dragon, I do it under my own command, not following orders from your mother or anyone else."

"Prince Daemon will be here," Jacaerys protested. "He should command. He has more experience—"

"Prince Daemon is at Harrenhal," Maegor cut him off. "Even if you send a raven tonight, he won't arrive for days. By then, Viserys will be in King's Landing, locked in the Red Keep, and your leverage is gone." He pushed off from the table, moving closer to Jacaerys. "You don't have time to wait for my father. You barely have time to intercept that fleet as it is. So you can either accept my conditions, or you can watch your mother throw away dragons and lives in a poorly planned assault that accomplishes nothing except adding more names to the list of the dead."

Jacaerys stared at him, and Maegor could see the boy's mind working through the options, the politics, the practicalities. He was smarter than Maegor had given him credit for. Not just book-smart, but sharp enough to recognize when he had no good choices left.

"What else?" Jacaerys asked finally.

"What makes you think there's anything else?"

"Because you're Maegor Targaryen." There was something almost like respect in Jacaerys's voice. "You don't do anything without calculating three moves ahead. So what else do you want?"

Maegor found himself smiling. "Public acknowledgment. When we return, when Viserys is safe, your mother acknowledges my contribution before the court. Not some private thanks, not a quiet word in a corridor. She stands in front of the lords and admits that without my help, her son would be dead or worse."

"That's..." Jacaerys stopped, clearly struggling with the politics of it. "She'll hate it."

"I know." Maegor's smile turned sharper. "But she'll do it, because the alternative is explaining to those same lords why she let pride cost her another son."

Jacaerys was quiet for a long moment, his brown eyes searching Maegor's face. "You really hate her that much? That you'd use her son's life as leverage for political gain?"

"I'm not using anything," Maegor corrected. "You came to me, remember? You asked for my help. I'm simply ensuring that help is properly valued." He moved back to the wine, taking a slow drink. "Besides, I'm not the one who sent her six-year-old son on a ship through contested waters during a civil war. If we're assigning blame for poor decisions, your mother has more than earned her share."

"She was trying to keep them safe," Jacaerys said. "Pentos is neutral, they would have been protected there."

"Neutral until someone offers them a better deal," Maegor countered. "The Triarchy proved that nicely. How much do you think they're being paid for delivering Viserys to the Greens? Enough to make them risk dragonfire, clearly."

Jacaerys turned away. "I'll bring your terms to her. I can't promise she'll agree."

"She'll agree." Maegor's voice carried certainty. "Because she's a mother before she's a queen, and a mother will swallow any amount of pride to save her child."

"Is that what Saera told you?" Jacaerys asked without turning around. "When she was filling your head with schemes and manipulation?"

"Saera tells me many things," Maegor replied. "Some of them are even true. But I don't need her wisdom to understand maternal instinct. My own mother die bringing me into this world. I know what mothers sacrifice for their children."

Jacaerys turned back to face him, and his expression had shifted to something more complex. "Why do you care so much about him? About Viserys, I mean. If you hate Rhaenyra, if you despise everything she represents, why not just let the Greens have him? One less heir to worry about, one less threat to whatever plans you and your ancient lover are plotting."

The question caught Maegor off guard, and for a moment, he considered lying. It would be easy to claim pure strategy, political calculation. But Jace's voice made him hesitate.

"Because he's six years old," Maegor said finally. "Because children don't choose their parents, their births, their sides in wars they don't understand. Because..." He stopped, searching for the right words. "Because I remember what it was like to be a child and have the world decide what I was before I had any chance to decide for myself."

Jacaerys studied him with those brown eyes that looked so much like Harwin Strong's. "You're not Maegor the Cruel."

"Aren't I?" Maegor gestured to himself. "I wear his name. I've murdered children to prevent future threats. I've burned and killed and made choices that would have disgusted the boy my mother hoped I'd become." He met Jacaerys's gaze. "The only difference between me and the first Maegor is that I'm still alive to regret it."

"But you do regret it," Jacaerys said quietly. "That's the difference."

"Is it?" Maegor turned away, moving back to his maps. The conversation was getting too personal. "Go back to your mother, Jacaerys. Tell her my terms. We leave at first light, which gives you about six hours to prepare. I want Vermithor fed and rested, and I want intelligence on the Triarchy's last known position. Talk to Lord Corlys. He knows the Gullet better than anyone."

"You'll help then?" There was relief in Jacaerys's voice. "Even knowing she'll hate every moment of owing you?"

"I'll help." Maegor looked up from the maps. "But not for her. And not for you, despite your pretty speech about family. I'm doing this because Baela would never forgive me if I let a child die when I could have prevented it. And because..." He trailed off, saying nothing.

Jacaerys moved toward the door, then paused with his hand on the handle. "Can I ask you something?"

"You've asked me several things already."

"Why do you hate us so much?" Jacaerys turned back. "Me and my brothers. We've never done anything to you. We weren't even alive when whatever happened between you and Mother took place. So why punish us for her sins?"

Maegor was quiet for a long moment. The fire crackled in the hearth, and outside, the distant sound of waves against stone provided a rhythm to the silence.

"I don't hate you," he said finally. "I hate what you represent. I hate that the realm is being asked to pretend obvious lies are truth. I hate that good men are dying for a succession built on deception." He met Jacaerys's eyes. "But you? Personally? You're a boy trying to protect his brothers, trying to do right by a mother who doesn't always make it easy. I can't hate that, even if I wanted to."

Jacaerys absorbed this, his expression unreadable. "Thank you for helping us. Whatever your reasons."

"Don't thank me yet," Maegor warned. "The Triarchy doesn't go down easily. There's a good chance some of us don't come back from this."

"I know." Jacaerys opened the door. "But at least we'll have tried. That has to count for something."

Then he was gone, leaving Maegor alone with his maps and his thoughts.

He stared down at the parchment, at the narrow waterway called the Gullet where the Blackwater met the Narrow Sea. Treacherous waters even in peacetime. During war, with Triarchy warships hunting for targets? It would be a slaughter.

Unless they were very, very good.

The door opened again without a knock, and Saera glided back in like she'd never left. She probably hadn't gone far, just far enough to let the boy think he had privacy.

"Well?" she asked, moving to pour herself more wine. "Did the bastard prince beg prettily?"

"Pretty enough." Maegor rolled up the map. "We're flying at first light. Vermithor, Vermax, Moondancer. Possibly Miseryx if you're coming."

Saera's eyebrows rose. "Am I invited?"

"You're not invited. But you'll come anyway because you never miss an opportunity to insert yourself into events." He looked at her directly. "The question is what you hope to gain from it."

"The same thing I always hope to gain," she replied, swirling her wine. "More dragons under our influence. More debt owed to you. More proof that Rhaenyra needs you more than she wants to admit." She smiled. "Every time you save her incompetent arse, it makes her position weaker and yours stronger. Eventually, the lords will start wondering why they're following her instead of you."

"I'm not trying to take her throne."

"Not yet," Saera agreed. "But you will. Because that's what Targaryens do. We take what's ours." She moved closer, running a finger along his jaw. "And make no mistake, my dear nephew, that throne is yours by right. Your mother was a Stark princess, your father is Daemon Targaryen. Your blood is as pure as Rhaenyra's, purer than those brown-haired bastards she calls sons."

Maegor caught her wrist, pulling her hand away. "This isn't about the throne. This is about a child who doesn't deserve to be a hostage."

"Of course it is," Saera said, but her tone suggested she believed otherwise. "You keep telling yourself that. Keep pretending you're doing this for noble reasons, for family, for the poor captured prince." She leaned in closer. "But we both know the truth. You're doing this because it's the smart move. Because every time you prove indispensable, you become harder to get rid of. Because Rhaenyra is digging her own grave, and you're simply standing by with a shovel, waiting for the right moment to help her fall in."

"Get out," Maegor said quietly.

Saera laughed. "I'll see you at dawn, my love. Try to get some sleep. You'll need your strength for tomorrow." She paused at the door. "And do try to bring the prince back alive. Dead heroes are inspiring, but living ones are far more useful for our purposes."

Then she was gone, and Maegor was alone again.

He moved to the window, staring out at the dark ocean. Somewhere out there, Triarchy ships were sailing toward King's Landing with a six-year-old prince in chains. In a few hours, he'd be flying to intercept them, risking his life and Vermithor's for a family that had never shown him anything but suspicion and fear.

Was Saera right? Was he doing this for strategic gain, for political advantage?

Or was Jacaerys right? Was there still something in him that cared about family, about protecting the innocent, about being more than the monster everyone expected?

Maegor didn't know the answer. And he had six hours until dawn to stop caring about the question.

He turned from the window and began preparing for war.

Baela Velayron Targaryen

The pounding on her door pulled Baela from dreams of flying, of Moondancer's wings catching updrafts over the Narrow Sea. For a disoriented moment, she thought she was still airborne, still free. Then the knocking came again, and she jolted fully awake.

"What?" she called out, her voice rough with sleep.

"My lady," came a servant's voice, muffled through the heavy wood. "Prince Jacaerys requests your immediate presence. He says it's urgent."

Baela threw off her blankets, her feet hitting the cold stone floor. Immediate. Urgent. Nothing good ever came from those words together in the middle of the night.

She pulled on a tunic and breeches, not bothering with anything more formal. If Jace was summoning her before dawn, propriety could go hang itself. She yanked open the door to find a young servant girl, barely fourteen, looking nervous and exhausted.

"Where is he?"

"The war room, my lady. He asked me to bring you immediately."

Baela was already moving past her, taking the corridor at a pace just short of running. The war room meant something military, something serious. An attack on Dragonstone? News from the Riverlands? Had something happened to Father?

She found Jacaerys standing over the Painted Table, his hands braced against Dragonstone's position. He looked like he hadn't slept, his face drawn and pale in the candlelight.

"Jace?" Baela moved closer. "What's happened?"

He looked up, and she saw the fear in his eyes. "Viserys has been captured. The Triarchy attacked his ship. Aegon escaped, but Viserys..." He swallowed hard. "They're taking him to King's Landing."

Little Viserys, six years old, with his gap-toothed smile and his obsession with learning High Valyrian. Captured. Being delivered to the Greens like a package.

"Fuck," Baela breathed. Then, louder, "Fuck! When?"

"Yesterday, maybe the day before. Aegon flew all night to reach us." Jacaerys's hands were shaking slightly against the table. "We're mounting a rescue. Every dragon we can muster. We need to intercept them before they reach King's Landing."

"Obviously." Baela's mind went to her own dragon. "Moondancer and I are ready. When do we leave?"

"First light. That gives us maybe four hours." Jacaerys hesitated. "Baela, there's something else. Your brother has agreed to help."

Relief flooded through her so suddenly it almost made her dizzy. "Aegor's coming? Thank the gods. With Vermithor, we actually have a chance." Then she caught Jacaerys's expression. "What? What's wrong?"

"He had conditions."

"Of course he did." Baela felt her jaw tighten. "What does he want? Gold? Lands? A formal apology from Rhaenyra for being a paranoid bitch?"

"Command," Jacaerys said simply. "He wants tactical command of the assault. And public acknowledgment of his contribution when we return."

Baela stared at him, then laughed. It came out harsher than she intended. "Good for him."

"Good for him?" Jacaerys looked at her incredulously. "Baela, he's using Viserys's life as leverage to humiliate your stepmother."

"He's using his skills as leverage to ensure we don't all die stupidly," Baela corrected. "There's a difference." She moved around the table, tracing the waters of the Gullet with one finger. "Jace, who else do we have who's actually fought the Triarchy? Who knows their tactics, their ship configurations, how they position scorpions?"

"Your father—"

"Is at Harrenhal and won't get here in time," Baela interrupted. "We both know it. By the time Father flies south, Viserys will be locked in the Red Keep." She looked up at Jacaerys. "Aegor fought in the Stepstones for three years. He knows the Triarchy better than anyone except maybe Lord Corlys, and Grandfather is too grief-stricken to sail into battle right now."

Jacaerys was quiet for a moment. "You think he can do this? Lead us?"

"I think he's the best chance we have," Baela said honestly. "And I think he wouldn't have agreed to help if he thought we'd fail. Whatever else Aegor is, he's not suicidal." She paused. "What did he say exactly? About why he's doing this?"

"He said..." Jacaerys seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "He said he's doing it because you'd never forgive him if he let a child die when he could prevent it."

Something warm unfurled in Baela's chest, easing some of the cold fear. That was Aegor. Not Maegor, not the bitter prince who'd returned from Volantis with ancient whores and fire magic. Aegor, her brother, who still cared what she thought of him.

"He's right," she said quietly. "I wouldn't." She straightened. "Where is he now?"

"His chambers, I assume. I left him about an hour ago." Jacaerys moved toward the door. "I need to brief the others, make sure Vermax is ready. Can you—"

"I'll find him," Baela promised. "And Jace? Thank you. For going to him. I know that couldn't have been easy."

Jacaerys's smile was tired. "He called me a bastard. Several times, actually. In various creative ways."

"Did you hit him?"

"No. Though I thought about it." He paused in the doorway. "Baela, he's different. Not just the magic or the scars. Something's changed in him. Be careful."

"He's my brother," Baela replied. "I'm always careful with him."

But as Jacaerys left and she made her way toward the dragon roosts, she wondered if that was true. Could you be careful with someone you loved? Or did love itself make you reckless, make you believe you could fix what was broken when maybe all you could do was stand beside them while they bled?

The sky was beginning to lighten as she reached the roosts, that peculiar gray hour between true night and dawn. The air smelled of salt and smoke and dragon, a combination that had meant home for as long as Baela could remember.

She found Aegor exactly where she expected: standing before Vermithor's massive form, one hand resting against the bronze dragon's scaled neck. The dragon's eyes gleamed in the dim light. Vermithor had been old when King Jaehaerys rode him, had seen more battles and burned more enemies than most dragons currently alive. Next to him, Moondancer's roost seemed almost comically small.

"You're up early," Baela called out, making her approach obvious. Startling someone standing next to a dragon was a good way to get burned.

Aegor turned.

"Couldn't sleep," he replied. "Too much to think about."

Baela moved to stand beside him, tilting her head back to look up at Vermithor's massive head. The dragon watched her with those intelligent eyes, and she felt the familiar thrill of being in the presence of such ancient power.

"Jace told me about Viserys," she said. "And about your conditions."

"Are you here to argue with me about them?"

"No." She kept her eyes on Vermithor. "I'm here to tell you I'm glad you're doing this. And that I think you're right to demand command."

That got his attention. She felt him turn to look at her. "You do?"

"You fought the Triarchy for three years, Aegor. You know how they think, how they fight. Jace is smart and brave, but he's never faced them in real combat. I've fought Greens, not pirates." She finally looked at him. "If anyone should be leading this assault, it's you. Rhaenyra's just too proud to admit it."

Aegor studied her face like he was searching for a trap. "You're not worried I'll use this to betray her? Lead you all into an ambush, let the Greens have Viserys?"

"Are you planning to do that?"

"No."

"Then I'm not worried." She reached out and punched his shoulder, not gently. "Stop expecting me to think the worst of you. It's getting boring."

A smile flickered across his face. "You might be the only person in Westeros who doesn't."

"Good. That means I'm special." She turned her attention to Moondancer, who had noticed her presence and was making her way over with the awkward grace of young dragons. "So what's the plan? I assume you have one, since you demanded command."

"Hit them at dawn," Aegor said, shifting into tactical mode. His voice changed, became more focused. "The Triarchy will be watching for pursuit, but they'll expect us to come from behind, from Dragonstone's direction. Instead, we come at them from the east, out of the rising sun. Blind them, make it harder for the scorpion crews to track us."

Baela nodded, following his logic. "Vermithor draws their fire?"

"Vermithor can take it. His scales are thick enough to deflect most bolts unless they hit perfectly." He glanced at her. "Moondancer stays high and fast. You're our mobility, our ability to strike from unexpected angles. Vermax supports, follows my lead."

"And Saera?" Baela couldn't quite keep the distaste from her voice.

"If she comes, Miseryx handles any ships that try to run. We need to contain them, prevent them from scattering." Aegor's jaw tightened. "The moment they realize they're losing, they'll try to kill Viserys. Hostages are only valuable if you can threaten them. Once that leverage is gone..."

Moondancer reached them, lowering her green head to nuzzle against Baela's chest. The dragon was barely larger than a horse, young and eager and so much smaller than Vermithor that the size difference seemed almost absurd. Baela ran her hands over Moondancer's warm scales, feeling the rapid beat of the dragon's heart beneath.

"She's fast," Aegor said, watching them. "Faster than anything the Triarchy has. Use that. Don't try to match their firepower. Hit and run, strike and vanish."

"I know how to fight," Baela said.

"I know you do." Aegor moved closer, and Vermithor shifted with him, the massive dragon lowering his head closer to Moondancer. The young dragon went very still, instinctively recognizing the presence of an elder. "But the Triarchy is different from the Greens. They don't care about honor or single combat. They'll target the smallest, weakest dragon first because it's the smartest tactical choice."

"Moondancer isn't weak," Baela protested.

"No. But she's young. Inexperienced." His voice softened slightly. "And if something happened to her, if something happened to you..." He stopped, looking away.

Baela felt her throat tighten. This was the Aegor she remembered, the brother who used to check on her after nightmares, who'd taught her to shoot a crossbow, who'd been the only one to take her seriously when everyone else dismissed her as just a girl playing at being a warrior.

"I'll be careful," she promised.

"You're never careful," he countered. "You're brave and reckless and you throw yourself at danger like it's a game."

"Sounds like someone else I know." She reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing hard. "Aegor, look at me."

He did, reluctantly.

"We're going to do this together," she said firmly. "You, me, Jace. We're going to get Viserys back, and we're all going to come home alive. Do you understand?"

"You can't promise that."

"Watch me." She squeezed his hand harder. "I need you to promise me something. When we're out there, when the fighting starts, I need you to promise you'll come back. Not for Rhaenyra, not for the war, not for whatever grand plans that ancient bitch has filled your head with. For me. Promise me you'll come back to me."

"Vermithor is unkillable," he said finally. "You know that, right? The Bronze Fury has survived everything from the Cruel to—"

"Aegor." She didn't let go of his hand. "Promise me."

He sighed, a sound that seemed to come from somewhere deep and tired. "I promise. I'll come back." Then, quieter, "For you."

Baela pulled him into a hug before he could protest, wrapping her arms around him and holding tight. He stiffened for a moment, then slowly, awkwardly, returned the embrace. They stood like that for a long moment, two dragonriders about to fly into battle, two siblings who'd lost too much already.

When she pulled back, she kept her hands on his shoulders. "Are you doing this for the right reasons?"

"Does it matter?" he asked. "Viserys gets saved either way."

"It matters to me." She searched his face. "Jace said you told him you're doing this because I wouldn't forgive you otherwise. Is that true?"

Aegor looked away, toward where the sun was beginning to paint the eastern sky in shades of pink and gold. "I'm doing it because it's what's expected of House Targaryen," he said finally. "We protect our own. Even the ones we don't particularly like. Even the ones who'd probably be happier if we disappeared." He looked back at her. "And yes, because you'd never let me hear the end of it if I let a six-year-old die."

"That's good enough for me," Baela said. She glanced at the sky, gauging the light. "We should head back. Jace will want to go over the plan."

"You mean my plan," Aegor corrected with a slight smirk.

"Your plan that I'm going to improve," she countered. "Someone needs to make sure you don't do anything stupidly heroic."

They started walking back toward the castle, Vermithor and Moondancer following at a distance. The two dragons moved with completely different gaits. Vermithor's steps shook the ground. Moondancer pranced and darted, still full of young energy despite the early hour.

They had a battle to win. And after that, if they all survived, she'd find a way to save her brother from whatever darkness was consuming him from the inside.

One way or another, she'd bring Aegor home.