The Blacks, The Greens and The Reds

by Loke_Lyon

Summary

Totally self-indulgent Rhaenyra Self-Insert, written solely because I need to start writing again instead of planning a story to death. Cross posted on AH.
Saltpeter, Charcoal and Sulfur. The three ingredients in one would need in order to make black powder.

Saltpeter had been acquired from a very awkward conversation with Harwin Strong. My attempts to distract him from why I needed all the bat poo I could remove from Harrenhal had, for an entire week, had him under the impression we were lovers and started five brand new rumours at court that I’m sure made Alicent all tingly.

Sulfur had been the next on my list and had left me with a bit of a dilemma. The easiest way to get your hands on Sulfur in Westeros was to buy it from the Dornish. The Hellholt was lousy with the stuff and the Ullers were always happy for the extra income from it’s sale. Unfortunately, that is the easiest method for anyone who isn’t a Targaryen. Another way is getting it out of Pyrite which meant dealing with the Lannisters. Lannisters or the Dornish, I’m hard pressed to say who are the more traitorous. In the end I gave in and asked Ser Joffrey to get it for me. He didn’t ask why I needed it and I didn’t ask how he got it.

Charcoal is the easiest. Charcoal burners litter Westeros and it was simple matter of raiding Driftmark for a small supply. Grind all three up, properly measure the ingredients, mix carefully but well and you have yourself the modest little powder that’s going to ensure a certain little sulky brat never lays so much of a finger on the throne that’s rightfully yours.

Not that I’m taking it personally of course.

An old pain lanced through my fingers as prepared to transfer the powder to it’s new home. I stopped the flex the cramping from them, it wouldn’t do to slip at this juncture. Very carefully, I scooped my black powder into the metal casing and tightened the cap. Whilst Dragonstone certainly lives up to it’s name, I’d rather not blow up the castle I’ve only been in possession of for six months. Alicent would love that.

Not that Dragonstone couldn’t do with a bit of exploding. Dragonstone the castle that is. The island itself wasn’t a problem. It’s farmland was rich and productive, the weather was pleasant and the views at times could be breathtaking. When not in my lab creating the recipe for Alicent’s downfall, I’ve taken to exploring it fully.

The problem is whoever built Dragonstone the castle apparently didn’t share my views on the island. Dragonstone itself had been built in the shadow of the Dragonmont, the towering active volcano that dominated the island. This had several knock-on effects. First it meant that the scenic views, rolling farmlands and gorgeous weather were on the other side of the damnable thing and to make things worse the shadow from the mountain cast the castle proper, and the small town surrounding it, into a permanent gloom. They’d then topped their monument to poorly thought out architecture in stone dragons. Huge stone dragons, small stone dragons, wall mounted stone dragons, statues of dragons… All made from the same fused black rock I had come to learn was indicative of Valyrian buildings.

As if that wasn’t enough, later architects had carved dragons into the walls, the floors, railings and banisters. No wonder Stannis had gone mad living here and if he was actually Azor Ahai and did have the power to wake dragons from stone then he was going to be a one man second coming of the bloody freehold.

Two guards in Targaryen livery fell into step behind me as a left the lab with my creation tucked
under my arm. One of the many stewards of Dragonstone would ensure the rooms were cleaned and locked. Not that any totally-not-Alicent’s-spies would be able to figure out what I was doing before it was too late. Still, this is Westeros and it never hurts to be pro-active about you enemies.

I realised I was scowling when a maid yelped and leapt out of my way. I would have to check that. I rearranged my face into what I hoped was polite smile and made my way to the small courtyard I’d had cleared for testing. My two guards took up positions out of the way. Happily, my instructions had been heeded and a brazier was merrily burning away. It was heading towards late afternoon and I probably shouldn’t be testing things so close to the evening meal. Especially since Lord Corlys was lurking around. That man was a menace.

I poured a modest amount of powder onto the flagstone. Before withdrawing and retrieved a wooden splint. I had to be extra careful here. All my work would be for nothing if I set myself alight. Gently I lowered the splint into the powder before stepping even further back.

Black powder will ignite if you look at It wrong. In the open, like mine, it should burn. Confined however, it produces an explosion which is what makes it useful for flinging bits of metal about at high speed.

At least that was what it was supposed to do.

I could only watch with a sinking sort of horror as the wooden splint sputtered and died amongst the completely unignited and very much not on fire powder. From the corner, I heard my guards move to intercept someone. I stared at the unburnt spot and tried to set my emotions in order.

Frustration: Check
Something weirdly close to grief: Check
A sinking feeling that I have to face the Dance of Dragons without my easy mode solution of firearms: Also check.

Someone up there is laughing at me, I just know it.

“Rhaenyra!”

I jumped as a hand collided with my shoulder, pulling from my one woman self-pity party. It was Laenor. Another set of unfortunate feelings rose up inside me and I resisted the urge to clock him for taking my pity party and switching it to a ‘oh no original Rhaenyra is definitely still here somewhere’ existential horror.

“What?” I bit out. I don’t even know my own age anymore but I’m damn sure I’m too young to be dealing with the question of whether I’m keeping someone prisoner inside their own body or the knowledge that a continent spanning super war is on it’s way because Alicent is raging b- bad person.

“My Lord Father has requested your presence for a pre-dinner meeting.”

He doesn’t even look the slightest bit apologetic for the delivery of bad news. I cast another glance at the black powder with the vain hope that maybe it will set alight and the first time was somehow a fluke. It remains inert and I sigh heavily before I can stop myself.

“Did your experiment not go to plan?” asked Laenor, peering around me.

I gestured to the black powder again with another sigh and he gives me a sympathetic look.

“Sorry it didn’t work out. Perhaps this is a sign to let go of all the alchemy stuff.”
He was trying to sound conciliatory. He may be a gay man in the heart of grimderp Westeros but beyond matters of inheritance and love, he was remarkably closed minded. I fixed him with what I hoped was an intimidating glare. He raised his hands in mock surrender before pushing some of his long silver hair from his face. The Rhaenyra in me was thrilled. He was a beautiful man, tall with delicate features and long silver hair. His eyes were the typical Valyrian violet and he held himself in a particularly regal manner. I had, thankfully, failed to somehow butterfly away Rhaenyra’s beauty. Trust me, she had well deserved her title of ‘Realm’s Delight’. I lifetime of lessons in deportment had meant I could match Laenor’s regal grace with my own. On the surface, we were a striking couple.

The current power couple of Westeros.

“I’m just saying, it’s beginning to be spoken about at court,” he continued. I frowned. He didn’t have to say who was talking about it. It was Alicent, it was always Alicent. My Father would only intervene if anything became blatant and even then he was unlikely to do anything that would actually protect me. I had seen it all play out in the past and in all likeliness, I would see it play out again. I flexed my fingers and they throbbed again in reminder.

“Perhaps it is time for you to find someone-“

I cut him off with a wave. I knew how that had gone for the original Rhaenyra. Three obvious bastards had tanked her support harder than anything Alicent could have ever done. Something I know would have tickled orginal Alicent pink if this Alicent was anything to go by.

“I have already told you-” Laenor cut me of this time, his face twisted in unhappiness.

“I can not. I have already explained. I can not.” I understood and sympathised to a degree. He was a gay man and no amount of closing his eyes and thing of Driftmark was going to change that. That didn’t change the fact that bearing anyone else’s children was a risk I could not take.

“I’m not about to have children now anyway, Laenor. It’s too early. Childbirth killed both my mother and her mother too. We have a few years to find a solution.”

He didn’t look convinced. That was probably Lord Corlys’ doing. No doubt he was hammering the need for a quick heir into his son’s head. In canon, Rhaenyra had already been pregnant with Jacaerys by this point. I suppose the lack of heir was spooking my so called ‘greatest supporter’.

“I fear that will not placate the Factions at court,” replied Laenor.

On that last miserable note, I guided him back out of the courtyard, leaving orders for the stewards to clear the mess and to be careful with the powder.
Laenor left me at the entrance to my rooms to go and prepare himself. A gaggle of maids soon surrounded me and I let myself relax under their ministrations. My hair was unbound and brushed, the dirt I hadn’t notice wiped away with a wash cloth and then the dresses were brought forward.

In a previous life, I’d hated dresses. I’d hated wearing them, hated trying to move in them and especially hated how no matter the fabric they pulled and itched. The Rhaenyra in me loved dresses, loved being attended to, adored the idea of court fashion.

I’d been startled to say the least when I’d realised I actually looked forward to dress fittings. Even more so when my new fashion conscious eye could pick out courtly attire and what it meant.

“Nothing to ostentatious tonight, Genna.” The maid in question curtsied and indicated for a black dress embroidered with red dragons. Another maid brought forth a mantle of red that evoked the style common to the Vale. Too tired to assess whether that would offend my dear Goodfather or not, I gave my assent.

The whole affair took about an hour. Outside of the window, the sun was beginning to set. I stopped to watch it. I wasn’t in any particular hurry and I beyond tired of dealing with Corlys. I needed a few moments just to myself. What would I do if I couldn’t get the Black Powder to work?

After my brief respite, I made my way to the private dining rooms. Laenor was not present yet but Lord Corlys and his wife were. I bit back a groan and hoped it hadn’t shown on my face. Corlys greeted me with his usual taciturn nod whilst his wife pulled me into a hug. I returned it happily. For all that I disliked Corlys, I loved Rhaenys.

“You look well! Any chance of good news?” she asked, with a friendly nudge as we sat down. Sometimes I wondered what the hell went on in their heads, that they could miss Laenor’s planet sized see-through closet. At the mention of heirs though, I became the subject of the Lord of Driftmark’s laser-like focus.

I took a sip of wine before answering.

“Not yet Lady Rhaenys but I pray to the Mother that I will be blessed soon.” When in doubt, invoke religion. It’s amazing how many Westerosi nobles dislike talking about religion.

“As do I,” echoed Laenor as he finally entered. He seated himself next to me after depositing a quick kiss on his Mother’s temple.

“Praying won’t help,” said Corlys, breaking his silence at last. Laenor tensed up, as did Rhaenys.

“Father-”

“No, Laenor. You have been married for nearly half a year now. You think the servants do not speak? They do and the realm is eager to listen. And what things they speak of? A Lord that has never visited his Lady’s bed chambers, A Princess who is happier to play with queer dusts and strange powders like some sort of alchemist!”

My fingers gave a throb of agony as my hand tightened around the goblet. Around us, the Stewards were doing their best to seem as unobtrusive as possible. How many were Alicent’s? How much could I say in their presence?
“Corlys,” hissed Rhaenys, her tone promising retribution. The Lord set his jaw, meeting his wife’s eyes and then his son’s. Both lost the ensuing staring match.

He turned his eyes on me. He was challenging me, although what he hoped to achieve was beyond me.

Our staring match was interrupted by the arrival of the meal itself. His eyes flickered for a moment, resting on the hand that held my wine before looking away entirely. I realised that my hand was still clenched tightly around the goblet, so much so that my fingers had turned white.

I couldn’t tell who had won that match of wills. Instead of agonising over it, I offered Laenor a smile before helping myself. Dinner tonight was beef pie accompanied by a multitude of green vegetables. Delicious but my mind was whirring with other thoughts.

Why did he have to pick tonight of all nights? After today’s failure… Was that why he had picked it? No. He had sent Laenor before the Power had failed to ignite. Perhaps he knew I had begun testing today and wished to gauge my work before deciding to disapprove?

That sounded more in line with what I knew about the Sea Snake.

After the last of his famous voyages he’d come back to Westeros and assumed the title of Lord of the Tides. His treasures had made his House wealthy and Lord Corlys had proved himself as good a ruler as he had a sailor. He’d invested, begun construction on High Tide and married a Targaryen Princess.

At the time, it had been assumed by many that Lady Rhaenys would inherit the Throne and Lord Corlys had made it apparent to all who would listen that he was ready to fight her battles. The fact that he had proceeded to do so was something of a problem.

None of the books I had read had ever gone into detail about it but it seems the conflict between Aemon’s line and Baelon’s line had begun far earlier than the Grand Council of 101AC. As a youth, Rhaenys had climbed atop Meleys soon after Princess Alyssa’s death. To anyone unfamiliar with the customs of the Valyrian Freehold, this did not appear to be a problem.

However, I had soon been told otherwise. A dragon was personal thing, when a family member died custom dictated that those close to the deceased should have first refusal on the dragon. The fact that Rhaenys had so blatantly ignored this had enraged Prince Baelon as well as Prince Daemon. It had taken some not inconsiderable diplomacy from Prince Aemon to ensure it did not become an Incident.

But damage had been done. When Prince Aemon died on Tarth, Daemon claimed Caraxes in revenge. I think that Rhaenys wouldn’t have cared had she not learnt soon after that Jaehaerys had stripped Dragonstone and the Title of Heir from her. Instead, the loss of Caraxes for her own daughter, the just born Laena, had become symbolic of her loss no matter how unreasonable it was to expect a babe to claim a dragon.

So much so that both Corlys and Rhaenys were eager to look the other way when the seven year old Laena claimed Vhagar. When her claiming of the mighty beast had come to light, Viserys had to physically restrain an enraged Daemon. The fact that the target of his ire was seven year old girl, one he was happy to threaten violence upon did not go down well with the Court. Or Jaehaerys. The Old King had him confined to his rooms for a week.

Corlys hadn’t taken the incident well regardless of whether Daemon had been punished or not. He and Daemon had nearly started a civil war during the Great Council and it took years for matters to
thaw between them. Even then it had been a chance thing. An icily correct visit to court and an unplanned drunken night had given birth the Conquest of the Stepstones. I was given to understand the early years of the Conquest had been fraught with arguments and rivalry even then. They’d managed to reconcile however.

For all that Corlys blamed neither brother for the wrong done to his wife, there was still an empty chair on Viserys’ small council. Alicent was desperate to fill it with a Redwyne but Viserys refused, telling anyone who asked that the title of Master of Ships belonged to Corlys and would be waiting for him when Corlys came to claim it.

That Corlys had sworn he would not take the title until his wife and children’s rights were restored, that he would not aid a usurper, seemed not to bother Viserys overly much.

I took a drink of wine and used it to covertly scan the Lord of the Tides. He was in his early sixties but was still as healthy and as active of a man half his age. His skin was weathered by the sea, something he was eager to show off as he eschewed any particular fashion, opting for the garb of sailor. Admittedly, the fabrics used were silk and satin. He wasn’t as handsome as his son, his features were thicker than the normal aquiline Valyrian look but I’d imagine he still many a maiden blushing.

He certainly had the Rhaenys in me blushing. The dinner proceeded in an awkward silence, with no one quite willing to break it. Laenor opened his mouth a couple of times but seems to back down before the words made their way out.

I forced myself to focus. That Corlys was trying to assert authority over me was obvious. The fact that he had all but usurped the castle from me was annoying. I’d been so focused on the powder… I pulled my thoughts away. This needed to be about Corlys.

Oh, of course. He can’t be seen involving himself too much in the goings on of the court. He publicly declared his withdrawal from it several times. He’s backed himself into a corner with hasty declarations made years ago that his own pride won’t allow him to forswear. Controlling a future Queen is fine and dandy but I think what he really wants is the Black faction.

I resist the urge to groan at that. The Black faction. The one I’d been neglecting in my haste to develop the Black Powder. I’d reasoned it all away in my head that I wouldn’t need the Lords of Westeros with dragons, guns and canons.

I’d messed it up somehow. I was certain I had the mixture right though. Even if I wasn’t exact there still should have been some reaction, something I could use to refine it further.

Laenor cleared his throat. The room’s attention swung towards him.

“Out of curiosity, what was your experiment today supposed to do?” he asked. I took a sip of wine to give myself time to think. In the corner, Rhaenys leaned forward slightly, evidently eager for anything that would alleviate the oppressive atmosphere that had sprung up.

“It was supposed to burn or explode.” I replied, seeing no way out. Laenor’s eyebrows drew together.

“Explode. Forgive me, Rhaenys, but I do not see the advantage?” Laenor’s face was scrunched up in confusion. Damn him, even comically confused he was beautiful.

“Ah. Well… I had hoped to use it to create new artillery.” I managed lamely. At that, Corlys put his goblet down and leant forward.
“How would this have worked?” He asked. I couldn’t tell if he was genuinely interested or not. Hopefully, he was. For all that he was a curmudgeon, his support would be priceless. His current focus was the Stepstones. If I was going to have to play the political game after all, the earlier I could use him as an active Black, the better.

“Simply? A long metal tube with lead shot. The Black powder explodes and launches the shot out of the tube at high speed.” I explained. I was not going to tell him that early canons had a bad habit of exploding the people using them at the same time.

“But the powder doesn’t work.” There was reprimand in his tone. I kept the glare from my face barely. I’d walked right into a trap in my haste to trap him.

“I must have done something wrong. I can fix i-”

“How would this new artillery even help your cause? You ride a dragon, your Goodmother rides a dragon and your husband rides a dragon. I would suggest you leave the art of explosions to the Alchemists Guild.”

Realisation hit me like a punch to the face. I barely heard Rhaenys’ tart response.

The Alchemists Guild. I was an idiot. By the time of Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon they were a sad shadow of their former glory but right now? Right now they were at the height of their power. Dragons weren’t extinct and their knowledge of magic and science could rival that of a Citadel trained Maester.

I took a long gulp of wine to hide my grin. If anyone could help me perfect the Black Powder it would be the Alchemists. Oh, and what a coincidence, I had the perfect excuse to show up on Viserys’ doorstep. Thanks Alicent!

“Perhaps a change of subject is in order,” I said, forestalling the brewing argument between the Queen Who Never Was and the Sea Snake. “I have actually been wondering if it might be worth travelling to King’s Landing. After all, I have a new brother now and I’d be a poor sister if I didn’t at least go and see him.”

“I wasn’t aware you were fond of your brothers?” said Rhaenys. She had a point. The last male relative I’d had any fondness for had been Prince Baelon. If one did not count Laenor, he was the only male relative I had ever had any fondness for.

“Brother or no, you’re better of staying away from that pit.” Corlys growled. His look of disapproval was back. I watched as he speared a vegetable with uncalled for violence.

“If scurrilous rumours are circulating in the capital perhaps it’s best to go there and make a show of it.” Laenor cut in. Corlys frowned as his earlier argument was flung back at him with an uncharacteristic show of backbone from his son.

“It wouldn’t hurt to touch base with my supporters either.” I added. I knew I’d been correct about his motives when Corlys reacted like a shark that had scented blood in the water. He drummed his fingers on the table before nodding.

“It seems appropriate,” he admitted. “As much as they should come to you.”

“Good luck with that, dear husband. The lords of Westeros are prickly bunch. They don’t like being summoned like common servants.” chuckled Rhaenys. As the atmosphere became less tense she’d begun relaxing. Corlys merely snorted in response.
Chilled fruit was served soon after.

“Regardless of your plans, it seems I can not stay here for much longer. That is why I requested this meal tonight. I need to return to the Stepstones and I’ve tarried here for as long as possible.”

In response to Corlys’ statement, Rhaenys sighed and looked harried. Laenor leant forth and, surprisingly, laid a gentle hand over mine.

“Is there news regarding Prince Daemon?” he asked. I tensed and Laenor’s hand tightened about mine. The fingers of my right hand ached. I was glad Corlys had waited until the main meal was over with as at the mention of my uncle, my appetite fled. Rhaenys shot me a pained look.

“It seems the pirates once thought routed have gathered under a new banner. They will launch an attack on Bloodstone before the year is out.” Corlys explained.

“The Triarchy?” asked Laenor. I wasn’t paying attention though. I could not deal with thoughts of him tonight. Not after the failure of the powder and Corlys’ antics.

“I shall retire.” I announced, rising to my feet. If Corlys was surprised by this, he did not show it. Instead, he nodded his permission.

The Rhaenyras in me wanted to slap him. This was my castle, not his. I could not, of course. I would wait until he was gone and route out the men and women he had bought. Ser Joffrey was uncommonly good at finding and locating those with loose tongues and it would be a nice distraction from his romantic troubles. Killing them was too much but perhaps a one-way ride to Driftmark with a notice that Corlys had forgotten some of his men and women.

“Laenor, why don’t you accompany your wife tonight.”

For all that it was put forward as a suggestion, it was a command. One Laenor leapt to obey, his earlier show of backbone forgotten in haste to be out from underneath the all-knowing eye of his Father. I pictured his face as he read the message informing him that I had severed his power base in Dragonstone without death or violence before offering Laenor a comforting smile.

Evidently a long night’s sleep and time to think up a plan were not on the cards today then.
We didn’t speak as we made our way back to my rooms. I wanted to point out that Lord Corlys had gone so far beyond propriety tonight that he was possibly approaching politeness from the other side but to do so before Joffrey’s spring cleaning would be stupid. Corlys wouldn’t take it personally but he’d absolutely use it against me.

I guided Laenor inside my rooms and dismissed the maids and servants with a final request for a pitcher of wine. My lord husband was tense, as if he were made of glass. I directed him to a chair and took a seat opposite him. We did not speak until the steward delivered the pitcher and two goblets. Even then we both had made our way through our first goblet before I started, having spent the silence searching for the right approach.

“I do believe your Lord Father was five minutes away from suggesting he attend to the matter of an heir personally as well,” My voice wasn’t quite the dry, scathing tone I was going for but it worked to startle Laenor from his funk. He gave a sharp, short laugh.

“Mother would feed him to Meleys,” I could see that. Lady Rhaenys had a fierce temper and according to Laena and Laenor, many a maid had been dismissed from their roles at High Tide.

“We can not keep on like this Laenor,” I told him in the silence after. The man nodded solemnly.

“I will stick by my plan to wait for an heir but you must provide it.”

He sighed heavily and poured himself more wine before throwing back nearly half the goblet. I felt sorry for him, I truly did. He’d found his true love and lost him all in one year. Ser Joffrey may not have died when Criston Cole struck him down but what was left was a pale shadow compared to the man before. Then, whilst dealing with that loss, he’d had to navigate married life with increased duties on Driftmark.

“I do not know how but I will do my best. Do the Alchemists not know of some potion?” His voice was strangely hopeful. I frowned as I thought. Hadn’t Melisandre said that she had charms that could interest a man? Or was I just making that up.

“I’m not sure. I intend to visit them discreetly whilst we are in King’s Landing but I think we must discuss what comes after,” He placed his goblet down and leant forward.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

“Today has been something of a wake up call. If the Black Powder doesn’t work then I have no back-up plan to ensure my ascent to the throne.” Laenor nodded in response. I resisted the urge to sigh. He was a clever man but totally under father’s thumb. If I was going to pull him from Corlys’ orbit and into mine I needed to involve him.

“What do you think is the best course of action?” I asked and he seemed surprised I had. He seemed to think it over for some time, wine forgotten. Hints of the mind Corlys wanted in his son but was forever crushing with his own oversized ego poking through I supposed.

“We should start with the Crownlands.” He began slowly. At my questioning look, he elaborated. “Whoever controls the Crownlands controls King’s Landing. If war does break out, we will need King’s Landing if we wish to have any chance of winning. Do you know what Lords we can rely on?”
I thought back to the original timeline. Most of Rhaenyra’s support had come from the northern regions whilst Aegon’s had been mostly southern. That was proving true in my case as well. The fledgling Black cause was mostly made up of the Crownland houses sworn to Dragonstone and Vale lords.

“My cousin will likely side with me,” I pointed out.

“Lady Jeyne has only recently obtained her majority and is already embroiled in a succession dispute herself. There’s also the chance that raids by the mountain clans could pull their armies away at a critical time.” Damn him, he was right. Jeyne had the support of the majority of the Vale lords but there were a few that either opposed her outright or did not care to offer any support.

“Perhaps an offer of support. A letter to my cousin to assure her that I will ensure her rights are respected should armed conflict break out.” Laenor nodded in agreement.

“I can try and obtain permission from Father to send overly ambitious male relatives to the Stepstones? It would give Lady Jeyne an excuse to cut them off from their support bases in the Vale. There’s still the matter of the Mountain Clansman though.”

The Mountain Clansman of the Vale were the biggest problem for a stronger Vale. Dealing with them would not be easy. They were First Men who believed that the Vale was rightfully their’s and viewed all Andals as trespassers. The problem with that line of thought was that by now, the Andals had been here for thousands of years. You couldn’t just ship them off back to Andalos.

For most of the time, the Clansmen were willing to sit in their hidden villages and attack only the remotest of locations. When Autumn came however, they would swarm down from the mountains into the Vale of Arryn proper and carry out mass raiding for food and women. Jeyne’s father and brother had died whilst attempting to mount a response to the Autumn raiding. A story every House in the Vale could relate too.

They refused all diplomacy, they killed people, drove the rest from their homes, stole women and the aftermaths of their attacks often saw even more people dying due to lack of food and adequate shelter. Although it revolted me, they would have to be eliminated. I said as much to Laenor, who merely shook his head.

“The Arryn’s have been saying that for centuries. Although, I suppose they’ve never had a dragon before,” he mused. Suddenly, I wish we’d had this meeting around the Painted Table. It would have been much cooler.

“So we cultivate allies in the Crownlands and the Vale as our first step. Give ourselves a core of loyal lords and use the strengthened Black faction to pull in more from other regions,” I concluded. It would work as a solid opening move, politically.

Although, even if Black Powder was behaving strange, other things might not be. What was the first thing everyone did in the stories? Seed drill. There were other areas that could be uplifted, not just military technology.

“What about glass houses?” I asked.

“Glass houses? I admit such things would be useful for luring Northern lords to our side,” his voice clearly laying out that he thought the Northern Lords would be about as useful as a chocolate teapot “But they are too expensive. To buy and for the Northern Lords to maintain.”

“Not if we can make it ourselves.” Westeros was fully capable of making glass. The issue is that it
was glass of a truly awful quality. Most glass was bought and shipped from Myr, which drove the prices to truly eye watering heights.

“You believe your Alchemy could give us the ability to make glass?” he asked, doubtfully. I wasn’t surprised, Myr kept the glass making secrets close to their chest. Slaves were bought as children and raised into the profession, those of them that tried to run away were given horrific punishment and those that stayed and were obedient were given a far better life than even some of the free citizens of Myr. A gilded cage but a cage none the less.

I, however, had an advantage no Westerosi glass maker had.

When I had awoken as Rhaenyra, I had put as much as I remembered of modern technology to paper. Whilst the knowledge of glass creation was not exactly something I could remember now I knew I’d written down some details about it’s creation. Along with a whole treasure trove of technology I could use for the carrot part of a ‘carrot and stick’ routine with the lords of Westeros.

The stick part would, of course, be Syrax.

“I can’t. I came into possession of a book when I was younger. A very poor translation of an older work from the Valyrian Freehold. I copied as much as possible but it was very damaged. It contained many useful technologies but the instructions were rather garbled. I know glass was in there somewhere.” When in doubt imply that your operating on secrets obtained from the Freehold. Anyone with even a drop of Valyrian blood has a tendency to buy it hook, line and sinker.

It would also cover for the fact that I hadn’t exactly remembered many of the instructions. Not that I could remember anything about it now, of course. When I had been four and a fresh, newcomer to Westeros the information had been fresh in my mind but even fresh it was hardly a step by step guide to an uplift.

Oh. Balls.

I’d hidden it in a tunnel accessible from my old room. My old room in the Tower of the Hand

The current occupant of the Tower was Lyonel Strong and his sons, Harwin and Larys. Larys was easy to deal with. He was intelligent and he enjoyed engaging in intelligent conversation without the pity or mocking that he usually dealt with due to his Clubfoot.

Harwin was a whole different problem. My need for saltpetre had seen me negotiate for access to Harrenhal. In my haste, I may have accidentally given Harwin the idea I was interested in more than a simple trade. The result had been awkward and Alicent had probably gone to sleep laughing for months afterwards.

“Technologies?”

Oh, I used an anachronism, didn’t I?

“That is what the book called them,” I replied with a shrug after the initial moment of panic had worm off.

“Well regardless of the terms a book about Valyrian ‘technologies’ would be invaluable. Do you still have the copy you made?” he asked, eagerly.

“That would be the issue.” I explained the issue with the current location and he sighed.

“The matter with Harwin was ill-done but it can’t be helped now. We must retrieve your copy.
Once we have it we can use the information to strengthen our allies and bind them to our cause,” He looked more animated now than I’d ever seen him and I’d seen him as a rambunctious seven year old that wanted to explore the secret passages of the Red Keep.

“Did your notion of Black Powder come from the book?” he asked after settling down.

“It did. As did the notion of the canon. They put them on ships, you know?” I informed him whilst screwing up the paper we’d been writing details about glass on.

“Imagine that? Pirates would never be a problem again,” he murmured.

I poured us some more wine. He took the goblet gratefully and took a sip. I took my own large gulp before adressing the next part of things.

“We have some solid political strategies down but we must talk personal.” It was like letting air out of a balloon as he seemed to literally deflate.

“Didn’t we already decide we were waiting for heirs?” he almost whined.

“Not that. I’m talking about the image we project to the world at large. As much as it pains me to admit, Lord Corlys was right.” Oh boy did it pain me to say that. “You spend your time on Driftmark up to your ears in paperwork and I spend mine of Dragonstone up to my ears in-”

“Bat crap,” Laenor interrupted.

“Queer dusts and strange powders,” I finished, overlooking his interruption. He smiled and took a drink of his wine once more.

“What would you have us do?” he asked.

“Play the husband. We need to be seen together. Perhaps we could fly Syrax and Seasmoke regularly? And of course, we will need to regularly share a bed-”

“I thought you said this wasn’t about heirs,” he said with a petulant air.

“Stop interrupting me. As I was saying, we need the appearance of a loving couple. One that had a rocky start perhaps but nevertheless…” I trailed of and he nodded as it sank in.

“I wouldn’t mind flying with you regularly. Mother says you have the makings of an excellent rider,” I was beginning to think the heirs situation was something of a hot button issue for Laenor. Whenever the conversation even so much as touched on it he became as tense as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. His relief when steering away from the topic was palpable. His entire demeanour changed in an instant to the next.

“I must thank Rhaenys for her compliment tomorrow. I do, however, remember her telling me that I handled Syrax as gracefully as a rock.”

That made Laenor laugh. Learning riding from Lady Rhaenys had been fun. Not so much with my other teacher. I flexed hand around the goblet. After another hour of talking, mostly anecdotes about dragons and mothers, we made our way to bed.
Laenor left my rooms as early as was proper. I made a point of kissing him where the maids could see and although I could admit he wasn’t an unpleasant kisser, I could tell from the slight tensing that he’d rather I was Joffrey. Hopefully, it would get back to Corlys and curb some of the ‘talking’ going on.

After that I allowed a batch of giggly maids to attend to me. If we were to head to King’s Landing soon then preparations had to be made. Although I had a dragon, a royal could not just leap on it’s back and leave. I required dresses, attendants, guards, supplies, gifts… The list was almost endless.

An hour long meeting with castellan gave me a partial solution to the dilemma. Laenor and I would fly tomorrow with the bare essentials and our ship would follow along afterwards. There would be a gap of a few days but Viserys had never minded covering for that in the past.

After laying out what would need to be loaded onto the dragons and what the ship would be bringing. The longest part was deciding on appropriate gifts for me siblings. I finally settled on a dagger with a dragon hilt inlaid with emeralds for Aegon, a collection of really fancy thread for Helaena, a wooden sword and shield for Aemond and the usual assortment of rattles one gave to a newborn for Daeron.

I was willing to admit pride as I made my way to the set of rooms I’d claimed as an office space. One of the first things I’d done when arriving on Dragonstone had been to set up an actual bureaucracy so that no part of the castle lacked oversight. That my staff could now plan and enact royal travel with a days notice was testament to my success.

Apparently, getting too smug had attracted the Gods attention and they’d decided to knock me down a peg or two because as I returned to my office I found Rhaenys waiting outside. Don’t get me wrong, I loved Rhaenys. She was blunt, wore her heart on her sleeve and was absolutely ready to fight 100% of the time. I have fond memories of her ripping Viserys a new one on my behalf.

For all that, Rhaenys was just as dangerous as Corlys and twice as ambitious. She wasn’t cruel though. If she could help someone she would and I couldn’t forget what she’d risked when she’d stood before my Father and the Court and denounced my Uncle with words that, had they come from anyone else, were a good way of getting your tongue removed.

She ushered herself in after me, waving away the offer for refreshment. Before I sat down to deal with her, I sent a runner to Ser Joffrey to order him to attend to me at his earliest convenience.

“I’ll be heading off for Driftmark soon enough. I came to let you know I’ll be sending my girl to you in King’s Landing,” she informed me as she took a seat.

That was unusual, Laena was adventurous. She mostly spent her time flying on her dragon, planning to fly somewhere with her dragon or sightseeing in places she had flown to on her dragon.

“I always look forward to seeing cousin Laena but I was given to believe she was planning a trip to Pentos.” At least that had been Laenor’s report a couple of days ago when he and his family sans Laena had arrived.

“Corlys put a halt to it when he heard about the trouble on the Stepstones. He wanted one of us on Driftmark in case of trouble but I’ve offered to step in.” Rhaenys explained. I raised an eyebrow. That did explain why Rhaenys was sending her to me rather than to Pentos but didn’t explain why
Rhaenys was leaving her husband a dragon short in the face on renewed hostilities.

“Did Lady Laena cancel her plans to fly to Pentos?” I asked. Rhaenys sighed and shook her head.

“She’s too into flying. She needs something to tether her to Westeros and the Seven knows her Father isn’t going to deal with it anytime soon. It’s a mother’s hope she might find someone in court worth breaking that damnable contract. Besides, having a beautiful maiden to flaunt won’t exactly hurt your cause.”

I see. Rhaenys and Corlys are having differences again. From what I’ve gleaned from Laena and Laenor’s slip ups, this is a usual occurrence. They love one another and are a surprisingly good team despite their hugely differing attitudes towards life but every now and again they butt heads and reenact Jaehaerys and Alyssanne’s Great Quarrels. Still, Rhaenys is right. Laena is Lordling bait and so I send a message off to the castellan after she’s gone to advise him to co-ordinate with Laenor’s men about Laena.

I was half way through the harbour master’s report about a small collision that had occurred yesterday when Ser Joffrey Lonmouth limped in, leaning heavily on his stick. His brown hair was clipped short and his face was clean-shaven. The clothes he wore were a better fit for an academic than the knight he was. A far cry from the look he bore when I first met him.

Joffrey then had been brash and proud with long hair he’d had in a knot and a well-groomed beard. He’d duelled a few squires who’d made remarks about him and Laenor and on the same day made it clear to me that Laenor was his and that he wasn’t in the mood to share. I’d warned them both about Criston. My warning had saved Ser Joffrey’s life but he’d been crippled in the aftermath. The brash youth was gone and I had only my inability to manage Criston to blame.

Like the Black Powder, he was another failure. I’d assumed that as long as I didn’t encourage him or openly act ‘unchaste’ he’d remain loyal. That his betrayal had been fuelled by Rhaenyra’s behaviour in the original time line. I’d been proved wrong and I should have seen it coming.

The Kingsguard had been in love with me. He had created a story in his head that I was the beautiful Princess and he the dashing Knight. That, somehow, I would eventually end up with him. When Uncle Daemon had blown in, Ser Criston had been my shield in truth. When my betrothal had been announced he’d expected to defend me again.

He’d come to me before the wedding and laid out a plan to flee to the Disputed Lands. There, he claimed, he would win fame as a mercenary so that he could ensure I had everything I deserved. I had done my best but it hadn’t been enough. I had not been diplomatic in my refusal, I had been too shocked that I had missed all the warning signs even though I had known something would happen.

I should have flattered him, soothed his hurt ego and rejected him gently. I hadn’t and his desperate love had turned to hate and rage. Laenor had been the target and since he couldn’t directly harm Laenor, he’d tried to kill Ser Joffrey. A ‘take what’s mine and I’ll take what’s yours’ scenario. He’d gunned for Joffrey, ignored countless other Knights in the melee and it had been all that Joffrey could do to even survive.

In the aftermath, it did not seem to matter how much Laenor professed he did care about the injury, how he loved him, Ser Joffrey would not believe him. He’d come to me and begged my pardon for not listening to me and offered to serve in my household, so that he would not be burden to his family. I had agreed. I had gotten Criston Cole so wrong and it had destroyed someone in turn. I felt guilty. I couldn’t help but hope that with a little bit of time to realise he could be useful as something other than a fighter that he’d find his way back to Laenor.
“You called for me, your grace?” he asked as he lowered himself into the chair with difficulty. I made a show of filing the report before turning my attention to him as finished making himself comfortable.

“I will be heading to King’s Landing tomorrow. I’ve made the material arrangements with the castellan but I have some tasks for you whilst I’m gone.” There was no point asking how he was or asking nicely. He would take it as pity and sulk for weeks.

“Will Ser Laenor be departing with you?” he asked, a note of longing in his voice. I brushed over it.

“He will. We’re hoping to touch base with loyal lords at court, amongst other things,” I replied, ignoring the look on his face. “As for Dragonstone, it seems Lord Corlys has people here. I want every single one of his informers shipped to Driftmark.”

Joffrey ran a hand through his short hair and looked thoughtful.

“I did think he was overstepping his mark but you didn’t give orders to the contrary so I didn’t think to address the issue. I would advise we don’t send them all though. It would be a solid plan to keep a few in place to feed misinformation to our enemies.”

That was a good idea. I hadn’t thought of that. I studied the man opposite. I was loathe to admit it but I had been finding him gopher jobs in the few months he’d been here. Apparently I’d caught his ability to turf out Alicent’s spies and completely missed the fact he had a mind for sneakiness I could use. If I made him ‘master of whispers’ I could hopefully get another window into Westeros that wasn’t being filtered through the various factions amongst the Blacks and Greens.

I pulled a sheet of paper close. Technically, when writing a proclamation that someone has the authority to speak on your behalf it should be done on vellum, not paper. It was, surprise surprise, considered an insult but I judged Joffrey to be among the less block headed members of my staff.

“I would have you become my spy master of sorts,” I said as I slid it across to him and he read it, eyes widening.

“You grace! I…” he paused, mouth moving. It was more than a crippled second son had any right to expect. I saw the anger at the imagined pity.

“Don’t mistake this for pity or kindness, Ser Joffrey. You are capable and have my complete trust but I have no doubt that you’ll be cursing my name in a years time. I’m tasking you with routing out my enemies spies as well as establishing spies of your own within their ranks,” I informed him, taking care that my voice was cooler than I actually felt.

He swallowed audibly and nodded, staring at the paper transfixed. Having the ear of the heir to the throne was no minor thing.

“I should begin immediately,” he said finally.

“Speak to the castellan for an allocation of funds. Nothing too extravagant. Our goal is to ensure Dragonstone answers to me and only me currently,” The paper I’d given him should mean the cranky old man should listen to Joffrey. Oh well, he could come and find me if he was refused.

“I will not let you down, you Grace,” he swore as he pushed himself to his feet with a bit of struggle. My smugness about something going my way lasted until well past dinner, when Laenor presented himself at the door to my rooms looking decidedly discontent.
“You made Joffrey your voice on Dragonstone,” he accused the moment the doors shut and the room was free of unwelcome ears. “You made him your spymaster.”

“Yes Laenor, I did. He has a mind for people and the Seven know he needs something to do.” I snapped back, good mood evaporating. My husband dropped onto the bed and rested his head in his hands before sighing.

“I’m sorry. I should not… I miss him. I miss him so much. It’s like I’m missing an arm,” he flopped backwards and stared at the ceiling, talking to himself more than me. “Maybe Qarl is right and I should let him stew through it on his own.”

“Qarl?” I asked, voice weak. Laenor sat up, blushing slightly in the candlelight.

“Yes. Ser Qarl Correy. He and I have been…” He paused as if looking for the right word. “…close recently.”

Whhhhhhhhhhhhhhy?
Flying on the back of a dragon was indescribable. Nothing could compare to sitting astride a dragon as it soared through the air. Atop Syrax, I could understand why the Freehold had thought itself above gods and men. A light touch of the whip urged Syrax onward. She shuddered beneath me before pushing herself ahead of the bulkier Seasmoke. I let out a laugh of joy as I saw the chagrin on Laenor’s face as I moved to overtake.

King’s Landing was beginning to peer over the horizon. We’d be there within ten or so minutes. The thought wasn’t quite enough to take the joy from me, nothing could whilst flying Syrax, but it was enough to temper it. To get my thoughts moving back into the mind set I would need to survive court.

It had been a hectic morning. I’d awoken early to track down Joffrey. He hadn’t been keen on the idea of getting rid of Laenor’s current lover but brief rant about the Knight’s dubious claims of honour had seen the Stormlander clench his jaw and promise Qarl Correy would dealt with. Perhaps this was how my descent started because I was fairly sure that if Joffrey had him killed I wouldn’t care. In another life he was bought and paid for to end Laenor’s life. Better route him out now than risk a blade at our back later. Especially if he had been Daemon’s stooge.

As we soared over the Keep both dragons let out a bellowing roar. We made for the Dragonpit and I was reminded of yet something else I would need to deal with when I ruled. The Dragonpit was bad for dragons raised in it. There seemed to be a point in a dragons development when the malign effects were lessened but it was easy to figure out which dragons had spent too much time in the pit in their younger years.

Vermithor, Silverwing, Seasmoke, Vhagar - All were huge creatures for their ages and strong fliers to boot. In comparison, dragons such as Dreamfyre, my own Syrax and even Rhaenys’ Meleys were smaller and more slender. They lacked the sheer power non-pit dragons of similar ages. Of course, the pit dragons were easier to claim and train so perhaps that had been Maegor and Jaehaerys’ thoughts when they’d built the place.

The pit dragons may be stunted to start with but they could be salvaged. Plenty of food and flying had seen my Syrax able to match Seasmoke in speed and she was, according to Rhaenys, one of the best living dragons when it came to aerobatics. Rhaenys’ Meleys was now bigger and stronger than Dreamfyre, a dragon older than her by a few decades simply due to being on Driftmark for just over two decades.

I allowed Laenor to land first, circling the pit as keepers rushed forward to attend. Seasmoke snapped and growled as his harness was removed and a great loop of steel chain pulled about his neck. Laenor’s whip snapped a few times as he drove his dragon into the pit proper. It was quick and efficient. No one wanted to mess around where a dragon was concerned. They might suffer their riders but anyone else was fair game, either for roasting or a simple bite or swipe of the claws.

With a pang of loss I took Syrax in for the landing. She knew the routine, having spent most of her early life here and needed much less guidance than Seasmoke had. Again, the keepers were quick and efficient and Syrax soon followed Seasmoke into the gloom with minimal prodding.

I allowed myself a deep breath in the blazing sun of King’s Landing. Up here, on Rhaney’s Hill, the stench of the city was well obscured by the smell of Dragon and that had long ceased to bother me. Around me, men scurried to separate our baggage from the harnesses. Being royalty had it’s upsides I supposed. Like never having to unpack your bags.
I was pulled from my musing by the approach of a tall knight dressed in the armour of the Dragon Keepers. They had supposedly sworn an oath to defend the Dragonpit and the dragons themselves from danger whilst they rested. They oversaw pit security and the dragon’s actual keepers, usually smallfolk drawn in by the promise of good coin and a payout if they died or were injured in their duties.

From the sneer he couldn’t quite hide and the shallow bow that was just inside propriety I would guess he was one of Alicent’s appointments. No wonder the Dragonpit was left so undefended in canon if this was the quality of men we were letting in these days. No doubt the scent of war had these green knights charging forth, convinced that because they’d seen dragons docile under their riders, they could handle a dragon in battle.

“Your Grace,” he began with obvious distaste. “I am Ser Byren Hastwyck, current Commander of the Pit. I welcome you to King’s Landing in the name of His Grace King Viserys the First. I have taken the liberty to arrange for a litter to take you to Keep.”

Now there was a problem. If I took the litter I would be hidden from the smallfolk of King’s Landing. Given I didn’t know how I would be received by them the litter was probably safer. Then again the smallfolk reception would give me an accurate litmus test for the current attitudes in the capital. When in doubt, get a second opinion?

“Lord Husband! Do you desire to ride through the city or take the litter?” I shouted, ignoring Ser Byren’s startled look. Laenor, clearly amused, abandoned his task of directing the stewards and made his way over. I hoped he caught on that this Knight was not friendly.

“Riding if that’s possible, Rhaenyra, I can’t stand the litter,” he replied once he was in speaking range. If his answer displeased Alicent’s stooge, he didn’t show it. Instead he gave a stiff bow and promised that horses would be ready soon.

I placed my hands on Laenor’s hips, even as he tensed slightly.

“It seems Alicent’s rot extends to the Dragonpit,” I murmured. His arms wound around my back and he lowered his head so he could murmur in turn. His warm breath across my ear took me by surprise and I shuddered. If he realised why, he didn’t show it.

“A strengthened Black faction can check her ambition, Rhaenyra. We just need to focus on building it up,” he assured me in a low voice.

I curled into him, luxuriating in a warm, firm body before checking myself. By the Seven, could I at least keep it in my pants for five minutes? Yet when I pulled away it was with a reluctance I didn’t want to feel. Being seventeen again was a pain, all those hormones and no place to safely stick them. Laenor shot me a puzzled glance as Ser Byren made his way back to us.

“Your horses are ready,” he stated with the air of someone who simply wished we could be gone as soon as possible. I had been away from the capital for too long if Alicent had managed to install enough of her supporters that this minor Knight felt comfortable dancing so close to outright hostility.

I hesitate to say that the ride through the city was uneventful. It started off without much fanfare with some of the Knights of the Dragonpit forming around us but we were soon getting attention. Thankfully, the smallfolk of King’s Landing seemed remarkably ambivalent to me. I couldn’t pick out anything overly harsh but they also didn’t seem to have the love for me that Margaery Tyrell had inspired in canon. It was certainly something to look into cultivating at least, the smallfolk of King’s Landing had hated Rhaenyra so much they’d died by the thousands to slaughter the dragons
within the Dragonpit. As we got closer to the Keep the crowds grew thicker and the noise louder, mostly from the various markets. I noted Gold Cloaks reacting, forming a barrier and shoving them back out of our way so that we weren’t held up in traffic.

Eventually, with much smiling and waving, we made it to the Keep. We were shown into a set of rooms and given time to freshen ourselves up and change from the riding clothes to court clothes and then it was time to confront Viserys. Joy. Laenor was oddly quiet the entire time. As much as I wanted to ask him what was going on, we didn’t have time.

The Throne room was as unchanged as always. The huge skulls of dragons past hung from the walls interspersed with tapestry's depicting Aenar the Wise, Daenys the Dreamer, Gaemon the Glorious and Aegon the Conqueror. It was full to the brim with nobles from all corners of the Seven Kingdoms with the exception of the Iron Islands and the North. Much to my annoyance, I noticed that the Reach seemed extremely overrepresented. When I reached the foot of the Throne I bowed low to it’s occupant whilst simultaneously trying to ignore the person sitting on the smaller throne next to him.

“Daughter, it pleases me much that you have blessed us all here with your presence,” came Viserys’ voice. I stood up straight and shot him a polite smile. Next to him, Alicent glared daggers at me in the corner of my eye.

He’d put on weight in the few months since I’d last seen him. Viserys had always been prone to overindulge in food and wine. When Prince Baelon had been alive, he’d dragged Viserys out every morning to spar. After he died and Viserys became heir, that exercise stopped and my royal father had begun piling on the pounds. Now it seemed he was indulging himself even more which didn’t bode well for him living a long and healthy life in which he somehow outlives Alicent.

“I, and my Lord Husband, thank you for your welcome, Father,” I replied. At my words Laenor stepped forward and bowed again and Viserys’ smile grew even wider. Probably at the thought that heirs were only around the corner if we were finally getting on. I forged onward. “I have heard I have a new brother, Father, and have come here to pay respects.”

That got the court murmuring and Alicent frowning. Daeron had not been presented to the court yet and likely wouldn’t for a month or so. Not until the Maester could be sure he was unlikely to fall prey to any of the common ailments baby’s were wont to get in Westeros. The fact that I had come early, seemingly eager to meet a male sibling, no doubt had them all wondering what I was up too. Viserys, on the other hand, merely beamed at my perceived love for a new brother.

“Of course, daughter! I will arrange a private family meal and you can catch up with your other siblings as well.” Oh Viserys, you poor silly fool. This is not going to go how you want it too.

As Laenor and I made a show of happily accepting I realised something. This is going to be another awkward family dinner again, isn’t it?
After waiting around and chatting to the various nobles, touching base with a few of the present Blacks to boot, until it was socially appropriate to retreat, Laenor and I found ourselves in a suite of rooms. Our luggage had been brought up and unpacked for us, I was relieved to note. Ser Byren seemed the type to ‘lose’ it in transit.

Now I felt a tiny shred of guilt for making a mention to Father that he didn’t seem to be enjoying his job at the Dragonpit due to the fine temper he had been in. Father’s annoyed look had told me he’d gotten my meaning and that Ser Hastwyck wouldn’t have his royal appointment much longer. Only a tiny one though. One that could easily be banished by remembering his sneer.

Before we dressed, I collared a passing servant myself and had two messages sent out. One to the Guild of Alchemists to request a meeting at their soonest convenience and the other to Ser Harwin Strong and Larys Strong, inviting them to eat with us tomorrow night.

No doubt Alicent would be more interested in my message to Harwin. At the moment, even Viserys occasionally contracted the Alchemist’s Guild so even if many might mutter about it, it would likely be written off as a product of my uncommon interest in alchemy. No one would invoke the w-word in relation to it at least. Harwin was a different story. Laenor would have to be there at all times, Larys too. If I got permission to search the tunnels I would have to convince the older brother to remain with Laenor and allow me to go alone or with just Larys. No one would believe I’d sleep with Larys, poor guy. It was an annoyance but if I had to play the political game I needed to stop handing my enemies ammunition.

A few hours later, a steward stopped by to lead us to the private dining area used by the royal family as if I, the heir apparent, did not know where it was. I kept my smile gracious though. I could not afford rumours of a bad temper to go about. I gave word for a steward to follow us with the gifts I’d bought.

When we arrived, Viserys and Alicent were there sans children but clutching a sniffling bundle of cloth Alicent that I assumed to be Daeron. Thankfully, the Kingsguard on duty was not the Lord Commander. I’d probably end up stabbing Criston if I had to deal with him today.

Father enveloped me in a hug I wish I could let myself enjoy before moving on to Laenor. Hugs from the royal person were not something that happened everyday and the aftermath left Laenor looking dumbfounded. I was hard not to laugh as Viserys steered me over to the latest addition to the family. Daeron was a baby. Babies, for the most part, look exactly the same. Still, I made a show of cooing over him and even managed to coax a smile from him.

I was interrupted from making a show of being a good big sister by a bundle of energy flinging itself into my legs. This one I gave a genuine smile to as Helaena beamed up at me.

“Hello little one!” I exclaimed as I lifted her up. She immediately curled into me for a hug I gladly returned. In the corner of my eye, Viserys smile widened and Alicent looked as if someone had just served her curdled milk.

“Did you bring presents?” she asked, eye wide.

“Of course!” I smiled and let her down. As I did I caught sight of Aegon and Aemond.

I’d tried. I really had. I’d played the doting big sister, read them stories and made time for them. It had seemed like it was working for a while. Then I’d noticed him drawing back, shying away. When Alicent had suggested betrothing me to Aegon, the boy had exploded into a fury before
storming away which had nixed that idea. I’d tried to coax the reason for his outburst from him but what I’d got was a whole lot of garbled, snot covered whining that sounded as if it could be ripped straight from Alicent’s mouth.

I’d gathered she’d spent every moment I wasn’t with Aegon telling him I was stealing his birthright, intending on killing him or worse. A whole lot of me was furious. Alicent had terrified the poor boy and in doing so had laid the first slab on the path to the Dance. On the other hand, the Rhaenyra in me was angry that her overtures of love had been denied and wanted to slap the sulky little brat for being rude.

It was had to separate that out.

Helaena had been a pleasant success. Evidently, Alicent hadn’t found the need to fill her daughter’s head with visions of me literally eating babies and by the time she’d realised a need too nothing short of watching me murder kittens was going to convince Helaena I was anything other than the greatest older sister to ever exist. In response, she’d kept Aemond from me as much as she could get away with. So now I had two sulky little brothers and a bundle of energy and affection for a sister.

And now Daeron. Was it too much to hope she was lured into a false sense of security by me relocating to Dragonstone? Given the way she was clutching him to her chest, I’d say not.

“Aegon, look at you! You’ve grown so much,” I said with all the false pride of an older sister. He straightened under my scrutiny and shot me a practised smile that I was impressed to see only looked slightly strained. Aemond gave me a baleful look as I turned to him. Mother above, what had Alicent been telling him that a four year old would have that expression.

“Have you started squiring yet?” I asked.

“He has, under Ser Criston Cole,” Alicent said from somewhere behind me. There was a note of maliciousness to her voice. Her acquisition of Cole was one of her greatest victories and she enjoyed shoving it in my face at every conceivable moment.

“Has Ser Criston forbidden him to speak?” I asked her archly, my temper coming to the fore for a moment.

“Rhaenyra!” barked Viserys, warning in his tone. Beside him, Laenor looked like he’d rather be informing The Cannibal that he was, in fact, a very delicious baby dragon and Alicent looked triumphant. Aemond laid a hand on his brother’s arm, looking ready to leap at me and start biting.

“I apologise. That was ill-done of me,” I answered, forcing the anger down. It would not do to pull a Daemon and try to punch a seven-year old child. A traumatised seven-year old child who was terrified enough, I reminded myself.

“You shouldn’t apologise, Aegon was being rude,” came Helaena’s pouted response.

“No, he wasn’t!” Aemond all but screeched and Helaena glared at him with such ferocity I suddenly wanted to laugh.

“No, Helaena is right. I was being rude. I apologise, Sister.”

Oh, that was bad. Aegon had finally found his voice and I could see Ser Criston’s polished and precise manner in it. Aemond shot me a look of pure venom even as Aegon struggled to keep his polite smile up even as he shook in fear. It was hard to be angry with him when he looked like he was about to faint. I clapped my hands together and gestured the forgotten gifts forward.
Aegon looked as if his soul was about to leave his body when he saw the dagger. I made sure to give it to him hilt first, it may have a fancy sheath but given the way the boy was eyeing it anyone would think I was seconds away from stabbing him with it. His bow was polite enough and I was somewhat amused to see that his first instinct was to unsheathe it and poke it to see if it was sharp. It was and he made his finger bleed. He didn't thank me but I let it go because Alicent was making such a fuss you’d think he’d just cut his thumb off.

After that, I presented Helaena with her thread. She was fond of sewing and she was good at it too. She thanked me happily and her bow was sloppy but genuine. Aemond took his gifts with a pout and a bow so shallow that had it come from anyone else would have been breathtakingly rude. Still he was four and convinced I was going to murder him and his siblings at some point so I overlooked it.

Daeron wasn’t old enough to do anything more than gurgle and wiggle so Alicent thanked me for his gifts with such an icy tone that I came close to calling her on it. Our impromptu staring match was interrupted by Viserys clapping his hands together loudly.

“Perhaps we should all sit down,” he said after Alicent and I recovered from our simultaneous heart attacks.

Laenor seized the King’s interruption like a drowning man spotting dry land and all but threw himself into his seat. I took a seat at his side at a much more sedate pace after favouring Helaena with a smile and wink. Helaena took the chair to my other side and stuck her tongue out at Aemond when Viserys and Alicent weren’t looking. Daeron was handed off to his nursemaids and whisked away as the food was laid out.

“I have heard you’ve been busy on Driftmark, Ser Laenor,” said Alicent after a period of silence as we dug in. Laenor gave a her a smile and nodded.

“Father had me overseeing the ongoing construction at High Tide and working to ensure Spicetown’s growth is well managed,” he replied. “But he’s made other arrangements after speaking with Rhaenyra.”

Before Alicent could spring whatever nasty remark she’d been setting up, Viserys interrupted.

“Speaking with? He has been on Dragonstone?” The question was directed at me more than Laenor.

“Yes, Lord Corlys travelled back recently. Although he’ll be leaving again soon for the Stepstones once more.” I said, leaving out the fact that he’d only come back to yell at Laenor for not producing an heir fast enough and his reduction of Laenor’s duties being directly related to that.

“Is there any news of Daemon?” asked Viserys and I briefly had a vision of him wearing my soup bowl. Judging from the brief look of utter distaste that flashed across Alicent’s face, we were still united in our feelings on Daemon. As Laenor explained to situation on the islands, I allowed myself to tune out, whilst massaging my suddenly aching fingers.

Then again, Daemon was usually the only topic that we did agree on. The rumours about their supposed affair were true and had been the basis for Otto’s complete and utter loathing of the man. Daemon’s antics had also been the basis for the rift in the friendship I had been cultivating with Alicent given that she perceived him abandoning her to shower me with attention. That I very much didn’t want it hadn’t meant much to her.

Still, whaling on Daemon (or his reputation when he wasn’t present) was a good wholesome
activity both the Blacks and the Greens used as a point of unity. I thought it was nice that we could all put aside our differences every now and again but Viserys apparently didn’t see it that way. Even when Daemon had… Even when I had told him about Daemon he hadn’t cared to listen.

Instead, he’d scolded me for turning against family. Told me my grandfather would be ashamed to see me using court politics to so shame my own Uncle. I suppressed the old rage. I knew Viserys was wrong, Prince Baelon would have cracked both their heads together had he been informed about Daemon’s behaviour. It was in Viserys’ nature though to seek the easy path, to ignore problems and allow them escalate until they exploded in his face.

My fingers were proof enough.

The Dance of Dragons was proof enough.

I tuned back in to discover Laenor and Viserys discussing what could be done about the Dornish potentially allying with the Triarchy. As much as I didn’t wish to do anything that would help Daemon, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to score some brownie points with Viserys for at least trying.

“The Dornish follow the Seven, do they not?” I asked.

“Hmmm, yes. It’s belief is stronger to the west but those on the coast do follow it,” he replied, stroking his moustache. I hated that stupid moustache so much.

“Perhaps we can send some singers into the western part of Dorne to sing about the evils of slavery,” I suggested.

“It couldn’t hurt and at best it could cause a rift in Dornish unity. I will put the idea to the Master of Whispers.” Oh good. It’ll never get done then. Honestly, Viserys why did you even appoint Jaremy Corbray. He thinks any kind of sneaking around is beneath anyone with ‘honour’ and certainly beneath a Knight like himself.

Oh who am I kidding? Incompetence is entirely in character for you.
Painfully awkward dinner finally over with, Laenor and I slunk back to our rooms after promising that gifts would be following us via boat. Awaiting us were too notices in reply to my earlier messages. One from the Alchemists Guild inviting us to tour their building tomorrow and discuss whatever business I had with one of their Wisdoms. The second was from the Strong brothers accepting our invitation to dinner.

Laenor opted to stick to his own rooms that night. It was all well and good for him to sleep in my bed some of the time but too much was considered unseemly which I honestly considered an odd double standard. Sleep didn’t come easy and found myself awake as dawn broke over King’s Landing feeling as if I hadn’t slept at all.

The maids, likely Alicent’s creatures as my own had not yet arrived, clucked over my dark, sunken eyes and brought out a range of cosmetics I was forced to sharply order to be put away as I was fairly certain it was full of fun and exciting poisons that I wasn’t keen to rub into my face.

Instead I settled for a quick, relatively speaking anyway, bath and several cups of Mint Tea to pull my mind into the present and out of the longing to go back bed. I still didn’t look my best when Laenor presented himself at my door but I couldn’t afford to put off a visit to the Guild. Not if they could help me get the Black Powder working.

I opted for a litter instead of riding through the city. I was too tense to smile and make it look convincing and too tired to play the beautiful flawless princess of the people. Laenor sulked about it as it turns out he genuinely didn’t like the litter but he took pity when faced with an expression that I had hoped conveyed the possibility of impending wrath but according to him made me look like I was about to cry.

The city was awake around us. I heard peddlers and stall owners hawking their goods, two men arguing about a broken cartwheel, a gold cloak hauling a thief off to the barracks and more as I dozed the entire way to the Guild. Laenor left me alone the entire way, which was something I was grateful for.

The Wisdom that greeted us was a tall man with dark hair turning grey and eyes that betrayed a First Man origin. His bow was deep and respectful and seemed genuine. When he straightened up, he had a smile on his face that had his eyes twinkling.

“Your Graces, can I start by saying how honoured we are that you are visiting today,” he began. “I am Wisdom Jerrett,”

“I’m honoured to be invited to visit, Wisdom, I’ve heard much about the Guild,” I replied. Keep back the main flattery for later if they got stingy with secrets. Laenor echoed my sentiments but seemed happy for me to take the lead, so I did.

Jerrett gestured us to follow. I allowed him to show off the buildings and the labs. They were impressive for a medieval guild. He seemed especially proud of the custom-made glass implements they imported from Myr, expanding on their uses. I managed to understand every third word but I think the gist was that they were used in distillation, something that surprised me. From what I’d seen, the idea of distillation didn’t seem to well known in Westeros at large.

I made sure Laenor and I made all the appropriate noises of awe and shock and Wisdom Jerrett only swelled further with pride. Here was a man who lived and breathed Alchemy and the Guild.
Any compliment for them was compliment to him. I dread to think how he would have reacted had I accidentally insulted them.

It was a very happy Wisdom that led us into a bright and airy office and seated himself behind the desk as we placed ourselves in front of it.

“Truly well worth the visit, do you not think, Rhaenyra?” Laenor began. The Wisdom puffed up even more.

“Oh indeed. Forgive me, however, I did not come entirely for the tour,” I made sure to inject a note of apology into my tone. I did not want the Wisdom to suspect he was being used. I needn’t have bothered. Jerrett leant forward in his chair, looking fascinated.

“We had heard rumours of Her Grace’s interest in Alchemy. They were not wrong?” He sounded thrilled at the thought of a royal alchemist.

“I fear I do not understand most principals of Alchemy but I had been attempting to recreate a recipe I found in an old book. I confess, I have only found failure,” I ‘admitted’. Jerrett looked thoughtful before pulling a battered and already scrawled on piece of paper towards him.

“Could you describe the recipe? And the book?” he asked, preparing a quill and ink. I relayed the main points of Black Powder to him. After jotting it down he summoned an apprentice and ordered the young-looking boy to see if the Guild had anything similar in their records.

“The books itself… I remember it didn’t make a a lot of sense, it was in poor condition to start with. The language was confused and imprecise, I suspect now of course, that it was a poor translation of an earlier work. I’d thought it Valyrian in origin. I know that it was likely worth it weight in gold but as a child it was merely an interesting prop to practise my hand with.”

The Wisdom nodded along with my explanation, face solemn.

“A sad but common tale. Have you given thought that it may have been fake? Some sort of joke?”

It wasn’t and I knew it wasn’t but I could hardly tell him why. I shrugged in response and he stroked his chin before shrugging himself.

“No doubt, Your Grace, we shall discover the truth when young Harald returns from his search. If it is legitimate however, I would be very interested to see it,” his tone was light but a book on ancient tech probably had him drooling internally.

I had an idea.

My understanding of the tech I’d written down had been shaky at best, mostly half remembered from a satirical book on rebuilding the world if you got stuck in the past somehow. I wouldn’t have the time to interpret that half understanding of my younger self into real world tech if I was going to be getting political and I certainly couldn’t trust Maesters to help.

“Of course, Wisdom Jerrett. It may be selfish but I had hoping to use anything newly discovered to improve Dragonstone.”

The Wisdom got my hint immediately. He nodded.

“Should in turn out to be worth looking into, perhaps we could discuss setting up a small campus there. You would have the finest minds of the Alchemist’s Guild on hand to sort the wheat from the chaff.”
I was feeling indulgent enough not to point out that being involved in my pseudo-tech uplift from the beginning would massively boost their prestige in relation to the Maesters.

It took ‘young Harald’ another half and hour to appear with an old leather bound book. Jerrett immediately flipped it open, sending a cloud of dust into the air that had me sneezing and Laenor coughing.

“Apologies, apologies, Your Graces. A hazard one gets used to when working with old tomes. Now, lets see… Powders, powders… hmmm, how interesting.” After that he was silent for a few moments but I could see his grey eyes flickering back and forth across the page. Finally, he shut it and handed the tome back to Harald.

“Take this back to the archives and have a room set up with a supply of Niter, Vitriol and Charcoal,” he barked. Harald all but dematerialised from the mans room. Jerrett then smiled at us.

“It seems this book may well be the real thing. The Black Powder you have described is known to us. Although I suspect it is not Valyrian in origin but somewhere further East,” he explained.

I was forced to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning. So it was me, I had gotten the recipe wrong. My dream of shooting Otto in his stupid knees could still come true!

“The East? Like Yi-Ti?” he asked, barely constrained excitement. Of all of the Sea Snakes legendary journeys it seemed that Yi-Ti excited Laenor the most, I would have to remember that. The Wisdom was nodding.

“Indeed. I have often said that at it’s heart, Alchemy is the scientific study of magic. In the West, this method has only been in use for a few hundred years. We are too eager to rely on superstition and belief. The East are far more enlightened than us in this regard. The understand the need to study magic and have since before the fall of the Great Empire of the Dawn.” He sounded like he was lecturing but not even my internal glee at the thought of Black Powder could distract me from that name drop.

“The Great Empire of the Dawn. I thought it a myth?” The Wisdom shook his head so hard I was worried he was going to make himself dizzy.

“Not at all. We have a lot of evidence that it very much existed although perhaps not ruled by God Kings.” We all gave an indulgent chuckle at that.

“What is this evidence? How does it relate to Alchemy?” asked Laenor. Talk of the East had definitely made this visit way more interesting for him.

“Oh, there’s the obvious evidence such as the Five Forts and other such buildings dotted about Essos but if we’re talking Alchemy then nothing is more proof than the Tablet of Stars.” He said it with such reverence that both I and Laenor found ourselves leaning forward.

“Found in Asshai, few Westerosi scholars have ever managed to get close enough to describe it. They say it speaks of the Great Empire’s fall into anarchy and the first Long Night.”

Oh. Oh no. Oh god no. No white walkers please.

My face must have reflected my horror because he chuckled and leant back.

“I wouldn’t worry, Your Grace. Many civilisations from that time have records of the Long Night.
It’s been accepted by scholars all over Westeros and Essos that this was some sort of super winter. Keeping an Empire together in those circumstances would have been next to impossible. Why, what records we have from the North in that same time period says that even a much smaller kingdom shattered into independent tribes.”

Why did today keep going from bad to good to bad? I was interrupted from my brooding and Laenor’s total fan-booing over Yi-ti by Harald’s reappearance to let us know the room Jerrett had requested had been prepared. We dutifully followed him through the halls to another surprisingly well lit room. Laid out were three jars of powder I recognised, a mortar and pestle, measuring implements, a candle, wooden splints and for some reason a knife.

We watched in silence as Jerrett pulled on a pair of gloves and began grinding the three ingredients into a fine powder. He measured out a mixture that looked roughly like my own before mixing to Black Powder itself. Finally he took a small pinch of the finished powder a placed it on a ceramic tile.

“It does look like yours,” Laenor hazarded after a moment.

“Eastern books refer to this as Burn Powder. When properly prepared, it will burn and explode readily,” explained Jerrett, lighting a wooden splint. Then, as we watched, he placed it against the powder. Nothing happened.

“I see your look of confusion. This powder is not the finished product. You likely stopped here thinking it finished but there is one more step.” He pulled off his glove and picked up the knife. Then whilst holding his hand over the small deposit of powder he pricked his finger and bled on it. Using the knife he ensured the blood was soaked in before retrieving another splint.

This time, when he pressed the splint to it, it burst into flame.

I stared in horror, not bothering to smother it in a mask of politeness.

“I understand your horror, Your Grace. We try not to use blood in our practises here. I take it the original manual did not go into detail about this part.”

I shook my head. I had no words. Beside me, Laenor looked similarly pale. Looking sympathetic, Jerrett steered us back to his office, leaving Harald to clean up.
It had been Laenor who’d had the sense to arrange a further meeting about setting up a satellite campus on Dragonstone and access to the ‘book’. I’d been too busy trying to set my feelings in order. In order to create Black Powder in sufficient quantities I would need to wade through a literal river of blood. I would burn through any reputation I developed. It would be worse than original Rhaenyra, worse than Maegor even.

I blinked in the afternoon light as Laenor steered me into the litter. I felt numb. What kind of bullshit logic did this place operate on? All this talk about ancient tablets, the Long Night and blood magic was taking a second seat to the fact that even when the first round of testing had not worked I’d still assumed I’d get the Black Powder somehow. That I’d still have guns and that all the politics could be avoided with a superior show of firepower.

When the litter stopped we were not at the Red Keep but the Dragonpit. At my questioning look, Laenor smiled and placed a warm hand over my cool one.

“You looked upset. I figured we could make a start on that promise to fly together,” he said, with a reassuring smile.

“Thank you. And… Thank you for sorting things out with Wisdom Jerrett.” I had to fight a wince at my tone. I sounded exhausted. I felt exhausted. I wanted nothing more than to fly to Dragonstone, curl up in my bed and weep at how unfair it all was. He held me close for a few moments and I tried not to care about that jolt of wrongness.

The flight on Syrax cheered me up. The feeling of freedom that being a Princess tended to strangle. As Seasmoke and Syrax danced over the waves we caught sight of the vast bulk of Vhagar flying alongside two ships. One bore a Velaryon banner and the other Targaryen one. Together, Laenor and I moved in, circling Vhagar. She was not a fast beast and our playful flitting back forth certainly got a rise out of her rider if the yelling was any indication.

I felt better by the time we had all landed and the dragons moved into Dragonpit. Less like the world had ended but I still felt fragile, as if any little thing could shatter me. I couldn’t afford to shatter in King’s Landing. I happily sank into Laena’s hug before moving away and laughing as Laenor ruffled his sister’s immaculate ringlets and she slapped at his hands in mock annoyance.

“So, I hear you were on the wrong end of Father recently,” Laena mentioned as we clambered into the litter. Laenor groaned and Laena laughed. She was in an odd position when it came to her father. She was the second half of his grand plan to cement his legacy. Beautiful, wealthy and equipped with a dragon, Corlys had sought marry his daughter to my father, the King, because aim high I guess. When he failed, he’d used her to secure Braavos’ support in his upcoming conquest.

A marriage to the then Sea Lord’s son with the understanding he would have the prestige of a dragon rider for a wife, the Sea Snake’s incredible wealth and the subtle pressure of his wife’s family controlling shipping in the narrow sea via the Stepstones backing him to succeed his father when he died. But the Sea Lord of Braavos’ died early and Tycheo Hartios had proved an utter wastrel. He’d quickly squandered his father’s money after his death by making several appallingly bad investments. Investments that had actually managed to damage his family name by sheer association. Apparently the Braavosi nobles saw lack of financial acumen as major turn off much as one dishonourable family member could tank a Westerosi House for generations, I supposed. By the time Laena was eligible to marry he’d been a penniless scion of a declining house.
Corlys’ pride would not allow him to marry his daughter to such a man but a lot of the upfront money for the Conquest had been Hartios money. The Iron Bank themselves were involved when the contract was written and the contract stated she was to marry him. So Corlys came up with excuse after excuse as to why the wedding couldn’t happen yet whilst plying Tycheo with wine and women in the hope the fool would get himself killed.

No wonder he’d jumped on Daemon marrying Laena in the original timeline, in fact, I’d take a bet that Corlys had asked Daemon to rid him of the stupid boy in the process. Just mentioning his name would have Corlys grinding his teeth, a fact I can assure you I did not take advantage of.

The odd intersection of the deadlock on the marriage front, the massive dragon and Laena’s own personality meant her father was completely unsure of how to deal with her and so solved his problem by not dealing with her at all. As far as I could tell, as long as he was unable to incorporate her into his ongoing plans to strengthen House Velaryon, he liked to pretend she didn’t exist.

“Rhaenyra dared have an original idea,” said Laenor dryly, sending Laena into peels of laughter. “He took it as well as expected.”

That just made Laena laugh harder.

“He blundered though. Now I know he has men on Dragonstone I intend to send them back to him via Driftmark,” I said lightly. Laenor frowned, likely realising that I was referring to Joffrey. No doubt he was worrying about the Knight being in danger. Corlys was basically a more restrained Tywin, I’d come to realise. He would not strike at me for the insult but Joffrey had no such protection.

“Oh, I would pay to see Father’s face when he gets that note from Mother. Probably along with her commentary as well. ‘Damn you, you thick-headed fool!’”

Laena’s excellent impression of her mother had me chuckling as well as Laenor guffawing. The ride back was spent with the two siblings making increasingly more ridiculous impressions of their parents. The horror of my earlier discovery seemed so far away but before I could let myself make plans for the future, I had to live through a meal with Harwin and Larys.

Before that, we had to show our faces at court. Viserys greeted Laena warmly and Laenor and I chatted with Lord Hayford and one of the Rosbys. Both Houses were Blacks through and through but it was always a good idea to reinforce that loyalty. In addition, Laenor had managed to arrange a sit down meeting with Lord Wendwater through his nephew by discussing timber shipments. Today would not be a total loss then.

Lord Wendwater was a hesitant Green. Given the complete lack of knowledge about where the young, impetuous Boros Baratheon would jump, he was right to be hesitant. The Stormlands bordered Lord Wendwater’s lands and would make a juicy target should the Stormlands declare for a different claimant. I had been hoping to start on the other side of the Crownlands in Cracklaw Point but those Lords rarely came to court. I spent the rest of the session tracking down and persuading the Black leaning Lord Celtigar to help me with the matter.

Laena left us late on so that we could prepare to meet the Strong’s. Laenor thought it important we coordinated in order to subtly reinforce the fact Harwin had no chance with me, just in case he was still harbouring any mistaken thoughts. Which meant I got to try on a whole bunch of dresses, much to my internal glee. The current court style was heavily influenced by the Reach, not one I could imitate for obvious reasons, so finding a fashionable solution to that dilemma was always fun.
I had adopted a Vale influenced wardrobe, for the most part. The long swishy dresses that accentuated the figure usually accompanied by an equally swishy mantle that could be made to evoke wings, useful for falcons and dragons. Whereas most of the Vale dresses were woollen, I favoured silks and satins in materials. I did not need the dresses to last, nor did I need them to keep me warm. I opted for black and teal colour scheme, evoking mine and Laenor’s House’s.

Laenor had little interest in fashion, like most Westerosi lords he liked to be seen as above it, but he trusted me when it came to saying it with clothes and figuring out what others were saying with their style of dress so I didn’t have to swat the back of his head too much as I ordered the servants to lay out his outfit.

It had been a good idea to start preparing early as it turned out, we’d barely gotten ourselves dressed when Larys and Harwin arrived.

Harwin was a gorgeous man. Tall, muscled and with a face that could melt any maiden’s heart and bearing that distinctive nose that would be as good as a smoking gun if I gave into the temptation, it really was not hard to see why Rhaenyra had risked everything to be with him. Larys, on the other hand, was everything his brother was not. He walked with a limp due to his twisted foot, his face could charitably be described as interesting when he smiled which was not a regular occurrence and he had peculiar, intense way of looking at you that gave you the impression he was trying to imagine you without clothes on.

Given a choice, I’d take a talk with Larys over Harwin any day. He was breathtakingly intelligent and whilst shy, when he did speak it was always worth paying attention to him. Harwin on the other hand was quite willing to blather out every single thought that entered his fool head and I can assure you, very little of his thoughts were worth they energy it took to have them.

As much as Larys was the complete opposite of a Westerosi lord, Harwin was the epitome of one.

“Sorry we’re early, Your Grace. It’s difficult to time things with limpy here.” The shove that accompanied the comment nearly sent Larys sprawling but the smaller man recovered. Larys’ face did not move from it’s usual scowl but his eyes were full of hate. If Harwin wasn’t even making the effort to reign in his usual Westerosi dickishness tonight was not going to be fun.

“It’s not a problem, Ser Strong. Larys is a friend and I’m always willing to make accommodations for my friends.” I aimed a bright smile at the clubfoot but failed to coax one in return. I took his arm and guided him to the table, sitting him next to me if only to serve as a barrier against Harwin’s ongoing inane chatter.

If the start of the meal was awkward it only became more so as time went on. Harwin alternated between taking cheap shots at his brother, shamelessly flirting with me, drinking enough wine to kill a horse and implying that Laenor was gay or possibly a woman in disguise. Some of his insults were a bit indistinct. Larys kept quiet, only speaking to correct his brother’s more outrageous claims and to ask how Ser Joffrey had recovered from the accident at my wedding tourney. He seemed happy to learn that Joffrey was up and about, finding ways to make himself useful. Both I and Laenor were wondering when Larys had even befriended Joffrey. I resolved to ask him about it next time I saw him.

Finally, as we finished up dessert, I broached the topic I had invited them for.

“I must admit I had an alternative motive for inviting you tonight,” I said, as the servants cleared the table. Harwin perked up like a dog at the sound of the treat packet being opened but Larys merely nodded as if he’d completely expected this.
“Do you require our support in some kind scheme?” asked Harwin, eagerly. I forced myself not to grimace. If I ever wanted to sheme, it’d be Larys I’d choose. How Harwin had not given the game away himself in the original timeline was probably considered a minor miracle by some religions.

“No, nothing like that, Ser Strong,” Laenor butted in, hastily. “You are aware of course that until she was four my lady wife lived in the Tower of the Hand?” Harwin look puzzled as if that had never occurred to him before but Larys merely nodded for him to continue.

“As a child I was fond of exploring the tunnels in the Tower. I fear they are littered with old possessions of mine. I was wondering if you would allow me access so that I could reclaim them.”

“Tunnels? I was unaware of this,” Larys responded before Harwin could even open his mouth.

“Regardless, I’d be happy to accompany to accompany you,” Harwin quickly said, cutting off anything else his brother could say. It was what I had expected but luckily Laenor had come up with several excuses to lure the older Strong brother into staying with him. Harwin had little argument and was forced to sit there like a big, dumb puppy that knew it had done something wrong but couldn’t quite figure out what as Larys limped his way out the door as I followed.
The Tower of the Hand was much changed since it had been Prince Baelon’s place of residence. Unsurprising, I suppose as it had seen two hands since. I only realised I stopped in the entrance way when Larys limped up behind me.

“Is everything well, Your Grace?” he asked quietly, interrupting my mind as it began recreating the Tower as it had been when I’d first awoken as Rhaenyra.

“Apologies, Larys. It has changed so much.” He nodded but didn’t elaborate further. We made our way inside. Lyonel’s household didn’t seem to be in a rush to bother us but I’d bet they’d be eager to report my presence in the tower to their master the moment they could.

I didn’t bother making a show about remembering the entrance location. If it had been Harwin it would have worked but behaving like a ditzy woman around Larys was pointless. He’d just see through it and even if he didn’t, he wasn’t given to the pandering most men were all too willing to engage in around me.

The tunnels were as dusty and gloomy as I remembered. My little collection had been stored in an alcove further in and I was proud that it only took one or two wrong turns before I located the stash. Larys’ head seemed to be on a swivel, his eyes wide as he took in the surprisingly extensive tunnel system. All I can say is Maegor definitely didn’t trust his Hands. There wasn’t a single room in the Tower you couldn’t eavesdrop on from the tunnels.

The book was there, covered in grime and dust but other than that it looked undamaged. Well, book was an exaggeration really, it was a loose collection of paper I was telling everyone was copied from a book. It was the other items of the stash that took me completely of guard though. Gently, as if it might collapse at the touch, I lifted up the blue fabric of the blanket. As I realised just what it was, emotion I wasn’t prepared for punched me in the gut.

I suppose this was just going to be one of those days and so I resigned myself to the storm of regret.

“I had forgotten this was here. I thought it lost,” I choked and then realised I was crying. Behind me, Larys shifted uncomfortably. I turned the blanket over, obscured by dust but right where I remembered, the silver falcon and moon of the Arryn’s.

Oh, I had not wanted to love Aemma Arryn. The Rhaenyra in me had forced me but I hadn’t wanted to. The day she’d announced her pregnancy had been awful, I’d wept so much because I’d known. Aemma had assured me that a new child would not make her love me any less and I couldn’t… I couldn’t tell her what was coming. She’d ben desperate for a boy. Runciter had given the okay to get pregnant again but she’d died. Died because Viserys had married her when she’d been eleven and by thirteen she’d already given birth. A brother that had died before his first name day. It had ruined her health, ruined her body.

Viserys should have known. Runciter should have known. They still kept pushing, for them a male heir was more important than a living wife. I’d come along and the effort alone had nearly killed her. She’d been fifteen and bed bound for months afterwards. Viserys hadn’t given up. He’d kept pushing and only miscarriages had followed. Until the babe she carried hadn’t died in the womb like the rest. Until the birth killed her. What had Viserys been thinking!? I knew the answer to that. He hadn’t. Stupid, stupid bastard!
Seven month’s wasn’t enough to say goodbye to your Mother!

Larys was awkwardly patting me on the back and I realised I was sobbing. I must have been doing it for some time if Larys had been moved enough to try his own brand of comforting. I dashed the tears from my eyes and gathered everything for the pages to a cracked pitcher.

“My apologies, Larys. Old memories.” I hated how thick my voice sounded.

“I quite understand. My own mother died in the child bed.” His voice was quiet. “Do you fear it?”

The question took me by surprise. It was considered a woman’s duty to marry and birth heirs above anything else. To ask a woman if she feared the child bed was like asking a man if he feared battle. Fighting words to the Westerosi.

Oh but I did fear child birth. Men would not understand and the only older female figure in my life was Alicent. I feared the child bed so badly that when I thought of it, in the dead of night, I was in danger of sending myself into spirals of panic. Breath coming short, head spinning - all for nothing because no matter how I twisted and turned I simply could not get away with not having children.

“I would be a fool not too. Both my grandmothers died in childbirth, my mother died in childbirth.” My voice was wavering at the thought of it. “But I will do my duty when the time comes as they did before me.”

“I have no doubt you will, Your Grace. If I may offer some advice though? Most Maesters do not study childbirth overly much. Make sure yours is prepared.”

I didn’t have time to delve into that comment because we emerged from the hatch to find Lord Strong and Viserys waiting for us. It wasn’t the two most powerful in the Seven Kingdoms that set my stomach rolling though, it was the man that flanked them. Ser Criston Cole. I suppose I couldn’t avoid him forever, he was still the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

Someone up there really hates me though. This hasn’t been the worst day I’ve had in Westeros but by Gods, it’s definitely in the running.

Lord Strong studied me for a moment and then barked out an order for something clean myself with. I was ditched, covered in grime and dust with clear tear tracks on my face. I must have looked a state.

“You went into the tunnels unguarded,” said the King. I examined him, trying to get an idea of which mood he was in tonight. He wasn’t angry, not truly, he seemed more annoyed. Unfortunately for him, I’d been reminded of his shortcomings recently so I was definitely not going to roll over and accept being reprimanded by him for something he had no right to stick his nose into.

“It was hardly a risk. None of the tunnels lead outside the Keep and it was important,” I sneered back. I shouldn’t provoke him but I was tired. Today had been far too much and my emotions had been stretched to the breaking point. He scowled at me before focusing on the bundle I held.

“It’s the blanket Mother gave me,” I answered before he could query it. At my answer, the irritation left him and instead he smiled indulgently.

“Ah. It makes more sense now. You want it for your own babe?” he said as a maid bustled in with the water. I hadn’t even remembered it was there but now that I thought about it, it was a nice idea. I nodded as I used the water to clean myself up.

“Well, I can’t argue with that. Does this mean you are pregnant?” Ser Criston stiffened at his
words. Oh great, don’t ask how I’m doing ruling Dragonstone or whether I have opinions on roads. Those things aren’t important to being Queen, it’s all about how many babies you can shoot out and whether they have the correct hair colour. I will be Queen, not Laenor’s broodmare!

Whoops, dial it back and answer the man.

“No, Father. I intend to wait for a year or two,” I told him. He frowned, anger evident on his features.

“It is your duty-”

“I understand my duty well, Father, but might I remind you of how your own mother died? My mother? Her mother? Even Queen Alysanne lost babes!” I snapped. He took a deep breath to retort but I held up a hand. “I am exhausted and wish to return to my rooms;”

That really wasn’t a lie but I doubt Laenor would let me sleep before we’d flicked through the pages together.

“Of course, Daughter. Ser Criston, please escort the Princess back her rooms.” Ouch, okay, I had that coming. Yelling at a King was not cool and all that but you really have to rub it in, Viserys?

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was silent as we made out way back. From the way his jaw was clenched, he was angry. No doubt Alicent would receive a report of tonight’s events. I nearly crashed into him when he stopped.

“Larys Strong?” he asked, finally.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. He spun around to face me.

“You’ll fuck Larys Strong but you will not have me?” he hissed. His hands were flexing around the hilt of his sword. I did not like where this was going. “When Prince Daemon nearly killed you, I defended you. I fought for you! You would take that disgusting boy-lover and the fucking clubfoot over me!?”

“You defended me, yes. You did your duty as a Kingsguard. Care to remember what else to oath of the Kingsguard commands? As for Larys, I did not fuck him. You know I did not. I am loyal to my husband. To Laenor Velaryon. Not to Daemon Targaryen. Not to Harwin or Larys Strong. And certainly not to you. And if you insult my husband in such a manner again, I will have you killed.”

The arctic tone of my voice caused him to stiffen, his hand clenched tightly around the hilt of his sword, his face turn to a mottled white of pure fury.

“Whore!” he hissed.

“If I am whore, Criston, what does it say about you that I will not have you?”

I was saved from his ire and rage by Harwin and one of the Cargyll twins rounding the corner and talking loudly. No doubt they saw my furious expression and Criston pulling back from me like a child with his hand in the cookie jar. The two newcomers paused.

“Ser Cargyll, Harwin. Returning to the Tower of the Hand?” I asked. Harwin was quick to tell me that his father had dispatched Ser Cargyll to fetch him but the knight in question was keeping a cool eye on Ser Criston. No doubt Viserys would receive the report we had argued and promptly dismiss it like every report of Criston’s behaviour in regards to me and Alicent.

“Thank you for escorting me this far, Ser Cole.” I slipped by him before he could insist on walking
me the entire way. “Good night, Ser Erryk, Ser Harwin.”

Laenor was still in my rooms when I returned, pacing up and down in some amount of agitation.

“Oh, you’re okay! The King is apparently in a fine temper to learn you’ve been messing with the Strong’s.” I put my bundle down on the table we had eaten on not so long ago.

“I set him straight,” I replied, negelecting to mention our spat. Gods, what the hell went off in that man’s head? To name his daughter heir but then screw her over in every other conceivable way? If you hate me, why make me heir? If you want me dead, why not just have me killed?

My head span and I grimaced. I couldn’t take any more of this yo-yo’ing. If everyday in Kings Landing was this exciting I’m going to give serious thought to moving to Ibb or something.

“You told him about the book?” Laenor asked, eyes wide. I shook my head and unfolded the blanket, grimacing at the state it was in. Laenor moved over, quickly collecting the pages before stopping to give a puzzled look at the rest of the items.

“Is that the wooden sword you stole from me at the Great Council?” he sounded dumbfounded, even as I smiled.

“You lost it in a bet,” I replied and he huffed before chuckling himself. “The blanket belonged to my mother and her mother before her. I intend to get it restored and give it to our child.”

A reassuring hand rubbed between my shoulder blades and he didn’t even tense up this time. Laenor put the pages aside. Apart from his sword, the pages and the blanket itself nothing really had any sentimental value. One of the maids was summoned to take the blanket away for cleaning and Laenor quickly hid his old toy from it’s ‘original thief’, he’d declared it his own ‘heirloom’. Then it was time to get to business.

We split the pages and read through them. I’d managed to get the agriculture ones, the ones that described selective breeding, crop rotation, farming machinery and food preservation. I’d also managed to get half of the notes on distillation. It was clear from my confused rambling I hadn’t really ‘gotten’ the concept of farming. For example, I’d made mention of a plough but there were no descriptions on how it would help, it’s purpose or even how it differed from normal farming techniques.

I dutifully wrote down a summary from what I could understand and glanced at Laenor. He was rigid in his seat, eyes flickering back and forth with excitement written large on his face.

That… probably wasn’t good.

“Rhaenrya! Look at this! If it’s right this could change everything.” He slid a page yellowed with time across to me and I picked it up. I gotten halfway through talking about mould when I realised what this entailed. Penicillin. I glanced back at Laenor who looked as if he was barely stopping himself from bouncing in his chair. Would Penicillin even work? Gun powder had not. If it did the possibilities were endless but the question was whether the spore even existed in Westeros.

“A medicine that can treat a massive range of illnesses. A near cure all,” he squeaked. “And look here. A section on birthing!”

Another paper was slid across. In a past life, my sister had been a midwife. For all that the concept of birth terrified me, I’d still been eager to listen to the stories told. Here’s a fun fact about midwifery, forceps are really, really useful for preventing unnecessary deaths in child birth. In our world they’d been invented by this one guy who’d kept them a secret, going so far as to blindfold
mothers during birth so no one would find out his trick. And then his family had done the same thing for the next 150 years.

I suddenly wanted to throw up. Could this have saved my mother’s life? As if reading my thoughts, Laenor laid a hand on mine.

“You were a child. Even if you had shown Runciter, he wouldn’t have listened,” he said kindly, before pulling free another page. “Look at this one! A simple device for amplifying sound. Simple! Yet not one Maester has ever thought to use something like this.”

Numb, I left him to his discovery’s and summoned a maid to help me prepare for bed. I fell asleep soon after to Laenor’s exclamations of excitement and frantic scribbling from the other room.
When I awoke and staggered out of bed regretting all my life choices, Laenor was still in the same place he’d been the night before, paper littering the table and floor around him. He waved me over and I collapsed into a chair opposite him. Mornings were hard. A maid hurried over and presented me with a cup of juice and some fruit, one of mine that arrived yesterday. I thanked her before turning my attention back to my husband, who was sorting the paper explosion into some kind of order.

“I’ve managed to create a system in which the papers are filed into general groups. A few of the big ones are Agriculture, Medicine and oddly enough Glass. Whoever wrote this really, really had a high opinion of glass,” he told me. Sue me, it’s super useful for everything and it’s a travesty we all just accept Myr makes the best glass. “From there I’ve ordered them into how much detail the text goes into producing the ‘technology’. I think we can start work on the Agricultural technologies on Dragonstone and Driftmark this year even.”

“You wish to start on Dragonstone and Driftmark? Why not the Crownlands? We need to start gathering and strengthening allies as soon as possible,” I asked, ignoring the slightly wild look in his eyes. He’d definitely not slept. His doublet was creased, his eyes dark and his hair an unbound mess. I resisted the urge to comb my hands through it, he wouldn’t appreciate it. He got defensive when it came to his hair.

“Have you ever worked with farmers?” I shook my head. My duties at Dragonstone mostly bought me into contact with the small time merchants in the port. “Well, they’re stubborn. Very stubborn. Not they they don’t have good reason, if they all try something new and they all fail then they do not eat and neither does anyone else.”

“The section on farming machinery is very vague and we’ll probably require the help of the Wisdom’s producing anything from it but the idea of actively breeding plants and animals for traits? We do that already but just not on the scale the book describes in necessary for fast change. The field system suggested, although I admit I’ve never heard of Norfolk, could be implemented across the islands within a year. Two at most. It’s underlying theory could spawn more technology the writer of this book couldn’t dream of!”

“And once we prove it works, we’ll be hip deep in Lord’s wanting to know how we did it.” I said slowly, unable to stop the cat-like smile of satisfaction growing across my face. He nodded along, eye bright now that I’d finally ‘gotten it’. I eyed his other stacks and had an idea.

“Laenor, have you looked anymore into the section on birthing?” I asked. He nodded and tapped a stack of pages, I recognised some of the terms. Had he seriously copied everything? I scooped a few of the pages up and found that yes, he had copied the entire thing by hand. He’d even tried producing sketches of the things I’d described. Some of them were remarkably close and some… well, they could use work.

“Larys said yesterday that his mother died in childbirth.” I said slowly. “Have you any relatives who…”

“Well, Father hardly likes to tell everyone but my birth ended Mother’s chances of another child. She struggled with Laena as well.” It was an awkward subject. Septons and Septas liked to wax lyrical about the miracle of birth and how the birthing bed was a woman’s ultimate duty but no one liked to acknowledge how dangerous it was, how often women died or lost their children.
“Larys said that most Maesters do not overly study child birth.” Laenor snorted in response.

“Maesters study everything,” he replied but my brain was spinning now. Taking what I knew of Westeros and of the Maesters and of how nearly every family in every generation had a tale of someone dying needlessly and comparing with vague memories of a sister who’d studied for years to be a midwife, who’d still not been allowed to do solo births until she had assisted others and had proven experience. Unbidden, my mind drifted to the doddering Runciter and the sneering Mellos and even my own Gerardys.

In truth, I had never been fond of the Maesters. Runciter had merely turned that dislike into a hardened idea to do something something about them in the distant future.

I thought about Westeros’ idea of midwives. Midwives were a tradition of the smallfolk and were usually older women who’d gotten the role through experience than study. It was sort of assumed anyone who was anyone had a Maester. If you were having to consult midwives and healers then you were as good as saying you didn’t have the money or prestige for one of Westeros’ knights of the mind.

“That’s right. They do. How could any man truly know a subject if he spends half a year studying at best?” I asked, slowly. After all, doctors studied for years and still had to jump through hoops to practise. Was this why so many died? Not malice or some conspiracy but simple mistakes made by men who’d never assisted in birth before. Afterall, the Maesters served a castle. They didn’t deliver every pregnant woman in a ten mile radius. Laenor was looking at me strangely.

“Think about it. How many times do you think Maester Gerardys has assisted in a birth? And he has several silver links.” Now Laenor looked thoughtful, probably because he knew the answer was zero.

“You believe that the inexperience of the Maesters is what kills their patients?” He asked slowly. I nodded eagerly.

“Yes! We have access to a set of ideas that could revolutionise medicine. We could create an entirely new set of healers, ones who study only the art of healing and may even specialise further into diseases or birthing.” Laenor stroked his chin but his mouth was twisted, as if he were wrestling with his thoughts and losing.

“The Maesters have always been Westeros’ healers. They have access to knowledge built up over centuries. Even if what is contained in the book is enough to challenge their supremacy, we’d need a massive investment to do so,” he pointed out, tone doubtful. Ah, pushback. I’ve presented something new too fast and it’s straining his Westerosi worldview. After all better farming is fine but knocking out a major pillar of the Maesters power? Questioning a system that’s been in use for thousands of years?

“Please, Laenor, any of this technology is unlikely to make the Maesters happy. Take the press for example? They make their money off of controlling access to books, deciding which books are copied and which are not. We could print any book a hundred times over for a fraction of the cost and in a fraction of the time.”

His face screwed up, a lifetime of socialisation telling him that this would not work.

“It’s much too far, much too fast. We’re trying to win you a throne, not take Westeros apart and put it back together again in a new order,” he pointed out finally. Damn him, he had a point. All but declaring war on the Maesters would likely scare a lot lords on principle alone. To say nothing of whose ears the Maesters themselves would start whispering in.
“For now we can focus on the farming and getting the Wisdoms to Dragonstone, but Laenor, I want to train midwives as well. That is not negotiable.” Laenor studied me for a few moments after that announcement. I finished the last of the fruit, ignoring his silent condemnation. I was not going to risk dying in a childbirth any more than I needed too and if we could prove they worked, that they were better than Maesters? Well, Westerosi lords would clammer for them and we’d be the only provider. It would be the first crack in their dominance over Westeros and one I could use to push my own doctors.

“Very well. I’ll add it to the instructions I send to Dragonstone.” I watched as he pulled a sheet free and jotted down a few lines. I drank my juice and listened to the sound of his scribbling, allowing my eyes to drift closed.

“I’m sending Laena to Dragonstone with all of this. She should be able to make a round trip in a day if she pushes Vhagar a little. Then I’m going to see Wisdom Jerrett so he can start getting a selection of Alchemists to Dragonstone,” He told me, rising from his seat.

“Perhaps you should change first?” I asked, nodding at his less than appropriate attire. He pulled a face. “You know certain people will have a field day if they see you sprinting around the city looking like that.”

“You’re right. It’s just… Rhaenyra, I have been trained to take the lordship of an island. My knowledge is trade, as shameful as most will find that, and even I can see that there isn’t a single technology in here that won’t improve lives across all of Westeros.” He ran an agitated hand through his hair.

I let him leave with the promise he’d at least bathe before speaking with Wisdom Jerrett and not give away too much of the technology contained within it’s pages until the Guild was under our thumb and indebted to us. I sipped the last of my juice and leant back in my chair. Was I making a mistake?

Even if I was wrong, it was too late now. Laenor had seen the pages. He knew that they were invaluable and they were, in more ways the monetary value. Used correctly they would secure Targaryen and Velaryon dominance for centuries to come. There would be no gradual decline as the family desperately tried to command unruly vassals, no civil wars that out opponents had any hope to win, no way to remove an unjust king…

Ah. Considering the general quality of Targaryen rulers, that’s going to be a problem.

On that horrifying thought I forced myself to rise, calling my maids to me. I had errands to run before a meeting with Lord Wendwater and then a meeting with Lord Celtigar. I would need to impress both if my work to sway the Crownlands was to make a good start. I couldn’t rely on just the Crownlands though. So after I had changed and bathed, I sat down and wrote to my cousin.

I had last seen Jeyne at my wedding. She’d seemed cheerful and friendly enough, at least when the swarms of potential suitors weren’t present, but I hadn’t been thinking politically then. I’d had visions of professional soldiers armed with muskets dancing before my eyes. I hadn’t bothered playing politics because I hadn’t thought I needed too. In retrospect, even had the Black Powder been viable, that had been a mistake.

So I was sure to remain warm but diplomatic, without assuming to much about how much leeway our shared blood would buy me. I enquired about her health, how the Vale was, whether she had her eye on any suitors and finally, whether she’d allow me to visit in the near future. The letter was too long and heavy to send by raven so I paid for a courier to get it to Jeyne post-haste which gave me another idea. If I was going to damage the Maesters as healers and archivists, why not damage
their hold on communications too?

The days turned into weeks as Laenor and I charmed and politicked our way through court. I acquired three ladies-in-waiting, one from House Stokeworth and the two Strong girls. The last two were odd in a way, I understood Lyonel disdained mine and Alicent’s games, preferring to focus on the practical sides of ruling a kingdom. As far as I understood, sending his daughters to me was less a show of support and more a way of saying that should my father die suddenly he would act in accordance with his wishes.

Gods, I hope I can stop this guy from burning to death. Having Otto as Hand when Viserys died would suck.

Marya Stokeworth was a plump but pretty girl who fussed over everyone. Shortly after she’d entered my service I’d been enacting my plan to win over King’s Landing by visiting a succession of orphanages and I think it had awoken something in her because she’d been organising sewing rings and charity parties and enquiring as to whether I could help with funding. She seemed so earnest that I couldn’t believe it was an act. No one was that good at acting.

And since she was doing it in my name… well, Alicent wasn’t too popular amongst the occupants of the city anymore.

The two Strong girls were called Alys and Sera. Twins, they took more after Harwin than Larys physically. Both were pretty with the Strong nose, their father’s height and blue eyes although thankfully, they didn’t take after their older brother in attitude or intelligence. They weren’t quite Larys levels of smart but they were quick-witted at least and knew their manners. I suspected they were less thrilled by Marya’s enforced sewing circles but they went along with it well enough, preferring to spend their time sewing by sharing the sort of inside jokes that only twins had.

Laenor acquired a squire from House Rosby named Alton who he swore was a good lad at heart but had me half-convinced he had nothing resembling a personality in the few brief times I’d met him.

With both of us turning the charms on the court, the Black faction went from strength to strength.

The Wisdoms, under the watchful eye of Jerrett, left on a ship bearing my colours two weeks after Laenor’s meeting with them. I was given to understand that the competition for a place within the new campus had been fierce. The idea of these ‘lost’ technologies had sent the Guild into a frenzy. Jerrett had still been trying to insist the Guild’s true purpose was magic even as his co-workers fought over glass production techniques and knowledge of the nitrogen cycle.

Viserys remained as spineless as ever, as predicted Ser Cargyll’s report about Criston’s behaviour did nothing after Alicent had stepped in on his behalf. I did manage to spend time with Helaena after I all but petitioned Viserys in open court as Alicent had been sibling hoarding.

I took the girl to the Dragonpit for a ride on Syrax which she’d talked about non-stop for three days. It was nice to be the big sister to a sibling that thought the world of you. Aegon, annoyingly, still avoided me like I had the plague when he could and when he couldn’t his interactions were icy, hostile but never outright rude. My one attempt to win Aemond over ended when he hit me in the shin with his wooden sword. It left a spectacular bruise and I was quite put out about it.

Daeron remained pink, round and loud.

As I approached the month mark, a cutter from Gulltown bearing Grafton colours arrived with a letter bearing the Arryn seal. Apparently, it would be impossible for me to meet with Jeyne right
now as the Eyrie had been sealed due to an outbreak of illness suspected to, from the way the letter writer described it, super plague. It had been signed by a Ser Arnold Arryn, Keeper of the Gates of the Moon.

Yeah, I was calling bullshit on that one.
“My wife is an enigma,”

Laena turned to him in surprise. They’d taken Seasmoke and Vhagar to a deserted beach North of King’s Landing and had been sitting watching the waves in silence for some time. Gods, he could see why his Father hated King’s Landing.

“I thought you liked her?” she asked, one eyebrow raised. When he’d been young, he’d thought that he’d marry Laena. It hadn’t been hard to imagine, she was his best friend. She already knew everything, he couldn’t shame himself in front of her. She would have been happy with a husband that didn’t try and prevent her from flying.

“I do. She just doesn’t make sense,” he finally replied. His sister huffed before scooping a rock from the sand and sending it flying into the waves. Laena did not see Rhaenyra like he did.

She had been just four when they’d first met. Prince Baelon had died and Mother had told him that she was going to make him a king. He hadn’t wanted to be a king, he’d wanted to fly Seasmoke and explore the world. He’d trailed about the Red Keep in misery until a small girl had ambushed him. Two years his junior and already so much more worldly-wise than him. They explored the tunnels together and afterwards his Mother had scolded him for doing so but he hadn’t cared.

Mother hadn’t made him king or even an heir to one. He hadn’t been allowed back to court and it was a decade before he saw her again. She’d flown to Driftmark atop Syrax and begged for Lady Rhaenys to protect her. She offered to marry him but Mother had been firm. She would not do anything to invite Viserys’ wrath down on them. Rhaenyra had stayed for a two weeks before her Father summoned her back.

She’d changed so much and in some ways not at all. She was still far more worldly-wise than he could dream of being with a smile that made it seem like she knew some kind of great secret no one else did. He’d thought he’d figured her out then. Why she’d been so afraid of Daemon? Why she’d sought him out as ‘safe’? He’d seen the way her eyes had moved to track his sister as she’d danced with his Father’s bannermen and captains.

When they’d been betrothed he’d assumed she’d find her own lover amongst her ladies and he’d have Joffrey and at some point she’d find someone suitable to bear their heirs. He’d told her as much as they’d sat on the bed after the wedding but she’d rebuked him. She’d told him they could not risk bastards, not with the Queen waiting for any slip up, not with Corlys watching them so closely.

He’d panicked and tipped off his Father by spending too much time at Driftmark. He’d been too heartsick at losing Joffrey and too terrified of the shame that would accompany Rhaenyra’s realisation that he couldn’t produce an heir with her. Father had made his play and he’d found his understanding of his wife thrown again. He’d always thought she was epitome of a princess. That she practised alchemy and had brought no ladies, no lords and no support to Dragonstone had shocked him.

Father had said that her obsession with whatever she was making would destroy her chances at the throne and had told Laenor he would ensure the whole alchemy business was finished with. That he would take a firm hand with the Blacks so that he could protect the rights of his unborn grandchildren. Mother had been little help, she had been weary of Father’s methods but she’d agreed Rhaenyra needed to be reigned in.
She’d told him to bed her and bed her well. That she’d fall in line once she was married woman in truth. He’d asked his Mother if she’d fallen in line with his Father after being bedded and she’d sent him to his room like an errant child and not the man of twenty that he was. She thought that any child of King Viserys was soft, like he was.

“Don’t misunderstand me, Laenor, I love the girl but she needs someone strong in her life,” his mother had told him. How wrong they were, how little they understood.

At least he knew just how little he knew about her.

He’d thought her attracted to women but after watching her for the past few months he’d begun noticing something odd. Her eyes flickered to women as if she couldn’t help herself but sometimes, if she wasn’t aware she was being watched, her mask would slip and she would look disappointed. As if she had been expecting something from them that hadn’t been delivered.

Men, himself included, had also provided a similarly puzzling reaction. When she allowed herself to look at them he could see the lust in her face and afterwards, she always looked vaguely unsettled. He’d prodded Joffrey into revealing that she had taken no lover in the six months they’d been apart. No man or woman had graced her bed, only books on such a wide range of subjects that many joked that she wished to become the first female Maester as well as first Queen.

And then there was The Book.

She was lying to him about it being a copy of a copy of a copy. She was lying about it being a relic from her childhood. He did not know why but he knew his wife had created these things. The manner of speech the author employed was too much like the manner of speech she herself used when she slipped. He’d heard too many of the strange words and phrases that peppered the text from his wife before the pages had come to light to believe that she’d last read it during her childhood.

Why would she not tell him she had written it?

“Oh! Speak of her and she will come!” came his sister’s voice, interrupting his musings. He followed her gaze to the rapidly approaching form of Syrax. They hauled themselves up from the sand and did their best to brush themselves clear as Rhaenyra steered her mount in for landing. He knew something was wrong from the way she strode over the sand towards them.

“Oh oh, this doesn’t look good. Have you angered her brother?” mumbled Laena. He didn’t have time to reply as Rhaenyra reached them a moment later and waved an envelope bearing the Arryn seal at them. Laena took it as his wife caught her breath, he watched as she read through it and palmed.

“There is some sort of plague in the Vale. The Eyrie has been sealed,” his sister stated, handing him the letter. He felt his heart sink. Rhaenyra had been so sure her cousin was in their corner. He had no idea who the heir to the Vale of Arryn was but he suspected they’d drive a much harder bargain for support than Rhaenyra’s own flesh and blood.

“It’s a lie! There is no plague.” It was stated with such anger and finality. Baffled, he risked a glance at his sister only see she’d done the same thing.

“Look at the signature on the letter,” she growled. He did so. Ser Arnold Arryn, Keeper of the Gates of the Moon. “He is Jeyne’s closest male relative. If women are excluded from inheritance then he is the man who inherits. The damn thing came on a ship in Grafton colours.”
“You believe he’s lying. That this is a plot against Lady Jeyne?” he asked. Rhaenyra nodded, eyes bright with fury. She was so certain. Why was she so certain? What did she know?

“If you’re wrong, you risk allowing the Vale to be decimated by plague,” his sister pointed out. He watched his wife’s jaw clench and the fingers on her right hand flex. An old injury, a parting gift from the Uncle that had terrified her so. What had Daemon done that she ran from him when she wouldn’t even bow in the face of plague?

“I am not wrong. There is no plague in the Vale, I would know if there was.” He took a deep breath and made a decision.

“Laena, could you stay here and reassure the Black lords in our absence. It seems Rhaenyra and I will be travelling to the Vale to discover the truth of it.”
Plague in the Vale, my ass. I know there’s no plague in the Vale just like I know that Ser Arnold is a dirty lying liar whose probably got Jeyne locked up somewhere whilst he brings the Vale lords to his side.

Maybe I was overreacting, history tells me he probably won’t succeed but hopefully flying to Jeyne’s aid would ingratiate me much further than words on paper. There was also the more selfish idea of that if, somehow, I had butterflied him into succeeding then he would never support me. If he did, he made his own claim on the Vale invalid.

I wanted to push the dragons hard but Laenor had counselled caution. He’d told me that if we pushed the dragons too hard they’d be in no condition to fight once we did reach the Vale. If I was right about Ser Arnold then we couldn’t take that risk. We had no clue how he was maintaining control currently, Laenor told me, he could have fooled the Vale lords like he’d try to fool me or be perched in the Gates of the Moon with a massive army. I’d accepted, grudgingly. This meant that instead of blurring past the fields of the Crownlands and the Riverlands rolled by at a much more sedate pace.

The trip took four days at the almost agonisingly slow pace Laenor had set. We’d stopped the night at Duskendale, Maidenpool and the Saltpans. Luckily, the Lords of those towns had understood that we were in a hurry and could not afford to engage in the lavish feasts that hosts were expected to throw when royalty came calling. Or maybe they were simply relieved we weren’t insisting on slowly bankrupting them with our presence.

We’d have to come back later and make a show of it. I could not afford to offend or alienate House Darklyn, House Mooton and House Cox. Or rather I could but that thinking was likely to lead to a disaster sooner or later, being too close the the original Rhaenyra’s ‘I am heir, bow to me’ attitude that had lost her the Dance. I found it hard to sleep as we made our way across Westeros, too strung out on thoughts of somehow butterflying Jeyne’s hold on the Vale away.

We reached the Bloody Gate itself in the late evening and made the decision to bypass it entirely, to fly onward to the Gates of the Moon. The dragons would cover the distance with ease and I couldn’t face another night of wondering if I’d messed up somehow. Had the original Rhaenyra shown more support? Had I failed to gain a supporter in the Vale that backed Jayne?

My thoughts swirled like that as we soared through the air. Then they ceased as I beheld the Eyrie for the first time.

I found myself forced to gape at the seat of House Arryn, struck dumb by the sheer impossibility of it. Seven white towers atop a colossal mountain, surrounded by more mountains on either side and long winding road as the only approach. Stylish, impossible to seige and all but practically screamed ‘I rule, you don’t now grovel’ to any who beheld it. It made the Red Keep look like some newly made Knight’s motte-and-bailey by comparison.

No wonder cousin Jeyne had been so proud of it.

After Laenor and I finished marvelling over the local architecture we took the dragons in for landing at the Gates of the Moon, ensuring we came down in front of the castle. Inside we would be surrounded at least this way, we wouldn’t have men at our backs. Dragons were vulnerable when they were on the ground in a way they simply were not in the air. Hardened scales that flexed when they breathed exposed the soft flesh beneath, impossible to hit whilst the flew but a valid
target for spears and swords when forced to land.

The Gates of the Moon did not quite match the Eyrie in beauty but they were still worthy of note. Beautiful but practical, no army was getting past it without the castle’s express permission. The first way stop for any visitor to the Eyrie and the first line of defence if the Eyrie ever came under attack. It also served as the seat of House Arryn during the winter which is why the title of Keeper was non-hereditary and normally given to someone within the Arryn family. Someone who could be trusted to remain loyal.

We were greeted by knights in the Arryn livery, they streamed from the open portcullis and formed a loose semi-circle around our mounts and my suspicions regarding the nature of the ‘plague’ were only reinforced by their nervous demeanour, the way they weren’t sure if they would soon need to draw weapons. I let Laenor do the talking as my eyes searched the battlements. More men in Arryn livery dotted it but I spotted the odd flash of Grafton colours.

“Ho there, I am Ser Laenor Velaryon, with me is Her Grace Princess Rhaenyra, heir to the Iron Throne,” he called. There was flurry of activity and then a handsome older man that could only be Ser Arnold Arryn strode out, waving his men to stand down. He had the classic Arryn look both my Mother and Jeyne bore. The sandy blonde hair and blue eyes that denoted their prized Andal heritage. He was clean-shaven with shoulder length hair worn in a knot and for all that he’d arranged his features into a pleasant smile a life of court had taught me to spot the subtle signs of stress.

The darkened eyes showing a lack of sleep, the tense way he held his shoulders… this guy was on the edge.

“Your Grace! I am Ser Arnold Arryn, Keeper of the Gates of the Moon,” Not for much longer if you’ve done anything to my cousin. “I am happy to receive you and offer you guest right but I must warn you—”

“We are aware of the rumours of plague within the Vale. It was my hope to somehow ascertain if my cousin was well,” I called. In the dimming light, I could see the indecision writ clear on his face. He could not prevent me from flying up the mountain if I so wished but if he was lying about the plague, I would soon know. Therefore he needed me to get gone as soon as possible and I’d just made it clear that I thought his claims of illness were just that, claims.

The fact that neither of us had moved to dismount our dragons, the only creature currently able to completely nullify the advantage the men of the Vale took pride in must also factor in to his decisions. I risked a glance at the battlements once more. More Grafton men and considerably more ranged weaponry now. He was stalling but even he knew he could not get away with murdering a Targaryen Princess and her consort, if he were even capable of it.

“I could not in good conscience allow you to do that, Your Grace. It is my duty to contain the plague here if the whole of the Vale of Arryn is not to be ravaged by it.” I clenched my jaw at the word ‘allow’. He would allow me nothing!

“Tell me, Ser Arryn, how did the plague come to be in the Eyrie. I note a lot of Grafton men here, perhaps it came through Gulltown?” Laenor pointed out and I watched as Ser Arnold shifted, hand falling to his hilt as he licked his lips. Probably wondering if his men could bring us down before we melt his castle down around his ears. I didn’t pay attention to his response, I was watching the Grafton men. They were agitated. Clearly fighting two dragons hadn’t been on their to-do list this morning and they were close to breaking. Either one would take a pot shot at us and the rest would follow or they would run.
I couldn’t risk an arrow storm.

I shifted in my saddle, urging Syrax to turn her gaze to the battlements. If Ser Arryn noticed, he didn’t break from his long winded explanation about the nature of the ‘illness’, the one Laenor was pretending to be enraptured by. I felt her tense under me as she sensed the fight coming. I loosened the whip at my side and focused on the battlements again. Having a dragon actually looking at them was doing wonders for their sudden sense of mortality.

Something just a little more direct then.

“Dracarys!” Syrax let forth a gout of flame that missed everyone standing on the battlements but ensured they all felt the heat of it. Panicked men threw down their weapons and fled, screaming. The knights that had met us outside the gate charged forward with shouts. I heard Laenor’s whip crack and Seasmoke lurched forward and incinerated half of them at once.

The rest fled. Ser Arnold Arryn hadn’t moved, hadn’t even drawn his sword and I could see the fury on his face. He knew he was beaten, knew the Vale was beyond his reach now and he knew I made that happen. I flashed him a sweet smile that evolved into a smirk of satisfaction as the Gates of the Moon exploded into chaos behind him, his men giving calls of retreat with no thought to whether he still lived. Evidently as loyal to him as they’d been to Jeyne.

That would teach him to rely on traitors and men easily bought. They found it so easy to do so once again.

“Keep an eye on him, Laenor. I’m going to see if Lady Arryn is well,” I ordered in a tone that promised dire retribution if she were not for any reason.

Laenor nodded, not taking his eyes off the Arryn knight. The look on his face suggested he’d be quite happy for Ser Arnold to make his move if only for Seasmoke to have a chance at eating him.

A light tap of the whip and Syrax took me upwards and over the wall. After the Gates of the Moon there were three more waycastles a would-be besieger would have to get around before assaulting the Eyrie proper.

Below me, the first waycastle, Stone, was silent and dark as the grave. Had the men of the garrison betrayed Jeyne or had they been killed when Ser Arnold had launched his coup? Syrax shifted underneath me and then snarled. I squinted at the mountain path but could make nothing out. Had she seen something? Dragons had good eyesight, even in the dark that had fallen around us. Actually, that was not strictly true. Dragons are terribly long-sighted. They could spot a rabbit racing through scrub land from the air but put that rabbit in front of them and they’d be snuffling around for it for a while.

Perhaps she’d heard something then? Another sense the dragon excelled at. Had she heard soldiers on the mountain perhaps? I was getting distracted, the adrenaline making it hard to focus on one thing for long.

In comparison to Stone, Snow was alive with activity. At the sight of Syrax, men scrambled into action. I couldn’t see precisely what they were doing but I could see fires winking out and get a general sense of frantic activity.

When I reached Sky, I didn’t need Syrax’s super hearing to hear the unusual response. The normal response to a dragon appearing the sky above your castle was fear and screaming, not the cheering of the men of the Sky garrison. I smiled to myself. They must be Jeyne’s men and nothing cheers the spirits like realising you had a dragon your side.
I swooped in low to more cheering before flying on the Eyrie proper. The fact that they had still been holding out suggested that Jeyne was still okay. Ser Arnold was her heir, technically, and if she’d died it would have given those men a legitimate reason to surrender lawfully. After all, fighting to defend a castle from the person who now owned it was not something anyone is Westeros would approve of.

The Eyrie had clearly not been built with dragons in mind. Syrax was just able to fit on the widest part of the approach to the main gate. I hopped off with less grace than I had hoped to convey and pulled my cloak tightly around my shoulders to ward against the chill. The moment I was fully away, Syrax took to the air once more and flew towards a smaller peak that the Eyrie overlooked.

I made my way to the gate. As I got closer I could make out shouts and activity from beyond it. Specks of light from torches flickered back and forth. By the time I’d actually reached them, they’d begun to swing open. More Arryn knights were there, flanking Jeyne. She was thinner than when I’d last seen her and her eyes spoke of too much missed sleep but she was smiling widely.

“Cousin! I sent you a letter but I fear it never made it through,” I called. She laughed although I could tell it was strained, more from surprise and relief than any true humour. I crossed the threshold of the gate and pulled her into a hug. She stiffened slightly before relaxing and returning it.

“Thank you for coming, cousin, how do you like the Eyrie?” she chuckled.
Things moved quickly after the siege was broken. At the sight of the dragon the besiegers had turned tail and fled, disorganised as they were it was unlikely they’d threaten the Eyrie again. The loyal Arryn men had been all too happy to chase in any case, just to make sure. Laenor personally bore Ser Arnold to the Eyrie where Jeyne had him locked in the Sky cells. His men were quick to start throwing blame around with most blaming the Graftons for the attempted coup.

As I stood beside Jeyne as she handed out judgement, I began to get an idea of what had occurred and how truly devious Ser Arnold had been. In his position of Keeper of the Gates of the Moon he’d begun subverting Jeyne’s guards and had been doing since the old Lord Royce had appointed him to the position a decade earlier.

He’d quietly sought aid from other houses in the Vale and had received it from a Grafton knight in return for the promise of a marriage to Ser Arnold’s children. This Grafton knight, Ser Roland, had apparently been responsible for providing most of the muscle Ser Arnold had been relying on.

Using Roland’s supposed mastery of Gulltown he’d brought in mercenaries under Lord Grafton’s nose and had hidden them within the Gates. Roland’s Grafton men had positioned themselves nearby and awaited the signal. He’d expected to announce his claim, march up the mountain and be admitted to the Eyrie through a show of force. To improve his odds he’d placed men inside the Eyrie with orders to demoralise the defenders and try their best to sabotage the defence. When the jaws of his trap closed, more men than expected stayed loyal to Jeyne and his march had floundered halfway up the mountain leaving him with no choice but to battle the rest of the way.

Even though his plan was, quite frankly, completely delusional it seemed he’d had some sense. His first victim had been Jeyne’s Maester, cutting her off from calling for aid. Other victims of his hidden men were older sergeants and men at arms who were in positions of command. Even though she couldn’t call for aid, he’d still been pushed for time. He’d claimed the Eyrie was suffering from sickness to cover his crime but the nobility of the Vale would investigate eventually. According to those of his men we’d captured, he’d been getting desperate. For good reason, as it turned out.

Three days after we had relieved the siege on the Eyrie, a small army of about two thousand under the command of Lord Denys Waynwood and Lord Gerold Redfort arrived and demanded that Ser Arnold Arryn turn over command of the Gates of the Moon to them or face siege.

“That honourless-!” Lord Redfort shouted as Jeyne summarised Arnold’s uprising and defeat. Next to him, his daughter looked ready to march to the Sky Cells herself and engage in some egregious violations of prisoner rights. ‘Dearest companion’ indeed.

Both Redforts had dark hair and dark eyes, although Lord Gerold’s was streaked with silver. He had short hair for a noble but made up for it with a long beard he evidently took a lot of pride in if the amount of grooming and braiding that went into it was any indication. Jessamyn Redfort was pretty enough although no real beauty by the standards of the realm, even if I felt a bit harsh in that judgement. I’d quickly learned she was quick-witted though and fun to speak with.

We were seated in Jeyne’s solar, sipping wine. Laenor had decided to take the opportunity to show everyone he could fight and had joined the loyal Arryn men to hunt for any lingering Grafton forces and hopefully head off the banditry that usually accompanied several thousand men finding themselves jobless and in possession of arms and armour. I’d tried to persuade him not to, to take Seasmoke, but he’d pointed out that the Lords of Westeros already muttered about his prowess with
the sword. If we meant to put a stop to any rumours, he would need to prove his martial ability without his dragon backing him up.

He was right but I couldn’t get past visions of his pointless death in taking a needless risk. I’d gotten revenge by making a show of it as they’d departed. I’d presented him with my favour before ordering him, loudly, to come back to me unharmed before pulling him in for a kiss. According to Jeyne, her people found it sweet that we were so in love.

“Please, Lord Gerold. I am unharmed and he is in the Sky Cells. The men he hired fled in the face of my cousin’s arrival and will likely not stop fleeing until they reach the Narrow Sea,” said Jeyne soothingly. Lord Gerold didn’t reply but took a long drink of his wine. Jessamyn Redfort leant forward and placed a hand on Jeyne’s arm. Jeyne covered it with a hand of her own and gave her a small smile. Lord Denys cleared his throat and the attention of the room moved to him.

He was monstrously tall and half as wide across with long blond hair he wore in a braid and a clean-shaven jaw that looked as if he could kill a man with it. For all that he looked like a bruiser, he’d been among the first to figure out Ser Arnold’s scheme and had been the the one who’d recruited Lord Redfort into his rescue. He was a lot more intelligent than he looked and someone to be weary of.

“We, of course, thank Her Grace for her assistance but the fact remains that there are still Grafton men out there who struck against you. That includes Ser Roland and I know Gulltown well enough that he could not have done it without the support of Lord Humfrey,” he said.

“You wish for me to strike at the Graftons. You believe Ser Roland a patsy and Lord Humfrey the true mastermind,” Jeyne stated.

“It makes sense,” I said. “Ser Arnold’s plan was equal parts brilliant and delusional. It speaks of two minds.”

“And I’ve met Ser Roland. He hasn’t the brains or the wits for this,” said Lord Denys pointed out. Jeyne placed her wine down and folded her hands beneath her chin.

“I can not punish Lord Humfrey with no proof as to whether he was involved. I do not have the support. The lords may tolerate me but they will not tolerate striking at one of their number without undeniable proof of wrongdoing,” she said, quietly.

“Nonsense! Those were Grafton men with Ser Arnold and mercenaries brought in via Gulltown. If Lord Humfrey did not know he is incompetent and if he did he is complicit. No lord would question you in this!” At Lord Gerold’s outburst, Jeyne leant back and massaged her temples before grimacing.

“Cousin, you have two dragons at your immediate disposal. You have two more that can be summoned within a week or two. You have the support of Lord Redfort and Lord Waynwood. If you don’t move now they will continue to ferment rebellion in the Vale,” I urged, seeing that she was wavering.

“Even if I did strike at Lord Grafton, what would you have me do? Cut his head off? His sons would be at the head of the next rebellion with half the Vale likely at their backs,” She snapped before sighing and closing her eyes. Lord Denys huffed in annoyance.

“Seize Gulltown,” I replied. Jayne’s eyes blinked open and she stared at me incredulously.

“Are you mad!? Even if your dragons swing the fight we could not take it without burning the
town first! And if we do take it, burned or not, I could not hold it!” She cried. Every eye in the room was staring at me in surprise. I sighed. From what I could remember the Graftons remained a problem for the Arryns well into the canon timeline. Getting rid of them now could only strengthen Jeyne’s hold over the Vale. Selfishly, of course, it would also make trading with her easier when the time came to begin developing Dragonstone in earnest.

“That… could work,” said Jessamyn Redfort slowly. Jeyne just shook her head as if she’d just noticed everyone around her had gone mad and she was still sane.

“Explain?” said her father.

“The Arryns of Gulltown. The Lannisters have the Lannisters of Lannisport, why not enoble the Arryns of Gulltown. Their legitimacy would come from Jeyne and they’d have an easier time of holding the city because they have history there and an existing rapport with the citizens.”

“And nobody is going to follow them if they did rebel because their line is bunch of coin counters,” added Lord Gerold, a large and nasty grin growing over his face. Then he stood and pulled his daughter into a crushing hug. I found myself blinking in surprise. That had gone down better than expected even if Jeyne was still looking at father and daughter as if she were waiting for someone to shout ‘fooled you!’.

“You are aware, of course, that if we intend to take the city without two dragons reducing it to cinders we will need the aid of Lady Royce,” Lord Denys pointed out. It was hard to tell who took this worse, myself or Jeyne.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I realised just who he meant by ‘Lady Royce’. Lady Rhea Royce, the current wife of Prince Daemon Targaryen. Opposite me, Jeyne’s face had gone an angry red and her jaw clenched. Did Jeyne not defend Rhea to Daemon? What had happened that would get this reaction from her?

“No! No. I will not ask that… I will not!” She stood, hands clenched.

“Pardon but what is the problem with enlisting my lady aunt?” I asked, hoping the lords had been too interested in Jeyne’s outburst to note my reaction. Jeyne flung herself into the chair. Jessamyn sat next to her and leant close, murmuring words of reassurance that did little to soften the angry glare etched into Jeyne’s face.

“Lady Royce’s father was Jeyne’s regent during her minority,” explained Lord Gerold with a sigh. “He-”

“He seized power! He made me a prisoner in my own castle! He sent away my ladies! He tried to marry me to his son! He used my name to marry his daughter to a prince!” I blinked at Jeyne’s outburst. She was standing again and looking ready to attack someone, Jessamyn was pulling at her dress, trying to calm her. Lord Denys merely sighed.

“It is true that Lord Royce greatly overstepped the boundaries of what is considered appropriate as a regent. There were talks to have him replaced when he was killed alongside his sons,” said Lord Gerold as Jeyne was guided back into her seat.

“Lady Royce has proved to be a loyal vassal devoid of her father’s ambition. In fact, I would hazard a guess that she resents it as it was the cause of her rather unfortunate marriage. She is quite happy to stay at Runestone and rule,” supplied Lord Denys. He would know, I suppose. His lands bordered Lady Rhea’s so he likely saw her more than any other noble in the Vale, barring her vassals.
“Did she ride to my aid?” snapped Jeyne, irritably.

“Don’t be bone-headed, Jeyne. Lady Royce could have ridden to your defence on the back of a griffon and you would have found fault!” came Jessamyn’s equally waspish reply.

Oh Gods, these two are less subtle than Laenor. How are they getting away with it?

“Jeyne, if you allow the Graftons to get away with this others in the Vale will wonder what they can get away with. If they see you, Royce, Redfort and Waynwood united with royal backing, they’ll think twice about any future rebellion,” I pointed out.

Jeyne’s face twisted in fury.

“Fine,” she spat. “We will ride to Runestone and pick up more Redfort and Waynwood troops on the way. I will sanction the seizure of Gulltown if Lady Rhea will add her strength to ours. Only if she agrees to add her strength to ours.”

Apparently sensing that was the best they were going to get, we moved onto other topics. Lord Denys and Lord Gerold were obviously angling for a reward of some kind but apparently my arrival rendered their own rescue pointless so Jeyne was able to duck it a little. She agreed to take Jessamyn Redfort as a lady-in-waiting and I’d had to force myself not to cackle as she acted like it was some great honour and not a forgone conclusion. Also were Vale lords blind? Because Jeyne was giving the Redfort girl major heart eyes and Lord Denys and Lord Gerold seem to have just… not noticed.

Doing my part for my cousin, I agreed to take Falena Waynwood with me back to the capital to join my growing pool of ladies-in-waiting. Lord Denys assured me she wasn’t the type to easily frighten and could be trusted amongst the various factions at court but I resolved to ensure that for myself before I let her in on any secrets. Although, to be fair, all of my new ladies-in-waiting were untested. Their fathers may be Blacks but history was littered with children that did not wish to follow their parents plans for them.

More work for Joffrey, I suppose.
If I’d been under any illusions about how fast Jeyne’s makeshift army was going to travel now that we had a firm goal in mind they were shattered within the first week. First we had to wait for the ‘hunting’ parties to return. Laenor came back with them unharmed and had apparently impressed a fair few of the knights that had accompanied him. A knight of house Hardyn named Jon had especially taken a shine to him and I suspected Laenor might have an admirer. Although given the looks Laenor was shooting right back the feeling was very much mutual.

Once Jeyne had made sure the land surrounding the Eyrie was devoid of any lurking armies to put it under siege again she moved on to scouring her garrison for any hint of treachery. The woman was relentless and she ended up dismissing a fair few knights and servants when the answers they gave regarding where their allegiances lay weren’t satisfactory.

I did manage to secure an hour or two for her, Laenor, Jessamyn and I to sit down and discuss the future of the Vale and the Black faction at court. Which was no easy feat given her dedication to ensuring Ser Arnold could never, ever subvert her people again. I was beginning to suspect a few of neuroses there, she had definitely not taken the threat on her home well.

“You believe Alicent will escalate then?” asked my cousin, studying me with a curious intensity. “I had thought her goal to be forcing your father to disavow you as his heir via political pressure from his Lords.”

“It will not work. Father is probably the most stubborn man in all of the Seven Kingdoms. I do not know why he refused to acknowledge Aegon as his heir after he was born but now it is too late for either of us to back down. When Father dies I will make my claim because to do otherwise is death and Alicent will make her claim because otherwise the Hightowers will lose a vast amount of resources and prestige.” I replied. Jeyne nodded thoughtfully.

“You have our complete support, Cousin, but we are not exactly the Reach when it comes to what we can provide.” Meaning her pockets weren’t endless or deep and she had a serious manpower problem. Luckily, Laenor and I could help with that.

I glanced at Laenor, who nodded and leant forward. I had been quite surprised to learn that during his time with the Vale Knights he’d been paying attention to just what they were saying regarding the problems the Vale had. He’d returned with several ideas on how our technology could be used to strengthen and develop our allies beyond the obvious in the farming technology.

The fact that I had convinced Jeyne to seize Gulltown for House Arryn, albeit a distant branch of it, had thrilled him. Apparently gaining a greater control of the port was something he’d been intending to advise Jeyne to do.

“Rhaenyra and I have begun working on developing ‘technologies’ from an ancient book,” he began.

“What does that actually mean?” asked Jessamyn, derailing his spiel. He paused, trying to explain and I took pity.

“Processes, devices, new ways of doing things. The ‘book’ is a copy of a copy and so on. It will require intense study but already we have a wealth of new ideas to work with,” I told her. Laenor nodded along.
“You would strengthen the Vale in return for me aiding you against Alicent and her Greens,” stated Jeyne.

“Wisdom Jerrett estimates that if we manage to reproduce even half of the technology mentioned we could increase crop yields by nine times and that’s a conservative estimate. That is just what the book says regarding agriculture,” Laenor pointed out.

“There’s more than just agriculture?” asked Jeyne. When Laenor nodded Jessamyn let out an impressed whistle and turned to Jeyne with wide eyes.

“You know that I would support you regardless of whether you gave me this information, Rhaenyra, but I will not lie and say that I do not want access to what you develop from this book,” Jeyne said after a moment’s pause.

“As Laenor said, we want to help develop the Vale. Yet we should also look to see how we can develop it in other ways, the research on the book has only just started, after all. Do you know whether the Vale can support mines?” I asked. Jessamyn giggle-snorted in a weird cross between amusement and frustration. Jeyne shot her a dry look.

“The Vale does support mines currently. Mostly in Royce lands in the form of copper and tin, which shouldn’t be surprising. I mine most of the marble and I believe the Belmore’s have a small iron mine,” she said after Jessamyn had calmed down.

“Oh, I see. It’s the mountain clans, isn’t it?” said Laenor before I could ask her to clarify why there was so little mining when you would assume the mountains would hold a wealth of resources.

“Correct. The mountains are rich with silver, iron and even some deposits of gold. Oh don’t get me wrong it’s nothing compared to Casterly Rock but it’s still a good amount. The problem is where it’s located, any permanent presence is either overrun before we can pull anything significant out of it or requires so much men to guard it that the mines simply aren’t economical. Honestly, most houses of the Vale have given up ever mining the resources of the mountains,” Jeyne told him.

Ouch. The lords of the Vale were a proud lot but poor. To know there was a king’s ransom sitting in the mountains they were so proud of and also know it’s completely untouchable must rankle.

“Then if we intend to help we have to start with the Mountain clans,” I said. This time both Jeyne and Jessamyn laughed but it was bitter.

“You think we have not tried? They know the mountains better than we do. Thousands of men can completely vanish and any attempt to chase them, even with vast armies or mounted knights, are doomed to failure,” said Jeyne finally. “We must settle for hunting them every autumn and depriving them of resources that way.”

I gritted my teeth. Perhaps I could kill two birds with one stone here. My new pike and shot model army was dead in the water but I didn’t have to give up on the idea of a professional army loyal to the crown. My entire knowledge of warfare came from playing copious amounts of Total War games but even I knew that relying on vassals for the majority of your muscle was a very bad idea.

The mountain clans had to be dealt with if the Vale was going to be strong enough to help win me the Dance. They were a nuisance that in the right circumstances could turn themselves into a disaster but they also presented an opportunity. During canon the mountain clans had served Tyrion. They’d hunted Stannis’ scouts with a ruthless efficiency, blinding him to Tywin and the Reach’s approach until it was too late.
The mountain clans would not work for me, I was under no illusions about that. I could, however, train my own versions with better equipment and supplies and use the Mountains of the Moon as their crucible. If it succeeded, I would have a reliable force that could blind my enemies to my movements and raid their supply lines and if it didn’t, I had still sent aid to Jeyne and would won some good will from her.

“You’ve had a thought,” said Laenor, looking at me. “I recognise that smirk.”

Was I smirking? Yes. I explained the idea to the three of them without the bit about Tyrion.

“The clans know the mountains better than any men you can send and they move about them with little to no effort. You will be sending them to their deaths. Even if you managed to find clan territory, they’d simply pick up and move.”

“I’m not suggesting we throw them into a search and destroy action straight away. I’d suggest they arrive, set up some sort of fort and slowly explore first, learnt he mountains. Then we use them in addition to whatever men your lords can raise to put the mountain clans to flight in a true campaign.”

“Jeyne, it’s worth a try. Even if it only succeeds for a season or two, it’s enough to create and reinforce some mines. You said yourself that something needed to change in the Vale,” said Jessamyn, softly. Jeyne sighed, melting in the face of her lover’s pleading look.

“Rhaenyra, you seem to have kicked over an anthill. Very well, if the business with Gulltown doesn’t explode in our faces, I will put it to my Lords for their opinions, Seven knows it will at least give them something to do.”

It was still another week until we left the Eyrie. An undercurrent of unease and excitement seemed to be boiling under the skin of every man and woman making the journey. Things were changing in the Vale. Word had gotten out the Graftons had earned Lady Arryn’s ire to the point that she was willing to seek Lady Royce’s aid which did not point to good things in Lord Humfrey Grafton’s future.

Going to war, even a minor one like this, was not as glamorous or fun as I’d hoped. Progress was achingly slow and a trip that Syrax could have made in less than half a day and one man on a horse could make in two days took us four whole days. Admittedly, the road was poor and the terrain hard to pass. Jeyne promised that we would make better time on the road from Iron Oaks to Runestone as it was on flatter land. Road being a generous term for the glorified dirt track that occasionally lead into steep rises over rock.

We stayed a few days in Ironoaks as more men joined us from houses sworn to Lord Denys and Lord Gerold before setting off for Runestone proper, a trip that promised to cost us another week in time. I was told Jeyne had sent word to Lady Rhea informing her of our coming but there had been no reply waiting at Ironoaks for us. Jeyne sulked about the whole matter the entire way and refused even Jessamyn’s cajoling to cheer up.

Happily, Falena Waynwood appeared to be made of sterner stuff than most. We’d picked her up during our brief stay at Ironoaks and she seemed completely unfazed by Syrax, the marching or the fact that Laenor was being as unsubtle as a brick to the face when it came to Ser Jon. I still wasn’t ready to trust her completely but it seemed she knew how to keep her mouth shut so far.

It was getting towards evening when we finally caught sight of Runestone. A respectable stone keep that towered over a cliff, looking out over the sea. Probably had some really nice views but I’m also will to bet no one ever told them about erosion. Actually, maybe I was wrong about that.
Part of the cliff had fallen away due to time and the sea but the land that supported the castle seemed untouched.

A mystery for another day, I suppose.

Lady Rhea and her household were waiting to greet us. My Lady Aunt was a tall woman with dark hair and hazel eyes. Her thin lips were being forced to form a polite smile but I could tell she was completely unimpressed with our arrival. We left the army setting up camp outside Runestone proper alongside Syrax and Seasmoke and accompanied the more distinguished members of our party to meet with Lady Royce.

It was awkward and the whole business did not get any less awkward as we preceded inside and were invited to share a small meal. Jeyne barely managed to stay on the right side of polite, a fact I attribute entirely to Jessamyn’s hasty diplomacy. For her own part, Lady Rhea ignored Jeyne’s comments and muttering, instead focusing on her meal like she was trying to ignore our presence.

Lord Denys and Lord Gerold were not willing to let her forget though and had already started putting pressure on Rhea to help us against the Graftons heedless of the tense mood. Rhea was as non-committal as possible but did agree to arrange a proper discussion regarding the matter. Honestly, to say the Royce’s supposedly had a blood feud going on with the Graftons, she was surprisingly ambivalent about the prospect of finally getting rid of them.

I probably should have taken that as a warning that she was preoccupied by something else completely. Me, namely. I’d barely gotten to the rooms assigned to me when one of her servants materialised and asked me if I’d like to join Lady Rhea in her solar for some wine.

“Princess Rhaenyra, I did not expect to see you riding to my liege lady’s aid. I must offer you my thanks for defending the Vale from such treachery.” For all that her words were praise, her tone was ice cold.

I offered her a warm smile and frantically tried to think of whatever I did that would have pissed her off this badly. I’d last seen her in person twelve years ago and even then it’d been a quick meet and greet. I’d gotten Daemon banished but again, that was hardly something she would be upset about given the way he’d treated her over the years.

“Thank you, Lady Rhea. My cousin is dear to me, I would not see her harmed,” I replied. That should be safe enough. Rhea regarded me with a cool look before waving a servant forth to pour wine. I wondered briefly if it could be poisoned before dismissing the thought. Rhea wasn’t nearly stupid enough to poison the heir to the Iron Throne in her own keep whilst an army and two dragons were camped outside.

“Dear to you? Or dear to the Blacks?” Rhea asked after she’d taken a sip. Okay, maybe she just doesn’t like me bringing my little private war to the Vale and especially to her doorstep?

“To be truthful, both but she is my cousin first. Besides, we women need to stick together,” I replied before taking a drink. Honesty seemed to be the best policy with Rhea.

“Oh? Were we ‘sticking together’ when you fucked my husband?”
I choked on the wine as a good portion of it went directly up my nose in surprise at the blunt question. Evidently she’d selected drowning in her attempted murder and here I was, like a fool, worried about poison. She was completely silent as I recovered from the shock of the question and her eyes never left me.

“Excuse me?” I managed to croak eventually.

“I believe I was quite clear. Tell me, what does your husband think of the fact you gave your maidenhood away to your uncle?”

I slammed down on my anger hard. I couldn’t risk Rhaenyra’ing this into an even more messed up situation than it already was. Evidently, Rhea had believed the rumours that had circled the capital nearly four years ago. As much as I was trying to understand her position, how she must view it, I wanted to rip her face off. How dare she make me out as the villain? I was the victim! Her husband had…

No. Deep breaths.

“Do you know why Jeyne hates your father so much?” I asked after counting to ten several times. Rhea raised an eyebrow at the seeming change in topic but nodded eventually.

“He isolated her, tried to control her, sent her allies away from her,” I recapped.

“I am aware. How does this relate to your indiscretions?”

“There was no indiscretion!” Damn it. Reign it in. Don’t offend her, be nice. She knows her husband, she knows what he’s like. Keep calm. My fingers ached but any sign of fidgeting would likely convince Rhea I was lying.

“Then tell me Princess, if he did not take your maidenhead, how did he earn his banishment?” She asked. I grimaced.

“He came to court during a tourney and made it clear he wanted me. I was fourteen, I’d seen how he’d treated Alicent and how he treated you, I knew what he was like and I… I wanted none of it but he did not stop! Would not stop! I did everything I could to get him to leave me alone. Even Alicent put aside our differences to help, so blatant were his wrongdoings,” I sounded like I was on the verge of tears. Scratch that, I was on the verge of tears. The old terror of knowing what he was capable of, knowing what he’d do if encouraged was coming to the fore.

It had been all well and good to sit and tell myself that he would not, could not, act so overtly. That my status as Princess and his niece protected me, that I knew the future and as long as everything was on track I could beat him with ease. Faced with the Rogue Prince in all his terrible glory, I’d been less certain.

“Even Lady Rhaenys came to help but he had Viserys on his side. He had her sent away and then took her role as my flight instructor, no matter where I went he was always present. He would have gotten what he wanted if I hadn’t, Viserys was wavering! He had my father call me back so I…” Tears forced me to pause.

I wasn’t proud of how I’d chosen to get rid of Daemon but I’d been terrified. I’d started off so certain Viserys would betroth me to Laenor, that he’d refuse to annul the marriage between Rhea
and Daemon but Daemon had been longer at court this time. Viserys had been wavering as Daemon spun him tale after tale of how miserable his life was with a wife like Rhea. If Viserys had given in, Daemon would never have stopped until he had me and once he had me, he’d never let go.

“I.. I invited him to my rooms. I goaded him, I said awful things and I pushed and I pushed until he got angry,” I risked a glance at Rhea. Her eyes were blazing with rage but I didn’t think it was directed at me anymore. In fact when she noticed me looking, her eyes softened just a little.

“He struck you?” she asked finally, as I struggled to get my breathing under control. I was crying in truth now and my aunt handed me a handkerchief. I took it gratefully.

“He knocked me to the floor. I had a knife f-for my protection but he-” I held up my aching fingers for Rhea to examine. She did so, cool fingers pulling my hand closer.

“He broke your fingers. Your Maester did a shoddy job with healing these,” she noted as her probing touch found the misshapen part of the bone. I laughed, I couldn’t help it and she shot me a startled look.

“Grand Maester Runciter was a piss-poor healer. Laenor never believes me. Mellos is even worse,” I explained at her questioning look. It probably wasn’t time to delve into my planned war against the Maesters, I’d probably sound unhinged. She let my hand go and sat back in her chair and I began massaging the ache away now that I didn’t have to fear her misunderstanding the action.

“What happened next?” she asked.

“Ser Criston saved me. I don’t know what Daemon would have done had he not been there. He was so, so angry. He drew Dark Sister and was ranting and raving and… Ser Criston heard and came to my rescue.” The truth of the matter was Ser Criston had been lying in wait for Daemon. I’d expected him to hit me, curse at me… The memory of his foot snapping my fingers around the hilt of the dagger made me want to retch.

“I see. Then your father banished him only after he’d physically harmed his daughter.” Her face twisted in distaste. I wasn’t surprised she hadn’t known. Viserys had covered the whole thing up, ordered the guards and servants to silence and cracked down hard on anyone who spoke of Daemon at all. “What did you say to goad him?”

“I… It was cruel.” I said, swallowing heavily. Rhea raised her eyebrow and I realised I had no way of escaping this line of questing. Not in a way she would accept. Shame rolled in my gut as I told her. “I taunted him about… about h-his bastard. The one he lost to the storm.”

“Cruel? Perhaps but you did what was necessary to defend yourself. Your father is a fool for letting it get that far,” Rhea said. I took a few shaky breaths and let out a watery chuckle.

“Crעד? Perhaps but you did what was necessary to defend yourself. Your father is a fool for letting it get that far,” Rhea said. I took a few shaky breaths and let out a watery chuckle.

“At a guess, Viserys covered for his brother as he has always done and refused to address the rumours,” Rhea sighed after a few moments of silence broken only by my hiccups and sniffles.

“Alicent was quick to spread the rumours you likely heard,” I told her, nodding. She believed I’d capitalised on the incident to get the betrothal to Laenor and his vast amounts of Velaryon gold secured. I couldn’t exactly tell her that it did not matter what I did, that Viserys was intending the betrothal anyway, she believed I’d betrayed our alliance first. The rumours had been her vengeance.

“Of course. I will have to pay her back in kind for shaming me so,” Rhea snorted. I wasn’t going to interact with that. Rhea was a proud woman and the rumours had clearly angered her. She’d been
embarrassed by the thought of Daemon carrying on in full view of the court with me and engineered a confrontation only to be proved wrong.

Twice the humiliation and now she had a target for revenge.

“Lord Denys would have me believe this notion of Jeyne’s to seize Gulltown has your full support,” she stated finally, jarring me from my thoughts.

“I suggested it in truth. Jeyne did not want to do so but agreed as long as you gave your support.”

“Surprising, I would not think Jeyne gave much thought to anything I did,” she said, as if challenging me to prove her wrong. I took a deep breath. If I let what had happened between Daemon and I, the old fear and self-recrimination, stop me from bring Rhea and Jeyne together then he would have won.

And I was not going to let him win.

“Jeyne is the first female ruler of the Vale and we are in a time where the role of women is questioned. I would hazard a guess that you could name one man who is representative of that. The one you’ll always hate because he’s the one you think of when men make out your aren’t worthy of your seat,” Rhea frowned at me and I realised that person was likely Daemon. Heedless, I forged on. “That person for Jeyne is your father. He made her feel unsafe and for the first time in her life she was unsafe because she was woman. She likely sees him in every sneer, every vaguely disloyal vassal.”

“So you would have me grovel for the sins of my father?” asked Rhea, archly. I shook my head. Rhea was too proud to admit any wrongdoing on her part but even if she wasn’t having a complete dick for a father was not illegal. If it were, we’d be sharing a cell.

“I would have you make common cause with her. As long as Royce and Arryn are split, both are vulnerable,” I urged. “You’re father died before Jeyne could truly gain closure, confront your father over what he had done. Mayhaps if you and her find common cause to succeed where he was so certain you’d fail, she can move past it.”

Rhea was silent for some time, mulling over my words.

“I will speak to her tomorrow. I can not promise anything,” she huffed, finally. It would have to be good enough. The Royce were Jeyne’s second most powerful vassal followed closely by the Graftons. If the Graftons were taken out of the picture and replaced with Arryns whilst the Royce stood behind her in support it would stop rebellion against Jeyne’s rule dead.

I left soon after, hoping that no one could tell that I had been crying. It would simply add fuel to the fire of the rumours that I had slept with Daemon and now his wife had confronted the harlot that had lured her husband from her.

Laenor was no where to be seen so I assumed he was visiting Jon. I felt a pang of… something after that. I wanted someone to hold tonight, someone to reassure me, and he was the only acceptable candidate. I couldn’t let anyone else see me vulnerable, it would become a black mark against me. A sign I was only a woman after all, unworthy of being queen. Too emotional.

I coiled up amongst the bedding and squeezed my eyes closed. I had knowledge of the future, I knew the players in this game, knew which way they’d jump if something bad happened so why did I keep messing it up? How did I keep getting people so wrong?

Ser Criston, Prince Daemon… I had to be better. At some point I fell asleep, with only the thoughts
of missed possibilities and mistakes to accompany me.

Jeyne and Rhea were missing when we gathered for breakfast the next morning. Not that anyone commented although Jessamyn kept shooting worried glances at the seat that Jeyne would occupy. We were all subdued and I hazarded a guess that no one had slept well the night before judging by the tired eyes and quiet voices. At least Laenor was in fine spirits. I’d been right about my theories in regards to his whereabouts last night, as it turned out.

Breakfast finished and servants appeared to begin clearing the area whilst those of us high enough station were invited to Rhea’s solar to discuss the Graftons and what could be done. It seemed that Rhea had made good on her promise to speak to Jeyne because that’s where we found the Lady of the Vale, scowling at a cup juice like it had just insulted her. Jessamyn slipped past me and sat next to her, looking to be two seconds away from putting a comforting arm around her. Instead, Jeyne pulled her eyes from the cup and smiled softly.

I watched as they stayed like that for a few moments, heart aching with want, until Rhea cleared her throat.

“I have spoken with both Lady Jeyne and Princess Rhaenyra regarding this plot to seize Gulltown,” she started. I felt myself tense up, nerves rolling in my gut. “Both have convinced me this is the best course of action in the face of Grafton treachery and so I will do my duty as a Royce of Runestone and a vassal of the Vale and support my liege lady in this.”

If my sigh of relief were audible, no one commented.

“Lady Rhea has some valuable information regarding Gulltown’s defences,” Jeyne said. “It seems Ser Roland returned with about two thirds of the men we sent running from the Gate of the Moon. The entire city has been on alert and Lord Grafton has been raising men from the surrounding villages.”

“He intends to force a siege. He hopes that political pressure from a long engagement will force you to the negotiating table,” said Lord Gerold.

“He may be right. Already Lord Corbray and Lord Hunter write to me of their displeasure at my march,” said Jeyne, gesturing at Rhea’s desk. Two letters bearing the ravens of House Corbray and the arrows of House Hunter.

“They protest because Lord Grafton’s sister is married to Lord Gawen Corbray and Lord Hunter is Gawen’s Goodbrother. They will not rise for Lord Humfrey but honour demands they do something,” said Lord Denys. Jeyne grimaced but nodded.

“He has no other potential allies in the Vale. His son’s wife is a Manderly but I would warrant they wouldn’t ride to his defence, even if they could get here in time,” Lord Gerold said, placing a fatherly hand on Jeyne’s shoulder.

“If it helps I can send a few galleys to the Sisters as a show of support. Driftmark still has a sizable home fleet, it would be no trouble,” Laenor told her, eyes eager. I watched Jeyne carefully, hoping she would not get cold feet. To attain an entire line was no small thing. Finally I saw her give in.

“Very well, you’ve all made your points. Lady Rhea, I will need to borrow your Maester to send out my decision to the Vale.”
The Vale - Chapter 14

“My Lady, I have always been a loyal vassal-”

“Lord Humfrey, your kinsman aided in treachery most foul. He brought mercenaries and Grafton men to siege me in the Eyrie itself!” said Jeyne, tone like ice. Lord Humfrey flinched and glanced around the pavilion, looking for allies.

He was seated opposite us with only a table as his defence. We’d arrived at Gulltown with Royce, Redfort and Waynwood troops ready for a siege. Lord Humfrey had called for a parley which Jeyne had been happy to grant. I’d made sure the soon to be ex-lord of Gulltown got a good look at Syrax and Seasmoke before he’d been presented with bread and salt.

Lady Rhea was seated to Jeyne’s left, a sign that Royce and Arryn were united once more even if the personal rift between the two women would take far longer to heal. The fact that Rhea was looking at Lord Humfrey with a savage glee in her eyes and small smile playing about her lips was likely not all that reassuring. Sat to Jeyne’s right, I kept my face neutral meeting his eyes with cool disinterest in the plea they conveyed. Finally, to Rhea’s left sat Lord Denys and Lord Gerold. Judging from Lord Humfrey’s defeated look, he hadn’t found reassurance in their corner either.

“My kinsman, My Lady! I will hand over Ser Roland gladly for he is a traitor but I am not,” he whined.

“And yet the mercenaries were brought in via Gulltown and Ser Roland raised an army from your lands. Do you claim to know nothing of this?” asked Jeyne. Lord Humfrey flushed, there was no good answer to that question.

“I understand I have failed you, My Lady, but failure does not warrant this judgement,” he replied after a moment or two. I heard Lord Denys snort from his seat and Lord Gerold hush him quickly.

“Forgive me, Lord Humfrey, I fail to see how it does not. Your incompetence let an army of enemies into the Vale and men of your family raised another from your own lands. A lord who does not notice that is not fit to be a lord,” Jeyne declared. Lord Humfrey glared at her before deciding to change tact, losing his snivelling demeanour. He straightened in his seat and his face became a sneer of anger.

“The Lords of the Vale will not stand for this travesty of justice!” he bellowed, rising to his feet.

“The Lords of the Vale already approve,” Lady Rhea all but sneered at him, gesturing to Lord Waynwood and Redfort.

“And what of you, My Lords? What will you do when this… this deviant harlot comes for your lands?” asked Lord Humfrey, face now red with rage. Lord Gerold leapt to his feet, hand on his blade. Well, I suppose that answers whether the Vale lords knew about Jessamyn. Why was it ignored? The Vale of Arryn was the most conservative Kingdom bar none.

“Enough!” barked Lord Denys, pulling Lord Gerold back into his seat. “We will have no problem with Lady Jeyne because we have no intention of betraying her.”

“Meet me on the field, Lord Humfrey, and I will have blood for that insult,” said Lord Gerold. Lord Humfrey snorted before turning to Laenor and I.

“I suppose I should not be surprised one woman who steals her families birthright should be
supported by another?” he asked. Beside me, Laenor’s hand came to rest on the sword he’d begun habitually carrying.

“Lady Arryn inherited the Eyrie in accordance with Andal customs. The preference for male heirs comes from the laws of the First Men, I believe, such as the Shetts?” Grafton flushed in rage at the reminder. “And as for my situation, King Jaehaerys proved a King has the right to choose his heir when he chose Prince Baelon over Princess Rhaenys. If he had followed Andal custom, I’d be married to Prince Laenor and bowing to his mother,”

Laenor snickered at the thought as I watched as Grafton stood there, fists clenching uselessly as even in his anger he was unwilling to break guest right.

“I reject your terms of peaceful surrender. I name you a whore, a pretender who sullies the title she stole! You would have the whole Vale follow you into deviancy! I know what you are, Jeyne Arryn, you can take my city from my cold, dead hands!”

“Don’t worry, Lord Humfrey, I will!” called Jeyne to his retreating back. After his men had finished filing out and we were left alone, Jeyne dropped her head into her hands and groaned.

“I suppose it was too much to hope he’d surrender peacefully?” she asked.

“A great shame,” said Lord Gerold, not sounding particularly upset. His eyes were still fixed on where Lord Humfrey had stood until moments ago, pale with rage.

“So, we must siege the city,” said Laenor. He hadn’t been keen on the idea, hoping Lord Grafton would see sense. Starving the Graftons out would be impossible which meant taking the walls and street fighting. Our army wasn’t big enough to throw away lives so deploying the dragons was almost guaranteed which meant Gulltown may well be reduced to cinders in the process.

“Not necessarily,” Lady Rhea replied. “Did you see the sigils on some of those guardsmen?”

“Arryn men. They heard our demand that Grafton turn the city over to the Arryns of Gulltown and will relay it too their masters. Grafton knows this too,” supplied Lord Denys.

“Which means either the Arryns let us in or Lord Grafton has to somehow get the Arryns out,” I said, seeing the logic. “Did you plan for that?”

“Lord Grafton likely thought he was threatening me by bringing the guards of my kinsman to confront me. Instead, he’s sealed the fate of his city,” Said Jeyne. “Although I confess we did not plan for it. The original plan was to have your dragons burn the gates and pray to the Seven the fires did not spread too far and too fast.”

“I’m just relieved I will not need to burn a city today,” replied Laenor and I nodded with him. Jeyne smiled and then frowned.

“My Lords and Ladies, could you leave me to discuss a personal matter with my cousin?” They all filed out, Jessamyn with a look of concern etched upon her face.

“I suppose you heard his parting insult to me?” she asked, once we were alone.

“I did wonder how you were getting away with being so obvious,” I replied and Jeyne blushed.

“You do not care?” she asked, surprise in her voice.

“Rhaenyra is not one to judge any man or woman based on who they love,” said Laenor.
“I had heard… rumours,” began Jeyne, hesitantly.

“About Joffrey and I? They were true. Rhaenyra knew even before our marriage,” Laenor told her before I could incriminate myself. Jeyne sat back and let out a sigh of relief.

“I did not wish to enter into our alliance proper without telling you but it is a hard thing to bring up. As for being obvious, well there’s a degree of deniability in the Vale. It’s not like elsewhere, as long as they do not see us actively engaging in such behaviour they will not bring it up.” I raised an eyebrow and she blushed again. That did not sound like Westeros, in fact, that sounded far too good to be true.

“I fear this business has me out of sorts if my tongue is failing me so,” she said. “If they bring it up with no proof, it is considered a mark against them that they were even thinking about something like that. Something no hightborn man or woman would ever do even if it were possible. Since no one has anyway of proving it unless I am caught in the act… It’s not ideal for those of us who love that way in the Vale but it’s better than a lot of Westeros. You truly do not care? I confess my Vale Lords will not speak of it but Alicent will surely spread the rumours, it could damage the Black faction immeasurably.”

She was right, of course, but then if Alicent found out about a lot of things it would damage the Black faction. Laenor, for instance. Myself, for another. Even if the alliance with the Vale was not on the cards, I was not going to shame a woman who loved another woman.

“I do not mind. As long as your Vale lords support you,” I replied. Jeyne smiled in relief and then surged forward, throwing her arms around my neck.

“Jess was right. You are something else entirely,” she mumbled. I heard Laenor snort in amusement as she drew back.

“Have you put our notion of clan hunting to Lord Denys and Lord Gerold?” I asked, needing an excuse to move away from more awkward topics of conversation.

“Not to them yet but I made mention of it to Lady Rhea. She says if we truly intend to go through with it there are men who live in her lands who are better acquainted with the clans than strictly legal. She will give as many as possible to us as guides and trainers,” Jeyne said, after a moment of studying me with pursed lips. “She also pointed out that funding such a force would be a problem for the Vale lords alone, to say nothing of the upfront cost.”

“House Velaryon can provide loans to that effect,” said Laenor, before I could reply.

“In return for a healthy amount of future profits, I imagine?” Jeyne snorted.

“We can discuss that when we draw up the contract,” Laenor replied diplomatically. Maybe I should make Laenor my Master of Coin? He seems to have a nose for making a profit. First, the timber from Lord Wendwater and now mines in the Vale.

The rest of the day was filled with waiting. Lady Rhea was certain that if either the Graftons or Arryns were going to strike at one another it would be during the night. It seemed Rhea had taken her houses enmity with the Graftons seriously because she’d gone out of her way to have her spies produce a reasonably detailed picture of all the ‘VIPs’ that resided in Gulltown.

According to her, Terrance Arryn was the type to strike in the evening as the guards were changing. Rhea also told us it was unlikely he would strike first. As High as Honour, he followed his house words with almost religious fervor. If he swore to Lord Grafton, he’d follow him, even if
betrayal would benefit him better. Still, all was not lost, he wasn’t a stupid man, he always left himself wiggle room.

If the Graftons made their move first it would be during the hour of ghosts, just before the sun rose, and it would be a show of overwhelming force to cow Gulltown into submission and quell any traitorous thoughts. Rhea thought this to be much more likely. Humfrey would be spoiling for a fight after his show in the pavilion earned him nothing but sneers in return and he was not likely viewing Ser Arryn in a positive light right now.

The day gave way to evening with no sign of any change within the city. I was tense but Laenor insisted I try to rest. Night saw my curled up on an impossibly uncomfortable camp bed, shivering under a completely inadequate blanket. Somehow I fell asleep only to be shaken awake in the early hours by Laenor, informing me that smoke had been seen above Gulltown. I got dressed as quickly as possible with Falena’s help and followed him out into the camp.

As I made my way to the pavilion, I could just make out the smoke clouds that were beginning to rise over the city although it was hard with the blackness of the sky. Around me the camp was coming to life as soldiers were shaken awake and preparing for battle. It seemed Rhea had an unrecorded gift for precognition.

‘-has likely been preparing this since he knew we intended to hand Gulltown to him. I doubt we will need to go to his aid, he’s a tricky one.” Rhea was saying as I entered.

“I could fly over the city and have Syrax roar a bit to encourage Grafton men to remember where their loyalty lies?” I suggested. Denys hummed thoughtfully before glancing at Gerold.

“It could cause a panic which would hinder the Arryn men if they have a plan to take the city,” he said after a moment of thought.

“Or incite the Grafton men to throw down their weapons if they believe the Arryns taking the city to be preferable to fighting a dragon,” Laenor pointed out from my side.

“We’ll keep it back. For now our men will march towards the city and see if the Arryn’s open the gates,” decided Lord Denys.

Butterflies stirred in my gut as I found Syrax, saddled and ready to fly. Around me, men flowed forward towards the city. From a small distance away, I heard Seasmoke bellowing and Syrax shifted at the noise. She was as agitated as I was, sensing a fight coming. I climbed aboard her and made myself ready, a task made harder by her increased shifting and shuffling. After I was secure on her back, I calmed her with gentle brushes to the soft skin behind her horns and she went still as my fingers danced along the most vulnerable part of her body. It would never get old to me that dragons, the fire breathing terrors of the sky, loved and adored head pats.

“The gates are open! Go! Go! Move into the city!”

The army surged forward and I could see that the gates were, indeed, open and displaying the Arryn sigil. Syrax tensed again at the sudden cries and shouts as the men ran forth, seeming more like a disorganised mob than a true army.

“Arryn! For the Vale!”

“Ironoaks! Ironoaks!”

“Strong as Stone! Redfort! Redfort!”
“Royce! Royce! Royce!”
The Vale - Chapter 15

Syrax soared over the city, giving me a perfect view of the fall of Gulltown, despite the darkness.

It had been Arryn men that had opened the gates. The main bulk of the army streamed through them, following Lord Redfort’s banners, whilst some peeled off with Lord Waynwood’s. I noted Lord Denys’ men seemed to be heading for the Keep the Grafton’s called home. Laenor circled them with Seasmoke before following the green and black banners.

I followed Lord Redfort’s men. Ahead of them, forming up by a set of defensive walls that split the docks from the city proper in what could be a market square, the Grafton men gathered. They were forming into rows and using the narrow streets to their advantage. In order to reach them, Jeyne’s army would have to march through a hail of arrows and then straight into spear men. Flanking would not be possible and charging them with his knights would be suicidal.

I watched as Lord Redfort began forming his men up, the heavily armoured dismounted knights to the front. Able to survive the arrow fire but the spears would be more difficult to navigate for them. He had archers of his own but the Grafton commander had effectively taken them out of the game with his positioning whilst giving his own archers a killing field.

I waited until the Knights began moving through the alleyways and the Grafton’s attention was taken up by them before urging Syrax into a shallow dive, pressing myself against her back. I heard screams as she trailed her massive claws through the Grafton men like she was so fond of doing when flying over the sea. I could hear the Grafton commander screaming for his men to form up and hold even as Syrax scattered them. Those that did not get out of her way died.

Syrax pulled out of her dive and took me up, only to nearly collide with Laenor who was urging his own Seasmoke on with some urgency if the crack of his whip was any indication.

I could barely make him out on Seasmoke’s back. I watched as he soared over the walls to sounds of dismay from the men on the other side of it. He pushed Seasmoke on and the circled back round. The ships, I realised, feeling like an idiot. There were ships in the bay and they didn’t look like they were keen on staying in the city. Instead of setting them alight, he turned Seasmoke’s breath on the sea. I watched as it boiled and rose into a thick mist.

Oh, that boy is a genius.

I turned back to the formation of Grafton men. They’d reorganised their formation but I could see the bodies of their fallen comrades. Bodies Syrax and myself had caused. Bile rose in my throat and I just had the time to turn my head before I threw up.

As if sensing my distress, Syrax gave a great bellowing roar but I was barely paying attention. I killed people. I’d had Syrax tear them apart, left them bloodymesses and smears on the cobble and I’d killed them…

I snapped out of my daze in time to see Lord Gerold’s banners reach the Grafton men. My distraction had done it’s job. The spearman no longer had the advantage of the alleyways and were forced to fall back into a semicircle, protecting the archers that fired volley after volley over their heads. Even though plate was expensive and damned near impossible to punch through with arrows, I could see the occasional knight fall to a lucky shot.

Sweat prickled across my skin and I shuddered with sudden coldness. I could break those lines with
I retched again at the thought but there was nothing left in my stomach to bring up.

I pushed Syrax to begin her descent again, the yellow-green dragon bellowing her anger at my distress. The Grafton commander was yelling at his men, screaming for them to focus on the knights and not the dragon but the lines broke as Syrax tore through them again. A few braver archers managed to snap shots off in my direction, I could hear the arrows whistle by, but none hit me. As Syrax pulled up again, the Knights moved in and began the slaughter.

Without the advantage of the terrain and the protection of formation fighting the Grafton men were mere sport for the heavily armoured and well trained Vale knights. Within minutes those that were left began surrendering. I gave Syrax a light strike with the whip and she obediently began circling for a good landing spot.

“I must thank you, Princess Rhaenyra. I wasn’t looking forward to breaking those Grafton lines! Just our luck to end up with the only competent Grafton facing us!” Lord Gerold bellowed as I clambered down from Syrax. My legs felt like jelly and if it hadn’t been for him speeding forward catching me, I would have fallen on my face as my legs decided to go on strike. She’d landed in the plaza once his men has cleared most of those that had surrendered. The last of them were being hauled off by the Arryn and Redfort knights. The ground was still littered with the dead and sharp scent of blood had me retching again.

“First fight takes you the hardest. Deep breaths,” he murmured, arm flung around my shoulder as if he were congratulating me on the victory and not the sole reason I was still on my feet. “Bring the Princess some wine! She’s the only reason half you sorry lot are alive! I think she’s earned it!”

A wineskin was pushed into my hands by a nervous looking young man in Redfort livery. I drank and retched again at the cloying sweetness of it.

“Good lass, keep drinking. You did well, you kept going, you kept your head,” his praise was spoken in a low voice so that his men could not hear. I did as he said. Smoke rose from the outskirts of Gulltown. I jumped as Lord Gerold’s cloak fell about my shoulders and I realised I had been shivering.

“My boy is off chasing the last of the bastards, your Laenor parked his dragon by the Gull Tower and the Shetts all but pissed themselves surrendering. Good thinking stopping the ships that way, got a good head on his shoulders that boy. More wine for the Princess!”

The empty wineskin was taken away and replaced someone else’s. I drank, teeth clattering against the wooden rim. Across the courtyard, Lord Denys rode in with his knights. It took him no time at all to dismount and cross to us, his face bearing a fierce grin.

“The keep surrendered when they realised their Lord was sitting in the harbour like a useless lump. Jeyne and Rhea are setting up there now, if you want to see dear Humfrey grovel I’d suggest we head there now,” he told us.

“Oh, I want to see that very much. Got your legs back yet, Princess?”

I took a few experimental steps. Wobbly but at least I didn’t fall flat on my face. Lord Gerold clapped me on the back and shouted for horses.

“Don’t worry too much about it, everyone’s first kill takes them hard. It takes a man not in his right mind to enjoy killing,” said Lord Denys softly.

“Thank you, my lords.” My voice was ragged and I suppressed a wince. I would need to see to that
if I was going to speak to Lord Humfrey. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing anything he’d done caused me distress.

We rode to the keep with a small escort of soldiers. Lord Gerold kept up an idle chatter for most of the way, something I was glad for. I had to sort through my thoughts. I had killed today. Actually killed. No, I couldn’t think about it now. Now I had to be the heir to the Iron Throne. If I wanted to be Queen, I had show everyone I was willing to fight to have it.

“Princess, is that your beast in the bay?” Lord Denys asked, interrupted Lord Gerold’s stream of chatter. I followed his gaze to see Syrax floating on top of the water. I fought the urge to giggle at the sight.

“Yes, that’s Syrax. She’s fond of water.”

“How can she fly out of water? Or does she climb out like a lizard lion?” asked Lord Gerold, seemingly out of genuine curiosity but I wouldn’t put it past him to be asking to take my mind off the fact I had ki… No.

“It’s more like a jump really. They dive and then push themselves out before flying normally. Syrax does it when she wants to catch fish.”

“Dragons eat fish?” came the surprised murmur of a knight I didn’t know the name of. Lord Denys shot him a look or warning.

“Dragons will eat anything they can half reduce to ash first. I’ve seen baby ones chew on charred plants and bushes,” I said with a laugh. Yeah, that was a weird quirk I’d discovered. Dragons liked their food very well done and it didn’t matter what kind of food as long as they had the chance to set it on fire first. Brief dragon physiology lesson over, we made our way into the great hall of what had been the Grafton keep.

The extended Grafton family were seated against the wall, under the watchful eye of Jeyne’s men. Jeyne herself had stolen what must have been Lord Humfrey’s chair and Lady Rhea flanked on her right, looking very much like the cat who’d gotten the cream. I took the seat to her left and returned the brief smile she shot me with a small one of my own.

After everyone had taken their places, Jeyne made a gesture. A man in Redfort colours stepped forward and bowed, respectfully.

“The city is secured, my lady. We had minimal looting and some fires on the outskirts but there is little actual damage,” He told us.

“That is excellent news indeed! What of the prisoners?” she asked, eyeing the Graftons lined up in the hall.

“Ser Laenor prevented any ships from escaping the bay so we have captured all the Graftons that were within the walls at the time of the siege. We making good time on processing the men who surrendered by the docks.”

“Good! Good! I will make sure your men are well rewarded for their heroics.” The man bowed again, sensing the dismissal. After he’d left, another man was brought forward. I frowned. He was no peasant but he was hardly dressed in a manner I would expect from a Lord. He bowed low though and in a clearly respectful manner.

“My lady! I have come to beg you to reconsider granting Gulltown to your kinsman here! They are no true nobles! They engage in trade, they shame their noble ancestors with copper counting!”
voice was loud, almost a shout. From just beyond Jeyne, I heard Rhea sigh. I watched the man carefully. Was he a Shett? The same Shett’s that lost Gulltown to the Graftons after losing a war to the Royces?

“We have the better claim on Gulltown, it was stolen from us by the perfidious Graftons-” Yes, he was.

“I didn’t hear you calling us perfidious when you swore to defend us against ‘Lady Jeyne’s unjust seizure of the city’, you snivelling little man!” barked a Grafton woman. One of the knights casually thumped her for speaking out, even as the man puffed up and opened his mouth to argue the point.

“Enough!” Jeyne shouted. “Ser Eustace, I hear your petition but my mind is made up on this front. House Shett has not the resources or expertise to hold Gulltown. Whether you like this or not, Gulltown is centre of trade and the Vale needs a family that understands that trade. However, I will ensure that a suitable amount of land outside the city is placed under your purview for your loyalty to the Arryns.”

Ser Eustace bowed again, beaming. Oh! He hadn’t really thought he’d get Gulltown. He wanted to see what he could get from Jeyne to strengthen his house and in return, Jeyne gets to preemptively weaken a potentially troublesome vassal without breaking feudal contract.

Gods, I felt like my mind was running at half speed to not spot that.

Another man was brought forth, one I recognised this time. Lord Humfrey Grafton. His nose was broken and his doublet stained with blood but other than that he was in good health. The look of pure hate he directed at Jeyne was… wow.

“Lord Grafton. You incited rebellion in the Vale, you refused my lawful proclamations and then attempted to flee justice leaving others to die in your place. For this, I would see you dead but honour demands you have a choice. So, a black cloak or the headsman's block?”

Lord Humfrey didn’t speak for a while, his eyes flicking each of the Lords and Lady’s sitting in judgement before finally he sagged in defeat.

“A pox on you, I will take the black and hope I live to see you die,” he muttered finally.

“Coward! You shame us all!” The same Grafton woman yelled as Humfrey was hauled from the room. The same knight went to thump her but a raised hand and a command from Jeyne had them hauling her forward instead.

“Maris, enough of this. Your Lord Father lost, there has to be consequences,” Oh, they knew each other? I watched as Maris stared hard at Jeyne, who just seemed tired rather than incensed at the interruptions. “I will ensure you are taken care of but the Graftons can not remain in control of Gulltown. He brought an army in through it’s ports for the mother’s sake!”

Maris didn’t have anything to say to that so Jeyne had her steered away and out of the room. The Graftons were judged after that and Jeyne pulled no punches. All over the age of fourteen were offered death or the wall. Most chose the wall but I was surprised to see some chose death. Many grovelled for forgiveness, others stood defiant in the face of punishment but regardless of how the acted Jeyne remained determined, every inch the Lady of the Vale, through it all.

Afterwards, a man who could only be Terrance Arryn was shown forward. Cunning, let him see what happens to traitors before handing him the city. Also, seriously, Westeros genetics were weird
because this guy is several branches removed from Jeyne in the family tree but they could pass as cousins!

“Ser Terrance Arryn. When I proclaimed the Grafton line attainted, you alone rallied to my banner. It was your heroic actions that saved Gulltown from destruction!” declared Jeyne. Bullcrap, he waited for Grafton to betray him then betrayed Grafton right back.

“I merely did my duty as your kinsman,” replied Ser Terrance, full of false modesty.

“A duty you performed admirably. It is my decision to raise you to Lord of Gulltown, do you accept?”

“It would be my greatest honour to rule Gulltown in your name, Lady Arryn,” he said, bowing once more. Around the room, Grafton faces glared at the man with hate.

“Then I do pronounce you Lord Terrance Arryn of Gulltown! My your line rule fairly and justly from this moment until the end of time!”
The Vale - Chapter 16

Naturally, Lord Arryn’s elevation warranted a feast. As a royal and cousin of the current ruler of the Vale, I was exempt from helping with the preparations but it was pretty much a requirement that I stay to attend. My stay in the Vale had lasted much longer than I thought it would and had involved considerably more fighting and sieging than I’d been expecting.

Word had gotten back to Viserys and he wanted me back in the capital.

Awesome.

That knowledge hung over my like the sword of Damocles. That he was angry with me was a given. The question was how angry and whether I could navigate my way into a chance to explain without Alicent present and muttering in his ear. To distract myself, I offered to play chauffeur to Lady Rhea who had business in Runestone and had never ridden on a dragon before.

Besides, Syrax could use the exercise. She’d done nothing but swim, fish and terrify the local populace and I had no intention of creating the Syrax of the original time line. Not that Syrax approved of my ongoing mission to prevent her from becoming the laziest dragon in existence, I think she would love the idea of having dinner delivered right to her face every day.

As much as it pains me to admit now, I hadn’t set out to acquire Syrax. I’d wanted Silverwing for the associations with Good Queen Alysanne. I’d set off on the mountain that day with tips from the locals as to where she’d been seen last and sheer determination, only to run across Syrax a mile into my trek. She followed me across the Dragonmont making screeching noises the entire way. I never found Silverwing and Syrax had been very insistent.

And now? I wouldn’t chose Silverwing even if I had the choice. I’d grown fond of my lazy, greedy lizard.

It turned out that Rhea’s business was going to take a couple of days. Her nephew had been left in charge of the castle and had sent several alarmed letters back regarding a dispute he’d been asked to settle in Rhea’s absence. So I distracted myself with exploring Runestone. Or rather, seeing if I could solve the mystery of why the Keep seemed to ignore the erosion of the cliff. Asking the staff yielded no useful answers, most simply told me it had always been like that and always would be. A few old timers could remember a time when the cliff had been less eroded but it didn’t explain why the castle was ignoring it.

Flummoxed, my next stop was Rhea’s library. The Royces were an ancient House that could trace the ancestry back to the Bronze Kings in the Age of Heroes and they had the records to prove it. Records that were religiously maintained in defiance of the passage of time.

“I must say, it’s nice to see that you take an interest in history, Your Grace,” Rhea’s ancient Maester told me as he retrieved several books he thought might pertain to the building of Runestone.

“Lady Royce is my aunt. I have been unforgivably rude in not learning her House’s history,” I replied. The maester nodded and continued sorting through the stacks.

“Ah, here it is! This book makes mention of several parts of the castle that no longer exist. According to Maester Hugh, they fell into the sea over a hundred years ago!” He handed me the book. The book went into some detail about upgrades and extensions a series of ambitious Bronze
Kings had made to the keep after successfully conquering a portion of land that belonged to another king. A few years after the conquest there had been a great accident and the cliff had given way, plunging everything but the original keep into the seas below.

That… okay, that points to something odd going on here.

“Everything but the original keep fell?” I asked. The Maester nodded. “Nobody investigated why?”

“The cliffs are treacherous, Your Grace. Waves smash boats into the rocks and the current can pull even the strongest swimmers beneath the waves. They’ve no need to besides, fishing has always been poor here,” he explained.

He left me to my reading after that. Most of the books were more interested in the different kings that had occupied Runestone and what political pressures had lead to their changing of the keep. Of all the different changes and alterations I was forced to return to one single fact. Anything that wasn’t the original keep eventually fell prey to the waves below or the various winter storms that blew in from the sea.

Well that was wrong actually. There was apparently the overgrown remains of an entirely new keep one of the later Bronze Kings had raised somewhere to the west. It had fallen into disuse after his death when his nephew moved the court back to Runestone. So what was so special about Runestone? Why did the Royces, a house of kings, keep coming back to it again and again? It was a fine keep for lords but kings?

I hit jackpot half way through a book about the myths and legends of the Vale by some guy called Maester Ulf. Brandon the Builder.

This guy certainly got around. He’d apparently built Winterfell, the Wall, Storm’s End and now this book claims he was also involved in the building of Runestone. The Builder is said to have weaved spells into the foundations of Winterfell, perhaps he did so here? If so, perhaps I could see them if I took Syrax down. A quick check with the servant told me Rhea was still hip deep in the dispute her nephew had fouled up so I gave the order for Syrax to be saddled and changed into my riding outfit.

I didn’t head straight to the cliffs. It was a beautiful day so I let Syrax play amongst the clouds for a while, allowing myself to relax on her back as she chased any bird unfortunate to cross her path.

Eventually I nudged her towards the cliffs and the defiant spit of land that bore Runestone. Which was when Syrax began behaving very strangely. I could feel a change run through her body as she moved in closer. She was hanging back as if the cliffs were scaring her. I rubbed the back of her head and cooed reassuringly at her. It still took five minutes of darting back and forth before she summoned the nerve to take me closer, although I could tell she still wasn’t happy.

As I came in closer, I saw the slabs. Or at least, the bottom of them. The top halves were covered in dirt and soil from the overhang of the cliff. They were huge! How had everyone missed them? Then I realised. Ships avoided this stretch of the bay if they came here at all, they docked further east at a small town that fell under the Royce’s purview and nobody actually standing on the cliff could see them due to the overhang.

That was no accident, surely?

But the cliff had eroded slowly, so had the slabs been buried? Did they form a perfect ring around the keep?
Syrax fought against me as I urged her closer but I needed to see what the deal with those slabs were. No book had mentioned them, no servant had seen them as worth mentioning - surely someone had found them before?

Oh, more evidence for Brandon being responsible for this! There was definitely some kind of runes etched on there, although with the way Syrax was avoiding the cliff face it made it hard see. A few light strikes with the whip and I managed to get her to hold her position opposite one of the slabs, massive wings beating at a pace most would say impossible. Up close, they were even more awe inspiring. Each as tall as a man and as broad as twice that, they were engraved with the ancient spiky runes of the first men.

They’d definitely been buried, I could see the way their sheer weight had pushed through the rock over time. A shiver interrupted me and I wished I’d brought my cloak. It had seemed to so nice out earlier so I hadn’t thought to. Carefully, I unfastened myself from Syrax’s saddle and gripped her horns, hauling myself closer to the runes. The slabs themselves were freezing. I could feel them through my glove as I ran my hand along the stones, tracing the etchings…

Ice flowed through me, freezing me to the bone. First there was pain, such pain, and then blessed numbness. I felt as if I was drowning in the cold, my throat burning as I attempted to breath. Syrax gave a bellow of rage and dived, almost flinging me from her back. I somehow held on, more out of muscle memory than any real thought from myself. I could see my breath in the air despite the blazing sun above. We hit the water and I was thrown clear of my mount. The ice burned again and I screamed, even as felt water fill my lungs.

And then just as soon as the cold had come, it left me. I broke the surface of the water and swam forwards, wrapping my arm around Syrax. She gave a bellow of something I almost thought was fear and then…

Heat. Heat like standing next to Syrax’s flames. I burned in it, cooking and boiling in my own skin. Trapped as it grew inside me until I was sure I would blister with the intensity of it. It’s oppressiveness drove the air from my longs, robbing me of my ability to scream. I wanted to cry, to yell, to beg whoever was listening to make it all stop. I drowned in the heat, in the blazing fire that rose within in me until it burned itself out finally, leaving me in the cinders.

“What do you mean you don’t kn-”

“-buy us some time-”

“-broken at least-”

I opened my eyes. I was in a Maester tower, I realised, brain fuzzily making connections. What had happened? My limbs felt as if someone had tied weights to them, my head felt as if it was filled with wool and my eyes burned and stung. I tried to push myself upright but found myself choking and coughing.

“Your Grace! You have awoken!” I twisted my neck and grimaced at the ache it caused in my muscles and the brief feeling of nausea at the movement.

“What happened?” I rasped as the Maester gave rapid fire orders to someone I couldn’t quite see.

“We don’t know, your dragon bore you back to the castle. You had a fever and were unconscious for several days.”

Days!? What the hell happened?
“The feast?” I asked, grimacing as my throat gave a throb of pain. It felt like someone had taken sandpaper to my throat. The Maester pressed blessedly cool water to my lips and I drank greedily.

“Slow sips, Your Grace, you will make yourself sick otherwise. As for the feast, Lady Rhea sent word you were ill and Lady Jeyne insisted on delaying it until you recovered.”

I took slower sips and mulled that over. There was a clatter and the door flew open to reveal Rhea, lips pressed into a thin line of annoyance. She strode across the room and waited with folded arms as I finished the last of the water.

“What happened? According to the Maester you were perfectly fine when you mounted Syrax.”

That was the million dollar ques- The Slabs!

I’d touched them. Vague memories of the bitter, biting cold that had come from nowhere and heat that had followed. How Syrax had dove into the sea, away from the slabs and their strange etchings. Now how to explain to Rhea her castle had assaulted me? I opened my mouth to speak but she cut me off.

“You are young. You think yourself invincible. Let me assure you though that you are not, the next time you feel ill, tell someone. A simple fever can kill if you ignore it!” she barked. I sighed, that worked better than telling her about the slabs. I suppose that answered the questions I’d had about Runestone though and whether Brandon the Builder had raised it. Magic. Magic created by one of the most legendary figures in Westerosi history and it was in plain view of anyone brave enough to steer a boat up to the coast.

What else was I missing?

“I apologise, Aunt Rhea. I also apologise for delaying the feast, I will fly you to Gulltown on Syrax first thing tomorrow,” I promised.

“You most certainly will not! You will be getting in the wheel house and Syrax can fly herself. The Maester said your fever was the worst he’d ever seen, riding Syrax will simply make things worse!”

I grimaced. I hated wheelhouses. Perhaps I could charm Rhea into letting me at least ride a horse to Gulltown?
I was not able to convince Lady Rhea to allow me to ride a horse. The Bronze Tyrant kept me in the wheelhouse the entire way back to Gulltown and even the brief trips outside had her standing not far away, ready to raise the alarm if something happened. In one way it was genuinely touching, I’d won myself an ally in Lady Royce when I’d told her the truth about Daemon and I knew her over protective manner was born from worry.

She hadn’t brought it up and neither had I but we both knew that Targaryens didn’t just catch a fever. We didn’t get colds, sore throats or random aches like the rest of Westeros, it had been one of the corner stones of Jaehaerys’ doctrine of existentialism after all. Any time we got ill it was either deliberate or something so nasty that just catching it meant our lives were in danger. I knew she’d had her staff questioned but I doubt she’d find anything. It was those slabs, the ones I was certain had something to do with The Builder.

I’d finally solved one mystery but it had promptly given me another, greater one to muse on. It would have to take the backseat though. My time in the Vale was coming to an end and I needed to ensure I had the Vale lords loyalty.

“Rhaenyra! Have you recovered?” asked Jeyne, greeting us as I finally escaped the mobile prison Rhea had forced me in to. Lord Terrance was stood behind her, flanked by a younger version of himself that could only be Isembard Arryn. Hopefully he’d be a lot more sympathetic to Jeyne’s will this time round with the memory of his families raising in his mind.

“Well enough. I wanted to fly but I was strictly forbidden.” As if on cue, Syrax plunged us briefly into shadow as she flew over the city towards the sea. I wondered if the harbour master was prepared to deal with navigating ships around a dragon.

“By the Maester’s orders!” huffed Rhea from behind me. I was mildly impressed to see no tense reaction from Jeyne as Rhea bowed to her liege lady, instead she managed a small but seemingly genuine smile.

“Lady Rhea’s letter said a fever?” I nodded as we made our way inside. Her kinsman fell in step with us. “Forgive me but Ser Laenor was of the opinion that the Maester must be mistaken. It was all I could do to keep him in Gulltown and stop him from alerting every lord here that something was wrong.”

“My husband is right, Targaryen’s rarely get ill and it is normally serious when it does occur, the Maester said the fever was one of the worst he’d seen. It has passed though and I have recovered my strength.” Let’s leave the bit about poison out. I don’t want to give Jeyne any more reasons to be snotty about Rhea and implying she may have missed a poisoning attempt on the Crown Princess was pretty up there on things to get snotty about.

Jeyne nodded and let the matter lie. It seemed the delay I’d accidentally caused had worked to Jeyne’s advantage though. She’d apparently used it to put pressure on her Lords to make their way to Gulltown and within a day of my arrival they’d begun slowly trickling in. I was weary of them. They supported Jeyne nominally but these were the lords that could not have cared less had Jeyne been replaced by Ser Arnold. Treachery by inaction was, unfortunately, not punishable in Westeros unless it was truly egregious.

They were all quick to grovel forgiveness and profusely thank me for exposing Ser Arnold’s lack of honour and some of them even managed to make it seem halfway convincing. I’d barely gotten a
chance to assure Laenor I was okay before Jeyne, with the most powerful political actors in the Vale present, called a meeting so that we could put the notion of my scouts to them and raise support for the first wide scale proactive move against the clans in a generation.

“A bold plan, Your Grace,” said Lord Jon Melcolm, after I’d finished outlining the bare bones of the plan.

“It does not matter if the plan is bold, it will fail as all notions of removing the clans have failed in the past!” sneered Gawen Corbray. Lord Gerold had been right. He wasn’t willing to rise for a man who was already on his way to the wall but he sure was bitter about the Graftons getting overthrown. He’d gone so far as to take as many of the displaced house under his protection as he could.

A problem for the future.

“We’ve all fought the clans, true, and we’ve all hunted them and lost men for it. Yet no one has seen an effort on the scale in a long time and that campaign saw the High Road cleared for nigh on fifty years!” The current Lord Lynderly was ancient but his voice held steel.

“And if we get enough of the mountains cleared, we can expand mining operations and dig in. We can push them back.” Bless Lord Denys. He’d lost a sister to the mountain clans and had taken it hard. He likely viewed the scouts as a vector for revenge.

“It required the entire Vale to be raised to clear the High Road! We can not afford such a campaign like that!” Lord Corbray shouted. I was concerned to see it looked like he had some support in that sentiment. Still, if that was the only objection he could come up with…

“Ser Laenor and I have been discussing funding. With Arryn, Velaryon and Targaryen funds we can keep a small, elite force fighting in the Vale for quite some time,” The new Lord of Gulltown informed us all.

“So we can afford to waste the money! You have done nothing to convince me that this will work, that I will not just be sending men to their deaths in those Seven forsaken mountains.”

“Lord Corbray, calm yourself!” Jeyne commanded. The Lord threw himself back into his chair, eyes blazing with hate and looking very much like a child having a tantrum.

“Forgive me, I’m very much eager for a chance to expand my iron mines but I am confused as to how this will work. From the way you’ve explained it these will be Vale men under the permanent command of the Crown? I do not see the reason.” Lord Belmore’s tone was full of false confused politeness. He’d been one of those nodding along with Lord Corbray moments ago.

“The Vale as it stands is much weakened by the Mountain clans. In raising a permanent force to fight them back, we strengthen the Vale immeasurably but the simple matter is that the Vale can not afford to do this. My cousin funds two thirds of the unit, will only allow direct command of it to men of the Vale and will only deploy it outside the Vale in times of great strife,” explained Jeyne.

“So in practice, we retain control over it at all times, it’s stays in the Vale unless Her Grace calls it to service, we pay considerably less than we would for a force of it’s size and nature and we get all the benefits with little downsides,” Rhea’s voice cut in, voice as dry as the Dornish desert, as she spoke for the first time. Rhea and Jeyne’s shaky alliance had put many Vale lords on the back foot but it was still early days. Case in point, the venomous look Jeyne shot her for interrupting.
“And how does Her Grace benefit from the arrangement?” asked Lord Lucas, in the same tone of false confusion.

“A professional and experienced fighting force that will aid me if I call the banners of Westeros,” I replied. I examined faces. Lord Gerold and Lord Denys were ride or die at this point. Lord Terrance would go along with anything Jeyne suggested up to and probably including setting her up as God-Queen of the Vale. Actually out of all the Lords present, only Lord Gawen seemed set against it. Even his nominal supporters Lord Godric Hunter and Lucas Belmore seemed cautiously interested.

“And the name for this fighting force?” asked Victor Lynderly, gauging the room to be in favour.

“I have a suggestion,” said Rhea, turning her gaze to her liege lady. “The Falcons.”

Something told me Jeyne liked that idea, from the way she swelled with pride and damn near started preening. At that point, it was simply a matter of sorting out who would pay for what and who’s sons would be given precedent for command. I left that to Jeyne, she knew her lords better than I. Surprisingly, she asked that I stay behind to discuss a matter of ‘some importance’ with her as the Lords filed out.

“It is an awkward request,” she said finally. I poured myself a cup of juice and nodded for her to continue. That she seemed jumpy about whatever she was about to ask me had me worried.

“You understand, cousin, I do not wish to insult you with what I ask but… I would not ask if it were not important,” she said. My mind was already running through the worst possible scenarios right now. Spit out Jeyne, you’re going to give me a heart attack! “I need you to take an extra lady back with you.”

My sigh of relief was audible. Oh thank god, at least she wasn’t telling me she was actually marrying Aegon or something after all this.

“Of course I can take an extra lady back with me to King’s Landing. Falena has already proved her weight in gold!” I told her. Jeyne did not look reassured. “Which of your ladies did you want me to take?”

“Maris Grafton.” My train of thought braked hard.

“The mouthy one from the hall after the siege?” I asked.

“Mouthy? Odd way to describe her but accurate, I suppose. Yes, that would be who I am referring to.” Damn, I really needed to stop with the anachronisms. “I understand her house is in disgrace currently but…”

Oh, that unhappy look tells me you two have history.

“Are you using me to clear an old lover out of the Vale in a way she can’t protest at?” I asked. Blunt but I doubt Jeyne would be overly offended, we’d grown closer these past two months. I watched with delight as she went a vibrant red.

“Love- No! Not Maris! Not that I nev- I mean Jess is the-” I waved my hand to cut her off as I snorted in laughter. She shut up and glared at me but it lacked the bite she reserved for those she was truly angry at.

“Maris was one of my ladies when Lord Yorbert was my regent. She was the only one who stood up to him. ‘Mouthy’ even then.” She said after my giggling had died down to nothing.
Oh, now I got it. She was Jeyne’s Rhaenys. No matter what happened, however much of a bad idea it was to trust her, she couldn’t forget what she'd done. Like Rhaenys for me, Jeyne couldn’t live with herself if she had a chance to return the favour and did not take it.

“I understand, Jeyne, more than you could guess. I’ll take your first love back with me and you can tell her you’ve played the gallant knight in her defence.” She went red again and I couldn’t resist another parting shot. “I thought the knight was supposed to protect the lady from the dragon though,”

That earned me a slap on the arm that sent it numb for a few minutes after. Not that I cared, I was too busy laughing at Jeyne’s excellent tomato impression and stuttering insistence that it ‘wasn’t like that Rhaenyra, shut up!’.

With the last of the politicking out of the way, I tried to force myself to enjoy my remaining time in the Vale. I’d done everything I’d needed to do and more. Jeyne was mine, I’d gotten myself the first of my armies and started the process of strengthening the Vale. That Viserys was likely five minutes away from resurrecting the Black Dread and flying over to find me in sheer rage was a downside I wasn’t looking forward to navigating.

The moment the feast had ended and the Lords began to go home, a pit of dread had opened in my stomach. I almost cried when Jeyne told me Lord Gerold would be coming back to King’s Landing with us. She’d already promised to send a Vale delegation to court to at least balance out some of Alicent’s influence but I’d assumed they would be following on a few month’s behind as most Lord’s were still only selecting which heirs and second sons they would send.

“News of the King’s displeasure has reached us here, Cousin. Lord Gerold knows your father, he knows what to say to mitigate his anger.” Had been her explanation when I’d questioned her on it. I’d never been so glad for her decision to hide my illness than in that moment. It had been a risky move on her part but had it gotten back to Viserys… I dread to think. I was still feeling sick with nerves when our much increased party boarded the ship that would bear us home to King’s Landing.
“Will you miss the Vale, Lord Gerold?” I asked, looking for any conversation topic to distract myself from the upcoming shit show. The docks of King’s Landing were in sight and the travel back had been smooth sailing and we’d made good time. In fact, the only thing that had marred the trip back had been Maris Grafton’s ongoing reaction to her new position in life. She hadn’t taken Jeyne’s command well and in the end I’d handed her over to Falena with a heartfelt apology.

“Aye, I reckon I will but it’s time my boy got some real experience running the Redfort. He’s a man grown now and I’m not going to live forever,” he replied. “Besides, it would have been me or Denys and I know Denys is looking forward to your Falcons too much to sit in King’s Landing playing politics.”

I snorted without meaning to. Lord Denys had barely waited until the feast was over to start sounding out who could send what men and where they could source the equipment needed from.

“You needn’t be so worried, Your Grace, Viserys would be a fool to openly censure you for defending the rights of one of his paramount vassals,” said Lord Gerold after a while, having picked up on my dread as the docks came closer.

“Not as reassuring as you wish it to be, Viserys is a fool,” I muttered after a bitter laugh. “But even if you’re right, that just means his punishment will be private and tailored to fucking whatever plans he thinks I have in the works.”

Lord Gerold just snorted. If he was bothered by my blatant disrespect for Viserys, he didn’t show it. Then again, Jeyne had asked him to come with me solely to make sure Viserys would know I had her support behind me, so she’d evidently briefed him on the matter and he had met the man before. For all that I hoped a private word with Viserys would resolve the matter, I knew that with two months to twist my actions to suit her agenda, Alicent had likely already denied me that route. I had little to no chance of convincing him that I was in the right before Alicent conned him into a very public dressing down.

I was keen to avoid public humiliation and Lord Gerold was my insurance.

If we were to divide the Court up properly, it would be into five distinct factions. The Blacks that look to me for leadership and the Greens that look to Alicent’s leadership are the obvious and most powerful. Whilst not the largest factions, even combined, our little war meant each of us had cultivated quite a little bit of political pull in one place because anyone who wished to actively involve themselves in politics had to have picked a side.

Surprisingly, the actual largest of the factions were the Doves. They were the neutral lords, the Neds of the world, who would just like to pretend there wasn’t a succession war brewing under their noses and stay at home with the kids and wife. I had always wondered how Viserys had ignored the foundations of the Dance of Dragons being laid right before his eyes and the best I could come up with is blaming these guys. Their faction stretched from the southern Reach to the northern Vale and they all, adamantly, did not want to have a war. Viserys probably assumed that as long as they existed, we would be prevented from truly fighting one another.

Which made the War of Quills make a lot more sense now that I think about it.

The next of the factions of note were the War Hawks. These were mostly minor lordlings, spares and lowborn knights that wanted to fight and didn’t care who they went up against. They wanted
glory against an enemy and they weren’t picky about the enemy. They didn’t often raise their voices in court as they were Daemon’s biggest supporters outside of Corlys himself, but when they did bother to turn it up it was normally with demands for war and sanctions; with Dorne or The Triarchy being their usual focus of attention.

The smallest faction were the Seahorses, as I liked to refer to them. They were mostly made up of Stormlords that traded with Corlys heavily, supplying him the timber that the shipwrights in Hull consumed in vast amounts. Interestingly, they also included the last of Boremund Baratheon’s lords that had supported Rhaenys at the Great Council. They mostly deferred to the Blacks as putting me on the Throne meant putting Laenor’s children on it in turn but I wasn’t foolish enough to assume it was me they were loyal too.

This meant the Blacks, in theory, had four dragons, the War Hawks had one dragon, the Greens had the potential for four dragons and the Doves had nothing.

Which meant Viserys was forced to play politics to keep the Dove faction alive because if war looked likely and they had no dragons for aid, they’d abandon him to whatever faction could seize control of the capital. If Viserys looked to be leaning towards giving into Green pressure or I looked to be too risky to follow, the Doves would start jumping towards Alicent like rats off a drowning ship. If I began making significant inroads into the Green support or Aegon disgraced himself, I’d suddenly be hip deep in Dove lords that were suddenly very willing to uphold Viserys’ wishes.

That need to prevent the collapse of the Doves was what Lord Gerold and Jeyne were betting my standing in court on.

Which meant they were also betting on Viserys pulling his head out of his behind long enough to see that. Is it too late to go back to the Eyrie?

I was happy to see the smallfolk had turned out in droves to welcome me back. They lined the streets and cheered for the ‘Good Princess Rhaenyra’ and the ‘Brave Prince Laenor’ which, I’m not going to deny, felt really good. Evidently Marya’s nascent PR scheme was still going well, I’d have to find some sort of reward for her because this was beyond what I had been expecting from three months of work.

The fact that Viserys had sent an escort to ensure we didn’t get lost on our way to the Throne room was less nice. Evidently, Alicent was taking no chances that I could wriggle out of punishment. Even worse was that Ser Criston Cole was leading it with a triumphant smile on his face, a nasty look in his eye and an awful lot of Green knights backing him up.

“Princess Rhaenyra, I have been ordered to escort you to your Father,” he told me, as we dismounted the horses. I made a show of stretching, as if the words he had spoken were no great worry.

“You have our thanks, Ser Cole,” Laenor replied with false cheer, earning himself a dirty look from the white knight. I dispatched Falena and Maris to my rooms with orders to locate Marya and the Strong twins before taking an excruciatingly long time to organise the belongings we’d picked up in the Eyrie and to make sure Seasmoke and Syrax had actually flown to the Dragonpit and not bunked off to go swimming.

Commanding dragons was a bit hit and miss sometimes. As Crown Princess, I simply couldn’t live with myself if something happened to Syrax. Or, more likely, Syrax happened to something.

The fact I could almost hear Criston grinding his teeth at the delay had nothing to do with it.
Viserys evidently hadn’t appreciated the wait either because when we finally entered the Throne room he looked livid. Alicent had outdone herself. I could only spot a few Black lords amongst the overwhelming amount of Doves and Greens. My heart jumped when we passed the Velaryon party and I caught Laena’s eye. The tall girl was pale and very, very worried and if even Laena could spot the incoming stitch up…

“Daughter, you left so quickly for the Vale of Arryn, I fear you neglected to inform me of your departure.” The King’s tone was icy and Alicent had never looked more smug so I elected to spring my trump card straight away instead of waiting and baiting Alicent even further. I waved Lord Gerold forward.

“Father, I beg your forgiveness but I departed for the Vale to ride to my Cousin’s aid. Foul treachery would have seen her usurped and her own kinsman responsible.” Although I was reasonably sure everyone would have known the circumstances of Ser Arnold’s little rebellion by now the Throne room still exploded into shocked whispers and cries as the gossip sprang up. Viserys glared them all into silence before turning his eyes on Lord Gerold.

“The Princess speaks truly, Your Grace. Ser Arnold Arryn laid siege to the Eyrie itself. I can scarcely contain the shame that it required the Princess to expose his traitorous actions and not her loyal lords.”

Viserys’ livid expression became a scowl of annoyance, he couldn’t exactly yell at me when there was a Lord of the Vale telling him, without actually saying it, that Jeyne had my back. I was glad to note Alicent had realised that because she suddenly looked significantly less triumphant. Honestly, did she think I would just waltz in here without backup? Scratch that, she probably had. I hadn’t exactly shown any particular head for politics before my marriage and she had no way of knowing that it was me and not Corlys pulling the strings behind the Black resurgence I’d been engineering at court before I’d flown off into a small war.

Even though I had to admit I was surprised. Lord Gerold was essentially denying his and Lord Denys’ attempt at an intervention, one that proved I hadn’t been needed in the Vale to rescue Jeyne, at the expense of his own honour.

“I can only praise both Princess Rhaenyra and Ser Laenor’s actions in aiding us in rooting out the traitors and their collaborators. Ser Laenor personally lead a band of knights that put the reforming Grafton army to flight and prevented Humfrey Grafton from fleeing justice at great personal risk. Princess Rhaenyra saved hundreds of lives in the siege of Gulltown by breaking the enemy formations with minimal loss of life. Truly, I do not exaggerate when I say the all of the Vale of Arryn are in their debt.”

More murmurs of surprise and a smattering of applause led by Laena, who’s smile was reminiscent of Syrax spotting an easy meal. I had no idea she could look so… predatory. Viserys still looked unhappy but at least Alicent’s expression now matched it as she realised that even if Viserys was against me, the Lords she’d gathered for my supposed humiliation were not and they were even some of her Greens nodding along in approval at my actions.

“Is this so?” Viserys’ asked, a decidedly unfriendly look in his eyes. “Then I can only praise my Daughter’s swift actions in defending both the Lady of the Vale and the King’s Peace.”

“Thank you Father, but I only did my duty as a Targaryen and Heir to the Iron Throne,” I replied, trying not to smirk as my parting shot at Alicent struck true.

Oh, she definitely wants to strangle me now.
I may have gotten out of punishment in public but given the fact Viserys’ anger still had not abated by the time I left for my rooms, I was still going to get it in the neck in private. Still, my success in the Vale had inspired me to properly plan out a procession through Westeros. Of course, no one else had a succession war to interfere with right now but it never hurt to make it personal by showing up at their house with a fire-breathing dragon. Planning that was abruptly ended when Viserys stormed into my rooms and put my ladies to flight. Even Laena and Laenor had been sent away like small children so that Viserys could have a ‘private’ word with his daughter. He hadn’t bought Criston, at least. This conversation would be going very differently if he’d bought Criston.

“I can scarcely put into words how disappointed I am in you, Rhaenyra,” he told me, after he’d tried and failed to stare me out. I settled for rubbing the pain from my fingers and fixing him with my patented neutral court face. Anger flickered over his features and my own rose to match it. I swallowed it down.

“You come to court and tell me you’re refusing to fulfil the only duty I am asking of you currently. You gallivant around with the Strong brothers, set my lords fighting amongst themselves and then just as quickly you race off to the Vale, a place you had been told was suffering from the plague!” his voice rose to a shout but I refused to cower. Instead, I said nothing, very aware that my temper and his let loose always resulted in screaming matches.

“You start a war, raise an army on our doorstep and then come home as if you have done nothing wrong! What were you thinking, girl!?” At my silence he stood and slammed his hands down on the armrests of my chair. I couldn’t help it, I flinched. He didn’t notice, too lost in his anger.

“I make you my heir against the advice of all of my lords! I defend you against all those who believe you are not worthy to rule! And this is how you repay me!? Say something, girl, you are not a mute!”

“I defended my kin. I am defending my right to the Throne.” I replied, keeping my voice level. Viserys snorted in anger and threw himself back down in his chair. It creaked ominously at his weight colliding with it.

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“You right to the Throne comes from me. I gave it to you and I can strip it from you just as easily.” He wanted me to beg, wanted me on the back foot and worrying about whether he meant it. His violet eyes bored into mine and I refused to give him what he wanted even though I knew it would cost me. I would not let him derail everything I had worked for by constantly waving this threat in front of me.

“Strip me of my right to the throne now and you sign my execution order.”

“Seven hells, Rhaenyra! Alicent is your family! Aegon is your family! Neither will kill you for the damned throne!”

“Truly!? Aegon is terrified of me! Alicent hates me! And we all know how that happened don’t we, Father?” His lips peeled back into a snarl.

“You and I both know where those rumours came from, Rhaenyra. I seem to recall similar ones regarding yourself,” he said coldly and I saw red.

“Oh, without a doubt, except I never actually fucked him, unlike your whore of a wif-”

My airflow was suddenly cut off as Viserys wrapped his hand around my throat. He let out a hoarse scream as I struggled for air, slapping weakly at his arm. He wrenched me to my feet and my back slammed painfully into the wall. Then his face cleared and he dropped me. My legs gave
out and the floor rushed to meet me, my hands impacted the floor with a sting I barely felt as I gasped down precious air.

He hooked his hands under my arms, trying to pull me to my feet. The door slammed open and Lorent Marbrand stepped in, sword drawn. Viserys looked up and shook his head. The White Cloak nodded and stepped out. As if the King hadn’t just choked out his daughter, as if nothing was wrong.

I wanted to scream and throw something and…

My throat burned and my hand ached. I pushed his help away and used the chair to pull myself to my feet, breathing still ragged. His shaking hand under my chin forced me too look at him. His face was pale but I could tell he was still angry.

“Leave King’s Landing. Go back to Dragonstone. Stay there. Be the Heir instead of making a spectacle of yourself,” said Viserys quietly. “And if you ever cast such aspersions on Alicent again, you had better hope Daemon wants you on the Stepstones because you certainly won’t be wanted here,”

I left him there, sitting and looking at his hands as if he had only just noticed they existed. I rode to the Dragonpit, mounted Syrax and made for Dragonstone. I should have told Laenor, I should have organised my ladies, I should have warned Lord Gerold but I couldn’t. I couldn’t.

I was numb and aching and scared.

So I went home, the only place I felt safe. He would not take it from me.
I awoke to Joffrey shaking me awake, eyes wide with worry and shock. Blearily, I peered about. Two maids huddled by the door, each pale and grim-looking. Joffrey himself looked wild-eyed, his dress not entirely as put together I was used too. The maids must have woken him or interrupted his usual morning rituals.

“Thank the seven. Thank the seven. Where is Gerardys!?” His shout made me flinch and I cursed myself when he turned back to me, looking stricken. There was no way he hadn’t felt me jump with his hand still on my shoulder. The maids fled at his shout, leaving me alone with him. Head foggy with sleep, I pulled myself out of bed and staggered over to the juice the maids had evidently been in the process of bringing.

“Your Grace?” he asked, voice fearful. I ignored him in favour of downing as much juice as possible. My throat ached, making the act of swallowing painful. Annoyed, I raised my hand to it and rubbed at it as if I could erase last night. The door swung open to admit Gerardys, the Maester was panting as if he had run all the way from his rooms. When he saw me he stopped dead, then his eyes went lower and widened with horror.

“Your Grace! Please lie back down and allow me to attend to you,” he all but babbled. I finished my cup and couldn’t quite keep the grimace off of my face.

“I am fine,” I lied, pain in my throat flaring as I spoke. I felt a hand on my shoulder, steering me to the bed.

“Your Grace, someone has tried to strangle you!” Gerardys sounded somewhat hysterical so I allowed him to steer me to the bed. I didn’t let him force me to lie down but I put up with his tests, even if it was embarrassing to have Joffrey in the corner whilst he poked and prodded. After he left, Joffrey removed himself from the wall and stepped forward, falling to his knees in front of me.

“Your Grace, I have failed you.”

“Is it really that bad?” I rasped, wincing as I realised that if I was having trouble speaking it most certainly was. He raised his dark eyes and stared at me incredulously.

“Your Grace, the maids thought you dead! Strangled in your sleep!” He looked stricken and upset. I sighed and closed my eyes, hands trying to massage away a headache. I don’t know how he thought I’d been injured but he was clearly blaming himself.

“I am as well as can be expected. You may consider yourself innocent of any failing, the man who did this was one beyond your reach.” I couldn’t quite bring myself to say it was Viserys. I had never seen him like that. I knew he had a temper, had seen it directed at Daemon and various courtiers but… Gods, never at me and never that bad. Joffrey was silent for sometime as his eyes flickered this way and that, trying to figure out who I meant. I knew he’d hit on the right answer when his eyes widened and his face contorted into horror.

“I believe I understand, Your Grace. I will have the castle prepared to accommodate your return,” he told me, face neutral and tone unfriendly. He was almost stalking as he left, free hand going for a sword he no longer wore. There was the Knight of Kisses, the man willing to fight a Princess over the Prince. The man willing to fight a King over a Princess. He reached the door before I called out to him.
“Do not do anything rash, Ser Joffrey,” he nodded, eyes conveying his rage and unhappiness.

I rose once to change into a night shirt with the help of the maids before falling back to sleep. I felt heavy and drained and tired but no amount of rest seemed able to drive it away. I should get up and attend to Dragonstone, I likely had a stack of reports to make my way through. I should get up and go see Wisdom Jerrett and how he is coming along with the Guild campus. I should get up and find Joffrey to plan how I would remain in contact with the Blacks whilst I found myself unwelcome at court.

I had taken a bad situation and gotten close to salvaging it and then thrown it all away because my temper had gotten the better of me once again. The Rhaenyra in me had gotten the better of me once again. He knew… he knew what Daemon had done to me, knew that the rumours Alicent had spread weren’t true. Just as he knew that the rumours regarding Alicent were true. That she had entered the relationship willingly and had been quite charmed by him for the longest time. To conflate the two situations…

I dashed away my tears and gave into the sudden exhaustion I felt.

I awoke to feather light touches skimming over my face, tracing the curve of my cheek, before moving down and settling on my neck. I opened my eyes in confusion. Laena hung over me, cascades of silver ringlets curtaining her face. Her face bore an intense expression and her eyes were full of rage I had never seen in the girl before. In the low light of my rooms she was hauntingly beautiful in a way that caused my heart to lurch painfully and my mouth go dry. Realising I was awake, she snatched her hand back as if burned before favouring me with a small smile. That rage didn’t quite leave her eyes though.

“Sickbed or not, I’m not kissing you,” she said and I bit back a groan. Of course she’d noticed. She was only ever observant when it was inconvenient for her to be.

“Laena,” came Joffrey’s voice, sharp with warning.

“A joke, Ser Joffrey, one can not be serious all the time. Besides, I am the least likely to judge her proclivities,”

I pushed past her and pulled myself halfway to upright, leaning against the impressively carved headboard. A dragon wing poked my cheek. Laena shifted her position on the bed as I pulled at the covers and tried to smile, managing to look vaguely constipated. She seemed to be struggling to remove her gaze from my neck. She was still dressed in her riding gear and smelt of dragon and sea salt. Joffrey looked as grim as ever and still just as angry as he had when he had left this morning. I risked a glance out the window and was surprised to find it pitch black outside.

Had I really slept the whole day away?


“My dolt of a brother thought you wanted me in your bed. Flattering, I suppose,” she told me. This time I could see the look Joffrey cast at her, full of frustration. “Laena, this is not the time for japes.”

“Oh come on, Joff, both she and my brother have… inconvenient desires. You can’t deny hiding it will be the most important thing you do.”

“Her Grace is loyal to your brother,” Joffrey told her as I resigned myself to a painfully awkward conversation. “But even if she were not, now would not be the time to have this conversation.”
“Her Grace very much desires the company of her husband and has taken no lovers,” he continued after giving Laena time to process that information. “Of any sort.”

Ser Joffrey, I am going to do something very nice for you in the future. Although at least she isn’t full of pity. I don’t think I could handle pity right now.

“Oh by the seven! I beg your apologies, I must have sounded as vain as-”

I waved her apology off, feeling only slightly guilty at the deceit. Gods, it had been so odd to realise my sexuality had shifted. I had thought myself past surprises like that when I awoke in Rhaenyra’s body but fourteen years and the start of puberty later and I found my blood singing for a man.

Awkward to explain to the sister-in-law.

“Now that we’ve established I’m not a sexual harassment case waiting to happen, why are you here?”

“Sexual harassment?” she asked, frowning.

“A term Her Grace coined during her creation of the bureaucracy of Dragonstone. It’s quite simple to parse it’s meaning. Perhaps you could give Her Grace the news from the capital?”

The urge to laugh ran through me. Laena was clever in her own way, the best dragon rider of our generation and if Rhaenys ever let her would make an excellent explorer but when it came to anything not dragons or flying, she could be remarkably ditzy. Case in point, accusing the Crown Princess of having an affair as a joke. The sad thing was that if she ever bothered to focus on politics she’d probably be very good at it, she understood people well when she bothered to.

“Oh! Laenor sent me ahead to tell you. Rumours abound in the capital of your falling out with the King and Laenor wanted to make sure your lords knew that it was over the Vale business. Regardless, Lord Gerold is in a fine temper and even the Greens are discontent about the fact you have been unofficially banished over defending the rights of a vassal.”

“And?” Joffrey prompted. Laena rolled her eyes. Something told me Laenor had drilled this into his Sister’s head repeatedly before letting her go, something about her wording was reminiscent of him.

“And Viserys issued a decree supporting every action you took, including the seizure of Gulltown. You have nearly the entire court in your corner and the smallfolk praising your name from Cracklaw Point to the Wendwater!”

“With no way to turn that good will into solid political gains,” I reminded them both.

“Laenor says it’s not so! Lord Gerold is taking the lead with the Black faction in King’s Landing and many of your supporters have spoken about sending representatives to Dragonstone for your own court here and that’s just the courts reaction. Once the Lords Paramount hear the news there will be a second wave of condemnation for the King.”

“Then I trust Lord Gerold to handle it.”

At my dismissal, Laena and Joffrey shot each other surprised glances.

“That is… unlike you?” Laena said, her eyes worried.
“Her Grace is not well currently. Certainly once she has recovered she will resume her position in charge of the Black faction.”

“She is in the room, Joffrey.” I said as I laid back down and punched my pillow into a vaguely comfortable shape. “And she is going back to sleep.”

“Uh, there may be a small problem,” Laena’s tone was hesitant, as if she had bad news and suspected the messenger might very much get shot for delivering it. A sigh escaped me before I could stop it.

“Go ahead, ruin my evening.”

“Mother is here!” Laena said very quickly. I felt her weight leave the bed. I glared at my pillow. If Rhaenys were here it was a minor miracle hadn’t stormed my bedroom already.

“I thought it prudent to allow Laena to warn you rather than allow Lady Rhaenys to enter with you unaware.”

Joffrey, I don’t know how you did it but I’m going to make you tell me. Lady Rhaenys respects the laws of neither men nor gods, how did you get her to restrain herself for so long? I sat up again and glared at the worried looking Laena and the ever stoic Joffrey.

“Then it seems I must get dressed and receive Lady Rhaenys before she lays siege to my rooms.”

“Mother isn’t that bad, Rhaenyra,” Laena chuckled nervously. I shot her a dark look.

“Perhaps you can help Her Grace dress herself. I will ensure that Lady Rhaenys is aware that you will be attending to her shortly.”

I couldn’t be bothered with fashion and dress cuts so I asked Laena to find me a dress that wasn’t completely terrible and let her do most of the work when it came to pulling it on. It was clumsy and much slower than I really expected but then again, Laena had hardly played lady-in-waiting or maid before.

“Rhaenyra, are you truly well?” she asked me softly as I dug around for something to conceal my neck with. I’d looked into what passed as a mirror and discovered why everyone was so concerned. My neck was a riot of deep purple and blue, a very clear hand print dominated it. I didn’t bother answering her as I located a long red shawl and occupied myself with wrapping it about my neck. She sighed in annoyance at my silence but took my proffered arm.

Rhaenys was pacing the room when we finally got there, an untouched glass of wine on the low table she was supposed to be sitting at. When we entered she crossed the room and seized me by the shoulder, violet eyes studying me.

“Heard from my boy and half the court you flung yourself into two sieges, broke a quarantine and had a mighty row with Viserys over it all.” It wasn’t a question but a statement so I merely nodded. She turned to her daughter. “How bad?”

“Laenor says that-”

“No, Laena. How bad is whatever wound she’s hiding?” Laena’s eyes flickered between me and her mother, caught between a rock and a hard place, I realised. ”Don’t give me that look, something she did sent Viserys into a frenzy and I doubt it was catching this nonexistent plague.”

“I was not wounded in the Vale, Rhaenys,” I told her, then regretted it because my voice was still
rough and painful. Rhaenys turned back to me, mouth set into an unhappy curl.

“Show her, Rhaenyra.” Traitor! I glared at Laena who merely looked stricken.

“Trust me, you are not leaving until I have a whole accounting of whatever idiocy you and Viserys have managed to argue your way into.”

I glared at her. Viserys was the idiot, not me. He was the one that refused to see reason, refused to see that his belief that family was family and would never harm you would end in mine or Aegon’s death. I removed the shawl and Rhaenys actually growled in anger.

“What. Happened?” she managed to choke out after a moment. Her face was mottled white and red with rage and her hands balling repeatedly into fists.

“Viserys was unhappy with my work in the Vale. He believed it to be an extension of the factionalism I have apparently caused and stirred up. He told me Alicent would never see me harmed and I told him Alicent hates me because she thinks I took Daemon from her.”

Rhaenys groaned in dismay.

“Rhaenyra, you know how he rea-”

“It’s true! She was fucking him and he broke it off because he wanted to be closer to the throne than Alicent could get him.”

In the corner of my eye I could see Laena looking thrilled. She probably hadn’t heard this gossip before and if she had, she probably hadn’t had it confirmed as completely true. Viserys had always come down hard on those that repeated the rumours.

“I know that. You know that. Half of King’s Landing bloody well knows that! Viserys blinds himself to it willingly and reacts badly when people make him confront it.” Then she sighed and dropped into the chair. “That being said he shouldn’t have laid a finger on you, provoked or not. If the political stage were not as it were I would be in King’s Landing by morn and would have an explanation from him.”

A flicker of alarm shot through me and even Laena moved to confront her mother, who merely held up a hand.

“I will not do anything rash. Mark my words though, that man is going to get a reckoning soon.”
If I had thought Rhaenys and Laena’s reactions to be unduly angry, Laenor proved me wrong. He’d arrived back accompanying my ladies and the ships having initiated a graceful exit from King’s Landing and appointing Lord Celtigar and Lord Gerold as the nominal Black leaders in our absence.

That the King had ‘banished’ me for my actions in the Vale had been explained to him by Viserys himself who’d wrung his hands and listed the fact I had cared little for the plague warning, risked death by twitchy mercenaries, gotten caught up in two sieges and generally put myself at risk as the reason he’d been so angry. He’d reasoned that if I stayed at Dragonstone and ruled there it would be just as effective at showing the realm I could be heir than turning up at court at battling Alicent for influence over the Lords.

Funnily enough, he’d failed to mention the choking.

So Laenor had docked in Dragonstone and been greeted by his mother, his sister and his wife. Rhaenys had waited until Laenor had finished his explanation of his meeting with Viserys before pulling the shawl from my neck revealing the still ugly bruising. Laena had been forced to wrestle her brother to the ground to prevent him from flying Seasmoke straight back to King’s Landing in a rage.

“Hah! I was starting to have my doubts I’d ever see you in a Dragon Rage, Laenor,” she cackled, after he’d calmed down enough for Laena to stop sitting on him. One could almost hear the capital letters.

“Dragon rage? Really?” I asked dryly from my position behind a large glass of wine. This sounded like an interesting tidbit of lore. Hadn’t Viserys often blathered about waking the dragon in canon?

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had it explained to you, Rhaenyra?” Rhaenys asked before throwing her head back and laughing. “Of course you haven’t, Aemma wouldn’t have known and Viserys wouldn’t have cared.”

“Those of us bonded to dragons are vulnerable to rages beyond that of normal men,” explained Laena, shooting an amused look at her brother. Laenor flushed. That… actually explained a lot. Holy shit, why hadn’t Viserys ever mentioned this? At my presumably stunned expression, Rhaenys laughed again.

“I’ve seen you with it. You haven’t got the handle on it that you think you do but it’ll come with age. As for my girl, there’s a reason Corlys doesn’t argue with her these days. I seem to remember an invitation to talk to Vhagar about your frequent travels.”

“Mother!” Laena exclaimed, horrified. I had never seen Laena truly angry beyond the brief flash of murder she’d had over the bruises when she’d first seen them. Apparently, it wasn’t something I should seek out if even Corlys was weary of it.

“But it seems the only thing that’ll get Laenor fired up is a pretty wife in peril. Your father’s son in more ways than one.” There was a fierce grin gracing the Queen That Never Was’ face. Laenor went even redder, hands twisting the hem of his tunic. I allowed myself to enjoy the sight of him, red blush on high cheekbones, for a moment until I caught Laena watching me with a raised eyebrow and an odd expression.
Rhaenys was wrong, of course, about the cause being a wife in peril. I had seen Laenor truly beyond rage, filled with killing intent, as we’d waited for the Maester to finish looking over Joffrey. Laenor had wanted to challenge Criston Cole, had wanted him dead and not peacefully in his sleep either. It had been the desire to make sure Joffrey did not awaken alone that had prevented him storming the royal apartments to confront the Lord Commander. I certainly had nothing to do with it, he’d barely acknowledged my presence at the time.

“No doubt we’ll be receiving your Father’s judgement on all of this before long,” said Rhaenys, merrily and oblivious to her children’s suddenly chagrined expressions. I, myself, refused to allow my expression to change. Corlys could fall in line or continue sulking on those fucking islands but I was done with men telling me what to do, assuming they were better at it all simply because I lacked a cock and they didn’t.

Corlys did indeed have opinions. Surprising ones. His letter praised Laenor for his actions in the Vale, both in being a leader of men and flying in the Fall of Gulltown. He’d also waxed lyrical about how proud he was that Laenor had managed to use my ‘foolishness’ to create a boon for House Velaryon in the form of men, trade and resources from the Vale. He’d approved Laenor’s offers of the loans to Jeyne and given him permission to sink a princely amount into the new enterprise in the Vale.

I don’t think Laenor was supposed to read aloud the bit where Corlys implied I was an empty headed ‘chit’ who needed to be kept from harming myself through my own moronic ideas. Clearly, someone had received notice that Joffrey succeeded in emptying Dragonstone of his spies and was not taking it very well.

Joffrey had also succeeded in the other task I had set him because it seemed Qarl Correy was gone. No body, no scandal, no real rumours - he was just gone. Joffrey had been tight lipped about what he’d done even when I’d confronted him directly. I had no clue if he was dead or alive, if he’d left willingly or not, if he even knew why he’d been turfed out of his comfy life on Driftmark. I found myself troubled by how untroubled I was by Qarl Correy’s unknown fate.

He was probably dead. Likely executed…No, not executed, murdered for a crime he might commit in the future on the orders of a man who simply had another’s word of his untrustworthiness. My word.

At least Laenor hadn’t been too upset. He’d sulked for a day or two but had snapped out of it the moment Joffrey reported that Wisdom Jerrett had begun research and testing on Dragonstone. I admit I was excited too. Jerrett had split his Wisdoms into groups, roughly following the groups Laenor had used initially with a few minor changes.

Wisdom Hugh had taken command of a few farms close to the campus in my name and had started the experiments. They’d given one farmer the tools they’d produced, one farmer the idea and process of the four field system, the third both the field system and the tools and final one had been told to keep farming as usual.

Wisdom Gawen had been given charge of the ‘communications’ research. A fancy word for what was essentially just the printing press and the vague idea of typewriter. I was told he’d made good progress though. He’d come up with several promising prototypes for the press itself but had run into a problem with the actual print part.

Wisdom Beron had started his experiments into glass which were not going as well as hoped. Clear glass was still out of our reach it seemed as my vague ideas about seaweed were just that. Vague. Still, we were learning a lot about the different types of seaweed that graced the waters around
Dragonstone and Driftmark and learning was never bad.

The final research group of any note was not lead by a Wisdom but by Maester Gerardys. Gerardys was a gifted healer and had read only a few pages of the book before insisting he be allowed to work with the Wisdoms. I had been worried he’d sell us all out and tell the Maesters about my plans but he’d insisted he was loyal to me.

He’d done that in canon. I remembered where it had got him there.

I’d begrudgingly allowed it because in the end he was the best man for the job. None of the Wisdoms really knew much about the body and medicine and Gerardys did have multiple silver links. So far, I did not think my trust had been misplaced even if he had sulked regarding my insistence that he train midwives. He’d given in after an afternoon spent arguing with me when he’d realised I wasn’t backing down.

He’d sought out a few young girls from the castle town and begun teaching them how to read and write. After that he promised to teach them basic biology and bring in an older midwife to go over the finer points of delivering a baby. Then they’d be dispatched to gain experience on Dragonstone and Driftmark before returning to be present at my own birth. Hopefully with the Crown Princess favouring them, their popularity would soon justify training more.

Still, Gerardys wasn’t entirely focused on training midwives. He’d successfully created Ether which was, admittedly, not as useful as it could be in a world with Milk of the Poppy but apparently still a worthy breakthrough in the field of medicine. He’d also produced a few stethoscope prototypes alongside some of the apprentices.

He was very excited about the stethoscope.

He’d devoted himself to researching all of the ways the stethoscope could be incorporated into the diagnoses process. Honestly, with all the testing he’d been doing the people of Dragonstone had never been healthier and I’d never been more popular as it seems the smallfolk had interpreted my Maester homing in on anyone with so much as a cough or a sniffle like a heat seeking missile as a sign of my exceedingly charitable nature.

At least the success of the stethoscope was balancing out the continued lack of progress of the penicillin front. Gerardys had done some research and discovered that early First Men included fruit mold in many of their ointments and poultices which did point to the spore existing but that damn thing remained illusive.

Wisdom Jerrett watched over it all, diving in and out of tasks and research as fancy took him. He’d been appointed as the leader of the Alchemists I had lured away from the capital. Not surprising given the pages had been ‘secured’ by his actions but I made a point of asking Joffrey to ensure that we did not become embroiled in any intra-guild politics. It would be a pain to lose progress because Jerrett wanted to argue about which hat he got to wear.

Speaking of politics, Joffrey and Laenor had been right. Viserys’ actions had put him massively on the back foot with his courtiers and lords. He’d been forced to excessively praise my efforts to defend Jeyne’s rights to all that would listen after an outpouring of support for me and condemnation at my perceived punishment.

It was also a complete mystery how descriptions of what Viserys had done to me had dispersed about the capital, wasn’t it, Joffrey? To say nothing of the actual, honest to the seven public denouncement Rhaenys decided to send out to every lord that would listen, which hadn’t helped Viserys’ position, as it had simply confirmed Joffrey’s rumours.
Oh yes, my dear Father was very unpopular in the capital right now.

Although practically speaking, I was the only one popular in the capital right now.

Some of the Greens had begun wavering, wondering if their rights would be defended given that Alicent was doubling down on condemning me. Not that she had a choice, Joffrey was quick to tell me that the Greens were suffering from backlash from… well, actually nobody was sure. Soon after my departure, Viserys and Alicent had a terrible row over what Joffrey did not know but it had taken days for them to begin speaking to one another again.

I must admit to being impressed she’d managed to come up with a half decent party line for her Greens to line up behind. She’d taken the view that it had been an internal dispute in the Vale and that I had overstepped my rights as Princess and Heir when I’d interfered without anyone asking me too. Hardcore Greens were obediently parroting it to all who would listen whilst implying I would weaken the rights of the Lords Paramount to strengthen myself unjustly.

Unfortunately, only her most hardcore Greens were buying it.

Truly, the Greens were definitely in worse shape than I would have expected, losing royal favour and lucrative appointments left, right and centre. Viserys may not be appointing my Blacks in their place but Alicent’s hold on the capital was shakier than it had been in years. In fact, even Viserys’ latest and greatest idea seemed to be an extension of Green disfavour when taken in the context of the court.

Oh yes, Viserys had apparently had another stroke of genius because a letter had been sent to Dragonstone bearing the King’s seal.

The letter was typical of his missives. He acknowledged that his hasty reaction to my actions in the Vale had been ill-considered and divisive. He informed me of the reasons he’d reacted so which mostly boiled down to the fact he’d been scared stiff I would get myself killed. He praised my sense of justice, my political sense and my quick wit for solving the Vale situation in a manner that had been uncommonly light on casualties for succession disputes. He confirmed that he still thought of me as his heir and that if I continued showing such qualities as I did, I would be a finer ruler than Jaehaerys and a worthy Queen for Westeros.

But not once did he apologise. Not once did he say sorry for physically attacking me, for shouting and throwing his weight around. There was no rescinding of my informal ‘banishment’ and that said more to me than his entire letter had.

Still, if it had just been the praise, the support and the new confirmation he still saw me as his heir it would have been an annoying letter I could point to later when someone got snotty with me but this was Viserys. Viserys who seemed to be innately gifted in making every situation he ever got involved in objectively worse.

I had to hand it to him though, this time he wasn’t making my life worse. Or rather, he wasn’t making it directly worse, I had no doubt Alicent was thinking of a thousand different ways to make me pay for this.

Viserys had decreed the Helaena was old enough to be sent to foster.

And he’d chosen me, her doting older sister.

I really, really want to know what Alicent did to piss him off.
Interlude -Rhaenys

She watched the paper that lay on her desk as one might watch a live viper and toyed with her glass of wine. She didn't need to read it to know what it said, she’d read through it enough to know the words by heart now.

Empty headed fool! What was he thinking?

She knew of course. He was arrogant enough to not realise he’d lost control of the situation long ago. That everyone involved would dance to his tune. She took a sip of wine and glared at the fire in the grate. She had never danced to his tune and woe betide him if he thought she would not catch on to his game. That he would try and sell their daughter, their only daughter, to such a man. Oh he used such coy language opining it would be ‘good for them to meet’ and that ‘Rhaenyra’s influence had to be fought’ and so on, playing to what he knew to be her insecurities.

The wine glass came down to hard on the table, splashing it’s contents over her hand. Did he think her a fool? Did he think he could control Daemon the way he thought he could control Laenor and Laena? He couldn’t even control the daughter of that bleating sheep on the throne, how could he think he could control a true dragon?

In truth, he couldn’t even control their children anymore.

Her boy, a boy no more, married for nearly a year now. He’d been to war, fought and killed. He was out in the world making his own name, forging his own legend… That he was doing at the side of that girl was the only infuriating part. She seemed content to sit back and let her precious boy so all the hard work. Money for an army, bat your eyelids at Laenor. Money for bizarre experiments, earn it on your back from Laenor.

And as for the spies on Driftmark…

Stupid boy! Why had he not warned them that Lonmouth, another ungrateful bastard, had men crawling over the island? Her husband had taught Joffrey everything he knew, treated him like a second son, and he repaid them with betrayal. More to the point, why had she been such a fool to assume that after that stunt her husband had pulled with their spies that Rhaenyra would not return the favour? That Laenor had not told her galled her. His wife had bought out half his island and he had not cared to even try and even hint about them.

Too much like his father, she supposed, all Rhaenyra had to do was play the wounded doe and Laenor had done the rest. Cunning. Clever. It should reassure her that their future Queen had a brain in her head. She sighed. She was being to harsh on the girl. To wound up, to worried for her children. She was seeing threats in every corner. Rhaenyra wasn’t that bad. By her side, Laenor had become something more. Gone was the cowering boy, afraid of everything. Now he was a man in truth, soon to have babes on the way with any luck.

A knock on the door roused her from her thoughts.

“Come in!” she barked, placing her wine glass to the side and wiping her hand on the black tunic she wore. Laena appeared in the door way, looking worried and she gave her a warm smile. “Come in, girl, come in!”

She poured them both some wine and waited as her daughter made herself comfortable before handing her the cup.
“Thank you Mother. I wanted to speak to you about- about the Stepstones,” her voice was hesitant, as if she expected her to end the conversation there and then. “I don’t think I should go. It doesn’t feel right and Laenor said-”

“Laenor might as well be one of those fancy mimic birds from the summer islands right now. Rhaenyra doesn’t want to risk you bringing Daemon back to Westeros.” Her daughter flushed at the rebuke. Laena certainly approved of the girl as well. She hadn’t seen her daughter so keen to stay in one place since she’d been a child, since she’d clambered across the back of Vhagar and claimed the gargantuan beast for her own.

“Rhaenyra said he would want me because I’m beautiful and he likes to possess beautiful things.” The defiance did not surprise her, her daughter had always been mostly dragon in the same way Laenor had always been a seahorse, if only she could temper it with wisdom. “Laenor said that Father was offering me to him like a piece of meat to a starving dog.”

Damn it all! How could she refute something that wasn’t wrong? Corlys had better have a good explanation for trying such a bone-headed scheme. That Daemon would want the girl was a given fact, he would want her badly enough to start yet another dispute with his useless Brother, for all the good it would do Laena, who would be caught in the middle. Trapped in marital limbo again.

“Your Father offers you to no one. Prince Daemon is married and unlikely to be granted an annulment by the King. I would hope you remember that whilst aiding your Father.”

Laena’s face screwed up as she digested that. It would be good to remind her that for all Laenor and Rhaenyra’s scare-mongering she was, ostensibly, being sent to aid her Father and securing their families future by doing so.

“The King does not grant the annulment. Surely that is the High Septon?”

Oh my girl, my sweet girl, how can you be so clever and so blind to how the world works at the same time? How can he expect you to survive Daemon? How can you have travelled so far and yet be so ignorant? Daemon will eat you alive.

Mother’s Mercy, Rhaenyra is right. He’ll use you up and leave you a ruin.

“The High Septon wouldn’t dare grant an annulment if King Viserys does not wish it.” She snorted. “The High Septon does not shit in the morning without King Viserys’ permission.”

At least the useless lump understood that much. That the faith was a tool of the throne and not the other way round. Her daughter shifted at the casual destruction of her understanding of the world. She wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake her. She’d travelled as far as Volantis, rode the last of conquerors dragons and had the temper to match! How could she not understand?

“I… I believe I understand. I will fly to Bloodstone and aid Father in routing these new foes.” Ah, there it was. The look her girl got when she thought of adventure. Then she frowned. “I just… I will miss Laenor, Joff and Rhaenyra.”

“They will be here when you get back.” Laena’s face cleared and she smiled. “And you will remain out of the Prince’s way. Rhaenyra is right in saying he will want you.”

“You do not like Rhaenyra much?” asked her daughter after a while of silence, coiling her hair around her finger and looking thoughtful.

“To hear Laenor speak of her, she’s the second coming of the Seven-who-are-one. I merely think she overestimates herself.” In truth, she was about the best that she could ask for in a
gooddaughter. Pretty, clever enough and able to put her grandchildren on the throne where they belong.

“Laenor believes she can see the future.” Laena said, watching her carefully. She snorted, Laenor had once been convinced he’d met a man that could walk on water. “He says she knows things she shouldn’t.”

“More to do with the Lonmouth boy than any mystical knowledge.” The name was spat and she realised her daughter had picked up on it a second too late.

“You do not like Joff?” she asked. Oh how she was coming to loath the Lonmouth knight. Laenor’s brother in arms, Laena able to call him by a nickname with ease and her gooddaughter…

“I dislike how obvious the two of them are. I hope the girl has enough brains to ensure the baby comes out with the right parentage but I would prefer more discretion.”

Much to her surprise her daughter digested this news in silence before bursting into peels of laughter. She frowned, annoyed at missing something, annoyed at being made a joke of. Laena managed to get herself under control after a moment.

“I’m sorry Mother, the idea of Joff sleeping with Rhaenyra! Hahaha,” her daughter giggled with evident glee.

“And pray tell why the idea amuses you so?” At the question Laena paled a little and wasn’t that odd.

“Well… they’re both so serious. Any affair they had would probably be scheduled three weeks ahead of time. They’d get so caught up in paperwork they’d forget the actual bedding!” A lie. Her daughter was lying. She had always been able to see through her children’s lies but why would she lie about this? She had not lied about doubting an affair, why would she lie about why?
“Three of a kind,” said Falena Waynwood, laying her cards out for us all to see. She did indeed have three queens. Next to me, Alys Strong groaned in dismay and dropped her head onto the table. Her twin sister, Sera, patted her on the back consolingly. I didn’t have much sympathy, she should have known to fold on an ace high when Falena was willing to take risky bets. The woman was conservative and risk averse, she wouldn’t raise unless she knew she had a strong hand.

“An impressive hand, Falena, but I think you’ll find I take the pot. Flush!” chirruped Maris Grafton in an annoyingly sweet tone that had her fellow Vale woman scowling at her. She was a pig to play poker with. The complete opposite of Falena, she was happy to take big risks on bad hands in attempts to psych out her opponents and had a near impenetrable poker face.

“Oh bad luck, Fal!” came Marya’s ever cheerful voice as Maris eagerly scooped up the silver that composed of her winnings. Falena shot the Stokeworth lady a grateful smile. Marya had become the group’s ‘mom friend’ within a week of my return to Dragonstone. She was closest to Falena, the two were devout and conservative and had much in common, but where Falena regarded all she did not approve of with silent condemnation, Marya simply accepted she couldn’t change it and moved on.

It made her interactions with the Twins a lot easier. Alys and Sera were practical jokers and ever playing the fools, although they had the sense and tact to time their various comedy routines for when they were least likely to cause upset and on good days could even elicit a laugh or two from Falena. I liked that about them, they were never cruel with their jokes.

Maris Grafton was not as good a fit as I’d hoped. Frequently, she was a terror. Disdaining Marya’s charity work, scorning Falena’s quiet devotion to the Seven and scolding the Twins when they attempted to cheer her up. I suppose it wasn’t too unexpected, Maris Grafton had been the oldest daughter of a powerful lord before I’d appeared in her life. Now she was forced to rely on the charity of the woman who had deposed her father based on nebulous good will she’d won years earlier. She was a weakness in my household that I could not easily eliminate and it made my shoulders itch.

It still did not feel right with Laena’s absence. She’d only been here all of several weeks before Corlys had pulled his utterly ridiculous… no, no. You’ve raged at this enough. It’s been nearly five months now. Be sensible. Still, I missed the girl.

“Another round, Your Grace?” asked Sera, reaching for the cards.

“Not at the moment, Sera, I’m exhausted. Today was somewhat hectic.” I was not lying. In the months since Viserys had sent me packing, Dragonstone had been transformed from lonely empty castle to a secondary court, heaving with second sons and those who sought my favour. I’d even had to renovate parts of the castle long since abandoned just to fit everyone inside. Although in the long run I was calling that a win because I’d managed to stealthily reduce the amount of Dragon iconography from ‘literally everywhere you look’ to ‘at least I can see the floor now’.

Baby steps.

But I was still frustrated. I should be out there right now, winning support, shaking hands and making deals. Instead I was forced to stay here and only act through proxies because Viserys was still sulking.
“Oh but it was wonderful! Did you see Ser Byren? He looked so handsome,” Marya sighed. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. As if punishing me for my sins Ser Byren Hastwyck had appeared on the island, charged with protecting Princess Helaena during her fostering here, and Marya had been instantly taken with him. The rest of my ladies tended to form up around her defensively when he entered the room but Marya was not to be deterred.

“The man is a peacock, all show and no substance,” groused Falena. Marya ignored her in favour of sighing dreamily and looking out the window.

“I wouldn’t try and persuade her otherwise, Falena, she won’t hear it!” Sera told the Waynwood woman as she packed the cards away. I watched in amusement as Alys stole her wine having finished her own and presumably being unwilling to challenge Maris over the pitcher.

“Well if he hurts her, our Princess will feed him to Syrax feet first if I know her,” Maris interjected, shooting me a dark look. It was true I’d made it clear that I’d be very unamused if my ladies were to be hurt in any manner but Maris was baiting me and doing so blatantly.

“Dear Maris, I wouldn’t feed him to Syrax, I don’t know where he’s been after all,” I shot back. The Grafton lady laughed along with the rest. At least she wasn’t inclined to rages when the targets of her acidic wit fired back.

“Oh! How is Syrax? I saw her in the sea today after your ride with Ser Laenor,” said Marya, returning from her fantasy of marrying the human incarnation of stepping on lego. At the mention of Laenor, my ladies tittered in delight. He cut quite the striking figure these days owing to his frequent practising with the blade he now wore regularly.

It was enough to make a girl blush.

“You can drool all you like over our Princess’s handsome Prince but I think that Ser Joffrey is a dark horse,” Maris told them, shooting me another look that told me she was baiting again.

“Oh! He does seem like a sensitive soul. A crippled knight who needs a woman to soothe his hurts and he’s soooo mysterious!” sighed Alys.

“Yes, I suppose you could see it that way sister, but does he not remind you of Larys at times?” asked Sera, face screwed up in disgust.

“I find little wrong with him, Sera, he serves me well and has a mind that more than makes up for any perceived physical failing,” I told her. She flushed at the rebuke and offered me a small bow.

“I apologise, Your Grace, I did not mean to disparage Ser Joffrey but he does remind me of Larys at times beyond the um… limp,” she said quickly before forging on as she noted the frown on my face. “They’re both quiet men and work well in the background, they shun accolades and glory and they’re both very intelligent.”

“My apologies then, Sera, I did not mean to overreact.” I relaxed back in my chair and Sera shot me a grateful smile before noticing her lack of wine and starting argument with her sister over the theft. My eyes were drawn back to Maris who wore a triumphant smile, she raised her wine glass in a mock toast, eyes twinkling in amusement.

I’d clearly fallen prey to whatever trap she’d laid out. Concerning.

“Oh! But what about Ser Hugh?”

“Ser Hugh? ‘Red’ Hugh? He looks like a nervous rabbit!”
I tuned out the laughter and gossip about boys and allowed myself to enjoy the wine. A fruity blend from the Reach that, surprisingly enough, hadn’t passed through Redwyne hands before making it’s way to Dragonstone. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the price of Arbor Red going up Alicent because I have and I want you to know it’s extremely petty!

The arrival of a knight in Targaryen livery startled the ladies from their gossip.

“Your Grace, Princess Helaena wishes to see you.”

I put aside my wine and bid my ladies farewell, dismissing them to find some sort of gainful occupation elsewhere before making my way to Helaena’s room. My little sister had not been sleeping well of late so I’d given her a day free. Her attendants told me she frequently awoke screaming and crying from nightmares she refused to describe to anyone, even me. It was a concern but unless she actually confided in me, I could do nothing to help.

She was in bed when I arrived, bound in a cocoon of bedding and pale as a ghost. When she noticed me, she wriggled free with a cry and threw herself into my arms with a sob. I curled her close and murmured reassurances in her ear.

“They are just dreams, Helaena, they can’t hurt you.” I told her in the most gentle voice I could. She shuddered against me and clutched at my mantle.

“You will not tell me what you dream of?” I asked. I felt her shake her head against my shoulder and I sighed.

“I can’t!” she sniffled.

“Then at least tell me no one is harming you or making you feel unwelcome here?” I was fairly certain that wasn’t the case. The castellan had assured me Helaena’s attendants were polite and well trained and that her knights were the epitome of chivalry and ready to guard her from any knaves. I believed it, her knights were the greenest Greens. If they could spot something they could attribute to me they’d do it in instant.

She pulled back from my shoulder, reddened eyes wide.

“No! I mean, no one hurt me. It’s just…”

“The nightmares,” I finished as she trailed off, looking glum. She nodded and I sighed.

“Well, I suppose we will have to find something for you to do then so that you do not think of them. Meet me in the yard for practise?”

Helaena’s eyes lit up at that and she nodded. An hour later we stood in the Practise yard. It was normally reserved for knights that wished to spar and keep their skills sharp or for those training squires but it was all but abandoned in the midday sun with most preferring the evening or morning time. The master-of-arms, Rogar Langward, was still present though and was quick to fetch both mine and Helaena’s bow for practise. It seemed we’d be getting his full attention today, a step up from the quick tips he gave me when I accompanied Laenor here.

Helaena was quite the shot for a nearly-six year old and most people agreed that she’d be terror in hunting grounds everywhere when she was old enough. At the moment though she was limited to the least powerful bow in existence and only being allowed near arrows when someone halfway responsible was around. My own ability… well let’s just say it was improving. Slowly. I could hit the broadside of a barn if I concentrated?
I was much better with throwing daggers. Another weapon I’d begun practising with, albeit less publicly than the bow. After being absolutely helpless against Viserys, Joffrey had suggested it might help if I trained in some kind of self defence. Don’t get me wrong, I couldn’t pull a knife on the King but anyone else was fair game and that included any ne’er-do-wells and cutthroats that slipped through Joffrey’s surprisingly extensive nets.

The dear man had even gone out of his way to acquire a harness that allowed me to wear multiple knives under my dresses.

“Are you going to shoot too?” asked Helaena and I realised I’d been staring off into space for the last five minutes whilst my younger sister had fired a good few arrows into the area surrounding the centre of her target. I readied myself and let an arrow fly at my own before strangling the instinctive curse as it struck the hay bales behind.

Alicent would have my head if her only daughter came back to court swearing like a sailor.

“Your Grace, you’re still much too tense when lining up your shot. Remember the breathing I taught you?” Rogar’s told me in his calm and deep voice. “Put the bow down and show me the exercises.”

I did as I was told and when he was happy he’d ironed out any poor practise, he returned the bow and ordered me to fire again. This time the arrow at least hit the target, barely. Helaena gave a cheer at the improvement. Rogar hummed for a moment and then moved up next to me.

“Try again Your Grace, keep an eye on the target… no, not the arrow, you are looking at the arrow, look at what you want to shoot.”

By the end of the session he’d ironed out several mistakes I kept making and drilled me until I could assume the correct posture and breathing required without thinking about it. He’d also strongly suggested I set aside time every day for him to work on my skills with him. Helaena’s eyes had lit up and I’d given in. She was proud of her skill with the bow and it wouldn’t hurt to have her improve alongside me with proper instruction.

Plus the only time she seemed truly free from her nightmares was with a bow in hand.

When I finally escaped, my arms ached as if I’d been lifting weights the entire day and my fingers felt raw but on the upside I could hit the target nine times out of ten now and Helaena’s smile was wider than I’d ever seen it.
“Joff! Please-” Laenor’s sentence became a strangled cry as I let myself into Joffrey’s office. When he realised I wasn’t some random courtier that needed to be lied to he turned back to his ex-lover, face full of grief.

“Joff! I love you, I care not that you can no longer fight. I loved you for your spirit, not your strength of arm,” he whispered. The shorter man merely sighed from his position behind the desk and shot me a pained look.

“Don’t mind me. I’m just your wife,” I told him, fighting to keep my tone light. I shouldn’t get involved in their fights but Laenor really shouldn’t keep doing this. He shot me an aggrieved look before dropping into one of the chairs opposite Joffrey’s desk like a sulking child.

“Please try to understand, Laenor. I can not… I-” he floundered, seemingly unable to find the words and looking so distressed my heart ached in sympathy for him. Their eyes met across the desk, both conveying misery at their perceived positions. This wasn’t time for me to play marriage counsellor. I’d tried before but Joffrey was still trying to discover who he was without the Knight of Kisses and Laenor still too keen for things to revert to how they’d been before with neither willing to budge on the topic.

“I apologise, Your Grace-”

“Please Joffrey, call me Rhaenyra and you needn’t apologise. Not to me and not for this,” I told him and meant every word. He gave me a quick smile that I was happy to see reached his eyes before busying himself with his papers. “Now before we start, have you any news from the Stepstones?”

“I leave you to figure it out, Rhaenyra, you wouldn’t believe me if I just told you,” he said finally.

“I told you not to bring it up, Laenor,” muttered Joffrey. I turned back to him to find him blushing slightly and scowling at the Velaryon. Unhappy with them both, I sat back in my chair and fixed them both with a Look.

“Just begin with the briefing. You are not my fools, leave the jokes to Mushroom.” Not that said sleaze bag was actually funny of course, the only time he cheered a room up was when he left it. Like naughty children being told off by a teacher they shuffled straighter in their chairs and adopted serious expressions.

“The first thing to report is from Laenor’s Captain Allard in Gulltown regarding movement of ships there.”

“Are my men okay?” asked Laenor, frowning. His galleys had been unnecessary to dissuading the Manderlys from trying to aid the Graftons but his captains had stayed to hunt pirates around the
Sisters and not so subtly remind the Manderlys that any future attempts at a Grafton restoration would go poorly. I doubted they’d act without Stark approval and the current Stark, Rickon, was very much an isolationist no matter how much his brother might raise hell about getting involved in southern politics.

Cregan I would have to deal with later. Preferably when he was closer to his age of majority and that same uncle was a cause of concern for him.

“There has been no issue with your ships. The issue is that a sizable Arryn convoy set off from Gulltown a few days ago. We’ve received word that Lady Jeyne is aboard.”

That was surprising. I couldn’t think of any reason she’d need to leave the Vale. Worry lanced through me.

“Is cousin Jeyne okay?” I asked, concern tingling my tone. We’d remained in close contact over the past few months and I was closer to the younger woman than I had ever been. She was clever, quick witted and an endless source of funny stories.

“Ah, I thought you were aware? She is coming to attend your nameday feast?” Joffrey told me in a dry tone that told me he was quite aware I’d forgotten my own nameday was coming up and was being facetious.

And I had. With all the business with Helaena, worrying about Laena, playing politics and entertaining my court the fact I was to turn eighteen within a month had completely slipped my mind. I groaned and sank down into my chair much to Laenor’s amusement.

“I knew you’d forgotten. Not to worry, I hadn’t. I asked Falena and Marya to help prepare it and told them it was unseemly that a Princess should have to plan her own Nameday celebrations,” my husband said, looking far to amused with himself. I shot him a glare.

“Well, I have ensured the staff are prepared for surprise visitors in the coming days. Moving on to my spies in King’s Landing—”

“You have spies in King’s Landing now? Since when? And how much is this costing me? I only wanted Dragonstone free of spies!” I cut him off. Laenor’s smugness at the fact he’d gotten one over on me was making me grouchy. Uncharacteristically, Joffrey blushed.

“I admit my activities have expanded in scope much faster than expected but I merely acted on several opportunities when they became available. As for budget, my information gathering brings in some money to allow me to reduce the strain on your finances.”

“And that means?” asked Laenor, looking at Joffrey in wonder. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat in response before directing a pleading look my way.

“I was hoping to keep my ways a secret,” he said, hopefully. I decided not to take pity and instead crossed my arms, an unimpressed expression in place over my face.

“Very well. I have been buying brothels in King’s Landing, Old Town, Gulltown, Lannisport, Seaguard and White Harbor. I have yet to acquire any in Lordsport as the Ironborn do not take kindly to strangers.”

Laenor’s mouth fell open and I mirrored it. Oh gods, he’d pulled a Littlefinger! He’d pulled more than a Littlefinger! How had I not seen this coming!?

“Brothels! You’ve made us whoremongers!” hissed Laenor, looking angry. Joffrey was trying to
formulate an answer but my brain was running fast. If discovered it the backlash would be a pig to deal with but then a lot of things we did would be awkward to explain in court and like it or not, prostitutes were considered closer to furniture by the Lords of Westeros. I could see the logic in recruiting them to gather your information but… I still disliked it.

“Tell me at least treat the women who work for you with respect,” I growled, ignoring Laenor’s startled look.

“They are well paid, have access to medical treatment if it’s needed, I provide security for them and they have the right to turn down any client for any reason,” he told me. I willed my jaw to unclench. For the working women and men of Westeros, those were ludicrously good terms for employment. Although I doubted Joffrey already had that in place out of the good of his heart. Nobody would risk a deal like that to betray him.

“But you have still made us whoremongers. What if someone finds out?” asked Laenor after I’d given Joffrey a stiff nod. Joffrey merely looked uncomfortable again, a look that did nothing to close the pit of dread that had opened in my stomach at the news of Joffrey’s methods of gathering information.

“I would say that no one would but…” he trailed off and I bit back a groan. “Recently someone has been challenging my operations in King’s Landing. Outing my spies, tracking my business fronts. I worry this person may be trying to discover my identity but I believe the risk worth it. Men will spill any manner of secrets to pretty women that the rack could not drag out of them!”

I sighed and tried to massage away an approaching headache.

“What’s done is done. Continue with your briefing Ser Joffrey, just… please be careful?” He nodded seriously and then gathered himself before continuing.

“More of Alicent’s Greens have lost favour. Lord Gerold said that it’s no coincidence that so many have lost their posts over the past few months but no one seems to know what happened. I have a few informants close to the Queen and they say she is keeping it very close to her chest. Regardless of why, it has apparently it’s forced a change of tactics. She’s not going for the Lords at court anymore but trying for a Lord Paramount. She is actively promising a royal marriage for the Lannisters, amongst other concessions. My spies report they are cautiously interested. They still remember losing out to the Farmans and are keen to even the odds.”

“And after that she will turn her attentions to Borros Baratheon to secure the South,” I didn’t need to see Joffrey’s nod to know I was right. “Can we court the Reynes in order to stall her?”

We both knew that actively sowing discord amongst a Lord Paramount’s vassals was a dangerous game with every chance to backfire but these were desperate times.

“Let her court Lord Borros, he will side with Mother when the time comes,” said Laenor, kicking his feet onto Joffrey’s desk. That wasn’t true, of course. In canon he’d side with Aegon in return for a marriage between Aegon and one of his daughters. He would be one of the contributing factors to the death of Lucerys Velaryon, one of Laenor’s ‘sons’, when his daughter goaded the one-eyed psychopath into kinslaying.

“We can’t bet on that. Lord Boremund loved your Mother but Borros is cut from a different cloth. He’ll side with the faction that gives him the best deal.” Laenor looked taken back at that, then worried.

“I agree with Her Grace. Lord Boremund was an honourable man but his son has made a few
worrying moves within the capital that indicate he’s looking to be courted. Lord Gerold approached him but, like many, it looks likely he seeks a marriage,” said Joffrey with a sympathetic look at Laenor. “We can court the Reynes and step up our work with the Tyrells but I fear swaying yet more neutrals to our cause will grow harder from this point onward.”

“Instruct Lord Gerold to sound them out for recruitment and see if he can’t figure out an opening offer. We just need to prevent Alicent from having a solid grip on the Westerlands. As for the Tyrells… well, Father’s punishment has been a pain but I will have a royal visit there at some point.” Joffrey obediently wrote my commands down. Laenor still looked unhappy but I couldn’t explain to him how I knew his Mother’s cousin would betray us in a heart beat if it benefited him.

“Those are the major power moves at the moment. Lord Gerold is masterfully handling the minor moves within court so as long as you are happy with our current bearing?” I nodded. “Excellent.”

Laenor and I began to rise but paused as Joffrey waved us back into his seats. He looked just as nervous as he had earlier, tongue darting out to wet his lips and he seemed to struggle for the right words to say.

“I have something else to report. Something, ah, closer to home,” he said finally and our worried looks merely deepened. I couldn’t remember anything worrying happening around about this time in canon. Nothing that would only be spotted by a spymaster anyway. Daemon’s return and Rhea’s death would be blasted across Westeros.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“My spies on Driftmark have reported some worrying information in regards to Lord Corlys,” Joffrey said, eyes finding Laenor. Lanor looked bewildered and glanced towards me.

“What is it, Joff? How’s Father going to anger Rhaenyra now?” he asked, attempting a smile and teasing tone but the worried look in his eyes ruined the effect. Joffrey sighed before leaning back in his chair.

“It’s not just Rhaenyra he’ll upset. It’s Lady Rhaenys, Lady Laena and yourself if I’m right,” he said, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

This did not bode well. He’d only risk pissing Rhaenys off for something big and important. My mind flashed to Laena who was still on the Stepstones, still within Daemon’s reach. Had Lord Corlys begun enacting some kind of plan to push her into his arms? My stomach was doing backflips in worry at the thought.

“When your Father last returned to Driftmark he made several visits to a certain shipwright in Hull.”

Oh. Oh no. Of course, Addam and Alyn. They hadn’t popped up until much later but… well Joffrey had been dead almost a year in canon by now and Laenor would never think to look.

“It seems that visit, and an earlier one, has resulted in-”

“Father is hiding bastards in Hull,” Laenor’s voice was cold. I watched him in surprise. His face bore no expression but he was tense, hands clenching and unclenching.

“And taking an active role in raising them when he can. Do you wish for me to alert Lady Rhaenys?” Joffrey asked and I felt a jolt of panic. Rhaenys would send them running at best or kill them at worst and I’d lose access to two potential dragonriders I knew would be completely loyal to my cause.
“No!” Laenor and Joffrey shot me startled looks before Laenor’s face twisted in annoyance. “What I mean is, if Lady Rhaenys gets rid of these bastards he’ll just make more, likely out of her reach this time. We have these within our grasp, surely we could subvert them? Besides Laenor, they are your brothers.”

Laenor studied me for a long time, face twisting this way and that as he thought through the benefits and downsides of keeping his father’s bastards alive and within spitting distance. An insult to his mother but impossibly useful down the line when it came to confronting his father. Finally he nodded, stiffly and only barely, but he nodded.

“Joffrey will keep an eye on them. Could I speak to him alone, please?” His voice was low, filled with distress and his eyes never left my face. I glanced between the two. Laenor was stiff and unmoving, face a mask of neutrality whilst Joffrey merely looked worried.

“Of course, husband. I bid you good day, Ser Joffrey.”
Laenor left for Driftmark that day and I tried not to be annoyed that he hadn’t even stopped to say goodbye. Joffrey assured me I had done nothing wrong, that he was upset about their argument and the bastards, but I wasn’t sure. Something about the way he’d shut down in that meeting was niggling at me.

I’d gotten used to having him around, tricking myself into thinking we were more than friends. Riding together, the intimate touches… fooling myself into thinking it was me he really loved and that he was not just playing a part. I sank into a black mood after he left that not even my ladies could cajole me from. Not that this fact prevented them from trying when they noticed my sulks.

“Leave her, Maris, our Princess is heart sick for Ser Laenor,” Marya hissed. Maris Grafton shot her a sneer but settled back down, glaring at her sewing. I ignored them, not in the mood for Marya’s pity or Maris’ remarks. Besides I was quite certain that whatever ‘comforting’ Maris had been planning would have had the opposite effect. Behind me, Falena continued pulling my hair into braids.

“That goes for you two as well,” I didn’t need to turn and see who she was speaking too. There were only two suspects after all. I could almost feel Falena’s worried yet disapproving look being directed at my back. A particularly hard tug that had pain stinging across my scalp and suddenly I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Out! Get out! All of you!”

My ladies scattered at my roar, in the distance I was vaguely aware of Syrax echoing it, but all I could focus on was the pounding of blood in my ears and the fact that my eyes were burning with unshed tears. Maris was the last to leave, casting me a look that made me contemplate violence as she left. I waited in the silence for a while before willing my body to untense, my hands to unclench and my breath to normal from the ragged panting it currently was.

I counted to ten a lot. And then threw a dagger at the bed post, it connected with a dragon head and I felt a little better.

There was a small but tentative knock on the door and I groaned, running my hands through my hair. Falena had only managed to braid half of my hair before I’d sent them all running. I must look ridiculous and lopsided.

“I said I wished to be alone,” I barked when the knock sounded again.

“It’s me!” came Helaena’s voice and I groaned again. She wouldn’t take me sending her running as well as my ladies would. Barring her entry would only similarly upset her. Her presence at my door stank of Joffrey’s interference. Damn that man. I dropped into a chair and lowered my face into my hands, scrubbing them over my face as if I could wake up from this dream.

“I said I wished to be alone,” I barked when the knock sounded again.

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“Come in,” I sighed. She trotted in, letting the door slam in Ser Byren’s face and I tried to suppress a smile, tried to remain angry. It seemed my little sister had picked up on my disdain for the man and was making it clear that if I didn’t like him, she didn’t. To think he’d probably assumed this a promotion for coming to my notice and having me strike at him, I wondered if he still felt that way.

“Ser Joffrey said that you were upset,” she said, face earnest in the way only a six year old could
manage before her eyes travelled to the dagger and widened. It was hard to be angry at a six year
old that worshipped the ground you walked on, especially one as genuinely sweet as Helaena. It
makes my heart clench to know what happened to her in canon. Not this time, this time she would
have a big sister that was worthy of her.

“A little. I miss Laenor. That is all.” She frowned at me, turning that over in her mind before
shrugging.

“Your hair is a mess,” she finally said and I laughed. Genuinely, honestly laughed until tears ran
down my face and my stomach hurt. It wasn’t funny, it wasn’t but… oh how could one not laugh
at a such a mismatch in priorities and once I’d started, I found myself unable to stop. Helaena just
pouted at my amusement, evidently thinking it applied to her, before dragging another chair loudly
across the stone floor so she could clamber up onto it and begin undoing my braids.

“I haven’t asked you how you’re finding your fostering yet?” I asked her, once I’d calmed myself
enough to speak.

“I miss Mother and Father and Aegon and even Aemon and Daeron but it’s nice being with you!
You let me practise with the bow and your ladies are very nice,” she told me as my hair fell down
around my shoulders.

“Well, that’s good. Maester Gerardys says you’re doing quite well in your lessons.”

“Maester Gerardys is very strange,” she told me, tone so serious I started giggling again. She
joined me this time, hopping down from her chair with a wide smile on her face. I scooped her into
a hug which she returned eagerly.

“Maester Gerardys also says you’re sleeping a bit better now?” I hoped she was. She certainly
looked better, more energetic with less dark circles under her eyes. A child of six should not look
so exhausted.

“A lot better. I have less nightmares now and more good dreams.”

I felt myself relax a little at that. For a while I’d been genuinely considering sending her back to
King’s Landing and Alicent. Helaena was quick to assure me she had nightmares there but surely
they hadn’t been that bad. Surely Viserys would have warned me? Even he couldn’t be that dim.
I’d feared a move to be fostered by the sister she may subconsciously view as a threat and the one
her siblings definitely viewed as a threat was making them worse.

“Did you want to go and practise?” she asked, leaning back with eyes bright. I sighed again, this
time with fondness. The fact she’d waited this long to ask was probably a sign of great restraint on
her part so I rewarded her with a nod of assent.

A few hours later, I was bitterly regretting my weakness. Ser Rogar had taken my poor
performance with the bow as a personal challenge and had become a terror during practise and
Warrior damn me if I ever missed a day on the range. The fact that there was a six-year old happily
out shooting me not five feet away was something of an embarrassment but I had to admit, I had
improved. Long gone were the days of being a danger only to the hay and maybe extra large castle
walls. I could hit the target reliably, was even starting to hit closer to the middle. Helaena and I got
so absorbed that I almost missed it when a messenger in Targaryen colours found us.

“Your Grace,” he said with a bow. I handed my bow and quiver to Rogar and turned to face the
youth. “Arryn ships have been spotted approaching the harbour. They’ll make land within the
hour.”
I summoned my ladies and made my apologies for my earlier behaviour before dispatching the Twins to help Helaena prepare. She had maids but the Twins liked her and she liked them. She found them funny, only the Gods know why. My ladies-in-waiting accepted my apologies gracefully and all but Maris seemed genuine. Still the baleful looks she was shooting my way lasted until she realised Jeyne was here.

“Do you suppose she might allow me to visit my mother and sisters?” she asked, voice smaller than I had ever heard it.

“That is a privilege granted at the pleasure of Lady Arryn,” Falena bit out.

“Don’t be cruel, Fal! I’m sure Lady Arryn will allow such a visit,” came Marya’s voice from behind me as she tamed the tangle Helaena had caused when she’d freed my partial braids. Maris said nothing, eyes on me.

“I will speak to Lady Arryn on your behalf, Maris,” I told her after a moment. She nodded stiffly and busied herself with preparing my dress. Falena glanced between me and her before her eyes softened slightly. Falena wasn’t completely married to propriety all the time, she knew when to bend slightly. Still, it was surprising to see her raise a comforting arm to Maris’ shoulder and given the way the Grafton jumped in fright, Maris hadn’t been expecting it either. Behind me, I heard Marya hum in satisfaction.

I… wasn’t going to ponder whether she’d engineered that. Down that road, madness lay.

Three galleys bearing the Arryn heraldry glided into the port at Dragonstone. The shouts of my own dock workers and Jeyne’s sailors were heard as they began the process of docking, disembarking passengers and the unloading of luggage. I watched as the party that was very evidently Jeyne’s left the ship and made their way towards us. Behind me a veritable army of courtiers were assembling, each likely eager to judge how close my cousin and I were or simply see if they could ferret out any gossip.

She was smiling broadly when she reached us as if someone had just told her a very good joke. At her back was a party of Vale nobles of which I only recognised a few. One of which was Lady Rhea Royce who was making a effort to look like she was smiling but was having the effect ruined by how pale and sweaty she was. And if I thought Lady Rhea was bad, poor Jessamyn Redfort put her to shame. She was leaning on a tall, dark haired man who I was willing to bet was her brother given their similar looks and it looked like he was all that was keeping her upright. The last lord I recognised was the broad and tall Lord Denys who was beaming at me and showing no signs of sea related distress at all.

“Cousin!” called Jeyne when she was close enough that the winds could not snatch her words away.

“Welcome to Dragonstone, Lady Arryn, it is not as beautiful as the Eyrie but I’m quite fond of it anyway!” She laughed and pulled me into a hug.

“Perhaps we should proceed inside, I note certain members of Lady Jeyne’s party could use some time to freshen up,” Joffrey said from somewhere within the welcoming group. Jessamyn’s noise of agreement turned into a groan and retching and it was with no small amount of alarm that we quickly ushered them along lest the very rare, very treasured non-dragon paved path get puked on.

“Poor Jess,” Jeyne said under her breath as we made our way inside. I linked her arm with mine and brought her closer.
“Has she been like this the whole way?” I asked and Jeyne giggled and then looked guilty for doing so.

“She didn’t want to come but the alternative was staying in the Eyrie by herself. She’s always been terribly seasick,” Jeyne told me, no small amount of affection in her voice. “Where is Ser Laenor?”

“Driftmark,” I answered, voice strained. Next to me, Jeyne sighed and shot me a pained look. We reached the entrance hall and servants were quick to come forth and begin showing the guests to their rooms.

“Perhaps we can speak privately, cousin?” she asked. Lord Denys shot us both a curious look from where he was being ushered away. We ended up in my offices with wine. The balcony overlooked the docks so we got an excellent view of the Arryn ships.

“You have bad news?” I said as we sat down. Jeyne poured herself a glass of wine from the pitcher and then took a gulp before she spoke.

“I promise you we came for your nameday but I do confess to another motive. The Falcons started rough. We gathered the volunteers at Strong Song and saw early success in fighting the bolder raiders. The problem is the clans have fallen back and are raiding in reprisal across Waynwood and Royce lands.” I groaned. We had been hoping the clans would not split up like that until the Falcons had more experience, that they would underestimate the threat they represented until much later. In retrospect, this was a mistake.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. We have knights pushing back the raiders but it seems we’ll need more money and more resources to spread the men out further and raise more of them. I had hoped to speak to Ser Laenor regarding a further loan but… is everything truly all right between you?”

“It is my fault. Joffrey assures me he will come round but the anger is all me,” I told her. Jeyne nodded, looking decidedly un-reassured.

“I will have a message sent to Driftmark, summoning him back so that you may speak with him.”

And hopefully we won’t have marital strife in front of the guests.
Laenor greeted Jeyne with a practised bow followed by a kiss on the cheek and moved on to greeting Rhea who managed to not make an acidic remark about decorating choices and dragons for an entire five minutes to return the greeting and finally Jessamyn who looked a lot better than she had two days ago when Jeyne’s party had first arrived.

“How is Driftmark?” asked Rhea, as Laenor made himself comfortable. We had all gathered in my solar, I didn’t use it often, preferring my offices closer to the docks but it seemed more appropriate as it was larger and had more creature comforts.

“Faring well! Spicetown has grown much in the past year and High Tide nears completion. We’ve already moved much of Father’s treasures there for display. Only a few of the outer towers to complete now,” Laenor replied, his face glowing with boyish delight. High Tide and Spicetown were as much his projects as his Father’s. I busied myself with my wine and ignored the ache in my gut. Laenor could do as he wished and if I had convinced myself otherwise, it was my doing.

“Excellent! I must say, Terrance has been most pleased with business you and he struck whilst you were in the Vale,” Jeyne said. Laenor acknowledged the praise with a slight bow of his head. “And the ships you sent to us have been a great help in clearing the waters around Gulltown,”

“Thank you, Lady Arryn. I hope to have a long and prosperous relationship with Gulltown,” he said.

“Jeyne was informing me about the change of scale the Falcons will have to operate on. Is that covered by the pot your Father allocated to the Vale?” I asked him. He turned to me, shoulders tense before nodding.

“If Lady Arryn requires further loans I have acquired prior approval up until a point. I trust the current rates are acceptable?”

“I have a letter that Lord Terrance wrote up to put the matter to you. I’m afraid my education was rather lacking on such matter, Ser Laenor.” Translation, Yorbert didn’t think you needed to know how money works and assumed your husband would attend to it so now you’re desperately trying to catch up despite knowing even if you had been taught Terrance and Laenor could still run rings around you when it comes to finances.

“I will look over his proposals and send a reply as soon as I am able to, Lady Arryn.”

We frittered away a few hours making idle chatter. I was happy to see the relationship between Rhea and Jeyne had thawed considerably in the few months since I’d last seen them in the same room. Although there were still awkward pauses where one said something and realised it could be taken with offence Jessamyn’s quick wit normally compensated with a joke or a change of topic.

Rhea Royce was due for a fall from a horse at some point soon and I hoped among all hope that I had butterflied it away. The removal of a powerful enemy from her borders, a much better relationship with her liege lady, a trip to see her niece… something had to have worked. I couldn’t just tell her never go hawking again without sounding like a complete lunatic. Jeyne’s boisterous laugh startled me from thoughts and I looked up to meet Laenor’s violet eyes watching me with a weird mix of suspicion, curiosity and triumph.

“You seem distracted, wife?” he said when he noticed my focus, cutting through Jessamyn’s
retelling of a marriage proposal she’d had that had ended in disaster. There was an edge I wasn’t sure I liked in his voice. Three pairs of curious eyes turned to us and I blushed under the attention.

“Merely thinking,” I replied. His answering smile was somewhat reminiscent of a shark.

“Ah! I do believe I promised to meet Lord Denys at some point for a small tipple. Care to join me, Jeyne? Jessamyn?” Rhea rose to her feet and gestured to the two women, who mostly just looked puzzled. I suppose the woman who’s life was one ongoing domestic argument could spot marital strife from a mile away. I fought the urge to cause a scene and instead wished them a pleasant meeting with Lord Denys.

“What was that for!? We may be having our differences but if you humiliate me in front of my supporters again, there will be consequences!” I snapped the moment I was reasonably sure they were out of earshot. Laenor merely sat back and took a sip of wine, watching me over the rim of his cup.

Okay, no matter how satisfying it would be to rip the damn cup out of his hand and pour the stupid thing over his head, it’s a poor opening move in marital discussions. Let’s not escalate. It was still hard to force myself back into the chair opposite him, feeling like a child waiting to be told off for something. He finally finished his wine and placed the empty cup onto the table, pointedly ignoring my folded arms and restless leg. For brief moment I thought he was going to pour himself some more and trust me, if he had he’d be wearing the wine, childish or not, but he leant back and studied me.

“Now, you are going to tell me what in the seven hells is going on,” he said, interlacing his fingers and resting his chin on them. For all that he was trying to maintain a calm demeanour I could hear the frustration in his voice and it was not a new frustration. It was the frustration of someone who’d been chewing on a problem for years and was in sight of the solution.

“You will have to be more spec-” I started, only to be interrupted by his anger.

“You know damn well what I am speaking of, Rhaenyra!” he roared and I flinched. I couldn’t help it. I fought to control my breathing as he froze in the chair opposite me, watching me as if I were about to shatter. “I am sorry. You have lied to me for so long, I can not bear to hear you lie to me again. So I ask, how did you know about Daemon? Where did the book come from? The plague in the Vale? How- how did you know I had brothers?”

Oh silly Laenor, I thought we’d gotten this out of the way? You see, Daemon treated Alicent and Rhea like crap and I reasonably extrapolated he’d do the same to me as women do not seem to be worth much in his eyes. As for the book, I retrieved that from Runciter’s library, you do remember how my mother read to me every night and instilled in me a love of reading don’t you? How I was an advanced child, precocious and ever exploring? As for it’s true origin you’d need to ask the maesters. As for the plague, illness doesn’t strike just one place and it’s highly suspicious that the man who would benefit from it the most is the one telling everyone about it and honestly it mirrored my situation too much for me to dismiss it. Your brothers? Simple, Joffrey wouldn’t be worried about girls. They couldn’t challenge you in a succession dispute and anyway, Corlys doesn’t think highly enough of girls to suggest them as alternatives even if he loves their mother more than he loves Rhaenys.

Simple, logical explanations. Anyone could have made those decisions with the information I had. You are merely being unreasonably paranoid…

I opened my mouth and found I couldn’t do it. I’d seen him grow and change from a scared young boy into a cool, self-assured man. He’d clawed his way from his Father’s control and begun acting
like the future Lord of the Tides. This Laenor in front of me was so completely different than
canon and I had put that into motion. He was my husband by law even if I would never have his
heart and I couldn’t keep lying to him.

He was supposed to be my greatest ally. If I could not trust him then I could trust no one.

“I… was four,” His head shot up as I started to speak. “One day I… remembered another life. The
future, I think, and in that future I had read a book.”

“You remembered the future in which you read a book?” he asked, face etched with disbelief.
When you put it like that it did sound fairly ridiculous but what was I to tell him? That I’d been
born in this body? That control had come and gone throughout my childhood, that it had been
periods of clarity intermixed with a half-remembered dream state, that I’d finally fought my way to
the fore only to find I was a child who could do nothing to prevent what was to come.

“You wanted the truth!”

“You are right. I’m sorry,” he said. I scooped up my glass and poured the last of the wine into it
before downing as much as possible and taking a deep breath.

Then I told him. I told him about how the future was supposed to be, about the slow decline of the
Targaryen and Velaryon families, about the extinction of dragons about all that would come after.
He listened in silence, face only growing graver with every twist and turn. After I had explained
the Dance I went further; Aegon Dragonbane, Daeron the Young Dragon, Baelor the Blessed,
Viserys, Aegon the Unworthy, Daeron the Good, Daemon Blackfyre and the Great Bastards,
Aerys, Maekar, Aegon the Unlikely, Jaehaerys and finally the Mad King. I spoke of what I knew of
their failings and triumphs and how much of it could be traced back to here and now, the Blacks
and the Greens.

Two factions that would burn Westeros to the ground in a war it would take generations to recover
from, forge precedents that would end the Targaryen dynasty’s hold on Westeros and in all
likelihood, result in it’s extermination, as even if Daenerys could hatch three dragons in that distant
future she was unlikely to hold it in the face of a winter would herald a second long night.

Afterwards, Laenor was silent for a very long time, processing what I’d told him. Outside, the
evening had rolled in and the sky was beginning to darken. A chilly wind made it’s way inside and
I shivered.

“So, this is why you’re so certain Alicent will act,” he said quietly. “Father always wondered why
you were so keen to escalate court politics to the degree you have. He said it was reckless.”

I chuckled at that but there was no real humour in it. I was still waiting for the reaction, a sign of
what his true feelings about this were. He was silent again, body tense as he stared at something in
the distance I couldn’t see. It was difficult to breath properly, as if the very air I was breathing was
trying to strangle me.

“You will need to write down the exact course of events. Even if they will not happen now, it will
still be invaluable. And we will need to tell Joffrey. He… He died in this recounting of history, you
said? Then he is an anomaly. It will be useful.”

“Laen-” He held up a hand and drew a deep breath in and out.

“I need time to think this through. I need time. You have just told me I will be murdered b- oh of
course. You got rid of Qarl.” I kept my mouth shut but I sensed he wasn’t looking for my answer
anyway, he already knew. “So... yes. I need time.”

He rose on unsteady feet and took a moment to gather his bearings before heading to the door. I remained sitting, eyes burning.

“What.. Will you...” I wasn’t even sure what I was asking for. Forgiveness maybe? Was forgiveness even possible? I had manipulated him from the beginning, revealing the sheer depths of what I had done to him in one fell swoop.

And I’d been so proud about the changes I’d wrought. My revelation must had ripped the foundations from his world.

Stupid. Foolish.
I stayed in my solar until darkness had fallen completely, my minds eye replaying my failures for me, taunting me with how my own pig-headed arrogance had led to this. I could see every mistake, every idea that had seemed a good choice at the time, every triumph that turned out to be a misstep…

Eventually, Rhea came to me bearing a pitcher of wine. She waited for a steward to light the braziers and then dismissed him. After he’d left and she was sure he hadn’t hung around to eavesdrop she poured me a cup of wine and pushed it into my hands. I drank obediently.

“So, your marriage to Ser Laenor is not as happy as previously assumed,” she said quietly, her face looked softer by the light of the flames. She hadn’t poured any wine for herself, I noted.

“I am the one at fault,” I told her, voice as numb as I felt.

“Ser Laenor can be as blameless as he likes, he is not my niece,” she snorted before taking my empty cup and pouring more wine. She waited for me to drink some more before carrying on. “So, niece, care to tell me how you are at fault?”

I was silent as I searched for some way to convey how deeply I’d betrayed his trust without revealing everything to yet another person. How did you explain that you had not truly seen the world as real? That you had thought yourself so above it all that it had not even occurred to you that you were betraying someone trust by manipulating them? Rhea waited patiently, only moving to prod more wine forward when I stopped drinking.

“I was trying to lure him from his Father’s grip. To strengthen the Blacks. He learned various things I said were just manipulations… I…” I choked on the lie and took another swallow of wine. “I lied to him. Betrayed his trust.”

“And pricked his pride whilst you were at it?” she asked. “Men can be terrors when their blood is up. Let him stew on Driftmark for a while, Rhaenyra, he will soon come to realise manipulations or not, you are the best thing that has happened to him.”

I snorted at that. He had probably wanted a quieter life than Prince Consort. A life where he could marry someone sympathetic to his situation, who would produce heirs without his input, a life where he could keep Joffrey close and whole and live out his days with the man he loved and solidifying the gains the Seasnake had made, turning treasures and prestige into a long-lasting legacy.

Instead, he ended up with a wife who saw him as a chess piece, the eyes of the realm on him, the man he loved crippled and distant and the home he was content to stay in closed to him by his Father’s will. He’d been sold to Viserys for Corlys’ vision for a future where the Velaryon house was ascendant.

“Thank you, Aunt Rhea, for being here,” I slurred at her. How much wine had I drunk today? When had I last eaten? “But I fear my marriage to Laenor was the last thing he desired in this world, no matter how much I try convince myself otherwise.”

“Rhaenyra, this is not the end of the world. Your Ser Laenor is fond enough of you, even if I can tell you wish for his heart but can not have it,” her arms circled my shoulders and I found myself sobbing as she pulled me close. “Every relationship has it’s bad times and good times. Give him
time. He will realise soon enough that an unstable start does not have to mean a life of misery.”

Like her own relationship with Daemon had worked out so well?

“I am aware of the strangeness of that statement from myself, yes. Daemon is much different to your Ser Laenor. Too proud, too in love with himself and too in love with his ancestry. He hated the idea of tainting his blood, he hated me and he made it clear he would hate any children of ours. Your Ser Laenor lacks his pride, his hate and his anger.”

When I did not respond she released me, sighed and slid the pitcher towards me.

“Drink up, niece. The alcohol will dull the pain tonight and by tomorrow the memory will be further away and hurt you much less.” I did as I was told. She was the expert in husband related grief after all.

When I awoke the next morning it was with vague memories of finishing the pitcher alone. I remembered being on the beach and Joffrey supervising a guard carrying me to my rooms. Maris and Alys wrestling my dress from me before I was allowed to collapse into bed. The Grafton woman coaxing a cool liquid down my throat, lips pursed in equal parts amusement and frustration. Alys’ laughter ringing in my ears at something I had drunkenly mumbled and Maris looking both shocked and embarrassed.

I forced my eyes open and groaned at the light. Every beam of it felt like ice picks being driven directly into my skull. My head throbbed and my stomach gurgled unpleasantly, telling me that I hadn’t drunk nearly enough non-alcoholic fluids the night before to ward off what was promising to be a really heroic hangover. I pulled the covers up over my face and rolled over, regretting it immediately as my stomach flipped unpleasantly at the motion.

“Awake, Your Grace?” came one of the Twin’s voices. The covers were pried from my hands and pulled back slightly, letting the mid-morning light attack my poor eyeballs once again. I screwed my eyes shut and managed another pathetic groan. A hand on my back, solid and irresistible, pulled me into a half sitting position before the rim of a cup touched my lips.

Juice. I gripped the cup and poured it down my parched throat like it was the nectar of the gods, relinquishing it with a only vague sense of disappointment when it was finally drained. I heard whichever Strong twin was present chuckle before the sound of more liquid being poured alerted me to the possibility of more juice. I risked cracking open my eyes. Sera handed me more juice and some sort of grey concoction.

“Ser Joffrey had Maester Gerardys make that up. He said to make sure you drink all of it,” she said and I felt dread fall over me. Maester Gerardys was an excellent healer. Truly one the best the Maester’s had every produced but the man was terrible when it came to making foul smelling, foul tasting potions. My stomach rolled and I heaved, Sera stepped forward and caught my hand, bringing the Maester’s brew to my mouth.

I allowed her to direct it into my mouth, too tired and too hungover to summon the wrath that would normally be so easy to come to the fore for such a presumptuous action. The concoction was as disgusting as I’d assumed it would be and it was the work of the moment to keep it in my stomach. I chased it with several cups of juice that Sera was only to happy to provide. Gradually my stomach settled and my headache faded.

Awful they may be but they were effective.

Afterwards I managed to coax my stomach to accept a small bowl of sweetened porridge before
summoning my ladies to me. I had to keep it together, both in front of the lesser court here and
Westeros at large. I felt like I was going to war as they dressed me and prepared my hair. In a way I
was. Every courtesy a shield, every outfit a suit of armour, every barbed comment a sword strike
and every vicious rumour an arrow volley.

I set myself entirely to playing the Lady of Dragonstone over the next few weeks as guests from
King’s Landing a further afield trickled in to celebrate my eighteenth nameday. Dragonstone was
small but I had made my mark and it was never so obvious as in the days leading to my nameday
feast. All the ancient splendour of the Targaryen’s original seat in Westeros was on display. From
tapestry’s depicting long forgotten Valyrian myths and legends to more recent displays showing
the Field of Fire and the Burning of Harrenhal.

One could not throw a pebble in Dragonstone without finding some reminder of Targaryen might.
It did wonders for strangling the rumours and questions as to where Laenor was, when I was
having children and just who I shared my bed with. Even Rhea had quit making sarcastic remarks
regarding my choice of decorating which nothing less than a miracle. Not that her remarks weren’t
complete hypocrisy, the Royces might not have quite the amount of bronze and bronze-related
products as I did dragons it was a close run thing.

Oh, I was quite sure that in five or so months I’d go back to hating the damn things but here and
now? I felt as if I was all alone in the world with only an army of stone dragons at my back.

Not that I was actually alone. Helaena was quite insistent on dragging me to the practise range
every morning so that Ser Rogar could terrorise me and she could show off the fact she was
improving at a truly startling rate. Jeyne and Jessamyn contrived to fill my free time with laughter
and funny stories and my ladies were quick to use their influence to see all those who pestered me
or were otherwise inappropriate were ostracised by the female portion of Dragonstone. Rhea made
it a point to sit at my side during my many meetings offering whispered advice that in many cases
was actually pretty useful.

For all the stress that the guests for the feast caused me -Yes, Harwin had turned up, how did you
guess?- there was one arrival that sent my heart soaring. Lord Gerold’s arrival with his Vale
delegation at his back, made doubly happy due to it’s lack of Viserys and the whole host of
problems he would cause by arriving. Lord Gerold was in fine health and very optimistic regarding
his work in King’s Landing. I was glad he did not resent me for his being there and his reunion
with his daughter and son made me a little weepy. The fact that he seemed to have come to
consider Jeyne as an honorary adopted daughter was genuinely touching. It seemed Westeros could
produce decent parents who gave a shit about their daughters, even if they had inconvenient
choices in partner.

Even if he had told me he would soon be heading back to the Vale and that Jeyne would be sending
another lord to take his place.

The feast went off splendidly. Most of the Lords were Blacks but I did spot a few Greens here and
there. How much were Lords sent as Alicent’s spies and how many were thinking of jumping sides
was a question I would leave to Joffrey, who remained as vigilant as ever. Many toasts to my health
were drunk, much dancing was done and I suspected there would be more than a few maids with
rounded bellies soon enough if the celebrations after the feast were anything to go by.

In fact, although I hadn’t thought it possible, politics took a back seat as lords from each side mixed
with one another. Cautiously, at first, but as the night wore on and wine flowed the awkwardness
melted away. I myself danced with most who asked and were respectful about it. Lord Denys was a
surprisingly adept dancer for such a monstrously tall man. I danced with him, Lord Gerold, Ser
Hugh Redfort, Forrest Frey, Elmo Tully, Tyland Lannister and even Ser Harwin. Sadly, Joffrey declined my attempts to lure him from his corner and his brooding.

For all the fun that it was, Laenor’s silence began to wear on me and I was glad for the guests beginning to trickle away after the feast was done. Even if it did hurt when a week afterwards, Jeyne Arryn announced her party would be returning to the Vale. I’d been concerned that my marital problems might have impacted the Falcons but it seemed Laenor had sent word that he would meet all of Terrance Arryn’s requests for more funding. But I was still feeling rather fragile and vulnerable when I stood on the docks as they prepared to leave.

“Be well, cousin, and I do hope you reconcile with Ser Laenor. He’s such a charming fellow!” Jeyne said before pulling me into a hug. I returned it and fought the urge to weep into her shoulder.

“Don’t you worry about the clansman, Your Grace, we’ll have them cleared out of those mountains and the Vale moving forward within the year!” Lord Denys boasted. I doubted that but I appreciated the attempt at reassurance.

“Do not forget to write to me, niece, I would hate to come to this dragon-infested island to remind you once more!” Rhea told me sharply and with a hug that told me she really, really wasn’t used to hugging people. There was considerably more elbow than appreciated.

And then the Arryn ships were sailing away into the sunset and I was left alone. Well, not quite, I still had all those Westerosi nobles hanging around.

At least I had Ser Joffrey and my ladies. Well, minus Maris who’d been granted permission to stay a few months in the Vale.
“I must ask you to thank Ser Joffrey again, Your Grace,” Marya enthused. We’d been discussing her ongoing charity efforts in my name. After our informal banishment Marya had been terrified that without her overseeing it, it would be forgotten, relegated to an afterthought as a political play no longer needed. Apparently, Joffrey had stepped in and provided Marya the name of a trustworthy middle man. Lord Gerold’s Valemen had also been prevailed upon to help out with sermons about the Seven and such.

I was gathering quite the reputation as a devout and charitable woman in King’s Landing. Queen of soup kitchens and orphanages…

“I certainly will, Marya. I must once again praise you for your tireless dedication in the name of the Maiden and the Mother.” Marya seemed to glow at my words.

“Your Grace, you are too kind but truly I think all women should engage in more charitable works! I can’t imagine looking at those children, all alone in the world and starving, and not wanting to help!”

Marya was genuinely the nicest person I’ve ever encountered. Probably the Westerosi ideal of the perfect woman. She was kind and caring, yearned for children of her own and husband to stand beside her and had more than a passing knowledge of politics she’d mostly acquired in her quest to help said future husband. I mean her only flaw was her ongoing obsession with Ser Byren Hastwyck, Queen’s personal bootlicker.

I do not honestly know if the man has even noticed.

“I require no thanks, Lady Marya, I am a devout follower of the Seven myself and am only to glad to aid in charitable ventures in their name,” said Ser Joffery, as he limped closer. Marya smiled broadly at him. “However, I fear I must steal Her Grace away from you for the moment. Something urgent requires her attention,”

I stamped down on my initial flicker of alarm and directed a smile I didn’t really feel at Marya. Joffrey would not have sought me out unless it was serious and serious almost always meant extremely bad.

“I apologise, Lady Marya, but it seems duty calls,”

“Oh, that’s quite alright, Your Grace, should I let the rest of your ladies know?” she asked, suddenly hesitant.

“If that’s alright, Marya, I don’t want to have you running back and forth if you have other duties.” That was definitely the wrong thing to say for some reason because her eyes widened and she flushed before nodding frantically.

“I was going to accompany the Princess to town. I will see to her immediately.” Then she was off at a speed I’d never seen her reach before without actually running. Joffrey and I watched her go, both of our faces puzzled.

“Do you know what that was about?” I asked after she’d rounded a corner and disappeared.

“I confess I find myself unsure.” He replied. I chuckled at his expression, as if he had gotten so used to knowing everyone’s business not knowing was actually unsettling to him. “Regardless,
perhaps I should inform you in my office. I suspect you may be upset at the news.”

My stomach dropped like a stone as I followed him.

“I require assurances that you will not do anything… rash,” said Joffrey as we sat around his desk. Oh, that really didn’t bode well.

“You have my word that after you have given me this news I will remain seated and listen to you.” I told him. He didn’t look any less worried and my stomach started doing somersaults.

“I am going to lock the door. You have not been objective in regards to this issue in the past.” I stayed sitting while he limped past me. If it was ‘I need to go burn the Stepstones now’ news he had a window I could probably fit through, the fall wasn’t that long and into water besides. He sat back down and took a deep breath. I mirrored the action and forced myself to calm down.

“Lady Laena has returned to Driftmark. Alone and with only Vhagar for her escort. My spies report that she seemed to be in quite some distress.”

“Daemon?” I asked through gritted teeth, suppressing the urge to seek out Syrax and fly to Driftmark. What kind of distress!?

“They were unable to get closer to find out. Lady Rhaenys and Ser Laenor have been growing more aware of my activities. I would be of the opinion it’s likely his doing.”

Deep breaths. In and out. Count to- No! Fuck this!

“That silly idiot!” I stood and began pacing his office. “I warned her! Did I not!? I told her that Daemon would stop at nothing to have her! I swear if he has harmed her I will kill him, kinslayer or no!”

“Rhaenyra!” Joffrey barked and I turned to him. He was also standing, looking considerably more angry than worried now than. His hands were white with the force he was using to grip the head of his walking cane.

“Enough! Sit down. This is a delicate situation, we can not risk further driving away the Velaryons.” I glared at him, fists clenched before forcing myself to unclench them and massage the ache from the my hand. Joffrey stood opposite me and nodded, drawing in a deep breath to calm himself.

“You will listen to me. You will stop these tantrums, you are not a child but the future Queen!” I opened my mouth to retort but he shot me a look that knocked my legs from underneath me and I sank back into the chair. “I am your man. I swore myself to you. Truly, I understand your position in this but I can no longer pander to your rages! How much time have we lost because you allowed your anger to blind you to Viserys’ own rage? We can no longer afford for you to sulk at every little thing you dislike! You are eighteen! A woman grown! Sulk and rage in private, yes, but stop doing so in public!”

He retook his own seat and massaged his forehead.

“The Velaryons are your greatest supporters currently, it is not an exxgageration to say our ongoing efforts to sway the Lords of Westeros to our cause would be impossible without them. They provide the gold needed for the Falcons, your experiments and your charitable enterprises. I will not pretend to know why Laenor and yourself argued but I will not allow you to drive your most important pillar of support away from you! You are bound to them by marriage but you have yet to bind them to you with loyalty.”
“The marriage tie should be enough!” I shouted before lowering my voice with some effort. “They should be falling behind me. I will tie them to the Royal house for centuries to come.”

“Laenor has fallen behind you. So has Lady Laena for that matter. She dropped her entire plans for travel to stay on Dragonstone with you, might I point out, and believe me not even Corlys has managed that.”

“She has a fine way of showing it,” I grumbled. Joffrey raised an eyebrow and I blushed.

“Lady Rhaenys was once Princess Rhaenys. She was once considered likely to inherit the Iron Throne itself. That was taken from her twice. Corlys is much the same. Now they are both forced by circumstance to support you, the granddaughter and daughter of the men who stole the throne from them. It does not help that Viserys is a… less than adequate king.”

“Less than adequate is a polite was of putting it. So Lady Rhaenys resents me.” I couldn’t help but feel a little betrayed by that.

“Resents you, loves you, wants you to succeed to spite the lords that rejected her and to benefit her son.” I swallowed thickly at that. If Joffrey realised my emotional distress he didn’t show it. “Her greatest priority is her children above all else.”

“And Corlys?” Joffrey’s eyes darkened at the question.

“I would see him humbled,” muttered Joffrey, darkly. “His wishes to rule you and by proxy, Westeros. If we wish to ensure Velaryon loyalty, we must dissaude him of his assumption that he will be anything other than an adviser. But to do that, we must strip his last dragon from his side.”

“So how do we pry Lady Rhaenys from him? As I recall, she’s very in love with him for all that they argue.” Joffrey leant back and steepled his fingers.

“There are the bastards. I have a theory about them.” I nodded for him to continue. “I believe they’re his backups. He doesn’t believe Laenor can produce legitimate children and he’s intending on having one of them inherit instead in return for his tireless work on your behalf. His little scheme is a direct threat to the inheritance of her own children, if Lady Rhaenys were to find out…”

“She’d kill him. And the bastards. And the mother to boot,” I told him, horror growing in my gut. “What proof do you have of this?”

“He’s keeping them close, visits regularly when he’s at Driftmark, has begun seeking out tutors for them.” Joffrey shrugged. “His spies told me he was very interested in having records of just when you and Laenor bedded each other and to report another lover, even a suspected one, immediately to him. I would have suggested it earlier but you seemed intent on keeping them alive. It’s what tipped Laenor off that something was wrong, you know? You gave away the fact you knew they were boys before hand.”

“I am to be Queen and he has to know that I would never approve him raising his bastards over my own husband,” I mused, ignoring Joffrey’s prodding at the cause Laenor and I’s estrangement.

“And if he threatened to publicly named your own children bastards? The Queen already lays the foundations to claim your children illegitimate. Corlys’ denouncement would cement that as fact to Westeros as a whole?”

I paled at that. Is this what he had done in the original timeline? Rhaenyra had named his bastards heirs over her own Joffrey then. A proud woman like her would have found that hard to do, perhaps
Corlys had blackmailed her?

“What has Laenor told you about our argument.” I asked, mouth dry. Joffrey watched me, face impassive for a moment.

“Nothing. He came to my offices and asked if I ‘knew’. When he realised I did not, he left without informing me. I confess I have puzzled out some of the details. You have knowledge you should not and frequently make seemingly unsound decisions based around them. Then there is the ‘Book’, Laenor suspected you wrote it. He had a theory that you experienced what the Targaryens call ‘Dragon Dreams’ and had knowledge of the future.” I let out a shaky breath. Laenor had come closer than I’d suspected with his guesses.

“Let’s assume I do have some knowledge of the future.” I began slowly. “Let’s assume those bastards are likely to be very useful to our cause, the kind of useful that sets fire to our problems. I would very much want to keep them around if that were the case.”

“Then we bring the matter to Lady Rhaenys’ attention and direct her retribution along the lines of seizing control of the children.” Joffrey suggested. “Raising them to our way of thinking and making it clear that Corlys has to go along with us if he wishes his legacy to take shape in the way he wants.”

“We can’t use the fact that Corlys attempted to manipulate her into supporting the marriage of her daughter to someone they both know is an unstable wreck on the best of days? A plot that has apparently now backfired with some sort of harm to Laena?” I spat.

“Your feelings on Prince Daemon and Lady Laena are hardly objective. She would eventually figure it out and then she would consider it another manipulation,” he replied.

“Oh I think she’s figured out I want Daemon as far away from me as possible and preferably in the ground,” I told him tartly. He stared at me for a moment then sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. I waited for him to speak again but he seemed to have gotten stuck in his thoughts because he was silent for a long time, staring at his desk.

“Joffrey!” He snapped out of it and brought his eyes up to mine before sighing heavily again and massaging his temples.

“The fact that Lord Corlys has placed Laena into danger with an ill thought out scheme will certainly have Lady Rhaenys furious but Laena is alive and, as far as my spies could tell, unharmed. The threat of the loss of her children’s inheritance will far more effectively show her the consequences of her husband’s schemes.” He told me slowly, using his ‘I am talking to an idiot’ voice.

I resisted the urge to respond to that beyond a narrowing of my eyes. He was right, I did need to stop throwing tantrums. Not slapping my spymaster seemed like a good place to start.
I left Joffrey’s office with a promise to arrange a meeting to explain everything I knew, everything that had so upset Laenor, and orders to prepare rooms for Addam and Alyn of Hull. Probably their Mother too, since I doubted Rhaenys would let the girl stay once she found out about them.

Honestly, it would be a miracle if I could talk Rhaenys out of killing her.

The flight to Driftmark was pleasant enough but for the first time since I had mounted Syrax, riding her did not calm me and Syrax could feel my agitation. It took several more strikes of my whip than usual to keep her on course. I was wound up, worrying about Laena and what Daemon could have done.

Laenor met me, arms crossed but looking completely unsurprised as I scrambled off of Syrax.

“T...
“And her problems are only ours when we want the throne through her. Do not act like she brings nothing to the family in return,” Laenor replied testily. “Or would you also claim my own Mother not worthy of being here? She married my Father for the same reason after all.”

Vaemond’s retort died in his throat as he snapped his mouth shut so fast I heard his teeth crack together. The one Laenor had addressed as Mal turned to the Queen Who Never Was and gave a hopeless shrug. I stepped past them all and approached Laena who didn’t relax, worryingly, but did unball her fists and make an effort to appear less murderous.

“What happened?” I asked, as she desperately tried to avoid meeting my gaze. She opened her mouth.

“Laena happened,” replied Laenor, cutting off whatever remark his Sister was about to make. She slammed her mouth closed and shot him a glare. In response, Laenor folded his arms, unmoved by her anger. I turned back to her and she met my eyes for the first time and then she flushed in an odd mix of shame and defiance.

“I did nothing wrong. We did nothing wrong! Rhaenyra I know you and Daemon have had your differences but—”

“You slept with him?” I snapped. She set her jaw and met my gaze and then nodded stiffly. White hot anger caused my vision to dim and my hand throb in pain.

She slept with him. The man who was already a monster. She slept with him.

“Here. Since my children are so keen to spill all our secrets to you.” Rhaenys handed me a letter bearing the Velaryon seal. I snatched it from her and skimmed my eyes over it’s contents. Then I stopped and went back and read it again, slowly this time.

Corlys wrote of how he had discovered the affair between Laena and Daemon, that Laena had discovered she was pregnant, had fled in the aftermath in a rage when he’d suggested moon tea. That Rhaenys was to hold Laena on Driftmark whilst Corlys sailed home and figured out what to do.

My breath came harder to draw. She was pregnant! I’d told her, I’d fucking told her! I warned her about Daemon, about how he set out to charm and seduce. She’d promised me to my fucking face! She’d sworn an oath!

I handed the letter back to Rhaenys and tried to bring my thoughts into some sort of order so that I didn’t do exactly as Joffrey had warned me not to. Deep breaths didn’t seem to help. The room grew narrow and my teeth hurt as I ground them together.

I couldn’t drive her away. I couldn’t. I’d be driving away Vhagar. I couldn’t lose her to Daemon. What could I do?

This is impossible!

“I’d say our Princess isn’t in your corner either,” observed Rhaenys, dragging me back into the room. Laenor was next to me, hand raised as if to grab me in case I did anything rash like charge his stupid idiot of a sister.

“I will not kill my child!” Laena shot back, hand over her stomach protectively. I felt sick as hate and anger twisted it’s way through my gut. We’d given her every warning we could and she’d promptly ignored it all and leapt into his bed. How long had the affair lasted? Had she been writing to me and fucking him at the same time? Did she feel any guilt whatsoever?
Did she realise how fucked she was? That not even riding a dragon would save her?

“And what will you do? Bear a bastard!? It would ruin you!” snapped Laenor.

“He will not be a bastard! Daemon will marry me.” I laughed at that. A strangled, disbelieving laugh. Laena turned those fierce violet eyes on me. She believed it. She honestly believed he could marry her.

Stupid, stupid fool!

“My Uncle is married. To a woman in good health and younger than him,” I told her. “And I really, really wish you good luck in convincing my Father to annul the marriage of Jeyne Arryn’s chief bannerman.”

Laena’s eyes flickered uncertainly to her Mother who looked as if she agreed with everything I had just said but hated the fact it was me she was agreeing with. Then they flickered to her Brother, who I noted was nodding along to the point, expression as grim as I’d ever seen it.

“We are the blood of Old Valyria. Aegon had two wives, why shouldn’t Daemon?”

“Cousin! Be reasonable, no good Septon would ever marry you to an already married man! The child would still be a bastard!” cried the one called Mal whose full name I could not recall.

“And! We are the blood of Old Valyria! Why should we care what others think!?” Rhaenys marched forward and seized her daughter by the arms. Laena flinched backwards, shock evident on her face at the sheer fury etched into her Mother’s face.

“The only reason I have not slapped you girl is because you repeat his lies! Ask Maegor why we should pay attention to the laws of the land!” Laena pulled herself free of her Mother and scowled.

“Then I will take my dragon and fly back and be with him!”

“Then you will have nothing from us!” her Mother bellowed. “How long will you last without your Father’s fleets? His money!? How long until some cutthroat stabs you to get at Daemon? How long before your baby is taken from his cradle to hurt you!?”

“Perhaps we could hide the pregnancy? Hide the bastard? She could still raise it but we just wouldn’t acknowledge it to be hers?” suggested Vaemond.

“I will not abandon my child! I will not hide it!” At the exclamation I wanted to dash her head against the wall until she saw sense. I knew the problem. It was the same reason I couldn’t invite her to go back to my lying bastard of an Uncle and stew in the consequences. She rode Vhagar, last of the conqueror’s dragons. She’d been told all her life that made her special, now she assumed it left her above the consequences for breaking such an integral part of society.

“Marriage then,” I said. “Marriage to a Lord loyal to your Father who will overlook the bastard.”

Rhaenys shook her head, face doubtful.

“I can not think of one worthy of her hand that will overlook the bastard. That would allow her to raise it alongside it’s trueborn siblings. Besides, to propose a marriage to any lord of sufficient status would require months of negotiations, she would be showing by then!” said Mal.

“Then after she gives birth?” Mal shook is head, face a mask of unhappiness.
“Any man would spot the signs of pregnancy. If we failed to tell him before the bedding we’d… I truly dread to think of the consequences for our family.”

“You have to have bannerman on the island you can trust?” I asked, desperately. Rhaenys shook her head and was about to answer when Laena cut in again, evidently annoyed that we were speaking about her as if she wasn’t in the room.

“I do not need to marry! I will have the child here and return to Daemon! He will have me,” she told us. At the look on my face Laenor placed a warning hand on my shoulder.

Think of what will happen if literally anyone other than you has Vhagar. Do not knit Vhagar’s rider whilst you still need Vhagar.

“Laena be reasonable. We are not above those in Westeros. Even ignoring the fact that the Father is a man banished for reasons best left unsaid, you will not enjoy bearing a bastard. Westeros will not forgive you bearing a bastard,” he told her, voice gentle. He loved his older sister dearly, I knew, and seeing her happily walking off a cliff was likely painful for him.

Laena’s eyes flickered to me and back to her Brother. Laenor stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I have an idea. One that promises us both chance to be happy,” he said in a low voice. She focused on him. Vaemond and Mal craned their heads closer to hear but Rhaenys jabbed at them, forcing them to give her children privacy. “Marry Joffrey. He is a second son, he can take your name. He will claim your child. You can still carry on with Daemon, produce as many children as you want and Joffrey will say nothing to gainsay you.”

Her face twisted in annoyance and disgust.

“I will not marry your lover!” she hissed. In the corner of my eye, Rhaenys went white. Oh fuck she didn’t know. Oh fuck. My anger evaporated and was replaced with sheer terror that Rhaenys should learn this in such a manner. Her eyes travelled to me and her lips almost disappeared in displeasure. I swallowed and tried to catch Laena’s eye, desperate for her to back track but she was too focused on Laenor.

“Laena please! We can not marry you to another man, Joffrey is trustworthy, tales of your romance will be credible and-“

“You get to drape him in our colours! Your wife is stood not a few paces away,” And your Mother is too I tried to communicate through complicated eyebrow wiggling and desperately rolling my eyes in her direction. They still did not pay attention.

“You can not marry Daemon. You will not get a betrothal that allows you to raise your child alongside your trueborn ones. You will not be allowed to stay on Driftmark if you remain unmarried. Rhaenyra will not take a woman with a bastard as a lady,” said Rhaenys, voice like ice and both her children jumped, both turning an identical shade of white as they realised she’d heard everything. “And your Father will not allow a marriage to Joffrey Lonmouth.”

“What if we betroth her to a young lord? A child? Then hide her babe? Surely nobody would be able to tell?” came Mal’s voice, clearly not understanding what had just occurred. Vaemond elbowed him in the ribs. I ignored them.

“Lord Corlys is not the problem. He will not speak out against the marriage publicly if we hold Addam and Alyn and if it’s prestige you are worried about I will grant Joffrey land when I am
Queen, enough for future dragonriders.” A fierce guilt began burning in my gut as Rhaenys’ eyes lit up at the mention of land. I had a sinking feeling I’d just sealed her fate. She was going to marry a man she did not want because I’d done everything in my power to force it.

Oh gods, Vhagar better be worth this.

“Who are Addam and Alyn?” asked Rhaenys in a dangerous purr.
Laenor brought Joffrey to Driftmark on the back of Seasmoke and made a good show of being angry with him, even as the almost gentle way he was manhandling the knight was at odds with the anger in his tone. Joffrey, in turn, made a good show of apologising and swearing that he would shame his friend no further as Laenor frogmarched him through the gates of High Tide. Laena and I watched from the balcony in her rooms.

She still wanted Daemon, I could tell. It had taken a private meeting with Laenor to get her to finally agree. The thought of him and her made me want to mount Syrax and reduce his fucking islands to cinders.

My body burned with the intensity of my anger at my bastard of an Uncle.

“Do you truly wish to marry him?” I asked, voice thick. I wanted her to say no. I wanted her to acknowledge what kind of man he was.

“I do! Seven help me I do! I do not want to marry Joffrey!” She scowled at the courtyard before dashing away tears. “Laenor says he wants me for Mother’s claim. That even if he did someone how wed me, it would mean Laenor’s death so he could claim me Rhaenys’ true heir.”

Someone was getting creative with their lying. Laenor must have remembered the details of his canon murder. Still in that time line, Daemon had killed him for Rhaenyra only after Laena died in childbirth. I tried to picture the massive bulk of Vhagar, reminding myself that letting literally anyone else have it -coughAemondcough- would be really, really bad.

Laena was an idiot but she valued her family.

“He is in love with the idea of power. You would not be the first he has used to obtain it.” She sobbed and guilt flared in my gut, making me feel queasy. It was for her own good, she’d die if she went with Daemon. Die trying to reach the skies one last time and being denied.

And I’d lose a dragon.

“You’d better get to finishing those letters of yours. Laenor’s forger will need them before long,” I said and made a hasty exit, leaving her to her writing. My own letter to the King was not coming on exceptionally well. I’d already re-written it several times. Too much detail, not enough detail, too many inconsistencies, the plot of Corlys’ too obvious and too much like an accusation… This one was a lot more promising at least.

First I had laid out the supposed details of the false affair with Joffrey; that it had started in the aftermath of our banishment and Corlys moving her to the Stepstones had been to put a stop to it. I hinted about Corlys’ plan to marry her to Daemon somehow, implied it caused her desperate flight from the Stepstones into the arms of her lover. That her arrival had tipped both Laenor and I off that something was wrong and the subsequent scandalous discovery of their passion. Passion grown from a childhood together where Joffrey had been her Father’s page and then squire and finished by telling him, for proprieties sake, that Laenor and I had arranged a match be made between the two.

I suspect he’d be too relieved at the Velaryon making a match with someone unlikely to upset his precious court politics to look into whether my lies matched up timeline-wise. The story was neat, depressingly common and just interesting enough to get the gossips going for a few days or so
before something else came along to steal their interest. If Corlys refused our terms and pushed Daemon forward as responsible, Viserys would be able to point to the letter and name it a ploy. Alicent would know it for what it was instantly but not be able to prove and even if she could, she would not want to help Daemon find a new wife.

Alicent was out to prove the saying ‘A woman scorned’.

Still as simple as it sounded on the surface it was the words that refused to come in a way that did not promise to offend him. I would have to have Joffrey look it over once Laenor had finished making a spectacle for the more obvious spies to pick up on. Oh, we’d make a show of hiding it later but it was important Westeros saw what they thought was the truth instead of the actual truth. Once they had an explanation that fit their prejudices, most would stop looking.

After I’d finished with my awful attempt at diplomacy with Viserys, I sought out my Husband. We had unfinished business, words still to say. Gods, could Laena have waited a few more months? He was in his Father’s solar, busy letting people know of the upcoming wedding. When I entered he rose from the desk and faced me, arms crossed. I felt like a child caught in a lie.

“I am truly sorry,” I said in the silence. He gave me a small smile and moved around the desk, coming to me and placing his hands on my shoulders.

“I know you are. Just…” he paused, searching for the right words. “I spoke to Joffrey. He helped.”

I probably shouldn’t kiss Joffrey but I kind of wanted to.

“You must stop acting like we are pieces you can move about the Painted Table. We are people. We can help. Share this burden with us.”

“I understand.” He smiled and let his hands drop. It wasn’t a complete healing of the rift that had sprung between us but it was a promise things would get better.

I hesitated before asking my next question. “How is your mother?”

Rhaenys had barricaded herself in her rooms, refusing to see anyone but the maids that brought her food to her. Laenor, Laena and I had tried to coax her out to no avail. The only time any of us had gotten a reaction it had been a scream of rage and the sound of several things shattering as they were thrown against the wall.

“Still…” he trailed off. His face was drawn though. In truth I was surprised she hadn’t know but then her weakness had always been her children. “She will not speak to me. Or Laena.”

I held him close. She likely saw what he was as a betrayal. She’d tried to make him king once and then had married him to a future Queen. To learn those cruel rumours about him were true...

Add in the fact her daughter was pregnant with a bastard, her husband having bastard children that were potentially there to unseat her own and I could see her logic in hiding away from the world for a while. I’d probably do worse in her shoes. In fact, only smashing a few things would be downright restrained. Perhaps she was onto something with her tales of Dragon Rages.

“Your Mother is not the type to hide for long. I have no doubt she will inflict herself on us soon enough. Besides, would she miss Laena wed? Even if it’s a farce?”

“No,” he mumbled, burying his face in my neck. “Speaking of which, how goes the planning?”

Oh gods, do not get me started on the wedding.
With Rhaenys refusing to leave her rooms, I was the closest thing Driftmark had to a Lady of High Tide, and so most of it had fallen on me and let me tell you, Driftmark was no Dragonstone!

For a start, I’d been forced to do everything by hand practically. Food, singers, wine… On Dragonstone I would have given the order for a feast and had several taster menus and wine suggestions by the evening of the next day. I could desire entertainment and my men would be able to ask me what kind and procure it from a pre-approved list of acceptable candidates.

And on Dragonstone, I would not have to fight to have my orders followed by the staff!

Hazel Velaryon, born a Harte and the young gooddaughter of Vaemond Velaryon, was determined to stake her claim on the title of Lady of High Tide and had gathered a goodly number of relatives to her proverbial banner. I’d lost count of how many times I’d had to threaten the chef into changing the menu back from some ridiculous change she’d made or fire the singers she’d hired without my leave.

Infuriating!

One evening it boiled over and I was all but ready to march her out to feed her to Syrax when finally the true Lady of High Tide emerged from her rooms. Immaculately dressed, bathed and looking every inch the beauty she was purported to be in full Targaryen colours. Which was odd because she normally shied away from red and black despite still bearing the Targaryen name.

“Mother’s tits! I am indisposed for just a few days and you’ve all but drawn swords on one another! This is my daughter’s wedding you are fouling up. Well you shall do so no longer!” She had bellowed, striding into the hall as if the past few days had not happened.

And that had been that. We all awkwardly avoided the topic of Laena, Laenor or the Bastards and she in turn acted as if the revelation had never occurred. Well, apart from the fact she refused to even brook wearing her usual teal ensemble.

The Lonmouth’s had sailed in a week later and they had apparently decided to bring everyone that could even claim the name in reinforcements. Joffrey’s parents, siblings, cousins and distant relatives had all presented themselves to Laenor with apologies for his behaviour. To say his Father had been angry to discover his son was giving up his name had been an understatement. Laenor had been secluded with him for quite some time before the Lonmouth patriarch had finally given in and offered his blessings for the match.

After all the relevant actors were assembled, the preparations took on a rushed feeling. The only thing that could foul our plan now was Corlys arriving early. As his Heir Apparent, Laenor was Corlys’ voice on Driftmark whilst he was not present. That he knew Corlys would not approve of what he was doing meant he was already toeing the line of Westerosi legality with arranging the wedding. If Corlys turned up and said no, things would become complicated.

It was a relief when the day arrived and there were no signs of his fleet on the horizon.

The halls of High Tide were decked out with bunting, the smallfolk had been given the day off from their usual work and anyone who had any claim to fame had crowded into the reasonably large Sept that had been raised alongside the new castle. As Laenor’s wife and a Princess to boot I was given pride of place in the front rows next to Rhaenys.

Laenor gave his sister away and I could see how she flinched when her brother took her hand and how he looked pained in turn. She paused as she saw Joffrey, to the untrained eye it probably looked as if she were momentarily overwhelmed but I could tell it was reluctance that caused her to
Even miserable, she was jaw-droppingly beautiful in a white samite dress, the train of which bore seahorses made of emeralds and which the silver lace was so delicate I feared it would tear. I wondered where they had time to find such a piece but then again, it was likely it had been made when the contract with Tycheo was made. After all such a piece must have been hundreds of hours of work!

Once upon a time, the Seasnake had intended for his children to have only the best.

There was a tense moment as the Septon began saying the vows where she remained silent for a beat too long but she eventually said them. Once that panic was over, I allowed my thoughts to wander. Perhaps I was being too harsh on the Lord of the Tides, turning him into a villain frothing at the mouth. His actions did make sense in a twisted, Westerosi way, I supposed, and it annoyed me so much that I could see that.

He’d betrothed his son to a Princess who would become Queen and only begun seeking his bastards when he came to suspect his son would be a cuckold. He’d tried to marry his daughter to the next Sea Lord and then schemed to marry her to a Prince he assumed he could control. He’d fought for his Wife’s claim on the Throne twice and nearly started a civil war the second time round.

In front of me, the differences between a normal wedding and a wedding in which the Groom gives up his name to join the bride’s family became apparent. There was no cloaking of the bride in his own house colours but nor did Laena cloak him. To admit you were relying on your wife’s protection, even symbolically, was too much for the normal Westerosi male.

Actually scratch that, it was too much for even Joffrey and Joffrey was the most cosmopolitan and urbane guy I’d ever met in Westeros.

Joffrey divested himself of his house colours, handing them to his Father with a bow. The man took them and I thought I saw a teary eye there for a moment. Then Laenor stepped forward and, as acting Lord of the Tides and head of House Velaryon, handed Joffrey a cloak of sea green and silver. Joffrey took it and their hands brushed over one another.

Next to me, I heard Rhaenys inhale sharply as she noticed.

There was a respectful silence as Joffrey was cloaked in Velaryon colours and returned to Laena’s side. They faced one another. Joffrey looked every part the nervous groom who knew he was marrying far above his station. Laena looked like she was seconds away from vomiting on him which… okay, not the end of the world. People are always nervous at their weddings, right?

Vhagar, Vhagar, Vhagar, Vhagar… think of the really big dragon you don’t want your dick of an Uncle or psychopath of a Brother to get their hands on.

“With this kiss I pledge my love and take you for my Lord and Husband.”

“With this kiss I pledge my love and take you for my Lady and Wife.”

“I do declare these children of the Seven man and wife; one flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever!”

And then it was time for the feast.
The feast was hardly seventy-seven dishes and not even close what someone of Laena’s station would normally warrant. She was making a show of looking happy from her position next to Ser Joffrey but I could tell it was strained. As the dancing began, I caught her attention.

“How are you faring?” I asked, dropping into Ser Joffrey’s abandoned seat and making a point of being polite for Joffrey’s sake. Rhaenys had requested a dance and the poor man hadn’t been brave enough to refuse. From the looks on both their faces and Rhaenys’ lips moving I’d say the new Velaryon was having a not-so-friendly warning about which of the siblings he was interested in bedding. Laena followed my gaze and sighed.

“Mother blames him, you know?” I raised my eyebrow at her and she blushed, more red coming to her cheeks that were already flushed from the wine. “On the upside, she thinks you’ve the patience of the Mother now! She thought you and Joffrey were lovers.”

Oh geez, that explains a lot.

“Whilst I’m happy Lady Rhaenys no longer rates me as a homewrecker, I asked if you were well.” She regarded me through violet eyes for a moment before a small smile crept across her face.

“Homewrecker? You say such odd things sometimes, Rhaenyra.” I was about to take her to task for ignoring the question again when she sighed and answered. “I am as well as can be. It’s just… a hard thing to swallow. I don’t want this and yet Laenor says if I do not, I risk everything.”

She still believed that somehow he would marry her if she just went to him. Laenor’s lies may have wrestled an agreement out of her but it was clear she found them hard to weigh against her feelings. I cursed my Uncle again and forced a pleasant smile onto my face. I did not know what it would take to get her to see the truth. I’d laid out his desire for power, Laenor had ‘speculated’ as to his motives for the affair. She seemed genuinely wary of him but still proclaimed to love him.

Remember, you need the dragon. Don’t slap her silly, you really want her dragon.

One of her drunker cousins clambered to his feet and Laena tensed. The dreaded call for the bedding could come at any moment after all. I had hated my own bedding, being lifted into the air and stripped by a gang of drunken, lusty men. Worse still, they hadn’t exactly held back on grabbing what they could reasonably write off as an accident to their equally drunk fellows. My body had been a mess of bruises the next morning and Laenor hadn’t fared much better, the women had turned out to be just as grab happy as the men.

And some of the jokes and suggestions they’d shouted! I had been much older than the seventeen they thought me and remembering some of them still made me blush.

The drunken cousin merely called for another toast to the health of the newlyweds to the immediate happiness of the hall. A few more toasts followed and I was glad for the amount of food I’d managed to choke down. Had I drunk this much on a normal meal I’d probably be passed out in a corner right now. We settled into a companionable silence and watched the revellers party. Rhaenys eventually released Ser Joffrey who staggered his way up to us looking as if he’d just been fighting for his life, although given the look Rhaenys shot at his back, that might not be too far off.

He sat next to us and commandeered some wine, draining the mug.
“I haven’t asked how you’re holding up,” I said, feeling guilty. Laenor had been the one to lay our plan out for him and persuade him to go along with it. I had barely had time to ask him how he was doing. He was marrying Daemon’s seconds as disgusting as that concept was, claiming his bastard as his own. The fact that the marriage would not be a happy one went without saying as Laena still looked vaguely discontent even when she was supposed to be playing the blushing bride.

“Well enough. I will not complain that I have been given a beautiful bride, a chance to serve the future Queen and the esteem of the future Prince Consort,” his gaze drifted to Laenor, who was entertaining some of his female cousins. “Giving up the Lonmouth name… it is a painful thing but I… it is needed.”

“Do you intend to reconcile with Laenor?” asked Laena, leaning over me so that Joffrey could hear her lowered voice. She still felt guilty she’d outed him to her Mother I gathered. Even decked out in her wedding gown, she still smelt of dragon and the sea air.

“I hope to-” He was cut off.

“The bedding!” Laena snapped back into her chair and shot me a terrified look as the first call went up and was echoed by most of the hall. Men and women surged forward, Laenor leading the men, shooting glares at some of the dirtier guests. Joffrey didn’t look so much better, he was trying to compose his face into his default but the trapped look in his eyes gave it away. Did anyone actually enjoy this tradition?

Was it cruel to make them go through with it?

I fell in beside Joffrey and helped the crowd of women lift him, paying special attention to his leg so that it did not pain him. Some of the lesser Velaryon’s complained about how fiddly it made shucking him out of his clothes but were hushed either by his sister or, surprisingly, Lady Rhaenys herself. Still, they managed to strip him and both myself and Rhaenys managed to ensure he wasn’t dropped on the way before he was carried inside the set of rooms he would share with Laena and dropped onto their marriage bed. He was as red as a tomato as we left with some of our group still calling out decidedly lewd suggestions for the bedding itself.

We met Laenor’s group coming out as they delivered a naked and equally as embarrassed Laena. He moved back back to stand at my side as she was dropped next to Joffrey and given the last few ribald comments. I caught her eye as the door was closed and tried not to think about how horrified she looked by the whole ordeal. Laenor clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry so much about her, she’s hardly a stranger to-” His Mother’s meaningful cough cut us off.

“I think it’s time we had a chat. Just us two, don’t you?”

It was with a growing sense of doom that we trailed away from the crowds still shouting their crude phrases and headed towards the Lord’s solar. It was hard to tell who was more tense out the three of us but it was certainly a close run competition. I turned down her offer of wine when we were finally seated, which she promptly ignored by pushing a goblet into my hands.

“So,” she said, eyes flicking between us as we sat there. I didn’t know about Laenor but I felt much like a naughty schoolchild, right now.

“So,” parroted Laenor, looking disturbingly cool about the whole business. He was ready to come out of skin though, he’d been waiting for the other shoe to fall with his Mother since she’d taken control of the preparations and emerged from her rooms. Now it seemed it was time. I placed my
hand on his and he spared me a small smile.

“I don’t understand that. Those little things. Did you practice?” she said, nodding to our entwined hands.

“Not really. It’s a gesture of comfort,” I replied as Laenor stared at our hands as if he’d never given it much thought before. Rhaenys nodded and shifted. We were quiet for some time longer. At a few points she opened her mouth to ask some question or other only to close it once more.

“You will not have children then?” she finally asked in a small voice. I’d never heard her so… dismayed. My heart ached.

“Rhaenyra assures me there are ways around my… condition,” Laenor said and Rhaenys’ eyes came to rest on me. Whilst it was true there were ways, I had never assured him so to my knowledge. Still, I nodded along.

“And they would be his? My grandchildren in truth?” she asked.

“Yes. No other man involved,” I assured her. She nodded to herself before taking a deep and shuddering breath and I realised this woman who’d faced down a King and his entire court, who in another time would fight two dragonriders by herself, was dangerously close to having a complete breakdown.

I wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“I am sorry that I am not the son you wanted, Mother, but I will not stand before you and pretend I’m ashamed of myself. I love Joffrey-” His voice broke and I wasn’t sure who I wanted to comfort more. Rhaenys laughed through her tears suddenly and pulled her son close.

“Not the son I wanted. You fool! I do not pretend to understand and I do not pretend to approve but you are my son. I have been so proud of you in these past few days.” They both curled close to one another and I felt like an intruder in this family moment. “And you, I do not pretend to know how you can put up with this behaviour but… I thank you for not telling the world.”

I jumped as she addressed me before shooting her small smile. It seemed Laena hadn’t been wrong about her change in perspective.

“I thought you too keen to play the helpless baby bird, needing to be rescued. To keen to let others do your work for you but…” I cried a little. I couldn’t help it. “I am sorry.”

Everyone was a little weepy after that although I still avoided the wine. Laenor and Rhaenys had no such compunction and each made surprising inroads into a pitcher as Laenor came completely clean with his mother, explaining away her queries and worries. Eventually, with me providing support for a much more wobbly Laenor, we reached our rooms and fell into bed. He was smiling so widely I thought he’d break his face and I fell asleep listening to him chuckling to himself.

The castle was quiet the next morning with most of it’s occupants nursing splitting headaches and the other symptoms of a hangover. No one had held back in their drinking and even I was missing Gerardys’ cure-alls, no matter how foul they tasted. I stuck with mint tea and bread with an array of fruit preserves to dip it in to settle my troubled stomach.

Afterwards I dragged Laenor to the practise yard to help me with my archery. Ser Langward would only find new and cruel ways to torture me if I slacked off without him around. Not that Laenor was much help, curled up in the corner and cursing the sun, wine and his headache. Joffrey and Laena arrived soon after, arms entwined and looking every inch the happy couple. I took pride in
how wide her eyes were as she watched me land arrow after arrow on the target. Still a little haphazard in their placement but at least I didn’t embarrass myself by shooting a passing servant or something as equally ridiculous.

We chatted about nonsensical things for a while, each dancing around our own little awkward topic. Joffrey and Laenor regarding their still clear love for one another, Laena and Laenor regarding the fact she’d slept with the man he loved last night, Joffrey and I due to the promise of my future knowledge and Laena and I due to the terrible gut burning guilt that welled up when I thought of how I’d forced her into a marriage she’d didn’t want for a selfish need of her dragon and how it clashed with the utter rage that she’d slept with the man that had all but maimed me.

“… and now I have the most horrid bruise in the most awkward place. I swear that man is a menace!” Laena was telling Laenor, who was listening with clear amusement and a little bit of trepidation. Their relationship was shaky, currently, and it would need time for them to return to the easy way they’d had about them before.

“Back from your thoughts?” Joffrey asked quietly.

“It is nothing, Ser Joffrey,” I said, unable to shake the feeling I’d made a terrible mistake.
Seasmoke and Meleys were restless. They were lay about the beach, basking in the mid-day sun alongside my own Syrax, but I could see signs of their displeasure. It was reassuring in a way, it meant that their riders were all equally as restless and less likely to do something foolish like side with Daemon. Since I’d made it very clear I’d take a dim view of anyone that did so. It was less reassuring that Laena’s Vhagar was no where to be seen.

I shifted with anxiety once more. Caraxes had been sighted. I should have forseen that Corlys would bring Daemon. That Daemon would impulsively gamble his head and kingdom for a better chance at Laena’s bed…

Corlys had left a large part fleet anchored at Bloodstone by all reports and had taken only his flagship, the Seasnake, and a small escort back to Driftmark. The ship was his pride and joy and I could see why. It dwarfed any other ship I’d seen, practically a floating castle of wood and steel. It boasted a reinforced frame and the ability to carry far more soldiers than any mere cog or galley. Anything it didn’t immediately smash and sink in a ramming action would soon find itself up against Corlys’ finest men, all with top notch equipment and training.

You had to hand it to him, there was a reason Viserys wasn’t quite willing to let the idea of him being Master of Ships go.

“Never one to arrive without a fanfare,” Rhaenys muttered from somewhere to my left. I couldn’t bring myself to smile, too tense. Next to me, Laenor was much the same. We had decided not to hide the new addition to the family and had simply started out by draping Joffrey in as much teal and silver as we possibly could without him looking too ridiculous. That, combined with the arm thrown around a tense Laena’s waist, would hammer home the point far better than any spoken word could.

As the ship began docking, Caraxes landed on the beach. The reaction of the other dragons was instant and noticeable. Syrax had begun outright snapping and snarling, Seasmoke had risen from his prone position, sending a spray of sand across the beach as it dug impossibly deep grooves with his legs. Only Meleys had not moved or reacted much but I could see the eyes of the scarlet dragon trained on the newcomer in warning. As if sensing the danger, Caraxes claimed a stretch of beach much further up and the dragons calmed.

I dragged my eyes away from them and refocused on the human arrivals. Corlys was easy to pick out amongst his men. He was the centre of the whirlpool of activity, passing down commands in one moment and laughing along with his men the next. I could not see Daemon though. He was the arrogant type. He wouldn’t slink off the ship to go hide. He’d flaunt breaking his banishment, he’d want a grand entrance side by side with the Seasnake in the shadow of Westeros’ greatest ship so that all would know he had returned.

So where was he?

“Where is he?” Laenor asked, unknowingly echoing my thoughts.

Then as if on cue, a tall figure bounded down the gangplank to the cheers of the men below. It was undeniably him. My body stirred with interest and I hated myself. He was beautiful. Not in the way Laenor was, his features were thicker but valyrians didn’t do ugly and Daemon was beautiful by our standards too.
“Just be ready for some kind of trick,” I replied. He nodded, pale. He wasn’t looking forward to what would come. He might have skirted disobeying his Father before but this… this was far past rebellion. I rubbed my thumb across the back of his hand and he squeezed mine in return.

Next to us Laena was tense in Joffrey’s arms, looking deeply unhappy. Joffrey had been upset, he’d wanted more time to poison Laena thoroughly against my Uncle. Without that time Laena was in danger of falling right back under his sway. Given the way she was watching the swaggering figure following the Seasnake, I suspected he had quite the challenge on his hands.

Joffrey had told us we must see her as a battleground, each fighting for influence over her. He had the fact she loved him but we had the promise of a better future for her child and the esteem of her family. He’d told me, made a point of it, that I should be extra nice. No anger. No rejection. I was to be the face of his efforts to win Laena over.

I could see the exact moment Corlys saw Joffrey and realised what they had done. He actually stopped, the polite smile fell from his face as he fought with what was clearly rage and frustration. He had moved his daughter about the board like a chess piece and he was just now realising that she had, at some point, gotten up and walked off leaving him in check. His eyes went from his daughter and new goodson to his son, where they narrowed in accusation.

Daemon came to a halt behind him, eyes narrowing as he too realised. His had fell to Dark Sister and I mentally reminded myself where I had my knives and how to retrieve them from the folds of my dress as quickly as possible.

Rheanys was the first to greet them, sweeping forth and pulling her husband into an embrace that I was almost certain included hissed instructions in his ear and the threat of broken ribs because when she pulled away he’d managed to arrange his face into something more polite if a little strained.

Something similar occurred with Daemon although with far less success given he still looked furious as they reached us, hand still tapping the hilt of the legendary blade of Queen Visenya.

“Lord Father, welcome home.” Laenor said as we stepped forward, giving his Father a polite bow which Corlys acknowledged with a stiff nod. “Prince Daemon, welcome to High Tide!”

Daemon’s lips peeled back into a snarl but he returned the greeting after Rhaenys not so subtly elbowed him in the side. Curiously, he cringed away from her.

“Laenor, it is good to be home. We have much to discuss,” When he spoke his eyes were on Laena and Joffrey again. “However, first I must bring my dear Gooddaughter dire news. Your uncle has been injured in the fighting. I have brought him back here to heal and rest. I would beg your pardon and ask for your support in asking your Lord Father to lift his banishment in this case.”

Oh you smooth bastard. There is no way in hell Viserys would let Daemon ‘heal up’ on those rocks without a skilled Maester with every chance of being killed or dying of infection and I can not object without the optics being terrible. So despite wanting to scratch his face off, I smiled sweetly at him.

“Of course you have my support in this, Lord Corlys.” Said through gritted teeth but said all the same. “I will write to my Father with this news.”

“I thank you for your mercy, niece, it is good to see you once more. You and Ser Laenor make quite the beautiful couple,” Corlys frowned at that and Daemon seemed to remember himself. I flexed my angry fingers.
“Laena… you left so quickly I feared something was wrong,” he said, catching her hand lowering his lips to it. I wanted to stab him with his own stupid sword as she blushed. “And now I find you a married woman it seems.”

“It is… yes. I am sorry you could not be there.” Laena stop flirting with him in front of everyone! Daemon turned a nasty smile to Joffrey, who merely nodded. I mentally went over the downside of stabbing him and running away to Yi-ti with Laenor. Corlys embraced his daughter stiffly, both looking as if they’d rather be hugging an old, unrefrigerated fish.

The rest of the Velaryon’s made their welcomes with bows and curtseys. Most were polite, some genuinely warm but both his brother’s children greeted him with such an icy politeness that he seemed startled by it. Vaemond and Malentine had not held back on telling their families about the bastards and whilst most in the extended family did not believe it… well, it mattered not now. Addam, Alyn and Marilda were safely on Dragonstone and far away from any reprisals.

Although I could tell Corlys wanted to head inside to find out just what his son had done, we were forced to observe the niceties. A small meal to celebrate the Seasnake’s return. That was awkward but navigated well if extremely carefully with neither side willing to address the elephant in the room. Or rather, the ex-Lonmouth in the room.

Even Daemon managed to behave himself for a few hours. His familiar suave manner well in place. Compliments and jests delivered with impeccable timing, a facial expression of outward calm that never bordered on apathy and always ready with a bawdy tale or two. In fact the only time he broke the illusion was to fire acidic and borderline insulting comments at Laenor and Joffrey.

Oh but I could see the strain. How his eyes flickered to Laena just a little too much. How his expression tightened every time she turned to address Joffrey… It would also seem he was actually injured, taking a knife during a brawl. Daemon had survived years on that island without any major injuries and yet losing Laena threw him off enough that he let some random pirate through his guard.

Huh.

I could tell Corlys was very much on edge when Laenor, Laena, Joffrey, Rhaenys and I finally made it to his Solar. He’d sent Daemon away with a whispered and, in some cases hissed, conversation. My Uncle had not taken it well but in the end he’d bowed to Corlys’ demands, clearly Driftmark is an isle of wonders if even my Uncle bows to good sense occasionally.

He seated himself behind his giant desk and watched us all before slamming a fist into it. Unfortunately for him, his family seemed completely unfazed. Rhaenys and her children looked mutinous. Joffrey had defaulted to his solemn ‘I’m talking to royalty’ demeanour in which he stared at a bit of wall three inches left of your face and I… had flinched. Gods damn it!

Laenor took my hand.

“What happened?” he asked, obviously struggling not to bellow. “I told you to remain on the Stepstones whilst I sorted things out with Daemon. Instead you hare off and marry your brother’s lover?”

At that revelation, he watched Laenor with a triumphant gleam in his eye. So Corlys had known but Rhaenys had not. He looked very disappointed when no one reacted in shock and horror and instead what he got was his wife cracking him about the face.
“You knew!!?”

“Of course I knew! I never told you to spare you the shame but I knew,” he replied after a moment of silence, rubbing his face. His eyes fell on Laenor. “I trust you told her to get her onboard with this disgusting plan to marry your sister to him?”

“Laena told her,” Laenor said with calm he clearly wasn’t feeling as his hand tightened in mine.

“You do not have the right to anger here, Lord Corlys, you threw your daughter to my uncle with the intention of this happening,” I said, coolly. I was determined I wasn’t going to be the first to explode, not when the Velaryons had more right to anger.

“She was there to tempt him! She chose to leap into bed with him!” he rose to his feet and glared at us. “Then I find out you’re pregnant, that you shamed yourself and then you shame yourself further by keeping the babe!”

“Daemon told me you would ensure we married!” Laena shot back, only her mother’s hand keeping her from marching over to her Father in rage. It seemed her anger at me and her brother might have been transferred from the way she was almost struggling against Rhaenys.

“You were supposed to be an incentive, a reminder of what he could have! He’d given up on escaping the Royce woman, I needed to secure the Stepstones for our future and instead you have married a second son from the Stormlands! I would have made you Queen had you restrained yourself for a few months!”

“A queen, Father. You married Laenor to THE Queen!” she shouted right back.

I tried not to feel guilty at her anger. I had decided for her that she wouldn’t marry Daemon even though she’d clearly wanted to. How did that make me any better than Corlys? Then my anger crept back because she did want to marry him and how dare she!? I wanted to laugh at how twisted up inside this whole business had me.

“Your mother should have been THE Queen! You should have been the Queen and your brother your King! I was trying to give you a match worthy of you,” he sat down heavily and brought his hands up to his face, fight draining from his body. “And now even if you had not married Joffrey you would have nothing. Not with that bastard growing in your belly.”

“Not true,” Laenor said as Laena recoiled from her Father. Corlys looked up at him and then looked at me when Laenor nodded in my direction.

“You would grant them lands then?” he asked me.

“I will, when I have them to grant. In the meantime I intend to name Laena as one of my ladies,” I confirmed. “Of course, this is provided you do not do anything to harm Laenor and I’s children.”

Corlys ran his hands over his face and sighed heavily. Then he laughed, an ugly sound full of despair, and leaned back in his chair to face me. In that moment, I was startled to find he truly looked his sixty plus years. He looked... defeated.

“And there is the sting in the scorpions tail. You would have Laenor give Driftmark to your bastards and hold my own daughter’s future hostage,” he bit out. Laenor snorted in frustration. “Do you accept this, my love? Our son will not bed her. As like as not she’ll take some man as her lover and pass off his son’s as legitimate.”

“Rhaenyra and Laenor have some way of ensuring trueborn children,” Rhaenys growled. “At least
my son would inherit this way. You would have my son robbed of his inheritance!"

“We found Addam and Alyn, Father.” Laenor elaborated, at his look of confusion.

“You… you have not…?” Corlys face was white with sudden fear, glancing between his wife and son. Rhaenys’ face had gone stony, eyes promising retribution for the unfaithfulness.

“I am no kinslayer. They are safe.” Corlys’ shoulders slumped at the news.

“I could not let… some faceless knight’s children have Driftmark. Not ahead of my own blood. I’d always thought I could marry Laena’s children to make sure… Addam and Alyn… they were never meant to be anything other than a last resort.” He stood up and placed his hands on his son’s shoulders. “I have only ever wanted the best for you two. Wanted to see you take your rightful places as rulers. Be it of Braavos, Westeros or the Stepstones. You should have worn crowns… I failed your mother, I did not wish to fail you too.”

See, now I just felt like a complete idiot.
For three days we remained on Driftmark with nothing giving in, no outward change. Daemon did
his best to play the suave suitor, eager to offer dragon flights and bad poetry from Lys that never
the less had her blushing. He worked to catch her alone, weaved pretty tales of the idea of destined
souls and running away together. He was very very in love with the idea that he was the only man
Laena had ever loved and would ever love.

He always had a high opinion of himself.

Everyone else worked to pry her from his influence. Every slip of anger on his part became our
ammunition and every genuine, sweet thought he had was a strike at our assertion he was a
monster. She was caught between her family and the man she loved and nobody had any idea where
she would jump. So we all settled into the playing tug-of-war with the rider of the world’s largest
dragon. I’d never wanted to scream at someone more and been completely unable too.

Still as long as I kept my cool, Joffrey assured me, we would eventually win. Daemon was not a
man given to long, thought out planning. Eventually, he’d mess up and all that was left was to
capitalise on that.

Provided we played our own parts exactly as he asked.

At least Rhaenys and I were allies once more. It almost felt like old times, racing through the air
around Driftmark and bitching about Daemon. Well this time with the added spice of bitching
about Laena too. And occasionally Laenor. She was a lot less blind when it came to her children’s
faults after being so rudely awoken to them.

It was Viserys who broke the status quo in the form of a letter informing me that he was coming to
visit, having felt guilty that he’d missed my nameday feast. It probably had more to do with my
letter and Daemon’s return but it was still the first time I’d ever been genuinely happy to see a
letter with the King’s seal on it. I’d promptly convinced Corlys it was imperative I bring Laena
with me to Dragonstone.

Although it still took her mother threatening violence to get her to go.

Thankfully, my bureaucracy worked in my favour again. They were quick to get everything in the
castle up to royal standard. Granted, that was not that hard these days since half of Blacks had
moved in. Still, it meant a feast at the very minimum and I couldn’t get away with just the normal
three course style. I relished demonstrating it to Laenor, recalling the horrific days when I’d been
forced to plan Laena’s wedding.

Viserys arrived soon after, half his court in attendance on him, with Alicent and my brothers
trailing behind. Robert’s arrival at Winterfell this was not, despite the crowds that turned out to see
their king. Although Viserys was certainly giving Robert a run for his money when it came to his
girth. It was sort of depressing really, like the trim and man from my youth had died with his
Father.

I felt Helaena’s body language change when she spotted her mother and brothers. I was amused to
see she was almost quivering with excitement. I placed a hand on her shoulder, hopefully she knew
not to dart out at them before ceremony had been observed but she was young and unused to being
away from her Mother. For all that she was mature for her age, she was still only six. We bowed
low as Viserys and Alicent approached and I was glad that my ladies had taken to tutoring her in
etiquette as her bow was much improved.

The Queen was not looking at me at all, her eyes were on her only daughter as if searching for unreported injuries or some kind of harm. Aegon and Aemond were acting like two children who’d just been on a reasonably long journey and were then having to stay still and be polite. That is to say, they weren’t behaving all that well. It was Daeron that made my eyes nearly pop out my head. He wasn’t a pink bean anymore! He was still being held by a nursemaid but he looked to be doing a good job at squirming free. Could a one year old even walk?

Oh well, maybe I could get some bonding time in with him. He might not remember later down the line but it was never to late to start trying to PR your way past the whole ‘Mother knows best’ thing Alicent had going on.

“Welcome to Dragonstone, Your Graces, the castle is yours,” I said, as we stood. Viserys studied me, face solemn in a way I couldn’t quite figure out. I borrowed Joffrey’s tactic of staring just past the royal earlobe and adopted a blank face in defence. Then a large smile broke out over his features and pulled me into a hug that drove the air from my lungs

He did the same for Laenor, leaving him staggering, and then scooped up Helaena, swinging her around as she laughed in delight. In the corner of my eye, Alicent’s face softened a little now that she could see Helaena seemed well.

“My Queen.” I bowed slightly as she approached. Fun fact: I had to bow to her if Viserys was around. Something she liked to take advantage of. That being said if dear old Dad was nowhere to be seen, she had to bow to me. Funnily enough, we didn’t speak much on days Viserys wasn’t by her side.

“Princess,” she murmured in acknowledgement as Laenor and the rest bowed in greeting. “You have my thanks for watching over my daughter so diligently.”

“Helaena is a sweet girl,” I told her, maintaining my best civil tone. “My brothers look well. Daeron has grown so much.”

Alicent turned to regard them just as Aemond thumped Aegon in the back of the head. I covered my laugh up with a cough. The two boys glanced up and caught our gaze. Aemond flushed in embarrassment but his brother paled as our eyes met.

Poor kid.

“They are well. Daeron is every inch the rambunctious child his brothers were,” Alicent told me as she turned back, favouring me with a gracious smile and putting extra stress on the word brothers. I had to hand it to her, this woman was a top notch actress. Viserys joined our little smiling competition a moment later, handing the still giggling Helaena to her Mother. Alicent held her close, which got a more genuine smile out of me.

She did love her children. That was her biggest strength and biggest weakness.

“I was hoping you could show your old man the changes you’ve made to the place!” he boomed. “Every Heir makes their own changes, I’m eager to see yours!”

“I would be glad to, Father,” I replied. There was no easy way out of playing tour guide to the King. He beamed and then gestured Aegon over. Realising his Father’s intention, Aegon’s gait was a little wobbly and he went from pale to white. I really, really want to know what Alicent told the kid. And then I really, really want to slap Alicent.
Still, my love for bureaucracy smoothed over any awkwardness I might have felt.

When I’d come to Dragonstone the castle had been neglected in the extreme. Aemon, Baelon and even Viserys had bound themselves to the capital and Dragonstone had suffered for it. There was no real, clear centralised administration. The Castellan looked after the castle proper, the Steward was in charge of finances, there was a Reeve appointed to look after the castle town and deal with the villages elsewhere on Dragonstone, a Bailiff to collect taxes and dues, a Marshal to overlook it’s defences and a Master-at-Arms who oversaw the guard and their training.

Each masters of their own spheres of overlapping influence, each fighting for power over the island, each fighting for command of lesser posts and each a seemingly endless font of frustration, idiocy and inefficiency.

Take the charcoal incident. When my experiments had first started, I’d needed charcoal. I’d had to speak to the Castellan to discover we had none and subsequently order it. Then I had to speak to the Steward to release funds. Then I had to speak with the Bailiff to find out why he hadn’t handed over that months gold. Then I’d had to organise a guard for the transport because the Bailiff and Master-of-Arms had been having a fight over patrols. Patrols the Marshal was responsible for but had bunked off to go drinking, letting petty crime and tavern brawls get out of hand. Then I’d had to hire men from the town through the Reeve because the Castellan didn’t have men to spare and in fact was unsure how many men he even employed because no one wanted to tell him the truth.

You get the idea.

So I’d been forced to switch things up, if only to make life, and my experiments, easier. The Castellan, I explained to Viserys, was now the ultimate power on Dragonstone unless I said otherwise. He oversaw the rest, who’d each had their duties significantly trimmed. The Bailiff now served under the Steward, the Master-of-Arms had been merged with the Marshal and the Reeve now served as my representative outside the castle rather than a power in his own right.

Other, lesser, roles had been assigned under the area they made most sense too. Chamberlain under Castellan, Harbourmaster under Reeve and so on.

Then as punishment for their past idiocy I introduced them to the idea of reports and paperwork. Not that I mentioned it was a punishment to Viserys. No, making them sign forms in triplicate and unleashing archiving on them was all about accountability. So I could double check they weren’t stealing from me or using their positions to abuse their power. Watching them grimace and get wrist cramps was just a bonus.

Honest. I would never be so petty.

I’d set up a pseudo-HR department for maximum nastiness and promptly discovered staffing was terrifying. Did you know that until I’d arrived the Dragonstone kitchens hired anyone who turned up with a ladle? No references, just show up early enough with the rest of a pool of transient, unskilled workers and you’re in? And this same pool of potential staff members fed every other area of menial work? Because I didn’t!

How poison hasn’t played a bigger role in Westerosi politics I will never know.

Regardless, my HR department kept track of references, training, who was in charge of who and when to cut certain grab-happy grooms loose for chasing the kitchen maids a little too intently. Everyone gets paid on time, everyone knows what they’re doing, everyone is probably not an assassin waiting to poison me and with the basic hygiene training for everyone involved in any kind of cleaning or cooking meant they probably wouldn’t accidentally poison me either.
“I’m impressed! I’d never looked into things this deeply before!” Viserys said as I finished my explanation. He had a look on his face that said someone in the capital might be learning the joys of Human Resources very soon. Aegon, clearly, had not been so thrilled by my long lecture of command structure, administration and recruitment because he looked ready to fall asleep on his feet.

Then again he was eight, so what did you expect?

“And you can just throw a feast out of nowhere instead of racing around doing it half by hand now?” he asked, stroking his stupid, stupid moustache.

Who told him that looked good? Was it Alicent? I bet it was Alicent.

“And ensure most complaints are heard without me having to hear them directly,” I replied and he brightened up considerably at that. Since it’s probably Lyonel that’s going to get this dropped on his desk, I should probably draw up a letter of apology now.

“Well isn’t that a thing! Hear that, Aegon? Your sister has the right of it! Less complaints and more feasts, I say!” Aegon jerked out of his half-doze and nodded along frantically as if a proper complaints procedure were his hearts most fervent desire. Viserys patted him on the back.

“I have half a mind to give Aegon to that husband of yours. I know he has the Rosby lad but a page won’t hurt and it gets Aegon out of the court where they’ll stop feeding him so much tripe!” Aegon froze. Any boredom he had was gone now. Slowly, he turned a trembling head towards me as if I were some kind of t-rex and any speedy movement would cause me to notice his presence and eat him. My own smile became rather strained too. Having Aegon alongside Helaena would be a coup for me, yes, but the boy really was terrified of me. It seemed cruel.

Also Alicent would probably bathe me in wildfire.

“I doubt Alicent would like that. Besides he is doing so well with Criston.” Viserys snorted in derision when I mentioned his Lord Commander.

“He could do with getting out of his Mother’s skirts,” he groused.

“Father, he is eight. Allow him as much time as possible with his Mother, one can never predict if something will happen after all.” Viserys’ face softened at that.

“Well, you may have a point there,” he admitted, likely remembering I was not much younger the Aegon when Aemma had died. Aegon was glancing between us with a small ray of hope blossoming on his face. Viserys dropped a hand to his shoulder and shoved him forward towards me.

“Well, at least take the boy until the feast tonight. You barely have time together as it is, siblings should be closer!”

And then he was off. Seriously, whatever he smoked I wanted. Maybe it was the Hippocras?
“How is the capital?” I asked, as Viserys disappeared round the corner.

“Good,” Aegon squeaked back.

“How’s Aemon and Daeron?”

“Good.”

“Otto?”

“Good.”

“Criston?”

“Good.”

“Oh for Seven’s sake!” I cried and the boy flinched. I swallowed my annoyance heavily, stamped out the frustration with him and reminded myself he was just a child.

“You know I will not eat you, Aegon. I am fond of you all, I am your big sister,” when he said nothing I sighed again. “At least believe that no man or woman is more accursed than a kinslayer. I would not harm you because the Gods themselves will not allow it.”

Shockingly, theology was not reassuring to an eight year old so I stashed him in my solar with paper and permission to draw whatever he felt like and an order to tell Viserys he’d spent a splendid afternoon with me. He’d agreed readily and left me to my reports although I wasn’t foolish enough to not keep an eye on him between the carefully doctored tales my employees like to tell me of their rivals incompetence. He seemed to be trying to draw a knight of some description… a knight fighting something?

Oh very funny you little shit.

It was a knight fighting a dragon that I was fairly certain was supposed to be me.

Actually, he wasn’t half bad at art. Even if he did gouge the veneer off of the desk that had been in this solar since before Aegon the Conqueror’s time. After I’d finished signing off on a couple of reports I praised his excellent shading, critiqued his subject matter and sent him packing with orders for him to be cleaned before the feast. I pinned the drawing to the wall. It would do wonders to remind me that for all the trouble he caused me, it was indirect and he was a child at Alicent’s mercy.

I decided to do something new for the feast tonight. Instead of my normal Vale style I went for something in a Reach cut. Bare shoulders, rich fabrics… Hopefully it wouldn’t be seen as a slight against Alicent but I had to admit the Reach style did sexy very well and I wanted to feel good tonight.

“No, Lady Laena! Lace it this way,” A tug brought me back to reality and I sighed. I’d named Laena a lady and all I could say is that I was glad Maris had not yet arrived back from the Vale yet because the Grafton would have crucified the poor girl. Not she wasn’t making it completely obvious to anyone she’d rather not be here, so maybe her and Maris could get along splendidly.
Marya was trying her hardest to make up for her but… well. Another clumsy yank illustrated my point nicely and I heard Falena sigh in something dangerously close to despair. Ahead of me the twins were already dressed for the feast, having been excused their duties tonight. Technically speaking, so had Falena but she’d dived in anyway.

Falena was not one to sit back and complain about something if she could dive and get her hands dirty. Metaphorically speaking of course, I do pride myself on cleanliness above and beyond that expected by most Westerosi, which is by itself surprisingly clean. Somehow, we were all ready in time for the feast. Even if Laena looked incredibly uncomfortable in her gown of Velaryon teal and silver.

The feast went well enough. The Greens that had managed to sneak aboard with Viserys’ party were making themselves inconspicuous and my usual assortment of nobles were to busy sucking up to the King to be bothering me.

It seemed Viserys had not forgotten about his hate boner for the Greens because there were so little present that one would assume Alicent hadn’t even tried to bring back up. Any Green who I could easily identify seemed very keen on avoiding the King’s gaze as if they were expecting him to stroke out at the mere sight of them.

Alicent herself barely made any acidic comments. She asked about Helaena’s education, she managed a few about pregnancy after asking after news of that but… that was tame. Completely and utterly tame.

Had Viserys put his foot down or something?

It was well into the dancing when the man who called himself my Father laid a hand on my shoulder and bent down to request my presence in the Solar. He was outright swaying as we made our way up. Ser Fell had to place a hand on his back several times to prevent him from toppling over.

When we finally got there, Viserys ordered yet more wine and told Ser Fell to remain outside on guard. He strode inside as if he were still Lord of Dragonstone and sat his growing bulk into the chair behind the desk. He waited until we were served and he had a full goblet in his hand to start talking.

“Well done with the Velaryon business. You saved me from an awkward position there.” Oh no, is he trying to have a friendly and fatherly conversation with me? Where has this come from?

“Well, Laena is a friend,” I said, well she probably wasn’t now but I couldn’t exactly point out it was her dragon I wanted. I downed my own wine and grabbed some more. If he was going to try and be friendly, I needed to be drunk.

“Yes. She seems a fine girl. Nearly married her,” he told me, voice slurring. Ugh, I’d forgotten about that. Various members of the court after my mother died had been agitating for Viserys to marry Laena to unite the two competing claims for the throne. Honestly, I prefer Alicent. If Viserys had named me heir with Rhaenys about, Meleys would have eaten me years ago. “You seem quite taken with Ser Laenor?”

“He is a good man. I enjoy his company.” Please let this end soon. Please let him get bored. I’d even take a screaming match over whatever this is. Did he read a parenting guide and decide to connect with the youth or something? I mean, he has never done anything like this before.
Not even when I was made his cupbearer and I spent my days trailing after him making a ‘How not to be ruler’ guide based on his actions.

“But you and he are fond of each other?” There was almost a desperate note in his voice and I forced myself to mentally check in to the conversation again to properly study him.

“Are you asking if we love one another?” I asked carefully. He poured more wine.

“Maybe not love… something more than just tolerating one another?” That… is not something a Westerosi would normally ask? Or even care about?

“We are friends. He is a good and kind man,” I reassured him and he nodded and took a few more gulps from the goblet. “Is something wrong?”

“No. No, nothing is wrong. Not with me.”

We sat in silence for a few more minutes as he finished off the pitcher. I wasn’t sure what to say. I was so sure that seeing him again after my flight from King’s Landing would fill me with rage and it did but also… a lot of confusion.

“We did not part on the best of terms.” That startled a disbelieving laugh from me before I clamped down on it. The look he gave me was tired rather than angry. “I deserve that.”

And there goes the confusion! I took a few deep breaths. Last time I’d fucked a salvageable situation by flipping out and trying to hurt him as much as he was hurting me. Joffrey had made it clear I had to stop doing that. That I had to get serious and I couldn’t indulge in childish tantrums over hurt feelings anymore.

It was still so hard.

“It was still rude of me. I apologise,” I said. He chuckled in response and then called for another pitcher of wine that was delivered so fast they might have been waiting outside with it. I’d made it clear this visit needed to be perfect and it appeared my staff had delivered.

“Your letter said Daemon was back. How badly is he injured?” His tone was odd and hard to parse. Genuine worry, frustration and something else I couldn’t place.

“He will be well enough in a few weeks. Then he can return to the Stepstones.” Viserys stared at me uncomprehendingly. I elaborated slowly, like I was talking to a child. “Because he is technically breaking his banishment. The one you gave him for breaking my fingers and drawing steel on me.”

“I remember what I banished him for. I’ll leave it up to you to decide when he’s well enough to leave. It seems appropriate,” he replied dryly. I took a sip of wine to cover up my surprise. Viserys was normally very forgiving when it came to Daemon. “Don’t give me that look. I’ve not been the best brother to Daemon but he went too far when he hurt you. I should have listened to you but I convinced myself it was just another Black and Green battleground.”

“We were both agreeing that he was out of line,” I pointed out sourly. Viserys didn’t seem to notice my tone as he nodded. More awkward silence, more Viserys drinking wine like it was going out of fashion.

“That business in the Vale. I meant what I said in my letter. It was well done. Aemma would have been proud of you.” I swallowed thickly at that. He was playing dirty by bringing her into it. “She used to dote on Jeyne, tried to have me bring the girl to King’s Landing. Her Regent refused.”
“Yorbert sounds like something of a cunt,” I muttered without meaning to. Viserys roared with sudden laughter that made me jump.

“Hah! You never met the man but you’d be right,” he chuckled, tossing back more wine. How was he not passed out right now? Surely his bulk couldn’t soak up that much.

“Do you know why I married your mother?” he asked suddenly. I shook my head, bemused by the sudden change in topic. “It was right after Uncle Aemon’s death.”

“Ah. This is about Rhaenys.” He nodded, closing his eyes.

“It killed Father to see her turn on him like that. Disappeared off to Driftmark with Jocelyn and the new babe and refused to see him.”

“From her point of view, he turned on her first,” I pointed out. I’d never actually asked Rhaenys about what had happened. It seemed too much like rubbing salt in the wounds.

“I suppose you could look at it that way. It still hurt him. He didn’t want to be heir before her. Jaehaerys made him. Said even if she weren’t a woman, a tried and tested warrior was better than a stripling youth of seventeen. You reminded me of him when Aegon was born.”

“Did I?” I asked. Viserys snorted. I had made cautious mention of maybe changing his heir, as much as it truly pained me to do so. Viserys had turned me down cold.

“I married your Mother because Father needed the support. The Stormlands were acting up. Rhaenys had Corlys, his fleet and his blood. Jaehaerys wanted to make sure my heirs would have dragon blood on both sides and a Lord Paramount to back their claims. We didn’t much like each other in the beginning.”

“She was eleven.” And that still creeps me out!

“Yes, she was. Eleven and quiet as doormouse. Did her duty though. Daemon mocked me for days.” Was that bitterness when you said Daemon’s name? I think it was! “I should have been a second son. I could have lived with being a second son. Daemon would have been a worthy first. The only reason I claimed Balerion is because he mocked my lack of dragon. As if he were the expert? He took Uncle Aemon’s Caraxes the year before you see and you know when Rhaenys took Meleys. He found it quite funny I lacked a dragon.”

That did sound like Uncle Daemon. Arrogant, cruel and convinced he was the Warrior Reborn.

“Then Aemma had Aemon and I could look my brother in the eyes and feel worthy of being born first.”

“Aemon?” Viserys blinked at me, looking decidedly more drunk now than he had a few minutes ago. I could make a guess as to his identity but…

“Your brother. Older brother. Did Aemma truly never make a mention of him?” I knew I had an older brother who’d died in the cradle but I’d never heard his name. Mentions of him caused Mother’s face to crease in pain, Prince Baelon to look sad and make a small prayer to the Seven and Viserys… well, I’d never heard him mentioned to Viserys. I’d certainly never gotten a name. “Well, we named him after Uncle Aemon. Lived for all of six moons. Balerion died soon after.”

Ouch. Losing your firstborn son and your dragon in the same time frame. Ouch. Wait, help, I’m feeling sympathy for Viserys of all people.
“Forgive me Father, I do not se-”

“Laena reminded me of her,” he said, cutting me off and meeting my eyes. “Of your mother. A small child being asked to marry a man much older than her. I remember sitting on that throne and realising I couldn’t do it. Rhaenys brought her in all dressed up and paraded her in front of everyone. She looked up at me and I.. I couldn’t.”

“I remember that.” I wasn’t lying. I do remember. It had been only a few months after Viserys had made me his cupbearer. Laena had been terrified, that much was obvious. Rhaenys had tried to pass it off as nerves. Laena had been twelve and small. Viserys had been twenty eight and already fat. I could understand her terror.

“I was King. So I married someone I loved and I sent her back to Driftmark. And like a coward I sold you to the Velaryons to do my duty!” He stood suddenly and swayed on unsteady feet. His violet eyes peered down at me and I realised he was close to crying. He drew me to my feet and pulled me into his arms before taking a great shuddering breath. I found his hug to be very… tight. My ribs protested and I struggled to stay steady as he swayed back and forth, his strength forcing me to follow him.

“I hurt you. You do not know how sorry I am. Come back to court with me. Bring Ser Laenor, hell bring your entire court but come back. I should not have sent you away. I know that now.” He let me loose from the bone-crushing pressure and clapped me on the shoulders. He was a messy crier, I noted idly, despite my surprise. His face was a blotchy red and tears had drenched his now almost invisible moustache. He moved his hands to cradle my face. “Come home. Come help me rule.”

Well, that’s one way of getting un-banished?
I felt ill after Viserys’ little pity party in my solar but I wasn’t going to turn down a chance to be free from Dragonstone so I agreed. His joy made my stomach turn and his hug nearly broke my ribs. He eventually fell asleep on the couch in the Solar which was probably for the best, the last thing I needed was for him to break his neck falling down the stairs and kick off the Dance early. I left him with Ser Fell and went to find Laenor.

Who was very much unavailable! Very, very unavailable. As was Joffrey.

At least they’d made up. Silver linings and all that.

I ordered a pitcher before taking refuge in my rooms, and following Viserys’ earlier example of solving his problems with alcohol, tried to banish the lonely ache that had sprung up in my gut at the sight of the two men. I’d polished off half of it before Laena arrived. Not for the first time I was forced to wonder if one of the two had somehow borrowed Tyrion’s time travelling powers and they’d started off as twins. Either that or Rhaenys had figured out how to clone people.

“You left the feast,” she pointed out as she sat down and stole my goblet, finishing it herself. “And you left me alone with the twins,”

“The King demanded my attention,” I told her. She refilled the goblet and snorted before taking a long drink.

“Yes, and the twins wanted mine. They poured honey in my wine because I was being to ‘sour’. What did Viserys want anyway?” she asked with the same kind of derision I reserved for mentions of the man who’d sired me.

“We spoke about you.” That got her to put the goblet down. I stole it back as she raised an eyebrow.

“Me?” A hand fell to her stomach and I shook my head. “You did not-”

“About how you nearly became his wife,” I told her. She gave me a horrified, incredulous look and then shuddered dramatically. I couldn’t help it, I laughed. We may disagree on my Uncle but at least we agreed on the matter of Viserys. “I was thinking how it was a good thing you didn’t marry him,”

“Really? I’d hardly make as much trouble as Alicent. We would have been close,” she said, almost wistfully. My smile flickered at the reminder of the friendship that’d been destroyed by Daemon, did she miss it too? Okay, play it cool, we’re seducing her from Daemon. A moment of genuine bonding is definitely a good thing.

“I was more thinking that if he’d made me heir over your children Rhaenys would have fed me to Meleys.” That startled a laugh out of her and she took the cup back as I finished it. We traded stories back and forth for a while, her of her travels and mine of old court scandals. Laena was easy to talk to when she wasn’t being a brat and I was forced to admit I missed this closeness between us. I was half way through telling a particularly amusing story regarding Laenor during our bedding ceremony when she interrupted me, cheeks flushed red with wine.

“I… Rhaenyra…” I peered at her through the alcohol induced haze. She seemed to be very much struggling with her next sentence. “I do not like men much. I was happy when your Father refused the marriage. Daemon is the first man I’ve ever… What I’m trying to say is… When we first…”
Oh gods, please don’t give me an in-depth history on yourself and Daemon. I was way too drunk for this. I moved to the window and stuck my head out into the breeze for a while, letting the sea air cool my wine heated cheeks. Her hand touched my back a moment later.

“Sorry. I know it pains you to speak of him. Come, enjoy some more wine with me.” So I did.

I awoke still in my dress with Laena playing the big spoon, her arm flung over my stomach and her gentle snores the only noise in my chambers. It… did not say good things about my psyche that I laid there for a long time just enjoying the feel of someone else pressed close to me. Even when Laenor slept in my rooms he was stingy with physical affection. When the temptation to curl closer to her got too much I carefully extracted myself from the bed and snuck out, leaving her to rest. She looked like she needed it.

After the usual trials and tribulations of waking up with a hangover were done with and I had bathed and double checked all of my ladies were safe and not in the stables lost to drunken stupors -Thank you for that awkward morning, Alys-, I took up refuge in my offices to lay in to yet more of my back log and catch up with my daily correspondence. Normally at this time I’d be out on the range with Helaena, or more accurately, wrangling Helaena into her lessons with Gerardys instead of spending all day with her bow. Since Alicent was here, she could deal with the constant danger of getting shot by a stubborn six-year old.

Speaking of which, I would probably have to check what Viserys intended for Helaena when we returned to King’s Landing. Alicent would probably want to retake custody of her daughter after close to six months of having her away. I wrote up a reminder to ask him before we set off.

A letter from Jeyne, advising that the Falcons were recruiting at a much greater rate than Lord Denys had anticipated, was a nice start to my day. We were still far off any kind of solid solution to the hill clans but every bit of land we retook was a bit of land Jeyne could use to strengthen the Vale and soon, when they could reliably defend a wider area, we could begin getting a return on those Velaryon investments. I always felt a little guilty using Laenor’s gold to bankroll my projects but… well, Dragonstone may make more these days but it didn’t make nearly enough.

Still the good news in the Vale meant it was time to broach an awkward topic with my beloved cousin.

It was with some trepidation that I put the quill to paper. I’d been putting off the discussion but I could no longer, especially not now I could move about Westeros freely once more. I was going to have to try and get her to marry and produce at least one child. The succession of the Vale had been a shit show in the canon time line and I did not want to take the risk of it exploding in my face at an annoying and inconvenient time. Plus, and I was happy I still felt guilty at this, the marriage of the Lady of the Vale would potentially secure another ally to my side.

She was my blood, after all.

An invitation to attend the wedding of Forrest Frey and Sabitha Vypren. Interesting but not feasible. Forrest wasn’t a bad sort for all that he was insanely optimistic and for some reason the name Sabitha Vypren was tickling at me, familiar. I sent word to prepare an acceptable gift and to send my apologies and congratulations.

The most interesting letter proved to be from Wisdom Jerrett who was very excited about something they’d managed to discover from ongoing research efforts that, in his own words, ‘was completely unmentioned by the Book’. I admit that somewhat baffled me and I had suppress the urge to bolt over and demand what it was.
Instead I calmly penned a response that I would be arriving for a visit to the campus tomorrow to investigate this new discovery and to hear an update on their research. Then because I had not forgotten, I penned a reminder to Joffrey to set up a meeting so I could brief him on my knowledge of the canon Dance of Dragons and to inform him my unofficial banishment was at an end.

Late morning gave way to early afternoon and I received a short reply from Joffrey told me he was very eager to learn the truth because he’d suggested we meet as soon as possible as King’s Landing could be dangerous to explore this information in and a confirmation that Wisdom Jerrett would be happy to give us a tour.

As it was, Viserys only planned to stay for a few more days. A fact he announced half way through dinner that day alongside his invitation for me to rejoin him at court ‘where I belonged’.

That got some mixed reactions to say the least. Alicent managed to keep an extremely strained smile in place by, what I suspect, was sheer ingrained court habit. Aegon looked the weirdest cross between physically ill and cautiously excited, Helaena looked absolutely thrilled and Aemond was glaring at his plate and then his Father in rapid succession. The few Greens were doing their best to seem happy that the King was inviting his beloved daughter back to the capital whilst my court and Black lords actually let out a few cheers.

The next fright I had was Laenor bursting into my rooms at first light the next day and all but bouncing on my bed like a child on Christmas morning before bothering me about the tour we were going on. I was not a morning person. I may have said something quite rude in response. He dragged me out anyway and forced a cup of juice into my hand.

“Do you think you might know what it is?” he asked before taking a sip from his own cup. The maids he’d brought with him laid out some fruit for us before bowing and leaving us alone.

“I have no clue. I don’t even know who is supposed to have discovered this brand new thing,” I replied and stole his slices of pear in recompense for the early morning wake up call. He pouted before giving me a sly smirk.

“I heard my sister spent the night in your rooms.” I’m pretty sure that pear is in my lung now. He was almost cackling when I finally managed to recover from my coughing and spluttering.

“Please tell me that isn’t a new rumour!” I begged before gulping some juice down. He began laughing even harder but shook his head through his mirth. The last thing I needed was accusations of infidelity with both Joffrey AND his wife. That’d be just Alicent’s style, paint me as someone so depraved I couldn’t even stick to one gender of lovers... and the fact she would be on the right path is galling as well. A pit of nerves opened up in my stomach as his laughter died into chuckles.

“Well I wouldn’t have to monopolise your sister if someone weren’t completely allergic to physical intimacy.” I bit out and then realised what I said as his eyes went wide. “Wait! No! I meant cuddling! Not the other thing!”

“Well… you never said? Did you want me too?” he asked. Dear Seven, kill me now. I think my face had gone neon by the time he leant forward and patted me reassuringly on the hand.

“Don’t worry. Laena only told Joffrey because she woke up with one of your bracelets pressed into her side and ended up with a wicked looking bruise.” Oh. I see. I wondered where that went.

“Please don’t tell me Joff-” I started but Laenor’s giggling interrupted me again.
“I hate you sometimes,” I mumbled which sent Laenor off laughing again.

“But he did say good work! Laena is very much close to seeing sense,” he told me in a low tone. I blinked in surprise at that. I hadn’t thought it had been all that helpful but if Joffrey said otherwise…

The twins arrived sometime later to help me dress and I dispatched Laenor and his exhausting enthusiasm to get Joffrey and Laena. The former because I was going to tell him the future on the way back and the latter because I wanted to try and impress her with ‘The Book’.

We took the horses there. Laenor kept up an endless chatter the entire way, waxing lyrical about all the different ways ‘The Book’ would help Westeros advance and how they would help secure our houses for generations. Joffrey was politely interested. He already knew, of course, and had likely already put much more thought into what the technology I had revealed could do for our cause. Still, I didn’t miss the soft smile on his face as he watched Laenor come alive in a way only High Tide or Spicetown could get him.

Laena was much less respectful of ‘The Book’.

“I don’t see why we need this to secure our future. We have dragons!” she exclaimed as we rode through the front gates to the set of converted warehouses that now formed High Wisdom Jerrett’s domain.

“Jaehaerys understood we need more than that. We conquered the Andals, no offence Joffrey, and that the only reason we’ve lasted so long is the dragons. We need other avenues of loyalty beyond ‘obey me or be eaten’ as Maegor found out.”

She still looked troubled as Jerrett presented himself to us with a respectful bow, eyes bright with excitement. I introduced Joffrey and Laena to him and he managed to contain himself to make a good introduction, even though I’d bet the treasury of Dragonstone Joffrey already knew who he was on sight.

Eventually we were shown into a room with a wooden bowl containing purple crystals. A very nervous looking apprentice Harald stood by, eyes flicking between the bowl and us. I examined it, something niggling at the back of my mind.

“Harald here was assigned to the experimental seaweed extraction process and fouled the damn thing up!” Suddenly, the reason Harald looked so nervous was apparent. “But then we noticed this! Interesting, yes? We were hoping to obtain some more funding to study it.”

Oh bloody hell. Seaweed. Kelp.

I was an idiot.

Young Harald had just discovered Iodine.
At the look on my face as I gazed at the crystals, Laenor readily agreed to fund the investigation into its properties. I congratulated Harald on his potentially amazing discovery and tried my best to ignore the confused look on Laena’s face and Joffrey’s open curiosity. Then we proceeded to Jerrett’s new office, considerably more cramped than the old one, and were seated. He bustled off to arrange refreshments, leaving us alone.

“Well?” asked Laenor, eyes bright in excitement. I briefly had the urge to slap him.

“Iodine. Antisceptic and a supplement,” I replied. Laena stared between the three of us like I’d grown a second head spontaneously and no one else seemed to have noticed.

“Wait?… You wrote th-”

“Shhhhh.” Joffrey’s hand came to rest over her mouth. “Not when Jerrett is around.”

Her eyes went wide as she stared at me before nodding seriously. I tried not to let the annoyance show on my face that she knew but it was inevitable I suppose. I would have to trust Joffrey that she would not immediately run off and inform Daemon even if it made my teeth itch. Joffrey removed his hand and moment later Jerrett returned with two apprentices and drinks for us all.

“Sorry for the delay! We do not quite have the service our cousin’s in King’s Landing have yet!”

Oh no, he absolutely going to cause trouble with the ‘cousins’ in King’s Landing. I shot a quick glance at Joffrey who caught my gaze and nodded, barely a twitch of his head, to let me know he understood my worries completely. Laenor on the other hand had placed his chin on his folded hands and nodded eagerly, waiting for Jerrett to begin.

“I will start off with the good news, shall I?” When no one spoke their objections, he continued. “Firstly the agricultural work we have undertaken. Although we are not ready for harvest our farms are looking extremely promising. We are predicting much above the initial estimate of an increase in yield of nine times,”

He paused for effect. Laenor looked like someone had just told him he’d won an all expenses paid trip to Yi-ti, Joffrey was leaning forward with an intense expression on his face and even Laena was looking interested now. As for myself, I could barely keep the smile off of my face. More crops, better ways of harvesting them and more food in total would see my reign a golden age of Westeros.

“Of course, we shouldn’t get to excited until we’ve successfully reproduced this feat a few times. The farmers of Westeros will not be convinced by one harvest, we must prove it is not a stroke of luck or some sort of trick!”

“Have you any luck in cross-breeding plants and animals?” I asked.

“We’ve set up some testing but I fear that it will be even longer before we see results from such things,” he replied. I nodded. Even intense selective breeding would take generations of control to show results. Still, as long as it was in the works I might see some results within my time. “Moving on to the press. We have decided on the most effective prototype using a screw press as the base. Wisdom Gawen reports that early results are promising but he still wishes to obtain a better metal for the type.”

“We will need to acquire literature we want to print in order to prove the usefulness of the press,”
Joffrey said, folding his hands beneath his chin. Laena’s eyes lit up at the thought.

“Oh! We could produce some of the dragon manuals in Dragonstone. Mother often complained that she was never allowed to take them out of the castle.” Whilst that was a good thought, I’d known what the first thing we needed to print was since I’d placed the details of the press to paper. Although, I really really should print the dragon stuff as soon as possible. Those ancient and crumbling books were likely victims of Baelor in the original time line and were worth more than their weight in gold when it came to actually having a dragon.

They covered topics from physiology, training, diet, riding techniques… Literally priceless but, alas, not great candidates for uniting Westeros behind my press and against the Maesters who would surely object to it.

“The Seven-pointed Star,” I told them firmly. My show of piety would mean the Faith would have to approve, after all, who dislikes the idea of their holy book being disseminated on a scale unseen by even the Andal invasion? It may surprise you to know I was actually quite fond of the Seven-pointed Star. It wasn’t bad as holy books go. Comprised of seven books, go figure, each named for the aspects of the Seven-who-are-one.

Mother, Maiden, Crone, Smith, Father, Warrior and Stranger. Each book dealing with the kind of major life events the average smallfolk and the high and mighty noble could find common ground on. Birth, coming of age, becoming older, creation myths which weirdly fell under the Smith, law, war and death. Honestly, if I wanted proof that the worship of the Seven was complete bullcrap, all I needed to do was point at the Seven-pointed Star.

Because that book was created to be reassuring, non-offensive and as relatable as possible to anyone, be they King or farmhand.

“An excellent suggestion, Your Grace. I will inform Gawen of your decision,” Jerrett said proudly. Joffrey was nodding along proudly but Laenor and Laena just looked baffled at the decision. “On to less pleasing news?”

I nodded and grit my teeth.

“We have identified the type of seaweed used to create clear glass but it’s quite clear that we do not have nearly enough. Wisdom Beron has been instructed to create a way to farm it reliably but in the meantime our experiments within the Glassworks are much reduced.”

“Forward the types of seaweed you require to the Maester at Driftmark, I will instruct him to arrange for the collection of as much as possible in the waters surrounding the island,” Laenor ordered. I tried not to smile. Laenor wanted the Glassworks for Driftmark when it was perfected. If I could secure the seaweed farms for Dragonstone then it would ensure at least some income and another tie between the islands.

If I were being honest, I could understand why the Glassworks should be at Driftmark beyond Laenor’s desire to buoy his house once more. Dragonstone may have docks but it had no where near the infrastructure to deal with the demand for glass that Westeros would inevitably need. Spicetown was an ever expanding port town and could easily meet the needs of industry on a grand scale. Hell, even Hull could at a pinch but that was much closer to a shipwright’s abode these days. Ship creation and repair, less trading.

“As for the medicinal areas of study, Maester Gerardys would be the best to receive an update from.” The disapproval in his voice was evident. The Maester of Dragonstone did not get along with the new Wisdosms and Jerrett had made it clear that the feeling was very much mutual.
We did not tarry long after. Instead we rode to a cove not far from the town and settled down to watch the waves. Laena was sent away with a request to let those at Dragonstone know I was delayed. Joffrey and Laenor cuddled as I marshalled the courage it would take to tell Joffrey about everything. I nearly leapt out of my skin when Laenor placed his hand on mine and gave me a small smile.

“You need not do this alone.” I was strangely touched by that. Less touched when he promptly scooted back into Joffrey’s arms but the thought was there.

I finally managed to start, stammering the first part of my explanation regarding how I’d come to know these things, but I managed. Again I spoke of the Dance and it’s aftermath, how each King afterwards had eroded Targaryen power and finally our families fall from power at the hands of half of Westeros united against them. Afterwards Joffrey was silent, much in the same manner Laenor had been.

“Hmmmm,” he finally said after several agonising minutes. “So, it is confirmed Alicent will act and will do so with violence,”

“The War of Quills only occurred because neither side had overwhelming odds. If it looks like we’ll win a Great Council outright she’ll skip words and go for swords.” I told him.

“Alicent puts too much stock in her Reachman,” snorted Joffrey with all the arrogance of a Stormlander. “Still, it makes her courting of Lord Paramounts all the more worrying. Lords will vote freely in Council’s because it is anonymous, not following their lieges in battle and war is another thing entirely.”

We waited again as he tilted his head back and forth, occasionally squinting as something occurred to him.

“So I was truly destined to die at Criston Cole’s hands?” I nodded and he ran an agitated hand through his short hair. Laenor reached forward and took his hand. “Laena will not survive a second birth and Laenor must always have a guard we trust, Lady Rhaenys must not try and fight two opponents at once, although the Seven knows how we would stop her, and we must up the security at the dragon pit…”

He paused and then looked frustrated.

“And I can write none of this down! How do you cope?” he asked. I shrugged. In truth, I often forgot little details here and there only to remember them years later for basically no reason and promptly feel like an idiot for ever forgetting them in the first place.

“I think what we should take from this, more immediately, is that Daemon is a threat. He has no compunctions killing off those with rival claims be they adult or child. Blood and Cheese should demonstrate that!” I said, gesturing wildly. I knew Joffrey was fighting his part in the war for Laena but this would hopefully inspire him further.

“Now I must ask a difficult question. You said that this was a history book of sorts? How sensationalised is the tale?” I very much doubted it differed too greatly from what had happened as that would defeat the point of the book, something which I allowed them both to read on my face. Joffrey merely shrugged “But we can not be sure it was Daemon who hired Qarl Correy. It could have been any with a vested interest in forcing Rhaenyra to remarry. The Strongs, Alicent…”

“I was murdered months after Laena’s death and he was in Rhaenyra’s bed before the mourning period was even over!” cried Laenor.
“Alicent?” I found myself saying at the same time. Why would Alicent kill Laenor?

“But we must remember this tale was told after the fact from many different sources,” Joffrey replied, stubbornly, ignoring us both. “Including your Father’s fool, Mushroom.”

“He’s not a complete idiot. He just added certain explicit details to everything. Everything.” I told them with a dramatic shudder. “I dread to think what he’ll say about us.”

“Oh you will assuredly be playing the voyeur in his mind once more.” I went red, much to Laenor’s glee.

“Perhaps I should turn some spies on him if he intends to speak such calumnies,” mused Joffrey, rubbing his chin thoughtfully and ignoring my immense discomfort. “I may discover how Alicent so easily spreads her lies to the court. He would be the perfect vec-”

Laenor flicked sand at him and he recoiled, blinking in confusion at the suddenly impish grin on his lover’s face.

“Must you make everything about politics?” he asked. “Rhaenyra knows the worst that can happen so we can make it better! She knows these magical things that will change everything! And you want to talk poli-”

A handful of sand hit him directly in the face mid-word, thrown by a suddenly intense Joffrey. I scrambled out the way as Laenor responded in kind. Their sand fight lasted for an impressive amount of time given that sand is terribly unpleasant to have in any orifice on your body and I was sure they’d eaten and snorted enough to make a decorative glass vase from.

Dragonstone was alive with activity as ever, more so with the King’s visit, when we returned. Which made Alton Rosby’s nervous demeanour stand out considerably when I finally dragged my two sand covered idiots through the gates.

“Your Grace, Ser Laenor, Ser Joffrey?” he said, voice as nervous as his body language. “A message from Driftmark. There has been an… incident?”
It seemed Daemon had gotten very drunk, stood up in the centre of Corlys’ feast in his honour and declared Laena’s unannounced babe to be his own. Apparently, Corlys had only narrowly averted disaster by having Rhaenys confined to her rooms. A feat, he added in his letter, that had taken four men and she’d still broken Malentine’s leg in the process.

Great.

I begged my leave from Viserys and promised him I would return to court once I’d dealt with Daemon. He was leery of letting me go but he understood that Rhaenys and Daemon left alone with such an insult being levied would end in tears sooner rather than later. Whilst the others bathed I arranged for my ladies and retinue follow Viserys to King’s Landing.

Then they met me with damp hair and fresh clothes. My heart dropped as I noted that ‘they’ included Laena. When she saw my look she folded her arms and frowned, mouth set in determination.

“I’m going with you,” she said before I could open my mouth. I wanted to slap her. Did she not see the damage Daemon was doing to her reputation as well as Joffrey’s!?

“No.” I could not trust her to back Joffrey up. If she confirmed Daemon’s lies… Damn it, Joffrey didn’t deserve this.

“How are you going to stop me?” she asked, cocky grin on her face and tone mocking. It took Laenor catching me about the shoulders to prevent the incoming slap she richly deserved. Syrax snapped and snarled in Vhagar’s direction and Laena took a step back, grin falling from her face.

“Rhaenyra is worried you will side with Daemon. The harm to both our reputations would be incalculable.” As usual, Joffrey was playing mediator. Laena frowned, as if that hadn’t occurred to her. Wait, if she did confirm it we can legally hit her with a stick of wood! Confirm it!

“I… I did not think of that,” she admitted, voice small.

“I believe you should come. See if you can not convince Daemon to be reasonable,” Joffrey said, meeting my eyes in a silent glare. Surely she wasn’t that close to seeing reason? I gave my assent and hoped he knew what he was doing. Laena shot me a small smile and mounted Vhagar, swiftly urging her into the air. I scrambled to follow on Syrax. Seasmoke launched himself into the air behind us carrying Joffrey and Laenor.

“You know, the Valryians used to practice formation flying! They used to put on aerial displays!” bellowed Laenor, barely audible over the wind and clearly trying to lighten the atmosphere. I had actually known that. Rhaenyrs had told me when I was first starting to ride Syrax and the young dragon demonstrated an ability at aerial acrobatics. A sudden need to get Laena back took over me so I urged Syrax onward, overtaking the siblings.

I hadn’t practised a lot of manoeuvres with her but who could ever resist saying they’d done a barrel roll on a Dragon?

I circled round so that I was facing Vhagar and Seasmoke and urged Syrax to pick up some speed. Underneath me I could feel her go taut with excitement and anticipation. That the only thing that really roused my lazy dragon from her naps was the idea of aerial acrobatics it was amusing to note. We rushed towards them and I just caught sight of Laena frantically trying to pull Vhagar out
of my path before Syrax darted up. She snapped her wings inward and we rolled, the moment of vertigo as I looked up and saw the sea was brief as we ended the roll behind the two Velaryon dragons.

Syrax let out a bellow of approval as we went into a wide turn and began catching up again. I fell back in beside Vhagar and ignored the rude gesture Laena shot my way. From the way Laenor was sitting in his saddle and the way Joffrey was clutching at him, I would say that Laenor found the stunt hilarious.

Serves her right anyway. She could do with a bit of worry in that empty head of hers.

My trick was the only bit of levity we got before we arrived at Driftmark, all becoming more and more tense as the dragons touched down and we dismounted. I worried at my lip as we made our way into High Tide proper. I was sure it was a mistake to bring Laena but she would not be deterred and she did have the biggest dragon. Seasmoke and Syrax against Vhagar would be a no contest kind of fight if we weren’t aiming to kill.

Daemon was in the feasting hall. Drunk, I noted with a flicker of fear and shame. Around him he’d gathered a multitude of young squires and very minor Velaryons. Judging from the laughter, we’d caught him gathering his reinforcements. Laena almost tripped over her own feet when she saw him and Joffrey leant over and whispered something in her ear. She turned a wide eyed gaze on him and then smiled a small and fragile smile.

Unfortunately, that was the moment Daemon and his cronies spotted us.

“Ah! So you’ve returned to answer for trying to steal my child! My wife!” he bellowed. The hall was set murmuring and I felt the need summon Syrax and wipe his smug smile from his face. I could guess at his game. He wanted, no he needed, Joffrey to challenge him to duel. A duel Joffrey could not win. A duel Joffrey would instigate because Joffrey was still the Knight of Kisses for all I liked to think of him as the calm and controlled spymaster he’d forged himself into.

“Why Prince Daemon, I had no clue Joffrey had lain with Rhea Royce as well!” Laenor’s weak jape got a few of the crowd chuckling and I didn’t bother to hide my smile. Daemon’s crowd wasn’t as in his sway as he thought. Let’s see how you do now, Uncle, when all is not in your favour.

Laena stepped forward and peered at him. I wanted to curse at the look on her face, she was all but confirming the babes paternity to every idiot here! Daemon seemed to realise his slip up though and he swept through the crowd and halted before her, smiling gently.

“Fear not, dear heart, I will have you from this marriage soon enough. Then we shall petition Viserys together,” his smile was actually tender. I hated him, in that moment. Pure crystallised hate. Laena pulled her eyes away from Daemon and examined us, turning pale when she saw the look on my face.

“Daemon, stop this. We can be together just… Joffrey is a good man. He just wants to help,” she whispered in a low voice. Daemon’s jaw clenched as he glared up at the man in question. Laena took a step back and looped her arm through Joffrey’s and shot me a pleading look. I forced myself to breath. It was the best I could ask for. An almost rejection of his overtures and stepping back into Joffrey’s arms, the optics were not great for Daemon.

A fact he’d realised as his face screwed up in confusion. He followed Laena’s look and our eyes met. I swallowed the sudden nerves and focused on trying to massage the pain from my fingers.
“You are a hateful creature,” he finally spat, face screwed up in a riot of emotions I could not parse. I saw Laena flinch in Joffrey’s arms and swallowed back my angry retort. War of Influence, Vhagar, Joffrey, Laena… don’t screw this up!

“Good afternoon to you too, Uncle,” I said with a calm I was most certainly not feeling.

“Good? You took her from me out of spite! Or is it jealousy?”

“Fraternal duty,” said Laenor, meeting the Prince’s angry eyes with his own cool gaze. “I would be a poor brother if I sold her to the man who would draw steel on his own niece. A man who would claim her babe as his own to hurt her,”

“I love her. She was to be mine!” he shouted back. I flinched closer to Laenor and cursed myself for it.

“She is nobodies but her own,” said Joffrey, drawing Daemon’s ire back to himself. My Uncle sneered in hatred before extending his arm to Laena who was watching him with wide eyes and clutching Joffrey’s arm with surprising strength. When she shook her head at the unspoken invitation he went red with rage.

“She bares my babe! Are you such a cockless wonder that you’d claim another man’s child for your own?” he asked. Joffrey’s hands played at where he would have worn a sword and then clenched. “Tell me, did Criston Cole take your manhood as well as your leg? Or do you still have that to drive in-”

“Enough!” bellowed Laenor, frightening us all. “You stand in my Father’s halls, Daemon! A guest! You will not insult my goodbrother so.”

He gave Laena one last desperate look and then rounded on me again.

“Tell me, niece, do these boy lovers please you so? Do they perform for you? Did you seek to marry my Laena to the cripple so you could secure him the teal and silver your husband desires? At least I can be sure it’s not because you want to bed her yourself, I have seen your lustful eyes on me, niece!”

“Stop it! Stop it! Why are you being so cruel?” sobbed Laena, sagging onto Joffrey and causing him to stumble slightly.

Blazing hot anger coursed through my veins and if it hadn’t been for Laenor’s hold around on me I would have surged forward and given my all for scratching his face off. As it was I managed one step before Laenor drew me back, arm coming round to pin my free hand to my side. Probably to prevent me launching a dagger at him, I realised through the fog of hate.

“Daemon, enough!” came Corlys’ bark and I realised he’d joined us, two guardsmen at his back and several more sending the crowd from the room. “This is unbecoming of one of your station!”

Daemon all but snarled at the man.

“Unbecoming? I am a King! My brother is your liege!” He turned to look at us all before his sneer fell back into place. “I have tarried here too long. I will petition Viserys directly!”

“He will not see you. He has given me control over your banishment,” I told him, proud of my steady voice, as he stalked away. He froze at the threshold of the hall and spun around, face a mask of disbelief.
“No, no, he will see me! You are lying!”

“She is not, old friend. King Viserys sent the command on a raven today. I had hoped to speak to Rhaenyra in private before she made her decision.” Corlys’ voice was gentle as Daemon sank back against the great oak doors, face as pale as snow.

“You promised me her hand. She loves me, Corlys, and I love her. You promised me!” The desperation in his pleas saw my urge to vomit returning. Beside me Laenor was stiff, hands almost painfully tight around my arm. Corlys stepped forward and joined him by the door.

“I promised you support to petition the King. I promised you that if you obtained the annulment, you would have her hand.” His gentle tone became much harder. “You forced the issue by bedding her, getting her with child. You drove her away when you started with your threats and bravado. Can anyone blame her for her fear? When she runs from a man that threatened to kill everyone between himself and the throne if that is what it took to marry her.”

Laenor’s hands tightened again at that and I hissed, partly due to the pain but also due to the fact that this was the first I had heard of the threat. From the look on Laenor’s face, the threat was not new to him though. I risked a glance at Laena and noted it was me she was watching, not Daemon, her eyes round with fear.

Was she afraid of me or him?

Why would she be afraid of me?

Daemon slumped even further, face focused on the ground between his shoes. He drew in a shuddering breath after a while and tilted his face up to face the man he’d conquered a Kingdom with.

“I would make a better goodson than… him. Help me,” he pleaded.

“You have not shown yourself to be an exceptional husband so far. Lady Rhea could attest to that,” I observed. Corlys shot me an annoyed look as Daemon surged to his feet again, anger returning but not to the degree it had before.

“You will leave that Bronze Bitch out of it! She is just as hateful as you!” he hissed and I wanted to slap him again for the nickname he’d given her. She did not deserve Daemon. She was prickly, proud and blunt but she was also kind and caring. I knew, although I would never say so aloud, that she had wished for a babe for the longest time. She made do with each child her sisters and their families bought into the world but I know she wanted one of her own.

This fuck had denied her that.

“Why would I leave her out of it? You claim to be a better husband than Joffrey but at least he’s bedded his wife,” I replied with some heat, totally aware that I was being something of a hypocrite there. Joffrey’s eyebrows shooting up told me I wasn’t the only one aware.

“I can give her something no man ever could!?” he snarled.

“The life of an exile? Or is it the shame of a bastard? The constant danger of a warzone to raise a babe in?” asked Joffrey. Laena was clutching at him, white as sheet. I’d never seen her so terrified. “I know what you think you can offer her Daemon. It doesn’t make you special. You aren’t destined lovers because she wants you.”

Corlys, Laenor and two guards were forced to physically restrain Daemon as he threw himself
forward, looking very much like he’d just gone mad and decided ending Joffrey’s life was an excellent trade for his own.

“Enough Daemon, calm down now! Violence is not the answer!” Evidently Daemon did not agree because a few moments later his fist collided with Laenor’s face.
It took four guards to haul him off in chains, presumably to a cell. Corlys was furious beyond words but that was nothing compared to Rhaenys. If Corlys ever got into her bed again he’d be the smoothest motherfucker to ever exist. Joffrey, Laena and I sat outside his solar listening as the Queen Who Never Was picked apart his entire life, throwing insults that had us all blushing and Laena eyeing a nearby window.

Ouch, Rhaenys did not hold back.

Laenor had trooped back from the Maester’s tower to inform us that his nose was broken but that it should heal fairly well. Joffrey mothered him excessively and I learnt that the Knight of Kisses had apparently spent a fair bit of his youth getting into bar fights if the advice he gave Laenor for dodging punches was any indication. Finally, Rhaenys ended her tirade, sounding hoarse and furious still.

And then Corlys called Joffrey and I in.

“Well, your plan has ended in a fine mess,” I told him, not bothering to sit down. Corlys clenched his jaw.

“You do not need to inform me of such. How is Laenor?” he asked.

“Broken nose. He’ll be fine,” replied Joffrey, taking a seat opposite Corlys. “But that’s not want you want to talk about is it? You want a way out.”

Corlys said nothing but I could tell he was angry. And humiliated. This was Tywin Lannister-lite who’d just had his entire plan blow in his face. He’d lost the esteem of his wife, son and daughter. He was in danger of losing every shred of political power he held.

If I poked his pride now, I’d drive him away forever. If I showed pity, he would resent me. If I ignored him outright, he’d screw me over at the worst time possible out of spite.

Curse these Westerosi Lords and their prickly prides.

“I have something of an idea, if Your Grace and My Lord will humour me?” The best thing I’ve ever done is hire Joffery was all I could think as he outlined his plan.

My Uncle looked very much the worse for wear. Some of those guards had clearly not held back, and laying hands on the Lord’s son wasn’t a good recipe for a peaceful imprisonment normally. His white doublet was stained with blood from a clearly broken nose, his wrists were raw from the shackles he wore and his eye was already beginning to swell shut. Rhaenys sat by him, fingers drumming on her thighs and just daring him to start something with her angry glare.

Daemon, for his part, ignored us all, arranging himself into the closest thing to a lounge he could manage.

I wanted to see him suffer.

“This has gone along far enough,” Corlys said, after we were all seated. I swallowed down my annoyance that he would take that stance when he had started it. This was Joffrey’s plan now and he needed Daemon to see Colys as an ally still. Daemon was definitely arrogant enough to assume breaking Laenor’s nose would not have affected his relationship with the man.
“I must apologise.” Daemon’s voice smoothly interjected. “I was drunk and acted in a manner far below my station.”

We all tensed as he rose from his chair and dropped onto one knee before Laena, even if he was hardly going to be seducing her half-beaten and bound.

“Forgive me, dear heart, I love you so much it is all-consuming. I will regret scaring you like that, losing my temper like, that until my dying day. You are the light of my life, command me and I am yours,” he murmured.

He closed his fingers around hers with an impossible gentleness and it was real, actual love I saw on his face. Laenor’s hand found mine as I swallowed around the sudden urge to scream. At least Laena seemed as discomforted by it as everyone else in the room, giving at least a token attempt to pull her hands back. He’d scared her, I realised. Suddenly all those warning do not seem so far fetched, do they, Laena?

“Daemon. That was cruel. You were cruel.” She seemed to struggle with words for a moment. “You hurt Laenor. And you… You swore you’d never-”

She cut herself off as she seemed to realise the rest of us were still present.

“Forgive me, forgive me, I should not have taunted you so. I should not have struck your brother so.” Wait, what? Taunted? I’m missing something here. I’m sure of it. My eyes flickered to Joffrey who was as stoic as ever. He had to know what they were speaking about. I had to trust he knew what he was doing. Daemon dropped small kisses across her hands as she stopped trying to free herself and simply let her fingers go limp in his grasp. His kisses became desperate and I burned in anger.

“Daemon,” said Rhaenys, warning in her voice. “Have some tact. She is a married woman.”

He stood and turned to Rhaenys, who rose to face him in turn. Corlys cleared his throat as if it were no great problem but I could see he was tense. Daemon was shackled and already injured but Rhaenys’ power was Meleys not hand to hand combat.

“I will not abandon my love,” Daemon said, backing off from his enraged cousin and turning his eyes on Corlys. “I am the only man for her. Not this excuse…”

A warning glance from Corlys cut him off.

“Why can we not all ally and petition Viserys?” asked Daemon, mouth set into an unhappy curl and a whine in his tone. “She loves me. Only me.”

“Because it is no longer the matter of my daughter marrying, it’s become part of wider political tensions,” Corlys said, repeating Joffrey’s earlier explanation. “To say Alicent dislikes you is like saying water is wet. Her lords still infest the court, for all that they have fallen out of favour, and their only true opposition are Jeyne Arryn’s Vale Lords. So, Viserys can not grant the annulment and offend both of those parties.”

“My Brother loves me. He will do so if it means my happiness,” Daemon said stubbornly. I remembered the bitterness that Viserys had let slip during our drunken heart to heart and wasn’t so sure. You mocked him for his entire childhood but are perfectly willing to use him when it suits you.

Well, Uncle, he has washed his hands of you. If it weren’t for the fact that forcing you out now risks a tantrum you’d already be gone.
“That he loves you is not in doubt but he is king.” King was said with some disgust there, Rhaenys. “He can not afford to offend the various factions.”

“Neither can we. I will be clear with you Daemon, for the sake of my grandchildren, I am united behind Rhaenyra’s Blacks. That may not please you but I will no longer go against her,” he looked towards me and nodded curtly. “We have been at odds for too long, Gooddaughter, if I want my son’s sons in their rightful places I realise I must put side my own pride.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. This was my price. My price for letting him back to the table. No more scheming, no more struggling for power, no more interfering. He is mine. Anything he does is for me and Laenor and in time, his grandsons and his blood sit the Iron Throne. But first Daemon had to be dealt with. Joffrey had already set those wheels in motion, apparently. Give him the perfect solution to his problem in a way that ensures his pride will not allow him to accept it.

“Of course. When the time comes, my beloved niece will have my full support,” he lied. Laena was nodding along with him, eyes bright. Rhaenys just sighed, dangerously close to despair or violence.

“Daemon,” Corlys warned again and the man dropped the pretence and glared at me.

“I will make sure she gets everything she deserves,” he said and I did not like the tone or the wording one bit. My hand gave a warning ache and I rubbed at it.

“Daemon?” Laena wasn’t completely stupid or blind, she’d seen the malice in the threat. He turned to her again and I could tell he wanted to rant and rage about how unfair he found everything. “We would be loyal? To my family? To Rhaenyra?”

“When they have only given disloyalty in turn? They would chain you here when you are a creature born to be free! I know your secrets, your follies! They would keep you from me and abandon you to your fears!” She flinched at that but he didn’t seem to notice. “I would have given my everything to Rhaenyra and she rewarded me with hate in turn! I delivered your father a kingdom and he failed to deliver me a daughter!”

Her mouth moved silently, repeating his words over and over as if he’d spoke them in a foreign language.

“I don’t understand. You said we would help Rhaenyra and my brother?” My urge to scream returned but a look from Joffrey silenced me. I clenched my jaw as my Uncle moved from his chair again and took her hands, dropping those small kisses over her fingers once more. She shuddered and I hoped it was in disgust.

“I love you. You are the only one I have ever loved. I am the only man you have ever loved. Our hearts are destined for each other. I would abandon the Stepstones for you, I would fight the world for you, I would die for you and live for you but do not ask me to fight for that hateful creature!” his tone was low and urgent. I wanted to punch him, feed him to Syrax - anything! Anything other than sit here and watch him play the lovestruck fool over Laena.

“Why do you hate her so much?” she asked, eyes wide. That derailed my little revenge fantasy I had going quite thoroughly.

“She tempted me, dear heart, she made it clear she wanted me. Then she refused me, I promised her everything, to rule by her side, and she rejected me. She poisoned Viserys against me, had me-”

“You are fucking delusional,” I growled. Laena’s wide eyes had turned to me, studying me with an intensity I wasn’t sure I liked. Memories of that night intruded once more making breath harder to
draw and my hand feel as if someone had set it aflame.

“Daemon, I was there for most of your return to King’s Landing! Do not think you can lie your way out of this,” Rhaenys said, coming to my defence before addressing Laena. “Sweet girl, she came to Driftmark fleeing him. Do not tell me you do not remember?”

“You.. You just said there had been trouble at court and that I was to welcome her,” said Laena, faintly. Then she seemed to realise he was still clutching her hands and she pulled them away. He pulled away in turn, looking like someone had just shot him in the heart. “I thought you meant Alicent.”

“Laena, he was the trouble. He pursued her. He drew Dark Sister on her. Hell, he practically maimed her!” Laenor told her, tapping my damaged hand.

“She mocked me, my love, mocked my loss and mocked my marriage. I lost my tem-”

“Lost your temper and shattered her hand. The girl still struggles to use it,” Rhaenys stated plainly. Laena bought her her hands up to her face in shock, paler than I’d ever seen her. “You’ve been all but spitting in her face everytime you’ve insisted Daemon is the dashing romantic prince of your dreams. No doubt she thinks your bastard is a testment to how little you care!”

“I thought it an argument about being heir… I thought I could fix it,” she mumbled. “I thought…”

“I did not realise the break was so bad,” said Daemon, through gritted teeth. The sickening sounds my hand had made as he’d brought his boot down and twisted caused bile to surge into my throat. “I truly apologise if pains you still.”

“Not good enough,” I said, struggling to control my breathing and fighting the lightheaded feeling the threatened to send the room spinning. Rage helped. How dare he not know!? How dare he not know how much he had scared me? How much he had hurt Rhea? How much trouble he’d caused!?

“You had the Grand Maester to attend to you. My broken arm was tended to by a bone setter on Bloodstone a full week after Criston Cole snapped it.” He raised his arm and flexed it, showing off the raw skin beneath the shackle. “My arm has not pained me since.”

That sounded like an accusation. I stood, causing both Laenor and Joffrey to tense and struggled with my glove. Using my shaking off hand, the anger I was feeling and the fact that tears were blurring my vision made me clumsy. I flinched when Laenor stood next to me and took my hand, pulling the glove away as gently as he could.

He knew. He was with me. He had my back. Breathing became a little easier.

He brushed a thumb across the burning flesh and his mouth set into an unhappy grimace before he motioned Laena over. She came as if she were in a dream, a dream that just got worse and worse as it went on. Her touch was gentle and cool and I flinched at the oddness of it. She probed my fingers as Laenor pointed out where you could feel the bone was misshapen underneath the skin.

I kept my eyes on Daemon. I wanted him to know how much I hated him.

“I did not know,” she murmured, so soft I would not have caught it had the room not been tense and silent. “It feels as if it’s burning.”

“It is,” I managed through gritted teeth and she let her hand fall and then dropped back into her chair, eyes staring into the distance. I retook my own seat.
“Laena, it was an accident. I would not maim my own niece on purpose,” Daemon said with urgency in his voice. “Please do not believe that I could, I could not bear it.”

“What else am I to believe?” Her head came up and she stared at her currently very uncomfortable family. “The Seven must curse me. I am cursed.”

“Sweet girl, he is a sweet and seductive man. He took you in—”

“The Seven curse me because even when I see him for what he is, I still can not help but love him. I thought him my salvation, now I realise it is punishment.” Her voice was bitter and self-deprecating. I actually growled in frustration, that she should still…

“I will change! I will be worthy of your love, my dear heart.” He was a man begging on his knees. “I have been a terrible man in the past. I admit to it freely. You make me a better man. Do not leave me now.” He was crying. It was real and genuine. Just what we needed. It would be scary to me that Joffrey could set people up to this degree if it weren’t for the fact he’d rather cut off his left leg than betray Laenor.

Daemon was a pathetic sight now. Tears of grief through swollen eyes and a broken nose, on his knees before a woman, his wrists bound in shackles and wearing bloody clothes.

I wonder if Joffrey has any bards in his employ, the Beggar Prince sounds so much more appropriate than the Rogue Prince.

“Then you must prove it, Daemon,” Corlys said, making us all jump. It was hard to keep the triumphant smile of my face as Corlys played his part perfectly and the jaws of the trap closed. “Go to the Stepstones, secure it for the glory of your niece. Prove yourself a changed man and perhaps when Rhaenyra is Queen… well, the High Septon would answer to her.”

I grit my teeth and fought the urge to rub it into his face that he would never, ever have Laena. It would not help, for all that it would make me feel better. Corlys had played his part well enough, now it was time for mine.

“That is true. If Laena wishes it, I will argue that Laenor’s approval of the marriage was not legal in the eyes of Westerosi law,” It was a very, very weak excuse and anyone with half a brain would know it. It didn’t matter though. It would never happen.

“If my niece would swear an oath to do such a thing, then I will… do as you have asked,” Oh, you lying liar.

“I swear it, Uncle.” I replied, heart beating loud in my chest. “Secure the Stepstones for me, help me take my rightful throne, and I will make sure you stand at the altar with Laena one day.”

He turned back to Laena, who still looked as if she was three seconds away from leaping out the window. Why did she think she deserved punishment?

“I will do anything to be with you,” he said and kissed her hand one last time. I don’t believe that for a second. So now we just need to wait for the other shoe to drop.
Afterwards, Laena left for an earf- sorry, walk along the beach with Rhaenys, Daemon was placed under guard to prepare for his departure at first light, Corlys stayed in his solar to punish his liver and Joffrey, Laenor and I went to Laenor’s rooms. After Joffrey had declared Laenor to be ‘overstating how bad his nose pained him’ and Laenor had done pouting, we turned our attention to heavier matters.

“Do not worry. He can not accept sharing her. He can not accept putting himself under Rhaenyra’s power. Give him a few hours to work himself into a rage and do something stupid,” Joffrey told me and then poured himself a cup of wine. “Then Corlys will ship him off with no blame attached to us and he’ll look like an unhinged lunatic. We will secure Vhagar and Laena’s allegiance with little work on our part.”

“I dislike referring to my sister in such mercenary terms,” grouched Laenor.

“I apologise. If I’m being truthful, we were merely unlucky. Had Daemon remained on the Stepstones we would have had time to further bring Laena to our side. I had an angle of sorts. Him being present makes it far less effective,” Joffrey surmised as he took his wine and collapsed onto the low couch. Laenor dropped down next to him and drew him close.

“I am sorry Joff, I did not realise I was putting you in harm’s way.”

“And who else could you have married her too?” asked Joffrey, tangling their hands together. I suddenly felt like an intruder. “You married her to me because you wanted me close but if we speak truly I can think of no other who is loyal to Rhaenyra who would not only overlook the loss of her maidenhead but also the bastard.”

“We could have let her go back to, Daemon,” I said, voice bitter. “Let her learn just what her fairy tale life would have been.”

“Rhaenyra you can’t mean that!” Laenor cried. Joffrey just sighed.

“She’s angry Laena threw everything back in her face. Our Princess does not accept rejection lightly.” I frowned at that before turning round and walking to the window. He was right, damn him. Aegon, Laena… no, I’ve never taken rejection well. He could at least make me sound less like Daemon though.

“Rhaenyra?”

“Hmmm?”

“I am sorry about my sister.”

“What’s done is done. We need to think about the future now. What will we tell Viserys when we get to King’s Landing?” I asked, trying to cast her from my mind and not quite succeeding.

“We tell him Daemon believed Laena his by right and reacted badly to rejection. Corlys will have to silence the men who saw today but most will bow to him. Alicent will suspect but she’ll be even less willing to potentially push Laena into Daemon’s arms.” Joffrey told us. “We’ll be dancing the line of acc-”

“Must we speak about politics again? It’s all I ever get to speak about these days. I want one night
where I don’t have to think about bloody Daemon and who my sister is bedding,” Laenor sighed, frustration evident in his voice. I turned from the window and seated myself on the couch next to them and pushed a lock of silver hair from his face, enjoying the bewildered look I got in return.

“If we don’t play politics, we’ll all die in dragon flame,” I told him before tapping him gently on the nose. Joffrey chuckled as he wrinkled it in response.

“I shall throw myself into Seasmoke’s maw if I must play the perfect Prince even in private!” he cried, finger jamming into a chuckling Joffrey’s side. Joffrey jerked away and looked as if he very much wanted to respond in kind.

“You’re being dramatic, Laenor. You like playing politics more than you admit,” Joffrey said before running a finger over his neck, causing Laenor’s eyes to flutter closed and him to lean in to his lover’s chest. The tension seemed to drain from his body as Joffrey brought his arms around him with a chuckle. I had no business being here.

“I am going to ride Syrax! Have a nice afternoon.”

Ride her I did. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d simply clambered aboard Syrax and rode her without any real ulterior motive other than to just ride. Although my lazy dragon might grumble, I could tell she enjoyed it too. I urged her on through the winds, coaxing out the acrobatics Rhaenys had so praised her for. She especially loved dropping down low to send the sea spraying upwards with her claws. It was a meditation of sorts, taking all my anger, fear and jumbled emotions and letting Syrax burn them all up. A way to let my mind wander and just feel Syrax beneath me, let her take me where she wanted. I barely even had to use my whip, she seemed to respond to the lightest touch on the reins or twist of my body.

I was half-drowned and emotionally numb when I finally took her in for a landing and clambered off. One of the braver Velaryon men volunteered to strip her of her saddle and I was dreaming of a warm bath and dry clothes to replace my sodden riding gear when an out of breath Laena jogged into view. I managed to stifle the groan as my warm bath seemed further and further away. Instead, I marshalled what little energy I had left and grit my teeth.

She still loved him. She knew everything and she still loved him.

Something must have shown on my face because she approached cautiously, as one might approach a wild animal you were unsure of the temperament of. Okay, I will admit that sometimes that approach was warranted. She was still breathing hard when she reached me but she looked a little more reassured I wasn’t about to strike her with something when I didn’t fly into a rage. A bold move to keep approaching given I still had my riding whip.

I’d put up with so much, I was so close, I wasn’t going to piss it all away now because I was angry with her.

She could suffer after Daemon was safely away.

“I saw you riding Syrax. Mother says you’ve gotten even better,” she began, directing a small hesitant smile at me. Not in the mood for small talk, I raised an eyebrow. I’m sure I looked very impressive to her, being five foot two and vaguely resembling a drowned cat. And possessing the temper of one, I reminded myself. “Okay, she said you handle her better than a drunken ostler.”

I couldn’t help it, I snorted in amusement and some of the tension drained out of her shoulders. I didn’t take it personally, she’d once referred to Laena as an adequate rider. Adequate. The girl was the best rider of our generation. Adequate my arse, she could go toe to toe with Rhaenys on a good
day.

“She told me I had to come and speak to you,” Laena told me. “To beg your pardon and to ask for my position back amongst your ladies.”

Oh son of a-

I’d forgotten about that. Fuck me, I’d been stupid enough to forget. Laena was one of my ladies. Rhaenys may have assumed I’d striped her of her position but it hadn’t even occurred to me to do so. My ladies that accompanied me everywhere. Like to King’s Landing.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I opened my mouth to tell her that she wasn’t stepping foot in the capital in my employ but she cut in.

“Please. I made a mistake. I did, I know that, but I was never disloyal. I never betrayed you. I never betrayed Laenor.” When I had nothing to say to that she frowned. “You will have my nieces and nephews. You’ll put them on the throne. Please believe I would never endanger that.”

“You already have,” I stated sourly.

“Not on purpose! I thought I could bring him to you.” I did believe that. She loved her family too much to turn against them as Daemon would have required. She would love any offspring of her brothers too much to take a throne for her own from them.

She was a naive child with a temper. I’d known this. I’d always known this. Joffrey had known this. Laenor had known this. Hell, even Rhaenys had known that her complete lack of knowledge as to how the world actually worked would see her in trouble one day. None of us had done anything, even I had merely found it a charming quirk.

I worked my jaw, annoyed at being put on the spot.

I needed something to bind her to me more solidly before I could begin to trust her once more. How I hated that. That I needed blackmail material, that I needed to be the one in control, before I trusted her. Even if I could trust her she’d be a complete liability. I would be forever wondering about where she was and what she was being tricked into.

Damn it. Damn her. Damn Rhaenys.

“Do you not wish to have the babe on Driftmark?” I asked, changing tact. She blinked in surprise and laid a hand against her stomach. She would be showing soon. Hell, I was surprised she wasn’t already but new mothers were often slow to show.

“You do not wish me with you in the capital?” she asked, pale and upset. I mentally winced before sighing.

“Laena-”

“What do you want from me? I will do it. I want to be of use to you and the Blacks since I have damaged your cause.” Those were her Mother’s words. I studied her in the half light of the evening and grimaced.

“I can’t trust you,” I admitted and she recoiled from me as if I had physically struck her.

“But you would go through all of this for my dragon? Why? Why if you can’t trust her rider!? Why not just write me off as a lost cause?” Her sobbed question held a hint of anger and struck me
dumb for a moment.

I had put up with Daemon’s antics for her dragon. Put up with Laena’s antics for her dragon. I was going to put up with Daemon’s child close to me for years, potentially, for her sodding dragon but that dragon followed her rider. What good was the dragon if I couldn’t trust the rider?

“Fine but if you ever pull anything like this ever again, there will be no third chance,” I got out between gritted teeth. She nodded so hard that I feared her head may fly clean off. I’d have to get Joffrey to watch her to make sure she was never alone with Alicent’s lackeys.

I led her back to Laenor’s rooms and finally got my bath before changing into something dry then we took our meal in Laenor’s room as a storm began to roll in, thunder crashing in the distance and the wind beginning to pick up. A note arrived from Lady Rhaenys half way through dessert telling that Laena would be expected to announce her pregnancy to her family in the morn. The damage control had evidently started then.

I did not envy Corlys in managing this shit show.

The note set the cat amongst the pigeons and so as a distraction we broke out the playing cards and a pitcher of wine. We probably should have remained sober but my body was eighteen with all the joys that brought and I was stressed out of my mind. So sue me. The four of us were more than a little tipsy when Laenor gave up being the butt monkey and dragged Joffrey over to one of the bookshelves, reading risque poetry from Lys to his blushing lover.

I found myself growing melancholy after a while. The two seemed genuinely happy. I wanted that, I realised. I wanted to be happy with someone. Woman or man, I wasn’t sure it mattered to me anymore but I wanted it.

“I am sorry,” Laena said in a low voice startling me from my revelation. She’d remained at the table with me, sipping wine. “I did not know. About your hand. I asked Mother. She told me everything. That he pursued you beyond all the boundaries of acceptability. That she tried to protect you. That Viserys… your Father did not listen—”

I cut her off as I held up my fingers and marvelled at how alcohol numbed the pain that was normally present when I moved them too much, was stressed or when Daemon came up in conversation. Laena’s hands gently caught them and she probed the break again, pushing and rubbing at it in the way I frequently did when it pained me.

“I thought it was a tell for when you were nervous or lying,” she whispered and I could just pick up the bitterness in her tone again. “I thought you lied a lot.”

“I do it when it pains me. It pains me a lot,” I replied, wondering why we were whispering. We stayed in silence for quite a while, listening to Laenor’s terrible poetry recital and Joffrey’s occasional guffaws and gasps of scandalised shock.

“Could Maester Gerardys fix it?” she asked as I basked in the cool touch. I was well aware that I should not be letting her do this, that I should be pulling away, but that lonely ache inside of me would not let me. Instead, I let myself relax a little and allowed only a slight feeling of guilt at enjoying it. Laena had been the first, and to date only, woman I’d ever wanted in this body. I’d fled to Driftmark horrified at my attraction to Daemon and found her. My one lifeline to what my mind insisted was normal. I could look at other women all I liked and feel nothing.

“No. He would need to re-break them in the exact way they were broken beforehand. No healer could be that precise. It seems I am stuck with them,” I answered, shaking myself from melancholy
thoughts. Her lips pressed together at that and she carried on, as if the news they could not be fixed was a challenge.

“Perhaps we should go to my rooms?” suggested Laena, startling me out of half-doze about ten minutes later. I followed her gaze and drew in a sharp breath.

Yes, let’s definitely leave Joffrey and Laenor to it.
I followed her through the halls of High Tide, unsteady on my feet. I would have to watch that. Viserys was too keen to drink to forget his problems and I had no desire to end up being a second Viserys. Or a first King Robert. Then again, Laena was as unsteady as I was and apparently, quite the merry drunk.

“Did you see the look on Laenor’s face?” she murmured in a low voice before dissolving into giggles once more. In fairness, the fact that Laenor had forgotten our existence only to remember it as we left the room was hilarious so I giggled along with her.

Besides Joffrey’s plan was still echoing in my brain. She needed to be invested enough in me and my cause that Daemon was slowly pushed out.

Her rooms weren’t locked but it still took a while for us to fumble around with the heavy latch and get the doors open. Then we poured ourselves inside, still giggling. I wasn’t sure what I expected from them to be honest. They seemed cozy. A writing desk covered in books that I would hazard a guess included information about dragons or geography, several beautiful maps decorated the walls covering Westeros and Western Essos, a table and chairs surrounding a low-burning fire bathed the whole ensemble in a low and warm light.

In truth it was not to dissimilar to Laenor’s rooms. He just had a whole lot more books. The door swung shut and I turned to compliment her on the decor and realised she was frozen, staring in horror at something behind her. I followed her gaze and my blood turned to ice.

“Good evening, niece, I did not expect to see you here so late.” His smile was cruel as his eyes moved from me to Laena where it softened. Why was he here? He was supposed to be under guard!

“Daemon, why… you did not say you were coming.” Her eyes flickered to me and she bit her lip, looking worried. “You should not be here.”

I got the message. She hadn’t invited him. He wasn’t here because she wanted him here.

“Where are your guards, Uncle?” I asked, proud my voice did not waver. The smile he gave me told me everything I needed to know about their fates.

“They’ve retired for the night,” he said, completely unconvincingly. “I needed to speak with you, dear heart.”

“If you’ve killed my Father’s guards you’ll have less than nothing from me,” she said, voice cold. I forced air into my lungs. Fear was doing an admirable job of clearing my head of the fog of wine. Pain lanced through my fingers and I had to force a whimper to die in my throat.

There was no Criston Cole to save me now. I only had a six dinky knives and Laena.

“Laena, come now,” he said in a tone that had anyone used on me would have earned a slap at the minimum. It was patronising, as if she were a sulking child as opposed to the woman he professed to love. “We have had this conversation before. You swore you would not deny me anything.”

He stepped forward and I stepped back. Laena remained still, eyes blazing defiance.

“I thought you a better man back then. A man who would not maim his niece or betray his oaths.”
Oh Laena…

Daemon just chuckled in response to that and paced forward, slowly, as if he were some great cat stalking it’s prey. Then his eyes flickered to me and my heart seemed to leap into my throat.

“It is good that you have come, niece. This seems to be a day of truth, it is only fair you receive your share.” I forced myself to meet his eyes, to not show that I was internally screaming in horror. Laena’s sharply drawn breath drew my eye to her.

“Why am I not surprised?” she said, voice bitter and angry.

“I betray my oaths or did you forget that?”

Alright, I clearly only have half of this conversation. I watched as Daemon met Laena’s eyes. There was some sort of power play here. He knew something she didn’t want me to know and they were playing chicken as to whether she would give in before he told me.

I had to play this carefully.

“Come with me. Leave behind this uncertainty. I’ll even secure the Stepstones for her. I’ll put her on that damn Throne if I have to do so alone against all the world but come with me. Stay by my side.” A cold feeling of horror spread from my gut. So this was his plan. We’d thought he’d do something rash in his anger… this spoke of planning.

That was the problem with Daemon. He was impulsive, hedonistic and proud. He hated being told no or being disobeyed in any way. He hated coming in second to anyone and was good enough that it rarely happened. He was charismatic, cunning, intelligent and good enough with blade and lance to dance through life without really trying.

We had assumed he’d see the trap and opt to flip the table rather than lose the game but… but mayhaps he’d thought he’d found a strategy that would let him win.

“Daemon, no. We all agree-” He cut he off with a laugh, strolling past us both and dropping into one of her chairs, falling into his habitual lounge. Laena’s mouth pressed into near invisibility in displeasure.

“You all agreed. I did not. Do you not see what they have done?” he asked. Laena did not answer and he snorted. “She wants your dragon. Not you.”

“I know that!” Laena was flushed red with rage and he smirked again. I could run for the door. I could probably get it open before he caught me. I could scream for the guard then, bring every man in the castle running.

“Laena, she is not your friend. She sees you as a stepping stone on her path to the throne. If she truly cared about you she would have worked with you so that we could obtain the annulment. She would have sent you to me with her blessing.” Oh shit. Oh shit, he is good. “Instead she married you to a man who will never love you. Never please you. She dragged you down to her level so you could share her misery.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t know what was worse; that this had a good chance of working or that he was right. I had to do something. I’d be a bigger fool to let him control this whole conversation.

“That’s not true,” I was proud my voice did not shake, at least. Laena’s head whirled round as if she’d forgotten I was there. “Laena, you know that’s not true. I care for you. He is not a nice man, he would have hurt you in the end.”
“I’m a woman grown, Rhaenyra. You are the younger,” she said, looking miserable.

She does not know he would kill her. She does not know how low he would fall. Would she still make the choice to be with him if she knew? I swallowed back the old and familiar rage but some of it must have shown because she met my gaze with a defiant stare. Daemon laughed once more.

“Look at her. So full of hate and anger. What do you honestly think will happen when I’m gone? That you’ll be friends once more, that you’ll tell each other your… deepest, darkest secrets and all will be well?” My heart raced as she stared at her feet. “No. She’ll make you suffer for insulting her so. For bringing me back into her life. She’ll make your life miserable. She’ll make our child’s life miserable.”

I wanted to protest that it wasn’t true but the words stuck in my throat when Laena raised her gaze to me and I realised she’d already known.

“You’re petty, vain, angry, overly proud and arrogant in the extreme,” she told me, looking distinctly unimpressed. My heart dropped. Why was it always so easy to forget she was observant? “But I’ve always known that, Rheanyra.”

Guilt and shame hit me like a sledgehammer and I dropped my gaze to the floor. I’d married her to a man who’d never love her because it was convenient for me, I’d treated her like a pawn in a chess game and I’d blamed her for it all.

“How sweet,” came Daemon’s mocking tone.


“You will finally see sense then? Abandon this woman who is not worthy of you?”

“And you are?” she asked incredulously. My head shot up so fast I thought I might give myself whiplash. “You keep threatening me! You broke my brother’s nose!”

She examined us both, eyes critical, before she carried on.

“You both treat me as if I am some kind of prize possession. Something to be awarded to whoever can win this war of yours! You’d pull me apart and leave me broken before you let the other have me, do not pretend you would not!” She took a deep and shuddering breath. “I am not some plaything, not some tool to be argued over.”

Hadin’t I learned that lesson with Laenor? I’d been so happy to manipulate and lie… and then I’d done the exact same thing again on a woman arguably more observant. I am an idiot. A complete idiot that does not deserve that dragon.

I was supposed to be better than this. Better than Westeros.

Daemon’s catlike smile became a sneer and he rose to his feet. I wanted to step back again but I was rooted to the spot by a storm of emotions.

“I am not a patient man. You have one more chance.”

“Or what? You’ll tell her? Tell anyone who will listen?” He paused, tilting his head as if her defiance was completely unexpected before frowning in anger.

“What do you suppose she’ll do when she knows?” he asked, eyes glittering dangerously in the low light. Laena just laughed bitterly in response.
“You’re just proving my point!” When Daemon stared at her though, eyebrow raised in question she turned her head and looked at me. “She’ll be disgusted. She’ll pretend she isn’t because she’ll want my allegiance but…”

“I’m missing something,” I said before my brain caught up. Daemon chuckled and I was really starting to hate that stupid, stupid sound. I tried to keep my breathing level and not quail under his gaze.

“Indeed you are, niece. Perhaps we should mark this day with a festival? The day you admit you do not know everything,” he snarled, features coloured with anger. Then he turned back to Laena, who just looked… I couldn’t place that look actually.


“I’ve made my choice, Daemon. I choose my family.” His hand shot out and gripped her arm with so much force that I forgot my fear and staggered forwards. I watched helplessly as Laena’s hands curled into fists and her face twisted in anger right back at him.

“I love you. I love you so much I fear it my burn me up from the inside. You took my dull, unexciting life and brought colour to it. You made me want to live for someone else. You bear my child. I am yours and you are mine.” I wanted to retch. “Do not do this, Laena, I will not warn you again.”

“I am doing this. I am. This is my choice. I do love you. I know I should not but I do. But I can not have the both of you. I realise that now. Joffrey wanted to have me believe I could but he’s wrong. You proved that so I must choose. I’ve chosen family and home and my future Queen.”

Hah. I should be reveling in that. Crowing to my Uncle that I had won. Instead, I am ashamed. She thinks me some petty tyrant she will submit to and I’m not entirely sure how wrong she is.

“Do not do this to me,” his tone was quiet and carried the promise of violence. I tensed up, hand finding a knife amongst the folds of my dress. I had one throw, maybe two, before he absolutely demolished me. When Laena merely raised her head in defiance once more he snarled and spoke again.

“You will never have her. Never. She’ll make your life a living Hell. You’ll be stuck here, miserable, constantly yearning for what you can’t have.” Then he paused and sneered once more. “Or who knows, perhaps my whore of niece will earn her dragon on her back?”

Understanding hit me like a tonne of bricks.
“Oh,” I breathed out. They both turned to look at me. Daemon’s face was triumphant. This was his trump card. His play to push me into screaming denial, the one thing he believed I could never tolerate.

Understanding beat me about the head.

He thought I put up Laenor because I had no choice, because to expose him would be political suicide. It made his skin crawl so why should it not mine? And if I felt that way about Laenor, in his mind, what would I do if Laena directed those feelings at me? After all, I had rejected him, come to hate him, after his desire was unwelcome…

Laena was pale. It honestly looked as if she was three seconds away from throwing up. As the silence stretched on she closed her eyes and seemed to brace herself, as if she expected my rage to get physical and she wasn’t sure how hard I could hit.

I forced myself to focus. I was an idiot. An absolute idiot. She’d all but tried to tell me at the feast! How long had she been sitting on that? I could have set her mind at rest and maybe headed off so much of this bullshit. Nerves set my stomach rolling and I wet my lips.

I could have had her. I could have had her in my bed and Daemon would never have gotten his foot in the door. My body was waking up now, informing me of how much that thought pleased it.

“‘I see,’ Laena’s eyes opened once more and Daemon’s triumphant smile flickered and faded slightly. ‘I am not disgusted. That does not disgust me.’

They both stared at me as if I’d grown a second head. Then Laena laughed. Well, it was more a hysterical giggle. Then she turned those violet eyes to a startled Daemon and they narrowed.

“You see!” That smile was very alarming. “She does not care! Of course she does not!”

I saw it in his face then. He knew he’d lost. He knew that there was no way Laena would be leaving with him. That he’d shot his bolt and missed. He was angry. Very, very angry. Panic surged through me as he took a few steps closer to her, hand falling to where he normally wore his blade.

“This isn’t over, Laena. I do not lose. When you realise my dear niece is lying through her teeth I will be waiting for you. For my child.” Then he bought and hand up to her cheek. Laena didn’t move, still as a statue. “And if you make me come to you, you will not enjoy what happens next.”

“Enough!” My voice came to me, finally, as I managed to master my fear and panic. Wrestling my breath under control. “Uncle, enough. You’ve gone too far!”

“Dear Rhaenyra, you never fail to surprise me with how low you are willing to sink to claim that Throne. You ally with Alicent against your own blood, feign tolerance for that boy-lover, let him put his colours on his lover with your blessing… now you’re willing to whore yourself out for a Conquerer’s dragon. Of course, you must defend your children’s rights. Corlys wants a grandchild on the throne and the Seven know you can not provide that! So you must send me away, render my child’s claim null with your little marriage scheme and secure his Mother’s… good will.” The way he said good will made me want to burn my clothes and then boil my skin off for good measure.

But not even the rage and fear I was feeling could distract me from Laena’s careful movements.
Slowly backing up as if in fear… towards the door.

Okay, good thinking.

He sneered at my silence, taking my realisation of Laena’s plan as having nothing to say in my defence. I saw him lean back, getting ready to turn, to point out how terrible I was to someone who wasn’t standing by his side anymore.

Shit!

“Daemon Targaryen!” His attention whipped back towards me. All right, time to do this. Time to do this right. My voice trembled when I spoke again and I cursed it.

“In the name of Viserys, first of his name, King of the Andals, the First men and the Rhoynar, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm I, Rhaenya Targaryen, Heir to the Iron Throne, do hereby reinstate your sentence of banishment to be effective immediately, punishable by death should it be broken!”

He stayed still for a few moments and the tilted his head back and laughed, shoulders shaking and eyes running with mirth. I grit my teeth as Laena reached to door, eyes on me and worried.

“Oh Rhaenya that ship sailed a long time ago. You think I care about banishment now?” he laughed again and then turned to Laena, realising to late she wasn’t where she was supposed to be. He blinked when he saw her by the door.

Finally, his face morphed into one of fury. My fingers burned in response. He might have done something very stupid then, might have struck me or pulled a dagger or another unforgivable crime but Laena put a stop to all of that when she pulled the door open and and screamed for the guard.

He cursed and fully turned away from me to the door. Not the door, I realised as he started moving. Laena. He’s heading for Laena. He’ll do something terrible because she rejected him. He’ll do something terrible because he’s angry.

I let loose one of my daggers, mind blank with panic. With no time to aim, it was an appalling throw. I was tired, still tipsy and far from composed. It didn’t even hit him. In fact I was probably lucky I didn’t hit Laena. Instead it flew past Daemon’s chest and bounced of the the wall, leaving an ugly chunk missing from the dark wood veneer. Daemon crashed to a halt in surprise.

Taking advantage of the momentary pause, Laena scrambled backwards out of my sight and down the hallway. I could hear the guards now, shouting out in alarm and bringing more with them as they moved towards us. You had to hand it to them, when the Lord’s daughter screamed for help they arrived with a fire beneath their arses.

I was treated to one last look of utter hatred before he ran in the opposite direction.

Moments later men in Velaryon livery crashed after him, fully armed and ready for a fight. I let out a breath I hadn’t even known I was holding and sat down on the floor before my legs gave out. My heart thundered in my chest and I felt dizzy and sick. Spots danced in front of my vision and I realised when I raised my hands to rub at my eyes that I was shaking.

I don’t know how long I stayed there. Laena joined me at some point, dropping a heavy teal cloak around my shoulders and sitting next to me. I risked a glance at her but she was lost in her own breakdown.

She’d really loved him. Actually, genuinely loved him. In return he’d… done whatever this was.
Damaged her family, hurt her brother, spilled her secrets. I put a cautious arm around her shoulders and she flinched.

“Laena! Rhaenyra!” Our separate, private brooding was interrupted by Laenor and Joffrey’s arrival. My husband flung himself forward, scooping up his sister into a powerful hug before moving on to me. “The guards… they said Daemon had attacked you. I feared the worst!”

From behind him Joffrey’s brown eyes studied us intently, as if seeking out any injuries that we were hiding from him. He was clutching his stick tightly, fingers white. Had his leg not been broken by Criston Cole, Joffrey would have gone after Daemon. His temper could match any dragon rider’s when roused.

“No, no, we are unharmed,” Laena told him in a shaky voice. “He… he wanted me to go with him. I do not think he expected Rhaenyra to be here. He said terrible things…”

“Does this have anything to do with what we discussed?” asked Joffrey, causing Laenor to turn towards him with a frown on his face. It should not have surprised me Joffrey knew, he had spoken of having an angle after all. An angle less effective with Daemon present.

“Yes,” said Laena shakily. Then she drew a deep breath. “Yes. He told her. She knows.”

Laenor caught his sister by her arms as she trembled and guided her into one of the seats. I stood, awkwardly, and removed the cloak she’d given me. He took it and wrapped it around her and she curled into it, tears coursing down her face.

“It’s not a problem,” I said, after Joffrey turned his eyes on me. “I said I didn’t care.”

“What are you all talking about?” asked Laenor, rising from his crouch. Laena turned her eyes to us in despair. He took her hand. “Laena?”

When we were silent and she did not respond he looked stricken. Upset.

“Laena, talk to me? You can tell me anything. Remember when you were nine and you broke Father’s vase?” A ghost of a smile played across her face at that. “Please, there is nothing you can say that would make me love you less. You’re my best friend.”

Fresh tears spilled down her face.

“I… do you remember when Rhaenyra was banished from court?” Laenor shot me a puzzled glance at that. Not that I could enlighten him, I had no clue what she was on about either. “And you sent me home with news. I got Joffrey to let me into her rooms even though she was sleeping. She was… she was so beautiful. The Realm’s Delight.”

I saw recognition spark behind Laenor’s eyes then and he turned towards us both with the look reminiscent of a dog who knew it’s owner was hurting but did not know to fix it and was hurting in turn. Laena clutched at his hand like it was her lifeline, the only thing stopping her from drowning.

“Then she woke up and she looked at me like… like she wanted me. It thrilled me at the time but I did not know why. Understanding came later. I made a joke of it.” Is that when Joffrey had figured it out? Or was that when he began to suspect? “It was Daemon who first showed me my shame.”

“It is not a shame!” It was hard to tell who had spoken first, out of Laenor, Joffrey and I. She looked at us all bewildered, eyes lingering on me before wiping tears from her face.

“It is. It is for you and it is for me and it is for Joffrey. We pretend it is not but it is.” Laenor went
to protest but she silenced him with a raised hand. “Rhaenyra forgives you and Joffrey because she wants you. She pretends it does not bother her but I see the way she looks at you.”

Laenor turned accusing eyes to me and I blushed, suddenly finding my feet very interesting. The silence stretched onward after that. No one quite knew what to say.

My mind was whirling though. A leap of faith, a confession that would bind her too me. Fear made me hesitate. My brain still screamed she could not be trusted. It screamed she was clearly struggling with herself, that inserting myself in to the equation would complicate it further. It would create an expectation that I was not sure I could fulfill…

But had I not spent the last six months mooning over my own loneliness? Had I not bemoaned my own lack of intimacy? Had I not condemned her to the same fate? This would give everyone a chance to be happy. And if I hid it and she discovered it later, I dread to think of the fallout.

“Laena, I did not mistake you for Laenor,” I finally said, feeling like I might fly right out of my own skin. She studied me. I wasn’t sure what I had expected. Cautious hope, maybe happiness. Certainly not disappointment.

“Rhaenyra, I will be loyal to you. I will bring Vhagar to bear against your enemies. But please do not insult my intelligence. Surely even you can not think that lowly of it.” Before I could defend myself she started speaking again. “You look at Laenor like you want to eat him alive. You’ve even look at Joffrey like that sometimes. Harwin Strong, Forrest Frey… I’ve seen you look at our Father like that!”

Joffrey snorted at that as I felt my face heat up. Laenor for his part just look bewildered like the fact I was actually attracted to him physically was brand new information.

“You want to bed-” he started but I cut him off.

“Alright we don’t need to air everyone I’ve ever looked at with interest!” When had she ever caught me ogling Corlys!? “But I wasn’t lying. Joffrey, tell her!”

Unfortunately, my attempts to convince Laena of my sincerity were ended when a bellowing roar split the sky. We rushed to the window in time to see Caraxes’ vast form rise up and soar south but not before delivering his terrible breath directly into the distant gleaming lights of Spicetown.
Spicetown burned. It had been burning through the night and well into morn. The men had formed bucket chains now and were fighting it. Even from High Tide he could see the destruction. Great swathes of the town reduced to cinders, houses pulled down to form fire breaks and worst of all, the three terrible gouges where Caraxes flame had struck.

Daemon Targaryen was a dead man walking, he thought to himself as he finally pulled his eyes from the destruction. He would see him dead even if it took him a thousand lifetimes and his other leg. Laenor had poured his heart and soul into that town.

He limped his way through the familiar halls of High Tide to Laenor’s rooms.

Laenor would not be in them. His heart gave a pang at that. How was he supposed to deal with the revelation of Laena’s proclivities? He had not known, not for sure, until she’d returned and by that point the matter had been to delicate for him to tell Laenor!

His Silver Prince had fought the flames for as long as possible besides his men, directing their bucket chains and helping create the fire breaks that had saved a large part of the residences. Then he had gone to his mother and three of them, Laena included, had shut themselves away.

Laenor’s silence hurt. It was like a knife to his heart. The heart he had so recently reopened to the man he’d given his heart to the moment he had seen him. So recently… it was hard to believe that the feast had been just a few days ago. So much had happened.

He had returned to his rooms early. Criston Cole had been with the King that night and the sight of him made him sick with rage. Impotent rage. Laenor had been there, waiting for him, ready for some heartfelt gesture or declaration of love as only his sweet prince could.

He had given in. Once they’d bedded one another they’d spoken. Truly spoken for the first time since Criston Cole had shattered his leg on that field. It had been like coming home. He could not leave him again. Would not. The world could go hang itself if they ever thought the the Knight of Kisses would abandon his Seahorse once again.

For all that Laenor would not be in his rooms, someone was. He paused and listened at the door a moment as had become his habit since his Princess had trusted him as her Spymaster.

“Where can we find that vaunted honour!? Is it with the two bastard boys and whatever Laena whelps? Is it with the fortune and the fleet you sank into islands you’ve lost? Or is it in the ashes of Spicetown!”

He winced at the way she said Laena’s name. Her word choice was damning as well. She still smarting from Laena’s rejection. She’d moved too soon, been to dismissive of Laena’s turmoil on the matter and been rejected. She would consider it the second such rejection if he knew her. She was too proud to try for a third.

He opened the door and stepped inside.

When he’d been nine there had been a Great Council. All the Lords and Ladies of the Seven Kingdoms had gathered at Harrenhal to pick the next heir to the Throne. His Father had been a great supporter of Rhaenys Targaryen, or rather her Uncle and his Lord, Boremund Baratheon.

It had been that vocal loyalty that had earned his son a place as the Sea Snake’s squire. The nine year old Joffrey had left his home and taken up service to the Lord of the Tides. He’d grown up
fetching the man wine or papers, training under his watchful eye or running messages back and forth.

But never in all of the decade since had he seen Corlys Velaryon this defeated, this tired. It was a testament to how serious this was that the old man had foregone his faux-sailer garb, opting for a rumpled doublet. He’d not even worn a doublet when his brothers had died.

Rhaenyra did not look much better. Dark eyes that spoke to a lack of sleep and the hint of red that he’d come to know meant she had been crying recently. The empty pitcher spoke of ingested wine… a lot of it if how she was swaying in her seat was any indication.

Corlys paused in his response when he entered before snorting and gesturing to a free chair. Rhaenyra did not react as he lowered himself next to her. Her jaw was clenched tight. He internally sighed at that. It was a sign she was barely keeping her temper in check and if her earlier outburst was any indication when she did finally lose it, it would be explosive.

“Peace, we must remember the true enemy here,” he told them. Corlys gave him a stiff nod. An acknowledgement. He did not return it. He was Rhaenyra’s, not the Sea Snake’s.

“Daemon.” Corlys’ voice was cold fury. “That bastard. May the Seven curse the day he was born.”

Rhaenyra’s head shot up again and he silenced her with a warning look.

“We should scour those islands to the bedrock,” she said sourly. Corlys’ grimaced. Those islands had cost him a lot of capital. The fleet he’d used to take them even more so. Add in the fact that Spicetown had burned and Laenor’s investments not yet seeing a return…

He would be willing to bet the Sea Snake’s financial position was less secure than it had been since his voyages.

“We have taken a hit but we can recover.” He was a Velaryon now, after all. He sometimes forgot that, forgot he had taken his wife’s name, forgot he had taken the colours of the man he loved.

“Aye, don’t worry about it. We still have the businesses in Hull. Some of the docks can be expanded there in a pinch.”

“We can petition my father for funds to repair Spicetown,” Rhaenyra cut in. He winced mentally at the slur in her voice.

“Or sell Dark Sister,” muttered Corlys. Rhaenyra froze and stared at him.

“What?” He did not like that gleam in her eye.

“You do not think I was foolish enough to give him his sword back!? We’ve got it locked up. I suppose we’ll have to return it to Viserys.” Neither Corlys nor Rhaenyra wanted that, although for different reasons. He decided to head her next idea off at the pass.

“You can not wield Dark Sister,” he told her as she opened her mouth to suggest just that.

“Why not? We could buy into the whole warrior queen business and snap up some of those War Hawks.”

“Firstly, the last time you drew a sword you nearly cut your own fingers off. Secondly, please remember the last warrior queen that bore that sword. You are already associated with alchemy, do you wish to risk an association with sorcery? Thirdly, the moment we reveal we have Dark Sister,
Viserys will want it back. It is his right as head of House Targaryen. Then he’ll probably give it to Aegon or Aemond at some point and improve Green legitimacy.” She sulked at that but it was gratifying to know she was sulking because she knew he was right.

His princess trusted him and his advice.

“Besides,” added Corlys “Those War Hawks, as you call them, will be after Daemon like a starving dog after a cut of meat. The moment the news of this… what is the word you use? Shit show. Yes, the moment they hear of this shit show they will be clamouring to burn the Stepstones.”

“Can we even attack Daemon with what we have now? Your fleet is at Bloodstone.” Corlys blinked in surprise at the question and he hid his smile. Rhaenyra was not trained in war but sometimes, just sometimes, she would have some bizarrely accurate insight you would not expect. “We have four dragons but no fleet. And of those four dragons only two stand any chance against Caraxes.”

“And of those two only one… only one has seen true war,” said Corlys darkly. “I will not send my wife and children to their deaths. Only Rhaenys has a chance against him and she… humph, I am not convinced she would prevail.”

“Then he gets away with it!?” Corlys just laughed bitterly.

“For now. We can not respond alone. We must await Viserys’ decision,” he told her and she scowled. She had never had a high opinion of her Father if Laenor’s reports were to be believed.

“We have a more serious topic to discuss anyway,” intoned Corlys. He frowned. He could think of no topic more serious than Viserys’ decision regarding Daemon. “When this gets out it will shake up the political scene once more. We must capitalise on that. We can no longer guarantee the level of bribery we have before, as such we must turn to other… methods.”

Ah, he thought he saw where this was going.

“We must speak about your heirs.”
The Small Council chamber was empty but for Lyman Beesbury when I finally entered. That was normal. I had never actually seen Lyman Beesbury anywhere other than this table and I wasn’t entirely convinced he hadn’t fused with the wood and velvet of his chair years ago.

Still, one could not argue he was not damned effective at his job. Rego Draz may have been the best Master of Coin the Iron Throne would have, past and future included, but Lyman Beesbury was likely a close second. I certainly would pay money to see the old man meet Littlefinger, that’s for certain.

And in another time he had lost his life for Rhaenyra Targaryen.

I greeted him politely and he made his own greetings back. He’d never been a talkative fellow but during my times as cupbearer he’d been happy to teach me his trade. I will confess a lot of it went over my head but he’d been delighted I’d even tried.

Even Viserys dismissed what he did as copper counting to a degree.

“Your Grace, I had not expected you to be here.” Jasper Wylde. As unpleasant and slimy as Lyman was the opposite. I plastered a smile on my face.

“If I am to be Queen, Lord Wylde, I can not skip too many Small Council sessions.” It was credit to his talent as an actor that he didn’t scowl at that. He was a Green through and through. Even now if Aegon, Aemond and Daeron all suffered random accidents all unrelated to me he’d still struggle to choose between Daemon and I.

Even after everything Daemon had done. Damn him to the Seven Hells.

“Well said, Your Grace,” he conceded as he took his seat. No doubt he was under orders from Alicent to play nicely. She wanted Daemon’s head, and other parts of his anatomy, as much as I did.

“Oh, am I late?” came the reedy, high pitched voice of Grand Maester Mellos. Not as old as Runciter had been and with quite the unfortunate manner. I’m not sure what it was but even the greenest Green disliked spending time around him… and woe betide you if you needed any healing. His bedside manner was even more appalling.

“Not at all, Grand Maester,” Lyman assured him, voice faint with age. “We are merely early.”

Silence fell awkwardly over us all until the doors opened yet again and Lord Corlys stepped inside joined by Lyonel Strong. Both looked to be ending a conversation reluctantly and I coughed to hide my chuckle. They’d struck up a surprising friendship and it was doing wonders for Black control of the Council.

Speaking of which…

“Hold the door please!” Ser Corbray just made it as Corlys slammed his hand into door to prevent it from shutting on him. The Master of Whispers looked as if he had sprinted the entire length of the castle. Probably because he had, if those papers in his hand were any judge.

Jaremy Corbray was a Black as well. Brother to my biggest fan Gawen Corbray, although they thankfully hadn’t spoken in years. He was also hilariously incompetent. I’d given up trying to form
him into any particular talent under me and had thrown him to Ser Joffrey.

Those pages were his, I was certain of it. New information as like as not. I wet my lips. There was only one subject matter the King was interested in these days.

The Hand of the King, the Master of Whispers and the Master of Ships took their seats. The divide was obvious even to the most uninformed observer. Lord Corlys and Ser Corbray were mine in body and soul. Lyman and Lyonel were mine because they were Viserys’ in turn.

Jasper and Mellos bowed to Alicent in all things. Rounding out the Greens was Criston Cole, when Viserys let him attend, leaving her with three to my four. Five if you counted me. Rhaenyra had lost control of this Council and it had led to her downfall. I was not going to let Alicent wrestle it from me without a fight.

Finally the doors opened once more and Viserys stepped through flanked by Lorent Marbrand and Steffon Darklyn. He was grim when he saw us already assembled. There were dark shadows under his eyes that screamed of a lack of sleep and I felt a pang of sympathy. The ongoing situation with Daemon was hitting him hard.

We watched in silence as he stalked through the chamber before dropping his bulk into the chair at the head of the table. After a few moments of shifting to get himself comfortable he gestured to Jaremy to begin. Thankfully, the Master of Whispers did not need clarification on what Viserys wanted to hear.

“I have acquired the information you requested from my agents, Your Grace. It’s as recent as possible but please be aware we are suffering from a significant pushback against our spies.” Viserys nodded, jaw clenched tight. My own insides squirmed and my fingers panged in pain.

“It’s… it’s bad news, I’m afraid.”

“As you are aware, the Triarchy began raiding the Stepstones the moment they heard the news about your Brother’s disgrace. Now they are preparing to launch a full invasion force to take back as much as possible.” I didn’t miss Viserys’ flinch when Jaremy had said the word brother. “In response… the… ah,”

Viserys’ fist impacted the table and I flinched. Along with Mellos and Jaremy himself.

“Get on with it. What has that pox on our House done now?” he asked through gritted teeth. I swallowed hard. The last time he’d been this angry he’d laid his hands on me. If Daemon were in this room now he’d tear him apart with his bare hands, kinslayer or no.

“I’m given to understand there was a sizeable… er, holding camp of sorts? On Bloodstone?” Corlys groaned and dropped his head into his hands, attracting our attention.

“We were holding the defeated there until their ransoms came in or we sent them to the wall,” he told us, voice muffled by his fingers. “Slavers, pirates - the worst scum you can imagine.”

“It seems he opened the gates and declared any man who followed him to be free. He burnt the rest.” Jaremy told us. I felt sick. Never in my life had I ever thought Daemon would fall this far. He’d made such a big parade about how he was liberating the Stepstones from slavers and worse… now he was their king.

Viserys was on his feet, pacing back and forth.

“How many?” he asked eventually. “How many followed him?”
“With those men and the forces who chose not to flee when he took control of the Velaryon fleet I would estimate he has... ah, about six thousand men following him.”

“That is nothing. The Redwyne fleet alone can deal with that,” opined Jasper Wylde. Corlys just snorted in derision.

“If Daemon were any normal man, perhaps, but he has a dragon. He’d burn that fleet to cinders before they reached the shores,” Viserys sneered.

“We have four dragons to his on-”

“And which ones would you condemn to death!? My daughter!? My cousin!? Her children!?” roared Viserys. Jasper shut up, looking pale. It was rare for Viserys to get like this but when he was... hoo boy. “Only Rhaenys has the experience and skill to fly against him and sending her alone is suicide. Meleys would be winded, they’d be fighting above his territory and... and he is vicious. Rhaenys, for all her ability, can not face his viciousness alone.”

“There are also rumours of... foreign priests and other queer folk from further east.” Jaremy said, flicking through Joffrey’s report. “They say he is trying to... ah, recruit those with knowledge of magic.”

“Of course he is!” snarled Viserys. He was almost out breath with the force of his rage. “My brother does not have the sense he was born with.”

“Do not worry, Your Grace. Magic has been dying in Westeros since the Age of Heroes,” Mellos told us but he looked unsettled himself.

The room was silent as Viserys paced back and forth, wheezing breath setting my teeth on edge. I caught Corlys’ eye. He wasn’t happy he couldn’t take the islands back by force... but Daemon was one man and if Lord Corlys hadn’t already sent his own assassins I would be very surprised.

“Sanctions then?” asked Lyman. Viserys dropped into his chair and ran his hands over his face.

“We go further. Place a bounty on his head. It’ll give those young bucks something to chase... how much can we afford?” he said finally. Lyman blinked in surprised before glancing at his account sheets.

“It depends on how... displeased Your Grace is?” Lyman hesitated.

“Consider me ready to kill him myself. If I still had the Black Dread I’d have burned and salted his islands and made him fucking watch. I should have gelded him when he laid hands on Rhaenyra and damned you all!”

“Then the treasury can easily afford fifty thousand gold dragons,” Lyman answered quickly. I winced. Fifty thousand gold dragons... that was over twice the gross amount Dragonstone made in a year. Every bounty hunter in Westeros and Western Essos would want a bite.

Assassins of every nation, Dorne, The Triarchy - how long would he be able to keep his Kingdom? Even he needs to rest occasionally.

Still, foreign priests and queer folk from the east. Magic. That did not bode well. It was putting me in mind of a certain red headed preistess and her support of the brother of a King.

“Good. Have it disseminated as far and wide as possible,” Viserys’ voice was cold. “I want him brought to justice for what he has done.”
“And what is His Grace’s answer for the petition for funds to rebuild Spicetown?” Lord Corlys tensed. Viserys had been taking his bloody time with a decision, another thing which did not bode well. He was normally quick with his more generous actions.

“Daughter, what is your opinion?” he asked and I was peripherally aware of Lord Corlys’ jaw dropping. As did Wylde’s. Mellos looked very uncomfortable. I knew the feeling.

“Daemon burned Spicetown to avoid pursuit, Your Grace. He attacked a member of the Velaryon family as well. All whilst under guest right,” I started, unsure of why he was asking me. Surely Lyman was the best for advice. “He did so as a member of House Targaryen. Even if he was in disgrace at the time… we owe House Velaryon recompense for the damage done.”

He studied me for a moment and then nodded.

“I approve the petition, Lyman. You’ll have your gold, Lord Corlys. Spicetown will be rebuilt.” Corlys looked extremely unsure when he bowed his head in thanks. “And might I extend my thank you once more for returning to your rightful position as Master of Ships.”

“You are quite welcome, Your Grace. Your daughter is very persuasive.” Viserys beamed at me in pride, the first bit of happiness he’d shown since he’d arrived, but I couldn’t move my smile away from slightly queasy. It had been my price… my price for agreeing to birth an heir.

It made me want to throw up. I’d had the mother of all panic attacks when he’d forced the issue. It had come to Joffrey threatening to hit him with his stick over the matter when I agreed. He had been right in his arguments.

If I wanted my royal procession to yield any results beyond vague promises of support I needed more than vague promises of future heirs. Even one would secure everyone in the knowledge that I could have them. As long as they were silver haired they shouldn’t be named bastards widely, even if Alicent was going to try her best otherwise.

I really, really hope they take after Laenor.

I’m really not internally screaming at all.

“So we are to deny the petitions to mount a martial response to Daemon and announce the bounty on his head?” Lord Jasper was asking when I finally dragged my head out of the clouds. His eyes flickered to me. “Many lords will be… displeased.”

“Those lords can attack him with their own men if they so wish to claim the bounty that way,” Lord Corlys snorted. “But all they’ll get for their troubles is a fried army.”

“He is under assault by the Triarchy. It is only a matter of time before the Dornish sense his weakness as well!” Jasper cried, then shot a guilty glance at Viserys.

“Then let him die on those islands fighting beside slavers and scum. Let him die when a hidden knife finds his heart or some Dornish assassin finally manages to fill his wine with poison. Let him die alone with none to mourn him, having sacrificed every shred of his honour for nothing. The only loss I mourn is Caraxes for that noble beast deserved better!” he barked, rising to his feet. Darklyn and Marbrand stepped forward to flank him.

“This meeting is over! Rhaenyra, I would speak with you in private!”

What have I done now!?
The fact that Lyonel Strong was to accompany us alongside the two Kingsguard worried me slightly. It meant that whatever it was, Viserys felt that it could have political repercussions.

“How is your work with Alicent coming along?” asked Viserys after we’d walked out onto the small balcony that looked out over the bay.

“It’s a work in progress. I’m waiting on some of Alicent’s… staffing choices.” Ugh, it was such a shit show. We’d not been back five minutes before my dear Father had suggested I occupy myself with reproducing Dragonstone’s administration within the Red Keep and only two minutes after he’d said it aloud during a family meal had he realised how badly that was going to look to his wife. The woman nominally in charge of that sort of thing and who was now looking at him as if she were mere seconds away from developing the ability to kill with her eyeballs.

He’d been desperate for a topic that wasn’t how badly Daemon had fucked up. He’d hoped for a nice little task to ease me in to King’s Landing again and instead wandered into a political minefield. That was Viserys for you, I guess.

So he had, whilst desperately attempting to extract his foot from his mouth, settled on a compromise. I would create the rules and positions and Alicent got to choose who went where. At no point did Viserys see the problem with that.


Because the Blacks really needed that hit as well as Daemon’s shit and Corlys’ money troubles to boot.

Alicent was now the unquestioned mistress of the castle and had even gone so far as to remove those she didn’t feel were Green enough from their posts. This meant she’d resorted to shipping in knights and ladies from the Reach. I’m not screaming internally, at all.

“Excellent. I know Alicent was pleased with the whole business!” Oh, I bet she was.

“Alicent is a smart woman, Father,” I said and managed to make it sound like a pleasant observation instead of a curse. He beamed at me before proffering his arm. I took it and tried not to shudder as we meandered along the balcony.

“About heirs?” he asked after a while, eyeing my stomach meaningfully. I didn’t quite suppress the shiver that ran through me but he ignored it, like he ignores everything that doesn’t quite fit into his world view.

“Laenor and I are trying,” Liar liar. I hadn’t brought myself to do so yet…

“It cheers an old man up to hear of babies on the way,” His face had brightened considerably. “No doubt young Laena has your mind on the matter!”

I winced at that. She was showing now and I still wasn’t thinking of babies when I looked at her. Now that I knew she wanted me in turn every time we met I felt to big for my skin, butterflies exploded in my stomach and I felt like that fourteen year old Rhaenyra following her about like a lost puppy once more.

Aaaand she wouldn’t even look me in the eye. Fuck my life.
I took a deep breath and centered myself before I had a panic attack about babies or Laena in public. Mentioning I was hoping to have a child soon had been a mistake in retrospect, Viserys had seized on it as the only good news that had been delivered since Daemon’s flight.

“Do not worry Father, you will be the first to know when I am expecting.” He beamed at me. Something told me he was really looking forward to grandchildren. Like, really looking forward to them. “But surely you did not ask me here to discuss Alicent and my pregnancy?”

I winced again as his face darkened. So I was right. He was just avoiding a difficult conversation.

“I must know… it is a difficult thing to ask…” he began, eyes flickering to Lyonel. “Daemon made certain claims before he… left.”

I swallowed thickly and braced myself for a difficult conversation.

“Are you referring to his claims that Lady Laena’s babe is his? Or the claim he made that I am bedding Lady Laena? Or is it the excuse he gave to absolve himself of the burning of Spicetown, that Lord Corlys attacked first?” Viserys was silent, studying me. “Because none are true Father, it is Daemon attempting to wriggle free of the consequences of his actions once more!”

He stopped his walk and gazed out across the bay, jaw working hard.

“What colours do you wear Rhaenyra?” he asked finally. Flummoxed, I glanced down at my habitual black and red. His raised voice had my head snapping back up. “What words are yours? What creature is yours!”

“I don-”

Targaryen! Black and Red! Fire and Blood! You are a dragon!” When I flinched, his face softened. “You are not a seahorse, not a Velaryon, however close they have grown to us. To you.”

“I know that,” I said quietly, heart somewhere in my stomach.

“Who is the head of House Targaryen, Rhaenyra?” he asked. Behind me I could hear Lyonel shifting uneasily.

“You are.” He nodded at my answer.

“I am. I am the head of our House, your Father and your damned King!” His voice was steel and I could barely meet his eyes. “So when I ask you to tell me the truth you will tell me the damned truth! Now, let us try once more. Is the babe Laena Velaryon carries my brother’s get?”

Shit, shit, shit. Viserys had taken the gloves off.

“Your face says enough.” Panic surged through me. “Do you know you tense up and then relax when you lie? You have been doing it since you were old enough to lie. I am your father, at least credit me with knowing your tells.”

“Father please! Please, do not hurt her!” It hurt my pride to beg but if he revealed the father of her child now I doubted she’d survive the aftermath. “Father, she has been punished! She was taken in by him and she has been punished for that!”

He held up a hand, cutting me off.

“She is a woman grown, Rhaenyra, older than you and old enough to face the consequences for her
actions,” he said.

“She married below her station! The Father of her child burned her families pride!” His face remained stony. “Father, I will get on my knees and beg if it pleases you but do not do this!”

Fear for the girl was stealing my breath. He frowned.

“Pleas-”

“You will keep the Velaryons in check. Lord Corlys once sought to rule through Rhaenys and he will seek to rule through you as well. And if you ever hide anything from me again…” The warning was clear as he trailed off. I nodded. He had his stick now, I thought furiously, stripping me of my title of heir had never been a threat but threatening Laena… damn him.

Daemon had him looking around him and realising how fucked everything was.

“And the second thing, Father?” I asked sullenly after a period of silence.

“Your brother is old enough to squire. Away from court,” he grunted. A pit opened up in my stomach. He was definitely trying to put us all into order then. I’d bet Syrax there were two reasons behind sending Aegon away just as I returned.

The first? People at court were starting to whisper. Everyone has seen how terrified Aegon is of me and it’s gotten to the point where it’s not even me directly anymore but anything he perceives associated with me. The word ‘craven’ is starting to get muttered a lot behind his back… aaaaand to his face. Westeros is horrible.

But also Viserys was giving me the capital. Sending Aegon away meant Alicent could no longer use him personally. Perhaps he was not so blind to Alicent’s attempts to fill the castle administration with Greens as I had expected.

“What are you sending him to?” I asked, keeping my voice neutral. I felt like the world had suddenly shifted about me. Viserys had always been a speed bump before, something to be worked around certainly but never an active player.

“Alicant wants me to send him to Jason Lannister. I have a mind to agree.” Damn, she probably has him then. I’d have to tell Joffrey to step up his work on the Reynes. Historically, the Reynes have always been a good check on Lannister power. They too claim descent from Lann the Clever, albeit a cadet branch, and they’ve often had small skirmishes with the Lannisters. Oh, nothing on the scale of the Rains of Castamere or even like the Boltons to the Starks but enough to let the Lannisters know they really wouldn’t mind the Red Lions in Casterly Rock and it would only a take a small slip on the Golden Lions part to see that happen.

But the Reynes wanted what everyone wanted. A piece of my future children although they’d kindly let our agents know they’d settle for a daughter instead of a son. A future Lady Reyne instead of a future Queen.

“But Oldtown?” I asked. Viserys’ face darkened again and I realised that Old Town had likely been her first choice. Why refuse to send him to one Green just to send him to another? Why let Alicent fill the castle with Greens and then send her chosen candidate away? What game was he playing?

“No.” Ouch, that must have been one hell of an argument. Still, I’d long ago given up hopes of turning Aegon to my side. The fact that Alicent’s plan had blown up in her face did not amuse me as much as it should. Aegon was eight and what little self-confidence he had was being obliterated by the court right now.
Also, I had no real alternative. He could hardly squire for Jeyne after all and I had no other Black that came with as much prestige as a Lord Paramount.

“I have no objections if Alicent is happy with the arrangement.” Viserys nodded stiffly. Of course, if I’d actually had objections it wouldn’t have counted for anything. He was letting everyone know that for all we schemed he was still king and he had the final say.

We danced at his pleasure.

Lord Corlys found me after Viserys had left. I honestly don’t know if I preferred him as incompetent or competent. He might be trying to actively help me now but… well, it came with certain expectations and a hell of a lot more oversight.

And he finally had power over me. Fuck my entire life.

“What did Viserys want?” Corlys asked as we made our way to my rooms. Casa Velaryon was an awkward place to be right now so I wasn’t surprised he was lurking about the Red Keep. Laena had told Rhaenys, apparently. It went down like a lead balloon if the suspicious looks I kept getting and Laenor and Laena’s strange reluctance to be in the same manse as their mother were any indication.

“He is fostering Aegon at Casterly Rock at Alicent’s suggestion, apparently.”

“Blast! Well, Joffrey said she was after them. How goes our courtship of the Reynes?” I didn’t answer and he groaned. “They want a marriage too. How goes your attempts with my son?”

“Well enough.”

“We agree-”

“I know!” A few curious bypassers looked over at us at the shout. I grimaced and lowered my voice. “I know. If it pleases you I will start tonight.”

“It would have pleased me if you’d started the day you were wed,” he said as we reached the door. Inside I could hear the tell tale sounds of my ladies playing cards. Honestly, I regret teaching them some of the games. They’ve taken to it entirely too quickly. Blackjack being an ongoing favourite.

“Yes, well, we did not,” I said, testily.

“I shall ensure Laenor comes to you tonight.” I did not answer and opened the door. Corlys just snorted and bid me good day. I returned it with as good grace as I could manage and finally let myself relax as I stepped inside.

“Your Grace! We were just getting started on another game!” Alys told me, waving a handful of cards that told me she’d once again lost money to her compatriots. My eyes drifted to the woman on her left though, sitting with downcast eyes. Laena.

Laena, who had turned me down cold. Laena, who’d barely spoken to me since. Laena, who thought me a whore willing to spread my legs for a dragon.

At least I could take solace in the fact she thought me the most expensive whore in existence.

“Please carry on. I’ll watch,” I told them and took up residence on a low couch under the window, settling back a closing my eyes. Letting the sounds of my ladies mirth wash over me and trying to chase away the fear and nerves that had been set loose in my belly. I felt sick even though I hadn’t
eaten anything for lunch. I knew I should distract myself, maybe go ride Syrax or seek out Lord Gerold but…

The couch was very comfy and I was very tired.

I awoke to an a worried Laena and an amused Laenor with no sign of my ladies. The cards abandoned on the table told me they’d likely fled in a giggly mess the moment Laenor had turned up and left Laena to deal with the detritus. I groaned and pulled myself upright.

“What time is it?” I asked, voice thick with sleep.

“Approaching sundown. I arranged for us to take our meal here,” Laenor answered and I could see his amusement was a front, he was as nervous as I was. No doubt his Father had told him what I wanted him for. My stomach exploded into butterflies once more as Laena glanced between us.

“You are well?” she asked finally. I tried not to show my surprise at the lack of surliness in her tone. She’d assumed I was taking Daemon up on his suggestion to earn Vhagar with my body, according to the all-knowing Joffrey.

“You Father insists we revisit the issue of heirs,” I told her, rubbing my tired and stinging eyes. Spite momentarily welled within me. “I must earn his support on my back it seems.”

Laena directed a glare at me and I glared right back.

“You keep doing this! I will not be used again. Not even by you!” I got ready to argue right back but she held up her hand, taking a deep breath. “Rhaenyra, please… please stop with this? This is curiosity on your part. I look like Laenor. I am safe to experiment with. My interest… interests you in turn. But I am not… I just want to be comfortable with myself.”

“Why is it that you can have an exception but I can not?” I muttered, frustration boiling around inside of me and sounding more like a sulking child than I wanted. She gave her brother a look, who returned with one that said quite clearly he intended to stay out of whatever we had going on.

This was childish in the extreme. She’d made her position quite clear.

“Very well. I will not bring it up again. I am sorry to have made you uncomfortable.”
I awoke in Laenor’s arms with my face pressed against his naked chest. It was so nice just to be held, and against Laenor to boot, that I managed to stop myself shuddering in revulsion at how gross I felt. Sweaty and… unpleasantly sticky.

By gods, I want to boil my own skin off now.

Laenor stirred as I started trying to wiggle out of his grip, pulling himself up right and groaning at the morning light. Then he glanced towards me with a look of wonder on his face that really was not warranted. He laid a warm hand over my stomach with a kind of reverence that made me want to slap him or embrace him.

“Do you think you might be pregnant already?” he asked quietly. I doubted it but I didn’t want to demoralise him so instead I managed a small smile and laid my own hand over his.

“I hope so but we must keep trying until it is confirmed.” He beamed at me.

“What a fine thing, to be a father,” he marveled, hand still in place. I fought the urge to yell at him and took a deep breath, edging out the cold of fear. “I never thought… I thought I would die childless. That Laena’s children would inherit. I know you do not want to have a child… I… Thank you.”

That last bit was said in such a small voice that I forgot my anger and fear and brought him close, burying my face in the mess his hair had become. We stayed like that for a while until there was a knock on the door, startling us from our thoughts.

“Your Grace, we have drawn your bath as you requested.” I sighed happily into Laenor’s shoulder and moved away, wincing as muscles I was unused to using protested.

“I will be out in a moment!” I called and I heard the sound of the maid bustling off. As I made my way to the corner and began sorting for something to wear Laenor snorted and flopped back into the pillows.

“May ask you a question?” he said carefully as I retrieved a nightgown to hide my nakedness. He blushed. “I also did not realise you truly desired me as a wife desires her husband.”

“You are very desirable,” I told him. His training regime was already doing wonders for him. He’d begun putting on muscle. He’d never been a martial man, not truly. He’d squired with his Uncle Lucerys to learn ships and sailing. Add in his dragon… he’d always had a hard time seeing why he should use the sword.

But the chance at wielding Dark Sister had lit something within him.
Not that he could use the blade yet, of course. The moment I was head of House Targaryen though, I would make sure he would have it then. For now it would remain safely hidden with the Lonmouths.

And if Viserys thought his new hold over me would compel me to reveal that he had another thing coming.

“But… but I lay with another man. I love another man. I can not… I can not please you?” he sounded anxious. I snorted.

“You are a very pretty man with a very fine mind. You please me well enough.” I left before the temptation to kiss him got too much. He would try, for my sake he would try, but it would make him uncomfortable in the extreme. I had no right to force that on him.

The bath was steaming in the early morning light and I sighed happily as I discarded the nightgown and climbed in. My momentary jealousy that Laenor got to head back to the land of sleep gone as I luxuriated in the warmth.

I lowered my head back and closed my eyes, mind beginning to wake up. Last night had been… not all that great. Humiliating jumped to mind. Embarrassing, frustrating and nerve wracking were also good descriptors. We’d tried to do it the natural way first but Laenor had struggled and in the end we’d resorted to using more artificial means to… ah, do the deed.

I clutched at the soap and the washcloth and scrubbed myself down with a shudder.

It felt like I was in some kind of dream, sometimes. Daemon’s flight… I had been so sure it would lead to something; war, assassination, the game of thrones in truth. Now here I was bathing in King’s Landing and no one was talking about it anymore. The bounty would go out and he would die and nothing would really change.

I finished up and met Marya and Alys who helped me dress and kept up an endless stream of chatter. In truth I was glad for it. I could barely keep my thoughts on track and in the present. Without their questions and gossip, my brain might have exited my head entirely. After that I was summoned by my dearest Father to break my fast with the rest of the family.

Because of course he would pick the day I was feeling as if I might shatter at the slightest touch.

Alicent and her brood minus Daeron were already there. I took care to wrap Helaena in an extra tight hug. She’d been devastated when she’d been handed back into Alicent’s company. Even more so when the Queen had tried to forbid her practise with the bow. Helaena had apparently thrown a fit so loud and so great that Viserys had overrode Alicent for the first time ever when it came to the children in order to let her continue.

Dragon Rages. Not even once.

Or maybe just spoiled princess rages as Helaena didn’t actually have a dragon yet. Like most Targaryen children they’d been given eggs in the cradle but none had hatched. It had been the subject of some court gossip but ultimately it had come to nothing as my own egg had never hatched either. Huh, I hadn’t thought about that in years… where did that get to?

If I remember rightly it had been a pale red, almost pink, shot through with a deeper red. Honestly, it’s probably a good idea I didn’t end up with that dragon. I wouldn’t have been able to resist calling it Rasberry Ripple and who would follow a dragon called Rasberry Ripple into battle? No… let me see… Meleys. The egg had been from Meleys’ last clutch when she was ridden by
Princess Alyssa. Perhaps Rhaenys had it then?

“Are you listening to me, Rhaenyra?” Viserys’ question cut into my daydream about forcing everyone to take Raspberry Ripple very seriously lest they be set aflame. I flushed and mumbled an apology. “As I was saying, I have discussed this with Aegon and he has agreed so I am proud to tell you all he will be squiring for Lord Jason Lannister.”

Alicent looked especially smug as he smiled nervously at us all. His siblings were decidedly less so.

“You can’t send him away!” shouted Helaena and Aemond at the same time. Although Helaena sent her father a desperate look and Aemond sent me a hateful look. Viserys looked startled.

“You’re only sending him away because Rhaenyra is here. You should send Rhaenyra away again and then Aegon can stay here!” Aemond said, small fists balled up in anger and glaring hatefully between Viserys and I.

“Aemond, my beloved, he is not going away because of Rhaenyra,” Alicent cooed, trying to draw him onto her lap.

“But I want him to stay here!” said Helaena desperately, small hands finding her Mother’s arm.

Whatever next level puppy dog eyes Helaena was deploying managed to get Alicent pause in genuine emotional pain and halt her attempts to restrain Aemond, who promptly pulled himself free and flung himself at me. He collided with my midsection and proceeded to pummel at my stomach and thighs. He was only five but some of those strikes really fucking hurt okay? Viserys hauled him away and the little boy broke down crying in his Father’s arms.

“I hate you!” he said, clutching at his Father’s black sleeves. I sent Viserys a stricken look because there was absolutely nothing I could do or say to that. Through it all Aegon had remained silent and still. Now his eyes were on me, wide with fear, as if he expected retribution to be swift.

I hated that. I did not wish to be to him as Daemon had been to me.

“But Aegon wants to stay here!” Helaena was wailing with no small amount of distress, completely drowning out Aemond’s furious sniffling.

“Are you happy with going to Casterly Rock?” I asked him when Viserys became distracted calming Helaena’s wailing. “If not I will petition Father on your behalf.”

He looked bewildered at the offer but shook his head.

“I don’t like it here. I want to go.” He said and my heart broke when he added before thinking about it. “People are mean to me.”

Unfortunately, Alicent and Viserys caught the end of his sulk. I saw her green eyes blaze into fury and flicker to me.

“Who?” I asked. “If it is any of mine, I’ll have their heads.”

And I was telling the truth. I’d been very clear that when it came to my Blacks; Aegon and the children were off-limits. Alicent and her idiot Father were fair game but my siblings were children and deserved a childhood. Alicent had robbed them all of that but I was damned if I was going to contribute. Aegon just shook his head violently.

“Other children. Aemond shouts at them.” Viserys glanced towards his second son with a pained
“Do you know who these children are?” asked Alicent with the kind of malice that told me she wasn’t above fighting literal children when it came to her kids. I really hope none of those children are associated with me.

“I don’t know their names. I know what colours they wear though!” Aemond said brightly and with a worrying amount of vicious glee.

“Well, you shall tell me after we have broken our fast and we shall see how mean these children are when I have a word with their fathers.” Then she paused and eyed me with something close to grudging respect. “Apologise to your sister for striking her.”

“I’m sorry,” he said through gritted teeth. Viserys opened his mouth to scold him and I interrupted.

“It is no issue, Aemond. Anyone would be upset when their brother is leaving.” Viserys shut his mouth and gave me a grateful look as Aemond was released back to his chair next to Aegon. “Regardless, I do hope you enjoy yourself at Casterly Rock. They say there are rooms there lined with gold.”

Rooms I will see once I’d produced a baby to barter with. Ugh, Westeros was gross. Food arrived and I decided on my usual chilled fruit. I’d picked up an especial fondness for pear somewhere. It was nice to see someone knew this as I noted more of the delicious fruit was present than usually warranted.

“And when you ride a dragon, travel will be ea-” Alicent glared at me and I paused, glancing towards Viserys, who was stuffing his face with food and not paying attention. I turned my attention back and raised an eyebrow in questioning.

“When will we get dragons?” demanded Aemond. Oh. Oh that is why she doesn’t want me mentioning the D-word. Ooops.

“Our eggs didn’t hatch,” came Aegon’s gloomy reply.

“Mine didn’t hatch either,” I told him. His eyes flicked up in surprise and I smiled at him. His usual fear was gone, replaced by an almost hesitant excitement. “I tamed Syrax at Dragonstone.”

“Oh indeed! I remember that day clearly, Daughter! I was beside myself with fear the entire time after we discovered you missing! Aemma threatened to have my head if you were harmed,” Viserys boomed between mouthfuls of bread and jam. “And then you pitched such a fit about leaving her in the Dragonpit. I remember you being very insistent that she remain outside of it.”

He reached over and poured himself some juice before guzzling an entire goblet at once. I watched in a morbid kind of horror as he belched. I could definitely see how the pounds were being piled on.

“You gave me an entire lecture on why you’d risked a wild dragon over a pit bred one.” I was about to reply that it had hardly gotten me anywhere when Aemond cut in, eyes bright with excitement.

“There are dragons at the pit now? Dragons we can have?” I saw pain flicker across Alicent’s features and made an intuitive guess as to how the siblings had become so misinformed about dragons.

They will claim them eventually, history tells me that. But perhaps… perhaps I can give Aegon
one last good memory of me before he goes.

“If you will allow it, Father, I believe Aegon and Helaena are old enough to claim their own mounts. I can take them today, something to celebrate the news of Aegon’s squiring.” Viserys’ eyes lit up with happiness even as Alicent sent me a look of pure hate.
“Why can’t I claim a dragon?” protested Aemond as we reached the Dragonpit. Around us, Alicent’s knights were dismounting and preparing themselves for the sweltering heat of the pit proper.

“Aemond, you are five. Your Mother was very insistent.” I told him. Nearby, Helaena was speaking to a terrified Aegon in fast and low tones and it was hard to tell which of them was the six year old and which was the eight. I smiled only to have it wiped from my face when Aemond’s shoe bounced off my shin.

“Helaena is only six!” he snarled. “I want a dragon!”

“Well, you aren’t getting one,” I replied in an airy tone. He went to kick my shin again but was promptly lifted into the air by Criston Cole, who’d finally seemed to notice the incoming temper tantrum.

“Enough, Aemond. Your Mother is the ultimate authority when it comes to you all,” I said as he tried to wiggle out of Cole’s grip. He stilled and glared, sulky expression drifting over his face. “You may come with us to see the dragons but you are forbidden from trying to tame on.”

“Yes, Sister.” There was a lot of venom there. Also he goes still when lying.

“Swear it on your honour as a Targaryen.” If I had thought his glare heated before… well, let’s just say I’m not his favourite sibling ever and leave it at that.

“I, Aemond Targaryen, do swear that I will only look at the dragons and not try and tame one.”

“Keep an eye on him, Cole. If Alicent will have my head should he get injured, I dread to think what she would do to you.” Cole looked as if he wanted to argue. Unfortunately, he knew I was right. So he put up and shut up. I gathered our party together and we entered. Helaena led Aegon over and chivvied him into taking one of my hands whilst she claimed the other. At first his grip was loose, as if he expected to want to run, but when the first of the dragon’s bellowing reached us it clamped tightly around my fingers.

I gave both hands a reassuring squeeze.

“Well met, Your Grace,” rumbled a large, bare-chested man. A few of the true dragon keepers, not the knights, gathered behind him.

“Well met, Franklyn. Might I introduce you to my beloved siblings. Prince Aegon, Princess Helaena and Prince Aemond.” Franklyn bowed low and a tad floridly than necessary as my siblings sounded off their greetings.

“Aegon, Helaena, Aemond. This man is responsible for the well-being of all the dragons in the Pit.” Franklyn gave me a grin and I returned it. He was not a man given to overly respectful displays or chasing after influence like a starving dog. He knew his business and he knew it well. A king and a peasant are the same to a dragon after all and spending so much time with the beasts tends to warp ones sense of view.

How could you bow to a man when you’ve seen what Franklyn had seen?

We followed him through the dragon pit. The air around us became hotter and the knights that had
elected to follow us began looking extremely uncomfortable bar Criston Cole and Byren Hastwyck. Shame, it would have been nice to see them squirm a bit. Then my siblings stopped dead as they saw the dragons. My own Syrax was closest, coiled close to the scarlet Meleys and Laenor’s Seasmoke.

Interestingly, Vhagar was absent.

Of the other dragons I knew by name there was only Dreamfyre, the small and slender dragon of Rhaena Targaryen. I’d seen her only twice before and despite being the oldest dragon in the pit, she was amongst the smallest if one ignored the hatchlings. She was listless, sleepy and seemingly carrying the great tragedies her mistress had suffered around with her still. I disliked being near her. It made my heart hurt.

“Where is the big one?” asked Aemond, crashing into Aegon’s shoulders. I tugged them both back and tried not to think to hard about how Aemond lusted after Vhagar and why.

“Lady Laena is the greatest flyer of our generation. She is often astride Vhagar,” I told them and Aemond actually pouted.

“I think she’s right!” Aegon declared, letting go of my hand. “If you have a dragon you should ride it lots.”

Syrax moved her head to look at us as if to deny that outright. My dragon very much loved her naps and non-strenuous activities like swimming and setting fire to the innocent marine life of Blackwater Bay.

Don’t ask how. I’m pretty sure water shouldn’t burn like that as well.

Honestly, anti-pollution measures may need to be instituted once I get the Throne.

“You’ve got a few unclaimed hatchlings over there,” Franklyn told my two older siblings. I followed his pointed finger. Five young dragons coiled together and away from the larger, claimed dragons. Aegon scrambled forward to get a better look at them.

Please don’t be my future method of execution. That would really suck.

Helaena followed him, her eyes wondering over the claimed dragons though. Syrax generously allowed a few nose scritches as she passed. Meleys slumbered on as usual which honestly didn’t surprise me. That dragon had laziness levels that Syrax could only aspire too. Seasmoke stirred with interest but seemed to calm when he noted neither Meleys or Syrax had responded to any threat.

I followed the two at a distance, Franklyn at my side. Helaena paused and turned to look at Dreamfyre. She was a pretty dragon. A beautiful blue swirled over with silver. I’d once floated the idea of my Mother claiming her. After all, she fit Aemma’s colour scheme perfectly. Mother had laughed it off. She had considered herself an Arryn and was very firm on the idea she did not want a dragon despite her heritage giving her the right to try for one.


“What do you know the story of Rhaena Targaryen?” I asked. Helaena turned her wide violet eyes to me and nodded solemnly.

“Lady Marya told me. She said one of her great aunts died of sickness serving Princess Rhaena.”
That’s one way to put Samantha Stokeworth’s death. Well navigated, Marya. Gold stars all around.

“She died lonely, Lady Marya said. I don’t want to die alone.” What?

“Morbid thoughts. Where has this come from, little one?” I asked. My sister raised her eyes to me, looking pained and then she shrugged. I took her hands in mine and bent down to her level. She was chewing her her bottom lip in a way that told me she was exceptionally upset about something. Franklyn moved away to shadow Aegon and give us some privacy.

“I think it’s the worst thing in the world to die alone,” she whispered. Feeling very much like I only had half the story I prepared my best big sister speech I could give on the matter at short notice.

“Everyone dies alone, Helaena. We can’t take people or things with us when we go. We just need to live our lives as well as possible so that the Seven may judge us worthy,” I murmured. Helaena smiled and then brushed away a single tear.

“Thank you,” she said and turned her back on slumbering Dreamfyre and ran after her brother.

What had just happened? Perhaps this was something to mention to Alicent. If she had gotten dying alone from someone else… on second thought, I should probably investigate myself. There will already be hell to pay if it turns out my Blacks have been harassing Aegon via child proxy never mind if they’ve tried Helaena too. I stood up and rejoined Franklyn.

Aegon had the hatchlings now and was now reaching out to touch one. It was pale in the gloom, although when I truly examined it I could see it was actually the palest blue. The dragon was young, he would not be able to fly for a few more years yet. He wouldn’t be confined to the Dragonpit as Sunfyre presumably was in canon instead allowed to spend his formative years in Casterly Rock. Would this render him more deadly than the golden dragon? Aegon wouldn’t have the benefit of a dedicated instructor like I had in Lady Rhaenys…

What would this change?

Finally, the hatchling uncurled itself from the defensive ball it had assumed and sniffed curiously at him before making a high pitched sound that was crossed between a gargle and shriek and moving it’s head further into Aegon’s palm. I let out an explosive breath of relief.

“Behind the horns, Brother, the soft skin.” I called and his hand sought it out. A moment later he let out the strange gargling noise one more and stretched his neck out as far as it would go, eyes closed in pleasure. Aegon’s face lit up with a smile I rarely saw. Across from him, Helaena was approaching a mottled green hatchling that wouldn’t have looked out of place in the neck. It barely came up to her knee but I was well aware of what even a small dragon could do to an child. I tensed without meaning too.

But I needn’t have worried. This one did not even show the slightest hesitation as it curled forward, brushing up against her dresses.

“You did it Hela!” cheered Aegon, startling both the hatchlings. I chuckled, I couldn’t help it. Baby dragons were kind of dopey looking, even more so when startled.

“Now you need to name them,” I pointed out as Franklyn bustled off unobtrusively to inform the knights of my siblings success in claiming their dragons. They examined their dragons thoughtfully.

“Frost!” Aegon pronounced happily a moment later. I forced a smile onto my face. He was eight, I hadn’t exactly been expecting him to bust out the Valryian but still, Frost? Then again, his first
dragon had been called Sunfyre.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful dragon.” He puffed up at the praise before he went back to staring at the hatchling. I chuckled at the look of awe on his face and turned to Helaena.

“You named Syrax for a Valyrian Goddess?” She asked eventually.

“Yes, I did.” Technically anyway. “Syrax, the valyrian Goddess of Victory.”

A painfully ironic name in retrospect. Then again, Rhaenyra had got her victory in the end. She’d died for it but Aegon’s line had ended with him. All future Targaryens were descended from her.

I examined the hatchling as it examined it’s new rider in turn. It wasn’t going to win any dragon beauty awards but I could tell that did not matter to Helaena. She ran her fingers across the dragons snout, eyebrows furrowed in thought before it cleared and she smiled to herself.

“Morghul,” she said finally. “I shall name her Morghul.”

In another time, a time that would not come to pass, a doomed daughter of Helaena Targaryen had named her own dragon that. And now I had the necessary knowledge to give context to such a name. Morghul, the Valyrian Goddess of Death. I shivered despite the heat but Helaena did not notice, too enraptured with her new dragon. I shook off the morbidity.

Helaena would not throw herself from a window, mad with grief, and should she ever birth a daughter, I would make sure she lived a long and happy life.

“Come, your brother will be excited to see your new dragons.” They followed obediently, comparing their dragons to the others in excited tones. When Aemond saw us he wriggled free of Cole and charged over. The three promptly folded into a small celebration of all things dragon. I stood to the side where both groups were visible. Cole’s expression was quite unreadable but I warrant there was some relief there. Had the Queen lost even one child today she would have him killed slowly as an opener to her rage.

“Can we show Mother and Father?” asked Helaena. I looked at the two hatchlings, each barely coming up to their new owners waists and tried to formulate a way to let them down gently.

“Perhaps…” I glanced towards Aegon, who blushed and then took a deep breath. “Perhaps you could take us on Syrax and the dragons could follow.”

That… that was pretty brave of him actually. I smiled and my smile was actually and honestly genuine as I nodded. Helaena cheered and even Aemond look thrilled at the prospect of a dragon ride. After all, only Helaena had ever ridden a dragon amongst the three and even then it was only once or twice on Syrax’s back. Syrax gave me a pained look at the thought of three excited children clambering all over her but she could suck it up. Being clambered on now may save her a fight in the future.

Franklyn was fast at saddling her at least even if I did require extra straps to stop anyone falling to their deaths. After they were all strapped in securely and Criston Cole had gotten over his third heart attack I urged Syrax forward. I took us up first, laying out all of King’s Landing below us. I could hear Aegon laughing pure delight and I couldn’t help but grin myself. Morghul and Frost followed and when Syrax let out bellowing roar they let loose their own, slightly less impressive, echoes.

I twirled my siblings around the city a few times before landing in the courtyard of the Red Keep, near the crowd that had assembled by a visibly pacing figure I could only assume was Alicent and
the waving blob I was labelling Viserys. Syrax landed gracefully, something I was glad for. I was less glad when Aegon immediately tried to hurl himself from the saddle in excitement whilst still being chained to me. Still, I got them free eventually. I suspect Alicent was too relieved to see all her children alive and not on fire to summon the will to be angry at the unsanctioned dragon ride.

“Father! I do believe Helaena and Aegon have something to show you!” I called as I freed Aemond and handed him to his Mother. Frost and Morghul landed and the crowd that had formed oohed and aahed in appreciation. Viserys’ split into a wide grin at the sight and Alicent even managed a small smile, looking faint with relief.

Your children are dragons, I thought at her as she met my eyes, now see the proof.
Frost and Morghul were the talk of the Red Keep over the next few days and my siblings soaked up the attention like flowers facing the sun. The only worrying note was Aemond loudly telling his Mother he hadn’t wanted a dragon from the pit anyway because they were small and he wanted a big one like Vhagar. The way his eyes lit up when he said that name sent chills down my spine.

The urge to get Laena her own dedicated team of bodyguards is rising. Not that she’d consider curbing her own flying habits. Apparently, she’d decided to begin a secret project of her own, hence the trips she’d been taking to and from Dragonstone.

And speaking of my erstwhile Velaryon allies…

“Are you sure about Alicent’s plan for Helaena and Aegon?” asked Corlys. I’d retreated to the Velaryon manse after the preparations for Aegon’s going away feast had become too tiresome and Alicent too overbearing. At least Rhaenys had stopped looking at me like I was personally responsible for both her children’s proclivities. With the way she had been acting, anyone would think she thought it a communicable disease and she the next in line to catch it.

At least Laena hadn’t told her of my desire in turn.

“I’m pretty sure. She may be uncomfortable around dragons at the moment but she worships the ground Jaehaerys once walked on. She’ll want the associations with him and Alysanne for Helaena and Aegon,” I told the assembled group.

“I understand why you believe this, Rhaenyra, but you have… hmmm, subverted Helaena. Will she risk giving Aegon a disloyal Queen?” Joffrey asked. Damn, that was a good point. The young Stormlander had his leg stretched out in front of the fire. Laenor was massaging it, flinching every time Joffrey grimaced in pain.

“This squiring business sounds like code for introducing the young couple and seeing if a match can be made,” Rhaenys said, eyes on the beautiful myrish rug Corlys had decorated the room with. Her husband nodded along with her in agreement.

“And the Lannisters are rich. It gives her the advantage when it comes to bribes now,” grunted Corlys after quiet reflection. “With her allies in the West, she has literal gold mine to bring to bear.”

I chewed my lip. Had I butterflied the marriage away or was this a play by Alicent? Make me focus on the Lannisters and try… try to what?

“Speaking of deep pockets,” Corlys continued. “What in the seven hells are you two spending twenty thousand dragons on at Dragonstone!? Gold statues of yourselves!?”

I winced. That was a lot of money and that was just the Velaryon contribution. Corlys had become increasingly overbearing about money recently. Viserys’ grant to rebuild Spicetown may have ensured the town would be rebuilt but he was losing a king’s ransom in gold in the meantime.

My defence came from a very surprising corner.

“Father, I’ve seen what the Wisdoms are working on. Techniques for more food and they are close to making clear glass reliably,” Laena said. Corlys raised an eyebrow at her and she flushed. “And also the new midwives and Maester Gerardys says he has a secret project in the works that will
“Midwives are for the smallfolk,” Rhaenys cut in. She wasn’t taking Joffrey’s, actually my, insistence that Laena employ one very well but Laena’s midwife had forgotten more about delivering babies safely than most Maesters had ever known in the first place. And she came equipped with forceps, the ability to read and write and Gerardys’ lessons in biology and emergency care.

Try and die on her watch, Laena, it isn’t happening.

“These aren’t some hedge witches selling potions for a copper at the village market,” I said, tartly. “They’re trained by my own Maester Gerardys to the standards of any Maester. They have the latest techniques and technologies. Plus, they have experience, something most Maester’s lack.”

“And what’s the point in having them? The smallfolk love you since you’ve unleashed them on Dragonstone, Driftmark and King’s Landing but I hardly see the Lords of the Kingdoms clamouring for their services when they all pay for their perfectly sufficient Maesters,” Rhaenys snorted.

“Well after the Heir to the Iron Throne and her beloved Goodsister employs their services I’m sure more than few Lords will be interested,” I said. “And from then on it’s a simple matter of watching the Lords connect the dots as to who has the more living wives and children.”

“And these new midwives will be trained at Dragonstone, bought from Dragonstone and loyal to Dragonstone, I suppose,” asked Rhaenys, accepting a glass of wine from Corlys. I shrugged, she already knew the answer. “Well, if they keep my girl well with these constant visits like the one today, I’ll grant they might be useful.”

“I trust you can justify the other experiments. Glass for instance? You’ll hardly beat the Myrish.” Before I could answer Corlys, Laenor spoke up.

“We don’t need to. We just need it to do the job it needs to and the much lower price we can sell for will do the rest. We’re closer to the Westerosi and Braavosi markets,” he enthused. “And Rhaenyra has agreed to set up the initial Glassworks on Driftmark under Velaryon control!”

“That is very kind of you, Your Grace,” said Corlys, struggling to keep the look of greedy glee of his face as he mentally counted the likely profits.

“Wait until you hear about the seawe-” A knock at the door spared Corlys the lecture his son was about begin and a young maid stepped inside, curtsying low.

“My Lords, there is a lady called Alannys asking to see Lady Laena.” Laena sat up straight at that and dropped a hand to the swell of her stomach.

“Yes, yes. Show her to my rooms, I will join her in a moment.” I watched as she stood up before deciding to be spontaneous. Laena blinked in surprise as I stood to follow her.

“You do not mind? I am… Laenor and I have begun trying,” I explained, ignoring how Rhaenys’ face lit up and Corlys looked so self-satisfied I wanted to slap him on principal.

“Oh… I suppose?” Was it weird? I bet she thought I was being weird. “Yes, very well.”

Alannys was an older woman, tall and spare with red hair fading towards grey. I liked her, she had a naturally friendly face lined with evidence of a life spent laughing. I suppose putting women at ease was a good skill to have her line of work. I was ushered into a corner whilst Alannys helped
Laena into a white gown for ease of access but also to cover her modesty.

Although I did catch sight of her uncovered stomach, a dark line disappearing into her small clothes and angry red stretch marks across her pale skin. Even pregnant the sight set my heart racing and I had to remind myself not to be a complete creep.

Then she was covered and laid back on the bed and I got to see my first antenatal exam in Westeros. Designed by Gerardys and his coterie of midwives using techniques I’d introduced. You know, despite his protests to the contrary, I think he’s fond of the group of women he’d gathered.

“Have you been eating the recommended foods?” Alannys asked as her hands brushed over the swell of Laena’s belly. I could just make out her her nodding, silver hair brushing over the white pillows. “That’s the leafy dark vegetables, fish and eggs, Your Grace.”

“Is there any chance of twins?” I asked, after a few moments of watching Alannys poke and prod. The woman glanced up with a raised eyebrow at the randomness of the question before meeting Laena’s eyes.

“I doubt it. She would have shown far earlier and been a lot bigger,” Alannys mused. “Do you have a family history of twins?”

“Well, we’ve had a few. Not recently,” Laena replied, looking unaccountably relieved. Damn, I had hoped for Baela and Rhaena, second and third best Targaryens after Rhaenys in the original timeline and I will physically fight anyone who says otherwise.

“How is the baby moving?” she asked as she moved across to the bag she had bought out one of Gerardys’ prized stethoscopes. With care, and ignoring Laena’s startled squeak at the cold, she laid it against the bump and listened intently before humming in thought.

“He is… excitable.” Laena’s hands clenched in the sheets and I tried not to smile at her wording. By all accounts her baby was quite the active one. Not that I’d ever felt the babe move. Laena had never invited me to and it seemed like the height of folly to push the point.

I tried to not to feel hurt, to take offence, but it was hard.

“That is good. Your babe was slow to quicken, strong movements now are a good sign.” Alannys told us, moving away to return the stethoscope to it’s place in the bag. “Although it is hard to hear his heart beat today.”

“If he is already uncooperative I dread to see his teenage years,” I told her with a strained chuckle and she just sighed. Alannys returned and tapped at her legs slightly before giving me a meaningful look.

“I need to do a pelvic examination?” Oh! I certainly did need to be present for that! I went to rise but Laena stopped me, surprisingly.

“I am trying for a child myself. I wanted to see what Gerardys had come up with first hand.” She chuckled at that.
“Well, I wish you all the luck, Your Grace. We midwives know who we have the backing of and any one of us would be honoured to assist with your pregnancy.” That was strangely touching. Wrong choice of words considering where she currently had her hands, maybe.

Laena jumped and let out a hiss of discomfort. Her hand tightened it’s grip on mine as she jumped again. Then she screwed her eyes shut tightly and set her mouth into a grimace, whole body tense. Her hand tightened on mine almost painfully and I gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Please keep breathing, my Lady. You’ll make it harder if you tense up.” I rubbed my thumb in soothing circles across her hand as Laena began breathing again, breath hitching every so often. “Nearly over, my Lady.”

“Thank the Seven,” she mumbled and then squeaked in surprise at something as Alannys finished up.

“Excellent, my Lady. Certainly no problems there.” Alannys departed with little fanfare after that and a few more basic questions about Laena’s diet. I found I very much appreciated her bedside manner as well as her friendly demeanor. No nonsense but not a complete arse about it. I made a mental note to ask Joffrey to assign her to me if Laenor and I’s adventures in DIY IVF ever got off the ground.

Oh gods, I can’t even decide if I really hope it does or doesn’t.

After she had gotten dressed and cleaned up, I followed her to the garden of the manse. We walked for a while, side by side in silence.

“How are your attempts with my brother going?” she asked quietly, so quietly I almost didn’t hear her.

“Well. Fine.” She pursed her lips then. “They are certainly happening.”

“You do not sound happy,” she pointed out, resting a hand on her own stomach. “I had thought… I had thought you waited because of Laenor.”

The strangled, high-pitched and hastily cut off laugh she received from me in turn earned me a very odd look.

“No. No, I very much did not. I… I am afraid,” I admitted. “I do not want to be some broodmare, spitting out children on command. I do not want to ruin my looks, my health. It will hurt, I could die.”

“Oh,” she said, staring determinedly at a bright flower. “I did not know. I am sorry.”

“Think nothing of it. I hardly went around telling people.” More awkward silence as we took our seats on a bench and watched a bee make it’s way through the flowers. It was still warm in King’s Landing. Mellos said that Autumn was coming according to the Maesters but I could see why southerners didn’t much fear the seasons.

“I can resign as your lady, if you wish,” Laena said finally, eyes still on the bee. I stared at her in horror.

“No. No, I very much did not. I… I am afraid,” I admitted. “I do not want to be some broodmare, spitting out children on command. I do not want to ruin my looks, my health. It will hurt, I could die.”

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“Why? If I have made you uncom-” She cut me off as she turned to look at me, eyebrow raised. I flushed.

“We have been distant. Very distant. I thought… I thought perhaps you would happier with my child and I further away?” My eyes flickered to her enlarged stomach, her hand resting over it
protectively. Did she think me a monster? One who would kill a child for the sins of it’s father?

“Your child has nothing to fear from me,” I said, tone frosty. She was still tense though, still watching me as if I might lash out.

“You have never been rational when confronted with evidence of that man,” she pointed out, her tone made of steel.

“He is not just a child of ‘that man’. He is yours and Joffrey’s,” I began, she opened her mouth to respond but I kept going. “That man will have nothing to do with the child and I am offended… offended you think that I would harm a child for his Father’s sins! What do you think I am? Completely bereft of morality!? You accuse me of being a whore and a kinslayer… what next!?”

She closed her mouth as I finished, looking taken back.

“I… I did not mean it that way,” she finally said. I scowled at her careful tone, like she was the one walking on eggshells and I the one exploding for no good reason. “I merely meant-”

“That I am petty, vain, arrogant, proud and angry.” She winced and I rose to my feet. “Resign if you want! I would not wish to bind you in service when you so obviously do not wish to be here.”

She caught my hand.

“Wait, damn your temper! Wait!” I stopped and looked back as she struggled from the seat. “I did not mean any of this! I just did not wish for you to be uncomfortable! We were friends once Rhaenyra, I want to be again. I care for you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” I mumbled as she took my other hand. She snorted.

“I did not mean to imply you were a… a whore or a kinslayer. I did not. And I lo- I came to like you knowing your faults, Rhaenyra.” She brought my hands up and laid them across her stomach. Beneath her skin my cousin, and wasn’t that a strange thought, kicked away. “Let us be close again. I miss my friend.”

“Alright… alright. Friends.”
Aegon had changed since he’d tamed Frost and the change was so radical it was obvious. Instead of sulking and cowering he beamed in pride as Lord after Lord came before the high table to congratulate him on taming his dragon and on his squiring with the Lannisters. It was amusing to watch Alicent preen over how ‘regal’ her son was being only to remember that it was due to my actions and upset herself five minutes later.

She’d been even more upset to learn none of my Blacks had children amongst the little terrors that had been picking on my dearest younger brother. Mostly War Hawks, a few Doves and most surprisingly a Green Lord who was currently on his way home. Honestly, if Aegon were not already promised to Casterly Rock, she would have to send him away after that. The optics of her chosen candidate hiding in his Mother’s skirts whilst she unleashed hell on mere children were damaging the Green cause more than anything I could do.

Still, he was going away. He would be gone from court for many years until he was knighted. We’d be lucky to see him here in King’s Landing once or twice a year when something especially grand happened or whichever Lannister he was given too came by for business. I was startled to find myself worrying about him. It was hard to resent him when he thanked me for the fifth time for helping him get Frost, or showed such outward love for the gifts I’d gotten him that one would be forgiven for thinking they were the only gift he’d received.

Apparently, he really, really liked the various materials on dragons I’d forced Laena to hand over. Honestly, I had no clue why she had brought those to King’s Landing but I was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Despite all the progress I’d made with Aegon, it was still galling to see Alicent’s Greens returning to prominence as Viserys grew lax in his annoyance. I do not know what took place between them after I was sent away but with my return it had healed. Or perhaps he assumed that with Aegon’s fostering the Green presence would naturally die away as their chosen candidate was no longer within the city. That his taking his family in hand would end the two factions sooner rather than later.

Or maybe I was just grouchy. Lord Gerold was leaving and given I had annoyed Jeyne recently, I had no clue who’d she’d send to take his place.

“You seem discomfited, Rhaenyra,” came Alicent’s false concern and I gritted my teeth before directing I smile her way.

“Merely thinking, my Queen.”

“Hm, a habit you still haven’t broken I see,” she said, pleasant smile at odds with her disapproving tone. I became aware of a lot of eyes on us and plastered my own smile into place.

“What ever do you mean by that? Thinking?” I asked and she snorted, taking a sip of her drink.

“No. The habit of going off into your own head. You spent Queen Aemma’s entire lecture after your taming of Syrax looking as you were somewhere else entirely.” I honestly had not expected her to remember that. It had been twelve years ago after all. “And you barely acknowledged the Prince’s praise.”

Ouch. Still bitter.
“I think we’ve established what Daemon’s praise is worth by now,” Still no one had claimed his bounty. I think we had all expected every rogue on the island to turn on him the instant it was announced but it had only been a week. There was plenty of time for a knife to find his heart or guts yet. She snorted and then rose.

“Join me for a walk in the courtyard?” The eyes of the court, and Viserys, were on our backs we left. Criston went to follow but a small wave from Alicent saw him fall back. Ha, I hope Viserys had seen that. It would get him thinking even further about where Cole’s loyalty’s were. When we were outside in the nights air and we both had assured ourselves of privacy she turned to me with a look of rage.

“Why is the whore not dead yet?” she growled and I didn’t need to a mind reader to know who she was referring too.

“I’m not quite sure what you mean?” That did not mean I was going to play ball and throw Laena under the proverbial bus. Alicent would eat her alive. She snarled and then turned away, pacing back and forth.

“You can not fool me as easily as you can fool Viserys. The babe is his, I know it and you know it. Now why is the whore and the bastard still alive!?” she all but shouted into the night. So Viserys had not told her. My begging must have worked. Then again he was hardly going to hand his stick to Alicent now he’d finally found it. I took a deep breath to reply but she wasn’t done. “We had an agreement, Rhaenyra. Why have you not secured your Father’s agreement to burn those islands!?”

“Because to do so is suicide! You think if four dragons turned up to fight him I wouldn’t be his first target? And Laena carries Joffrey’s babe, not Daemon’s. Even Viserys knows that!” I spat.

“You always say you will aid me in fighting him and you always betray me!” she hissed right back. I knew what she was on about before she’d reached the end of her sentence.

“You and I both know Viserys wanted that betrothal, that it was always going to happen. You saw an excuse and took it,” I replied, trying to keep my voice low. Alicent stared at me. “Do you think that I would still call Laena a friend, still protect her, if she knew he’d maimed me and bedded him anyway?”

Technically true is the best kind of true, remember? The question took the wind out of Alicent’s sails and she actually seemed to be thinking that over.

“I do not trust her. I do not trust him around pretty young women.” Annoying but expected. Alicent had been very in love with Daemon, once upon a time. She’d have sacrificed her chance at having Viserys for a chance at Daemon. He’d first met her when she’d been thirteen, the new Hand’s daughter, fresh to court. He’d watched her grow, flirted and seduced her and then finally bedded her just two years later.

It was disgusting. I’d whined and wheedled and generally been a little shit but Alicent had been in love, she certainly wasn’t going to listen to a six year olds opinion. It had taken a year to go bad but the first signs of problems came almost immediately after Daemon left his first post as Master of Coin. Then he’d left his post as Master of Laws. Both resignations because he was bored.

Viserys had given him Commander of the Guard then and he had forged his Gold Cloaks. I would have to purge them in time because the Gold Cloaks had been made in Daemon’s image. They were greedy, corrupt and hedonistic. Canon knowledge tells me they’ll never improve and canon knowledge tells me that if he snaps his fingers, half of them will likely run to his side.
I can not afford that if I ever do have to strike at him.

Daemon’s drinking and whoring and association with ‘Lady’ Mysaria had gotten back to her eventually. She’d done what any spoiled child would do when threatened by a woman they have power over. She’d sent her Father’s men to kill her. Their corpses had been delivered to the Red Keep the next morning, a grim tableau of stab wounds and desecration. Daemon had mocked Otto in open court for it and his relationship with the Hand’s daughter had ended there and then.

And now… now he had given her every reason she ever needed to carry out her revenge. As angry as Corlys was, I would warrant Alicent had still managed to send more assassins than him.

“Alicent, the child is Joffrey’s. I care little as to your opinion on him though. I am returning to the feast before Father sends a search party.”

“Wait!” I paused and glanced back. I watched as she worked her jaw in a fury before giving in to whatever argument she’d been having in her head. “I did not thank you for helping the children. Aegon and Helaena are much happier. Aegon is… improved and Helaena does not seem to have as many nightmares now.”

“Did you ever find out what she dreamed about? She would not tell me.” It was curiosity that drove me to ask rather than concern.

“She would not tell me either. She told Aegon she dreamed of fire and dragons warring though.” I felt my stomach drop and it was sheer practice that kept my smile in place as we made our way back inside. Alicent made her way back to Viserys’ side and dropped a small kiss to his temple as she sat down. I made my way back to my seat beside Laenor and dropped into it, feeling like the queen of all idiots.

Dragon dreams. Did the Targaryens not see themselves as dragons in their dreams?

I glanced around the room, eyes seeking Helaena. She was at Aegon’s side and happily chatting away to him and his gaggle of friends. As if feeling my gaze she looked up and met my eyes, smile brightening before noticing my aghast expression. Then she looked downcast and wriggled her way free of the press of children to approach me. She was almost hesitant and afraid so I did the first thing that came to mind.

I opened my arms for a hug and she hit my shoulder a few moments later, clutching at the shawl I was wearing with a fierce grip. I ran my hand through her hair and rocked her back and forth.

“Why did you did not tell me?” I murmured.

“It hurts. If I tell people they change things and it hurts,” she whispered back and I could feel her tears on my bare shoulders. Next to me, clearly able to hear us, Laenor looked startled before forcing an indulgent look onto his face, as if this were nothing more than normal sisterly bonding.

I love that man sometimes.

“Please don’t ask. Please. It hurts and it makes them worse.”

“You told Aegon something, didn’t you? Can you tell me what you told him?” she tensed and drew back, mouth set into an unhappy curl.

“Two dragons, Black and Green, and they fought. And everything burned. They both died and turned to stone and afterward… afterward all the dragons turned to stone.”
“And he thought that was…” She nodded, miserably.

“He said Mother had already told him you would kill him. That my dream just made it real. He was so scared and afterward the dreams changed. And they hurt.” I pulled her close again. Laenor gave me an aghast look but clearly did not know what to say. He’d thought me to have Dragon Dreams once upon a time. I suspect learning a child of Viserys’ truly did have them…

My eyes met his again.

“Nobody can learn of this. Not even Joffrey,” I said in a low voice. He looked like he wanted to argue but then cast another glance at Helaena and then his face softened. Joffrey would want to use her and Helaena was eager enough to please… I did not want to hurt her for garbled look into the future.

“You have my word.” She extracted herself from my shoulder and wiped at her eyes. I noted Viserys’ gaze and shrugged at him. He looked unhappy but left me too it. Likely he just attributed it to a childish argument and Helaena running to her bid sister for comfort.

“Is this where all the talk of dying alone came from?” I asked in a low tone. She nodded.

“I used to see my death… I was so alone. I was older and I had children but they died. And Aegon was dead. And you were. Mother wanted to crown me instead of your daughter. I didn’t want to betray you. You’re the only one who never turns on me,” she whispered and my heart hurt for a child forced to see her own death.

Not her canon death though. This sounded far, far worse.

“I took poison.” Laenor gave me an aggrieved look. One I returned easily. No child should have to see that, to know that.

“It’s okay though. I stopped it. It hurt but I stopped it.” She raised her eyes to me and I wanted to hold her again. They shone in determination I’d rarely seen from anyone before. “I chose Morghul. Not Dreamfyre. I have Dreamfyre in those dreams. If I have Morghul, they can’t come true.”

“Seven hells,” breathed Laenor, looking as if he could go punch a dream he absolutely would. Maybe it was because we both had babies on the brain but… well, we were feeling protective. I worried at my lip. Had Helaena known in canon? Had… had that girl walked on through her life eating to numb the pain of what she knew was coming?

Helaena curled closer to me, pressing her face into my shoulder and brought my arms around her once more.

I only realised was weeping when Laenor brushed the tears away with a sad smile.
I woke that night whilst the moon was still high in the sky to cramps and blood. It set me weeping in loss, even though I had no clue why. I hadn’t wanted a baby, I still didn’t want a baby.

Why was I so upset that it hadn’t succeeded? Why did I worry I might never succeed?

If people could do it by accident, why couldn’t I do it on purpose?

Laenor and I laid together in bed for a long time afterward. He held me close as I sobbed into his chest and murmured reassurances into my ear. I could tell he was unhappy too. He had been so full of hope. He wanted a child. Now that the possibility had been placed before him, one of his own, he wanted them desperately. He’d brought that damn sword with him to King’s Landing. The wooden one we’d played with as children, ready to bequeath it to firstborn whether that be daughter or son. He’d whispered as such into my ear as we’d worked to create one. I don’t think he’d dared hope until that first night. I think he still thought there a trick somewhere.

He understood though. He told me that it did not matter, that we had so much time. So why did I feel like failure? Why did I feel like I wasn’t enough? Why am I crying when I don’t want this!?

A knock on the door broke us out of our despair some time in the mid-morning and before I could give into the urge to scream at whoever it was to leave, the door was opened and Laena slipped in. I wanted to cry again at the reminder her swollen belly gave me but instead settled for burrowing into the pillows and trying to control my tears. Laenor’s hand rested on my back as he addressed his sister’s concerns about the fact neither of us had risen yet.

“We… she began her monthly bleedings.”

“Oh! I see. Um… would you like me to tell Sera we aren’t needed?” Staying in bed all day was a bad idea, so I raised my head and sighed heavily in defeat. To stay and weep in loss would see me facing more rumours than I could shake a stick at. Too emotional to rule, too weepy to rule…

I couldn’t handle Sera at the moment though. I just couldn’t. She would joke and try to cheer me and I did not want to be cheered. In truth I did even want the constant reminder of Laena but at she would be silent about the matter.

“Tell Sera to leave. Do not tell her why. I’ll probably need your help to get my bloody dress on.” I’m Exceptionally poor choice of words there me, well done. My internal voice was bitter and mocking and I hated how dramatic I was being about it all, hated that it hurt this much.

“On my own?” At my look of annoyance that I threw over my shoulder she just frowned. “Very well, I’ll attend to Her Grace most diligently. As long as she doesn’t mind looking like she was dragged through a hedge backwards.”

I charitably ignored that and clambered free of the bed as Laenor did the same opposite me. He began throwing on his clothes in such a haphazard manner that I wanted to wince and go and correct them. Which wouldn’t do much good. He had grooms that would help him dress into fresh clothes when he reached his own rooms and the so called ‘walk of shame’ was anything but.

Once I’d gotten through the ordeal of dressing with Laena and her miraculous ability to tie her own fingers together whilst lacing dresses, I retrieved my correspondence and settled down to read through it. Jeyne was still adamantly ignoring all mentions of marriage, simply acting as if I had not mentioned it at all. I could read the annoyance in her other words though. The way she refused
to tell me who she was sending to King’s Landing in Lord Gerold’s stead and the way she threw Jessamyn’s name into every available sentence she could. That and she was sending Maris back, apparently.

Maybe I should have Falena search her for Arryn-sponsored knives.

Dragonstone spoke of the increased excitement for the crops and the prototype seaweed farms using ropes and small scale flooding. It was grounding. I found myself growing invested once again, mind moving from pregnancy and the lack of it as I read about the seaweed farms. Jerrett loved his job and often went into vast amounts of detail when a breakthrough was made.

Sadly, they still hadn’t discovered the true nature of ‘the purple crystals’. I made a mental note for Joffrey to find a sufficiently tractable Wisdom to give them a shove in the right direction. Iodine and Penicillin… well, it would certainly revolutionise Westerosi medicine. I made another mental note to see if the Maester Gerardys had seen any look in locating some of those old First Men ointment recipes.

Still, the letters only took up part of my day and I was soon sat behind my desk with little to do for my day-to-day tasks. I did not want to go to court, to feel small under all of their stares today. So I decided to look into a matter I’d been playing with ideas for since I’d set my heart on the Throne. Symbols.

Curious things. In Westeros, of course, they were sacrosanct. So much so that the Targaryens taking their own House colours and words brought many who otherwise would have resisted to their banner to their side during the Conquest. The idea of the dragons had kept the Targaryens in power long after they’d died out through it’s sheer legend and mystery.

It had kept the Starks in power in the face of the Red Kings and it kept ensuring said Red Kings would return until their or the Stark line was ended. It was what gave the Gardners so much control over the Reach and ensured the Tyrells would be centuries out on achieving such control, if they ever could. Lack of a decent symbol was the reason the Tully’s barely held the Riverlands everytime there was a war and why Arty Arryn had associated himself with a First Man hero despite being very very proud of his Andal heritage.

I needed to capitalise on that. Create my own version of England’s St. George so to speak. Which meant a trip to the Red Keep’s impressive library to research myths and legends. I could use Aegon to be fair. Or even Rhaenys. Visenya if I was feeling cheeky. Hell, Jaehaerys was a contender despite being King in living memory but they were Targaryen. I wanted something more in line with the Winged Knight.

Something that was here before us that we could point to. Let no one try and convince you I just wanted to read about myths and legends George hadn’t gotten round to putting to paper because it would be a filthy lie, any reports that I spent a good few hours absorbed in dusty books written by Maesters long dead about legends completely unhelpful to my cause are completely unfounded. The unfortunate truth was all that I could fine regarding dragons, knights and anything helpful was Serwyn of the Mirror Shield. The man who’d slain the dragon Urrax, so subtly named for the Valyrian God of Destruction. I returned the last book that promised to hold anything helpful to one of Mellos’ helpers and went wondering about the shelves. In Runciter’s time this had been his ultimate domain and I’d quite frequently gotten myself banned.

Never for long on Queen Aemma’s watch, she had delighted in our shared love of books.

Now Mellos was in charge he was a lot less careful about what went where. If Runciter were not
already dead, he’d have a heart attack at the dust and haphazard stacking of the books with complete disregard to the system he had painstakingly mapped out over the years he’d spent as Grand Maester. I hadn’t read for the sheer joy of it since before I’d discovered my Black Powder did not work.

Perhaps I should go back to doing so. Perhaps I should follow Aemma Arryn’s example and read to my children every night.

No. Can’t think about that.

I followed the shelves round to the section on geography, listlessly flicking through a treatises on Ghiscar, the Dothraki and Braavos. None of which should be next one another on the shelf. There were even a few books about Yi-ti, I noted. Laenor might enjoy them. Perhaps they might even have something new in them that he had not known before. It was adorable how he lit up when the topic was mentioned. Almost like he lit up when High Tide was mentioned. Or ‘The Book’. When he stepped away from his mask as the perfect Prince-Consort and became just Laenor, absolute dork.

He’d make a good dad. Better than Viserys and Corlys combined.

Damn it brain!

I scooped up a fair few and made my way towards the exit with my prizes only to run head first nearly into Lord Jasper Wylde. He bowed politely but it was clear he’d rather not be here or acknowledging I held any kind of power over him as the heir.

“My Lord, how does the day find you?” I asked from behind my stack, summoning a pleasant smile.

“Well enough, your Grace. I am hard at work on the Harlsbury case for your Father,” he said, eyes flickering towards the books as if praying for an escape. The Harlsbury case was an annoyance I could do without. It all came down to wills and how much power they should have.

I knew Alicent was behind this getting shunted up to Viserys. By all rights the Tully’s should have made a ruling. Even Daemon’s ongoing inability to die wouldn’t stop her capitalising on things.

“Truly a complicated case. I do not envy your search, my Lord.” He pursed his lips.

“Well some tasks are more complicated than others. I still believe it should be the nephew’s truthfully.” Not the bastard daughter whom Harlsbury had trained to be his heir.

“And the will of late Ser Harlsbury counts for nothing? Even though the nephew is a drunkard and a wastrel?” Jasper scowled at that.

“I believe the law should be followed in regards to all such cases.” Bold. Very bold. Let’s do this.

“Which law would that be? Andal Law? You and I both know that Andal Law is not the only law, even if it were a well-defined system. There is that of the First Men to start, that one is even more ill-defined.” When Jasper hesitated I decided to bait him further. “And, of course, there is the Iron Throne.”

“The law regarding the Iron Throne is, of course, different to that of the accepted Andal succession law,” he said slowly, stressing the word accepted. It must frustrate him that for all succession was supposed to be clear there were so many incidents of it not being that it was no small surprise Renly had gone for the Throne in canon. It was a mess. A mess I would have to deal with as Queen.
Regarding the Iron Throne though, my side argued that the succession law was that of the nominated heir regardless of gender and the Green’s argued it was a male-only title following primogeniture. Both arguments have some grounding in precedent. Mine in Valyrian law in which each house had a Designated Heir that was nominated by the current Head of House.

This Heir could be any male or female member that bore the family name and possessed a dragon. Even the tiny amount of literature Aenar had managed to bring over with him is littered with female Heads of House, men choosing their brothers or an especially talented cousin.

So it’s simple, right? Surely we can just take that concept and copy and paste it across to Westeros. Well, actually no.

Because the Lords Freeholder didn’t actually own land in the way Westerosi lords did, they didn’t have vassals in the way Westerosi lords did and most importantly there were forty families of the Lords Freeholder. Each of which had their own dragons and each of which had a vested interest in preventing open rebellion from non heirs in other families.

There were also the Valyrian concepts of disinheritance, elected governance, cadet branches, academia, religion and legitimisation which massively differ to how Westerosi understand those concepts. Okay, I thoroughly admit I’m getting off track here.

The point is, the Valyrian inheritance system is always going to be a bitch to get working in Westeros. It will need adjusting and tweaking but it’s a good foundation and miles better than me dying in dragon flame.

Their chosen form of succession, on the other hand, had it’s roots in First Man law. Not that a whole bunch of those very, very Andal lords wanted to admit it. Instead they argued that the Council of 101 had set a precedent to bar female inheritors. Which unfortunately for them danced very, very close to treason by insisting that a King could not set his own laws if a group of Lords had already a made decision.

There’s also another very good reason that they probably don’t want to admit it’s First Man law and that’s because the woman who ‘loses out’ on inheriting is supposed to be looked after by the male it favoured. With some of the examples in the past this mostly works out to marriage i.e. Baelon technically should have married Rhaenys which would have been possible because under First Man law a female claimant wouldn’t be married until after it had passed to the male claimant. First Men were smart about their marriages and keeping their claims together, I’ll give them that.

I hate law. I just hate it. It’s a mess of customs and common law and whilst Jaehaerys may have decreed it be the same everywhere he’d hardly put the work into getting rid of some of the more extraneous and complicated bits.

Regardless, the whole thing was a mess and someone as clever as Jasper Wylde knew that well. Baiting him so was purely for fun though, I knew damn well I had no hope in all Seven Hells of bringing him to my side.

“Well, that is a matter for the King,” I said, waving my hand and sending up a wave of dust.

“Indeed. We all await the day that King Viserys makes a ruling on the actual laws of succession surrounding the Iron Throne.” Touche. The fact that Viserys had not done so was a pain in everyone’s arse to be honest.

I left him the library in peace after that having made my point and gotten a bit of pettiness and spite out of my system. My rooms were empty, likely Laena and Sera’s misadventures this morning had
reached my ladies ears and they were hoping that by not being in my direct line of sight they would avoid my eventual raging.

I want to say I’m not that bad but… well, Joffrey had to tell me off for doing precisely that so I doubt I had a leg to stand on really.

Petty, vain, arrogant, angry and proud echoed in my mind and I fought a scowl.

I stashed the books in my desk to give to Laenor and dropped onto my couch and just allowed myself to enjoy the peace and quiet. The library may have taken up a good few hours but I hadn’t actually got anything done beyond confirm that Westeros had very few legends about dragons.

My body ached and I decided I’d at least touched base with Jasper, even if it had been to needle him, so maybe a nap would not be an issue.

Sleep claimed me quickly after that.
There was no Great Sept of Baelor in King’s Landing yet and whilst the Sept that would eventually be forged into such by the eponymous ruler was there it was no where near grand or great enough to draw much of the nobility. So any self-respecting worshipper of the Seven in King’s Landing with access to the Red Keep would usually simply attend services there. After all, going to the Sept on Visenya’s Hill was tantamount to admitting you couldn’t get into the Sept at the Red Keep.

Which was precisely why I was not allowed to get out of it.

So every seventh day, I would take a seat between Laenor and my Father and listen to Eustace drone on. He wasn’t a very good speaker. He had a tendency to get stuck in loops, repeating his point endlessly until even the most devout and true followers were squirming with boredom. He was also annoyingly conservative and I had never forgiven him for preventing Viserys from having Daemon executed in the aftermath of that night. No man is more accursed than the kinslayer my arse. Daemon would have killed Viserys in a heart beat and you know it!

Daemon who, annoyingly, still was not dead. Losing men, ships and islands at a truly astounding rate but still very much alive. Alive and desperate. An animal was at it’s most dangerous when cornered. It felt like everyone was holding their breath and waiting to see where the chips would fall.

At least Eustace had the good sense to keep his head down and keep his nose out of politics. I had no doubt he was firmly in Aegon’s camp, despite the Seven-pointed star saying nothing about succession issues, and was probably already creating a narrative that cast me as the villain. Don’t think I’ve forgotten it was you who made up the only details that have ever cast original Aegon in a sympathetic light, Eustace, because I haven’t.

I’m out of sorts and taking it out on a man that no longer exists.

After my bleedings were over, Laenor and I had gone right back to trying. Every other night he would present himself in my room, we’d both engage in acts that left us feeling thoroughly humiliated and then curl up together and try and forget that our pride was in tatters. Every morning I would get up, scrub myself clean and go about my day. Still nothing. My next bleeding had come, lighter than usual and gone much faster. I’d gone into such a rage over it that only Laena had braved being near me. She’d relayed Joffrey’s tantrum lecture three times before I’d felt sufficiently enough like a child to stop.

Laena, who only seemed to grow more beautiful with every passing week. Laena, who’s growing belly seemed to mock the lack of my own. Laena, who watched me with such intensity whenever she thought I was not looking. I couldn’t decide if I should slap her or kiss her and get the inevitable broken nose that would likely follow over and done with.

Then Lord Gerold had presented himself to me. He was expecting his first grandchild and would be returning to the Vale as soon as Jeyne sent him his replacement as the Lynderly girl his son had married was close to confinement and he did not want to risk missing it. I’d known it coming, he’d been saying so since my nameday celebration but an actual set date of his departure hurt all over again. Jeyne still wouldn’t tell me who she was sending in replacement. Still angry I had brought up the marriage business. We’ll see if she remains angry when I start my procession and turn up with four fire-breathing dragons and a meaningful look.

I need to calm down. I do. It feels like I’m on edge. I’ve had an entire month of peace where things
have been going well. This is normally where something terrible happens like more war in the Vale or Daemon popping up and setting fire to something I like.

I tuned in to catch the end of Eustace’s rant... sorry, sermon about not honouring the Seven in all aspects of your life and only when you visit the Sept. Then Viserys took my hand and I took Laenor’s and we all sang a final hymn to the Father and were finally, finally free to disperse.

“Your Grace, may I speak to you for a moment?” Or not. I turned to face Eustace with a smile on my face and sent Laenor on ahead. Laenor was not Eustace’s favourite person and the Septon often liked to deliver nasty little barbs disguised as the ‘wisdom of the Seven’. I think it genuinely upset Laenor to some degree in ways the normal attacks did not.

“Of course, Septon, I always have time for servants of the Seven. May I praise you on the excellent and well thought out sermon you delivered today?”

“Oh! Well, thank you, Your Grace,” he stammered, taken aback by the false warmth in my tone. “I have not noticed you in the Sept much recently.”

“My own prayers have been to the Mother. I have found peace in doing so more privately,” I lied. He nodded thoughtfully at that.

“Well, I shall certainly pray to the Mother on your behalf as well,” he lied right back. “But on the topic of the Mother, I wished to speak to you regarding these... midwives.”

Ah.

“Certainly, Septon Eustace. I’m rather excited about them myself!” His smile flickered. I has expected some groups to react badly, of course, but the Faith being the first to voice objections was a surprise. I’d have thought the Maesters would have been the first.

“I do wonder if these women are truly... appropriate?” he began. I let my face show confusion, a perfectly sculpted expression that I’d been told made me look like a brainless idiot. Perfect for throwing people off of their train of thought.

“How so, Septon?” I watched as he tried to formulate his argument. The Seven-pointed Star and the Faith in general had no original sin moment. No one thing to point to in the text books and say ‘this is why women suffer in childbirth’. In fact, the act of childbirth was supposed to be considered as valuable as the act of Knighting.

“The pain of childbirth is a sacred thing. Sacred to the Mother. Is it really appropriate to bring these devices and potions into the matter?” he asked finally. “The natural pain of birthing is the duty of the woman as the bleeding on the battlefield is the duty of the man. The raising of children is the duty of the woman as the burden of ruling wisely is the duty of the man.”

Wow.

“Forgive me, Septon Eustace, but I do not see where in the Seven-pointed Star that such a thing is written.” He tilted his head back, nostrils flaring. “That there must be pain? Only that it is a woman’s duty to bare the babes. A woman’s duty to raise them. A woman’s duty to guide them. As equal in importance as the man’s duties.”

“That is not precisely true,” he said finally, through gritted teeth. Haha, nice try, but I’d driven old Septon Victor half mad asking questions about the Faith. “Be that as it may there are still those who believe dulling the pain of birth is... unnatural. The Mother granted women that pain so that you might better know the joy of your babes.”
“Surely it is a matter of using the gifts the Smith has granted us?” I replied, trying a different tact. Eustace snorted and turned to the statue of said Smith. “Surely one might argue that two men in armour hitting each other with swords is unnatural? After all, we are hardly born with blades and plate. Instead the Smith gave us the secret of steel so that we would be better able to follow the Warrior. Surely this is using gifts the Smith gave us so that we might better honour the Mother.”

He was silent for a long time and then his mouth twisted in annoyance. No doubt I’d find street septons preaching against the midwives anyway. Unluckily for him, those street septons were going to get torn apart. My midwives were very popular for obvious reasons. Obvious reasons being that most people, surprisingly, didn’t like losing the women they loved in the birthing bed or losing children to entirely preventable causes. Combine that with them openly working with Marya’s many charities and… well, anyone saying a bad word against them would not be preaching to the choir, lets put it that way.

In King’s Landing anyway, I reminded myself. I could be as smug as I liked that Septon Eustace wouldn’t be able to smear me in the capital. He could still have me smeared everywhere else. He was the High Septon’s creature in truth, unlikely to bring an opinion to the table he hadn’t been told too. If the High Septon did dislike my midwives and this wasn’t just Eustace interpreting his orders creatively, I could be about to have every Septon from Old Town to the Twins bad mouthing me to whoever would listen. The worst part is, I had no real way to stop them. No in with the Faith. I certainly couldn’t order every Septon that said a bad word regarding myself to the death, I’d be Maegor with Teats again and all my hard PR work would have been for nothing.

Fine, Marya’s PR work.

How much of this was Alicent’s doing?

Laenor was still there when I got out, looking worried. After he checked I was okay, we mounted horses and rode to his Father’s manse in near silence. He’d gotten good at telling when I was worrying over something and when I wanted to vent or not. Right now, I wanted to speak with Joffrey. Joffrey whose grip on the Seven Kingdoms only seemed to tighten with each passing day. Joffrey who sometimes seemed to know what I was thinking before I’d even thought it.

Joffrey who loved his Silver Prince and would die to put his children on the Throne.

The Velaryon manse was starting to become a little bit like home. It felt welcoming, even if I did run the risk of Corlys’ hovering and whining about heirs. Rhaenys had clearly been here a while. She was dozing on one of the seats, bare feet roasting before the fire and her boots strewn across Corlys’ prized carpet. She still had not totally forgiven her husband but things were thawing once more.

As for her children… I could not tell. She seemed warm with them but when she was alone she was given to melancholy, or so Joffrey reported. She spent most her time at Driftmark, separate from them all, managing it’s rebuilding.

Not for the first time I wondered what she would have been like as Queen. Would she have been kind, wise and fierce? Or would have spent her reign battling against men who thought they knew better? Becoming slowly more embittered until she resembled nothing more than canon Rhaenyra?

Would she have taken Laenor and Laena any better as Queen? I have no doubt she’d have married the two, which was an odd thought. I’d heard whispers that she’d wanted them to marry after Viserys had married Alicent. I never thought I’d think this but I’m glad Corlys won that argument.

Speaking of her children, across from her was her daughter, hand stroking across her enlarged belly.
and looking completely enraptured by the flames. I felt myself tension drain from my shoulders at how domestic it all seemed as we both entered. They stirred in response.

“I thought you would arrive with Laena and Joffrey?” asked Rhaenys, stretching and yawning.

“She had to speak to Septon Eustace and now she’s angry,” Laenor told her as he bent down and suffered a kiss on the cheek from his Mother.

“Hm, leave the Septons to their preaching. It’s a bad idea to get too involved with the Faith. At least Viserys will be back at the Keep now.” Huh? Why did she want to see Viserys?

“What happened now?” came Joffrey’s wry voice from behind me as he slipped in having clearly just been changing into his more comfortable work wear.

“Nothing! Just Eustace sticking his nose where it does not belong,” He sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “He questioned me about the midwives. I’m worried it may be the start of interference from the Faith.”

“That does not bode well for when we begin rolling out other changes,” he stated, unhappily.

Laenor pulled him into the couch next to him and drew him in for a tired hug. Attending the Sept with Eustace left everyone the same. Strangely lethargic. Maybe it was the secret power of the Faith, the ability to dull even the sharpest mind.

“If they have any sense they’ll stay out of it,” growled Rhaenys. “Stick to their preaching.”

“They’re Hightower men. The Most Devout at the moment are nearly half Reachman,” Joffrey replied then muttered almost to himself. “This is too much. How is she doing this?”

“What?” asked Laenor. Joffrey gave us all a stricken look and for the first time I noted he was hardly his usual cool and composed self. He looked stressed and tired.

“You know I established… businesses in King’s Landing. When I first started it was easy… too easy I thought!” Laenor and I nodded along as Joffrey ran and agitated hand through his short-cropped hair. “Then someone began tracking me. Playing with me almost, a dance. They stepped forward, I respond and they step back. I was having to respond to them and now… Now there’s someone else. They’re different to the first, less playful. This one is directly attacking me. I’m having to… diversify to a greater degree. I don’t know if I can deal with them and the Faith.”

He looked miserable and I felt sorry for him. He’d hardly been trained for the role of Spymaster, he’d been making it up as he went along. Before I could reassure, Laena spoke up.

“Another player,” she mused, surprising us all. “Daemon?”

That made sense and if it were Daemon there was only one candidate for his hand in all this.

Mysaria.

Mysaria was dangerous. Dangerous and willing to slaughter any who stood in her path. She’d done as much to Hightower men when she’d been a dancing whore and they servants of the Hand of the King. What would she do if Daemon let her off the leash?

“Mysaria,” Joffrey repeated slowly. Connections forged themselves in my mind.

“Mysaria. Damn that whore, no wonder he still lives, if she is still dragging his worthless carcass out of trouble.”
And then Laena surprised us all again.

“If… if this Mysaria is Daemon’s and Joffrey is yours,” she started carefully. “Who is Alicent’s?”
There was no sign of the sun, I noted mournfully, as I pulled on my riding clothes. Even on a normal day I would not rise until after the sun, even if I did rise earlier than most. I groaned as my fingers refused to pull the laces of the breeches properly and cast another longing look at the bed. Across from me, Laenor pulled his shirt over his head, looking just as tired as I was.

We’d been invited to stay in the manse the night before. By invited, I meant told point blank by Rhaenys that we’d be staying so that she could ensure we’d rise before dawn the next day. Today was apparently what she’d been badgering Viserys about. Whatever it was, he’d agreed readily, which was always a worrying thought.

Viserys and Rhaenys agreeing on things did not happen often.

I wasn’t sure what was going on with those two. She definitely approved of his shiny new backbone but she hadn’t been appreciative of his almost but not quite hostility to her family. Viserys saw her children as seahorses, she saw them as dragons. He saw them as just another faction and she saw them as moving to their rightful places in life.

Did she resent him for sitting on her throne or just the fact he was doing such an awful job of it?

Oh and there was the fact her and Alicent were only ever two seconds away from gutting each other at any given time. Her sparse visits to the Keep were an endless source of stress for Viserys, moving the two women around so they might never meet by accident. Alicent may enjoy baiting Rhaenys about her lost title, her children and her husband but Rhaenys was probably the only person who could get away with physical violence in turn, something Viserys knew well and was eager to avoid because Rhaenys was also the only person who would break Alicent’s nose if pushed too far.

It was with leaden feet that I trundled downstairs, Laenor at my back. Both of us were yawning frequently and so widely that my jaw was beginning to hurt and from the way he rubbed at his face his jaw ached just as fiercely. Blegh, curse morning people.

Actually, this wasn’t even morning.

Rhaenys was waiting for us, eyes bright and alert. Her daughter was in a similar state of awake to us though. Surely Syrax, Vhagar and Seasmoke could overwhelm Meleys and let us all go back to the glorious land of sleep?

“Ah! There you two are, thought I’d have to get one of the servants to drench you through to get you rise!” Rhaenys said, smiling widely. Sadist. She was enjoying our misery. I dropped into a chair and briefly entertained the thought of laying my head on the table for five blessed minutes.

Laenor, saint of a man he was, poured us both some juice and slid the full cup towards me. Rhaenys cackled at our subdued manner.

“Eat up, you’ll need a good hearty meal to get you through today!”

“What is today?” Laenor asked, grabbing at the various items strewn about the table.

“This business with dragons got Viserys and I talking. You three have never received any real military training on dragon back. Hell, Rhaenyra and Laena do not have an martial training whatsoever!”
“That’s not true, I can use a bow,” I mumbled, pillaging some pear from the bowl of fruit. Rhaenys gave me a speculative look as I bit into it… and then immediately spat it back out. “This is awful! Who did you buy these from?”

“Not my job to buy the fruit. Corlys is probably trying to cut costs again, I’ll tell him to switch back. I didn’t know you could shoot? Have you tried from dragon back?” Rhaenys asked. I dropped the slice of pear and opted for something safe… like bacon… Mmmmm, much better.

“No,” I said, in between mouthfuls of delicious, delicious bacon. “In truth even Helaena is better than me but Ser Langward is a slave driver. I’m better than average.”

“Might be something to work on,” mused Rhaenys as she washed her own breakfast down with some sort of fruit tea. “Laena, feel like learning to use the bow?”

The girl in question looked at her swollen stomach doubtfully. She was still over a month off her due date but earlier births had happened. I doubted she’d been eager to fly today, not even Gerardys had been eager to have her flying around but Rhaenys had insisted that a dragon rider could not be denied the sky. Apparently she’d been flying with Laena until the moment she’d taken her chamber.

“I doubt I’m in the state for it Mother,” she said dryly, a rueful smile on her face.

“I meant afterwards, dear daughter. If this whole business does end in war… well, even if it does not you must be able to train your children in how to deploy a dragon in battle.”

“It is not a simple matter of pointing the front of it at the enemy and letting nature take it’s course?” I joked. Rhaenys snorted.

“You joke but if you do it that way eventually you’ll be shot down. You only need look at my namesake for that lesson.” I blinked at that. “She was no warrior and, without Visenya and Aegon by her side, in no rush to use proper tactics. A true attack on a castle should leave no opening for a scorpion to come anywhere near the dragon’s face!”

“And what is the proper way?” I asked, genuinely curious. The Queen Who Never Was, and how she hated that nickname and little shit who’d given it too her, placed her empty cup on the table and smiled.

“You’ve studied the Conquest?” I nodded. “Aegon’s attack on Harrenhal is how you are supposed to attack a fortified position with a dragon. By flying as high he did and diving he rendered their heavy siege weaponry useless. Rhaenys flew straight at the walls of Hellholt. The shot may have been a lucky one but she still put herself needlessly at risk.”

If I ever attacked a castle with Syrax I would definitely keep that in mind. After we had all finished up we took a ride to the Dragonpit and retrieved our mounts. Syrax seemed as unhappy as I was to be woken so early but at least she got to sleep until after the sun had risen.

We followed Meleys in formation. Laenor and I behind her and Laena behind us, forming a diamond shape. She took us to a stretch of deserted beach and signalled for us to land. She was taking this very seriously. I knew why, of course, she was dancing round it but the only reason we hadn’t trounced Daemon yet was because only Rhaenys had any hope of matching him. Laenor and I may have seen battle but that had been against foot soldiers. Laena’s only claim to battle had been flying in defence of Bloodstone against the one or two ships that slipped through the net and attempted to hit the harbour.
“I hope that woke everyone up!” Rhaenys called as we moved in close. “Now! First lesson! Laena, what’s Vhagar’s greatest weakness?” I risked a glance at the massive beast, scarred from her various fights. The biggest living dragon. It was hard believe she had any weakness whatsoever.

“Her speed. Even Syrax, the youngest dragon here, can out fly her,” Laena answered quickly. Rhaenys snorted but did not indicate either way if Laena was right.

“How would you fight a dragon like Syrax?” she asked. Laena gave me a hesitant look.

“I would… I would use Vhagar’s armour to my advantage. Bring her in close and beat her with strength,” she said. Rhaenys nodded once but she didn’t seem all that happy with the answer. I saw Laena hesitate, trying to figure out what she’d said wrong.

“Make note Rhaenyra, Syrax is fast but one blow, true or glancing, from a dragon like Vhagar will knock her out of the air. How would you fight Vhagar?” Feeling vaguely like I should be actually taking notes, I forced myself to consider the giant beast as a possible enemy.


“Excellent! If I’ve told you two once I’ve told you a thousand times! A dragon greatest weakness is it’s rider!” Laenor and Laena both looked down at their feet, almost perfectly in sync with one another and I covered my laugh with a cough. Rhaenys pursed her lips looking at them both. “A rider can not survive dragon fire. A rider does not have the instincts of a dragon. A dragon will follow it’s riders commands even if it does not believe them the best course of action. Scare or kill the rider and the dragon will be useless.”

When none of us answered she gently rapped her son on the head with her knuckles.

“I would not know what to do if anything happened to you that I could have prevented. Any of you. We might have had… difficulties but you are my children. Not even the Stranger himself will take you from me,” she whispered. “And that goes for you too, Rhaenyra.”

I swallowed, throat tight. In another world she’d outlived both of her children. Lost one to childbirth and one to murder. Had she really been reckless in that fight with Aemond and Aegon? Trapped in a cunning ambush? It was cruel thing to outlive a child, never mind two of them.

“Now, since I have grilled the girls it’s time for you, my son!” Laenor groaned. “Meleys and Syrax, Vhagar and Seasmoke… explain the difference.”

“Meleys and Syrax are pit dragons. They’re smaller and pack less of a punch but they’re faster and more manoeuvrable in a fight. Seasmoke and Vhagar are not pit bred. They rely on sheer power and thick armour,” he explained looking relieved when his mother nodded along with him. I had known that at least.

“Good! When we get to the practise side of things I’ll be pitting Syrax against Seasmoke and Meleys against Vhagar in the first half. Then we’ll switch. Seasmoke vs Vhagar and Syrax vs Meleys.” Ouch, that match up. I was well aware I was the least skilled rider here.

Actually, until Aegon and Helaena had tamed Frost and Morghul, I had been the least talented rider in Westeros. Behind even Laenor who wasn’t that far behind Laena in skill. I wasn’t sure if Daemon could outfly Laena but Rhaenys was the most talented without question when it came to the technicalities. In a fight they would be much more evenly matched, I had been assured, but I did wonder how much of that was… well, assuming Rhaenys worse in a fight because she was a
Rhaenys' lecture dragged on until the sun was high in the sky as she went over the different manoeuvres and tricks a dragon could use to defeat one bigger than it or faster than it. She warned us about fighting from a grounded dragon and promised to teach us what she knew about doing so in case the worst came to the worst. What made my heart hurt most was when she taught us how to escape from a fight you did not want to be in.

I think Laenor understood too if the look he gave me was any indication.

Finally, after a small picnic, she let us mount up once more and take to the sky, running us through different exercises and commenting on how sloppy we all were. It took me back to the days I’d have her teach me just for the pleasure of getting away from Daemon. Razor sharp tongue and all.

It was interesting to note that both Laena and Laenor used the whip much less sparingly than Rhaenys and I. More differences between the types of dragons, I supposed. I did well enough against Seasmoke and at least managed to avoid a complete humiliation. It was still clear that I had a lot to learn. I ‘died’ way too many times for comfort. Even if Daemon dropped dead tomorrow and never brought war to Westeros, there was still the Dance. I had over a decade to make sure I was good enough.

The less said about my aerial duels with Meleys the better. Rhaenys stomped me into the dirt and she stomped me into the dirt hard. At least I could take solace in the fact that a heavily pregnant Laena was still coming out victorious more often than not against her brother.

The sun was setting when Rhaenys called a halt to our training and we landed once more on the beach. My stomach was grumbling loudly when we crowded in close.

“Good work. This is going to be a regular thing, I want to work out new manoeuvres with you and perfect old ones. I also want you to get some experience in with night flying. Rhaenyra, we’ll work on your bow somehow. Ranged attack from dragon back will be useful! And both of you girls will be getting fitted for armour.”

Laena just sighed at the tone that brooked no argument. I found myself quite excited, I’d always wanted wear armour and yet had never been able to justify it. My status as princess only went so far, apparently, and it stopped at anything not ‘princess-y’.

Despite that, I was extremely grateful to finally fall into bed. We’d elected to all head back to the manse even though, technically, I was supposed to be at the Red Keep whenever possible. Part of Viserys’ crack down. Oh well, if he complained I’d set Rhaenys on him. That would teach him.
“If Jeyne thinks she’s not getting an earful about this she is sorely mistaken,” I muttered as we waited at the dockside for Lord Gerold’s replacement. Beside me Laenor rubbed my arm soothingly but said nothing.

I’m grouchy, sue me.

I’d woken up feeling like death warmed over and cursing Jaehaerys for his propaganda that Targaryens never got ill because I was feeling particularly awful. The rotting, fetid mess that masqueraded as sea water was not helping, it was sending my guts squirming and my throat turning with nausea. If I find out Alicent messed with my hygiene training again and I’ve got food poisoning I don’t care what Viserys says, I’m strangling her and having done with it.

Ugh. Please let me get through this hello ceremony without vomiting on the Vale’s new representative. Please.

Although if it’s Gawen Corbray I’ll reconsider.

The Arryn ship docked and it felt like time was a crawl as the they prepared to disembark everyone and unload the cargo it had brought. My heart leapt to my throat as Rhea Royce picked her way down the gangplank and made her way towards us. She looked as sick as I felt but she at least had the excuse of the sea not agreeing with her. I made my way over, carefully, and wrapped my arms about her shoulders, sinking into the embrace.

“Aunt Rhea. It is good to see you,” I mumbled, voice further muffled but the fabric of her dress. Her hand rubbed my back soothingly and then she pulled away, eyeing me critically.

“And it is good to see you too, niece, but-” She broke off and glanced about at the small crowd, and Maris Grafton, on the dock before shaking her head. “Come, show me to the Red Keep. I think you and I need to have a word or two.”

The litter ride was unpleasant. Very unpleasant but Laenor kept up an endless stream of chatter the entire way and it did somewhat work by keeping my mind off of it. At least until we got to the Red Keep and Rhea paused just too long when greeting Laena. I winced as Laena did the world’s worst job at keeping the mortification off of her face, further tipping off my incredibly perceptive aunt that the rumours surrounding this bedding were probably true.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Why is my head so foggy? I could have sent Laenor ahead on a horse, he hated the litter anyway, and gotten Laena out of sight…

Once we were all seated Rhea cast a critical eye over me once more before pursing her lips.

“You look awful.” I only narrowly avoided snorting juice. Why does she always wait until I’m drinking to spring these things on me?

“She’s been peaky for the past couple of days. She refused to see Mellos though,” Laenor explained and Rhea raised an eyebrow of accusation.

“Do you not remember what I said about not being invincible?” she asked archly and I flushed, before muttering an apology. I wasn’t going to tell her it was her own damn castle that had made me ill last time. “Although given what happened last time you saw a Grand Maester…”
I held my hand up at the reminder. Her lips thinned. She was likely another person sending an endless stream of assassins after Daemon. If he died, she could remarry without having to jump through hoops for an annulment. That he still wasn’t dead after all this time was galling.

“Laena offered to bring Maester Gerardys from Dragonstone. If she continues to be like this, I’ll send my sister regardless of Rhaenya’s opinion,” Laenor assured her as if I wasn’t sitting right next to him. Rhea shrugged and took a drink of her wine.

“Speaking of which…” There was an edge to her voice that I did not like. It made my teeth itch, I was genuinely fond of her, she was my aunt but…

“She’s a married woman.” And then cursed myself because I was a stupid idiot who’d just given the entire game away with one protest.

“So it’s true. Alicent wrote to me to inform me of what she’d done.” Fuck that woman! Seriously!

“Alicant wants you to expose her,” said Laenor as my brain promptly presented me with zero ideas to escape this problem. “Daemon is poison right now, if you expose Laena…”

“Hmmm, I have a mind too.” Upon seeing my stricken expression she rolled her eyes and sighed, looking suddenly tired. “I knew what Daemon was like long before you, niece, and I do recall owing Alicent payback. Do you truly not care it’s his bastard she carries?”

“It’s her child too. It’ll be Joffrey’s as well. Joffrey will raise the babe to be good and kind and clever and Daemon will get nothing. He won’t even know Daemon is his father,” I said.

“Oh! Too good!” She laughed. “A child of his precious blood will be raised by a mere Andal! He’ll call a mere Andal Father!”

Oh yeah, Rhea was really spiteful when she wanted to be.

“You must allow me to shower your sister’s child with gifts, Ser Laenor. I want him to know I know. I want to know he’s sitting on those rocks, surrounded by murderers and rapists, with the knowledge his Bronze Bitch sees more of his son than he ever will!” Laenor merely smiled in a smug manner and sat back.

“That can be arranged. Please do accept my deepest apologies for the way my Sister behaved however.” Rhea wiped a few tears of mirth from her eyes and sighed.

“If I demanded apologies from every girl he seduced I’d drown in a sea of paper. Still… his burning of Spicetown makes much more sense now. I wondered what could drive him to such madness. He has always wanted children… true valyrian children, mind you. No child of mine would have satisfied him.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Rhea.” She gave me a thin smile.

“Do not weep for me, Rhaenya, I got a perfectly serviceable niece out of him,” she said, smiling gently. It still didn’t sit right with me, that she should be so shackled to the man. I resolved to speak with Viserys, surely he wouldn’t argue against an annulment now. I rubbed at my face and sighed. Laenor laid a concerned hand on my shoulder and coaxed me into looking at him.

“Thank you,” I said and he nodded. He understood. He’d saved me a lot of embarrassment and neatly disarmed a trap Alicent must have been sitting on for near a month now. Which meant Alicent must have known Rhea was coming. Which meant Jeyne told her… or maybe Jeyne told Viserys?
This illness is hitting me harder than I thought if my brain is running this slow.

“Niece, you truly do not look well,” said Rhea gently, reaching over and placing a cool hand on my forehead. “No temperature, not a repeat of before then?”

“Rheanyra, perhaps you should get some rest. I’ll accompany Rhea to her introduction at court.” It was a testament to the nausea twisting in my guts that I went. My rooms were once again occupied by my ladies, Maris evidently right back to playing the card shark and fleecing her fellows out of their silver if the small pile she’d already acquired was any judge. I staggered past them and Alyse rose, catching me by the arm.

“Your Grace, I think you may require a Maester,” she said after a moment of studying me.

“An upset stomach, I think,” I replied, before groaning as my stomach tried to turn itself inside out. “I’ll be fine with some rest.”

“Targaryens do not get sick,” Maris cut in, surprising me. She seemed concerned enough. I noted the others were half out of their own chairs. My ladies. My loyal ladies.

“Maris is right. We Valyrians don’t get sick, not like you do. One of you send a message to my Mother to fetch Maester Gerardys from Dragonstone.” I’d never heard Laena’s voice so decisive and commanding. Neither had my ladies. “And one of you help me get her to bed.”

“I’ll tell Lady Rhaenys,” Sera Strong promised. Her twin pulled my arm across her shoulders and helped me walk forward. I wanted to protest that my balance was completely unaffected but I was sort of convinced that if I did I’d throw up on her, which was not a nice reward for her kindness. Falena joined us, evidently remembering that Laena had the grace of a newborn foal when it came to unravelling my clothing.

Maybe it was a testament to how sick I was that the thought of Laena unravelling my clothes did nothing but make my stomach turn faster.

All three of them managed to get me into bed as waves of nausea began to hit me. Marya was quick to bring a chamberpot forth and Falena and Alyse were quick to reposition themselves outside of any potential splashing. Smart girls.

“I’ll stay with her until the Maester gets here,” Laena said quietly but firmly. A dismissal.

“Forgive me, Lady Laena, but should you be alone with a sick woman? You have your babe to think of,” came Maris’ worried voice from beyond the doorway. It was odd to see her worried, normally she liked her wicked smiles and rage-inducing smirks. I hoped she’d enjoyed her trip to see her family and that she was in a better mood now.

“Valyrians do not get sick,” Laena replied in a hard voice as she coaxed me onto my side and pulled the chamberpot directly below me. The other three gave me a bow and left and even three seconds from meeting my breakfast again I wouldn’t have missed the doubtful looks on their faces. Laena settled behind me and pulled my hair free of it’s braid, stroking her fingers through the kinks.

It was nice.

“My dislike that woman already.” I wanted to ask who but I also really didn’t. “Maris. She was the one that started those rumours Mother heard about you and Joffrey according to Sera and Alyse.”

Of course she had. Memories of her amusement at my defence of Joffrey rose. Damn her. I should
send her back to Jeyne. My stomach rolled and I whimpered without meaning to.

“Mother will be here with Maester Gerardys soon,” she whispered. “Try to rest until then.”

Rest did not come easily. I lay on the bed, Laena stroking my hair as nausea rolled fiercely in my gut until eventually I retched and finally, finally brought up whatever had been troubling me. Laena held me close, murmuring reassurance in my ear and trying to coax me into drinking at least some water. Although I could not drink, it was a blessing to finally have some release.

At least until the nausea returned and I was left sobbing over the bowl as it tormented me once more.

Laenor, summoned by a distraught Alys arrived at some point, joining his sister making me as comfortable as possible. Rhea had apparently insisted he attend to me with the full intention of harassing Viserys about something in the meantime in order to distract him from the moment he inevitably received news I was ill and attempted to mount a full assault on my quarters in worry.

It felt like an age or more when the door finally opened and Maester Gerardys made his way through, accompanied by one of his faceless, ever changing assistants. When he saw me his eyes went wide and he immediately set his bag down and stepped forward. I interrupted his poking and prodding twice to retch.

“Has she eaten today?” he asked after while.

“Breakfast. She ate a breakfast of bacon, sausage and a boiled egg,” Laenor dutifully reported as Laena nodded along.

“What has she drank?”

“Just juice, I believe?” Laena said, glancing at Laenor for confirmation. I did not miss the look Gerardys shared with his assistant then.

“She has had nothing since she began vomiting?” His voice was little strained.

“I tried to get her to drink water but she refused,” Laenor explained, then fumbled to pull my hair back once more as I retched again, bringing up only burning, stinging bile.

“Make up a flask please, Edmund.” He bustled off. I finally extracted my head from the pot and noticed Rhaenys hovering by the door looking stricken. “Well, I do believe congratulations are in order!”

I glared at him through running eyes, brain chewing over that announcement until it came to it’s horrible conclusion.

“You can’t mean…?” came Laenor’s voice, somewhere from behind me. Warm hands came to rest on my shoulders as understanding trickled through me, leaving cold fear in it’s wake. A warm smile grew over Gerardys’ face and then those hands pulled me backwards and into a fierce hug, tears of happiness trickled into my neck.

“A baby, Rhaenyra. We are going to have a child. I’m going to be a Father!”
I woke up up to a storm of nausea and groaned unhappily, pulling myself upright using the headboard. It creaked and groaned at my weight startling awake Maris who had been sleeping in a small truckle bed next to my own. Since Gerardys’ very pleasing, not at all upsetting news my ladies had not left me alone. Alys and Sera joked and chattered, determined to stop my brooding. Marya liked to talk about my baby and how it would be such a fine thing to be a mother. Falena had taken refuge in religion, quoting parts of The Mother at me. Even Maris was trying her best, taking care to discover who had irritated me that day and heaping scornful insults upon them in solidarity.

Only Laena understood that what I really wanted was to be alone, some piece and quiet to figure out where the hell my life was going, to have my mental breakdown without feeling like I was somehow a failure. That I wanted to weep to myself about the fact that I was pregnant and people knew and there was no escaping it. She’d mastered figuring out if I wanted to be held or not, letting me tire myself out until sleep claimed me. I found myself dreading the day she would leave me, when she would birth her own babe. They’d already stopped her from sleeping at my side.

Reactions from elsewhere in the court were more joyful and less considerate. Laenor had been almost glowing with pride after the realisation. Rhaenys had flitted into the room and pulled us both into tight hugs of joy… and narrowly avoided being thrown up on in turn. Corlys had arrived later and clapped his son on the shoulder and given me a nod of approval.

Which was Corlys for ‘I’m so proud I may invent billboards to tell the world how proud I am’.

Viserys had not stopped singing my praises to anyone who would sit down for more than five minutes and listen. He was so happy to have a ‘grandson’ on the way. Goodness knows what will happen if he gets a granddaughter. Helaena had been odd. Happy but distant. Jealous, Alicent had said during the one conversation we’d managed to have civilly. Alicent was not pleased with the news but she had at least banned Aemond from seeing me which was something of a mercy. He’d only grown more hateful and angry after Aegon’s departure.

Speaking of which, he’d sent a letter to Viserys to say he’d arrived and it was nice there. He’d even included a line or two to let me know that there were rooms of gold and they were as cool as they sounded. It gave me hope for our future relationship that he’d remembered my attempt to cheer him and specifically asked after me to boot.

“Your Grace, are you well?” asked Maris with a yawn. Nausea made me groan and Maris moved quickly, seizing a chamber pot and laying it out. When I was done she handed me some of Maester Gerardys’ concoction he insisted I take after every vomiting spell. It was disgusting and hard to keep down but he insisted and Alannys had backed him up. As I’d discovered, that meant serious business.

“Do we have much scheduled today?” I asked, as I finished the cup and the urge to expel it had died somewhat.

“His Grace asked that you present yourself in court if you feel well enough.” I glared at the empty cup. My pregnancy had all but halted the factions various schemes as everyone waited with baited breath as to just what I would produce. A girl and I would be inundated with those wanting a new lady and the prestige of a match with a Princess. A son… A son was a different story.

If I had a son, various people I will not name may just wet themselves in happiness. As it was, I
had other concerns than Court. As an expecting mother I was now being frozen out of all levels of governing that Viserys had previously been happy to give me access to. It was frustrating to rely on Corlys to be my representative at Small Council meetings. I wasn’t even showing yet and already he was treating me like an invalid.

He said that I had a duty to build my child a household so that we would not be scrambling after the birth. Alicent had agreed and slyly offered her own services that I had politely rejected. I had been unable to dodge his demands I have a Kingsguard once more, annoyingly, and now I had Steffon Darklyn trailing after me as Criston Cole once had.

“Your Lady Aunt said that she might visit.” That was a slightly better option than dealing with my fatheaded Father.

“Yes, send a message to Lady Rhea please, Maris.” We had plenty to discuss. Marriages and Jeyne Arryn’s ongoing stubbornness. Maybe Rhea would be able to tell me just how deep in the shit I was with her. “Where are the rest of my ladies today?”

“Falena and Marya are attending to their charities, Lady Laena is with her Mother and Alys and Sera are spending the day with their Father and Brother.” I didn’t envy them. I’d die if I had to spend a day with Harwin and his motormouth. A year had not improved him by any real amount. He still watched me with covetous eyes and the announcement of my pregnancy had been like a shot to his heart.

If he went the way of Cole I was going to scream. Especially given that the City Watch was his in totality now. A loyal City Watch would be a useful thing to have.

“What does Your Grace desire to break her fast with this morn?” asked Maris. I felt a flicker of guilt. She looked exhausted. All my ladies were exhausted. Spending the night on an already uncomfortable camp bed and then aiding me whenever my stomach decided to go on strike. I’m pretty sure none of them had signed up for this. I tilted my head back to consider Maris’ question.

“Bacon and… ugh, fried mushrooms.” My appetite had been strange. My customary chilled fruit no longer seemed all that appealing and I hadn’t been able to stomach pear in over a month. “And a boiled egg.”

Maris went off to flag down a passing servant and I let myself relax a little and run my hand over my stomach. As far as Gerardys could tell I was not terribly far along, just over a month by his estimate. I’d protested that I’d bled but Alannys had informed me that it happened in some women. In thirty-five weeks I would have baby. In just eight months I would have a baby. Not even a year. I’d be nineteen, barely a month past my nameday…

Maris’ return startled me from my rising panic.

“Do you wish to dress to break your fast or take it here?” she asked, a yawn splitting her face again.

“Help me get dressed, Maris, then take my bed. I’m sorry to have had you up last night.” She shook her head ruefully.

“I may have cursed Jeyne Arryn when she sent me to you but never let it be said I shied from duty,” she told me. The headache that had threatened earlier was building up behind my eyes.

“But you found spreading rumours to be acceptable?” I snapped and Maris looked at her feet, ashamed.
“Truly, Your Grace, I was being awful. I had no idea Lady Laena and he were involved.” At the look on my face, the words she was going to follow that with died in her throat. “I apologise, Your Grace, it was far below what was expected of me as one of your Ladies. It will not happen again.”

When I did not answer her she made herself busy, fetching my clothing and laying it out for the day. I kept my jaw clenched shut. Maris’ idiocy had nearly cost me my alliance with Rhaenys. Who knows who else heard those rumours and believed them? Getting dressed was awkward as Maris desperately tried not to catch my eye, not willing to start the previous argument once more.

I’d be sure to have Joffrey turn her life in King’s Landing over. If I could have any excuse to send her right back to my pain in the arse of a cousin I was taking it.

“Young Grace, your food is here!” Maris called. She herself was eating sweetened porridge that made my stomach spin at just the smell. Still, I forced it down and shovelled my own breakfast into my face with less appreciation for table manners than I’d normally give. If it bothered her, she didn’t showed it. I did note she’d arranged for some Ginger tea for me, which did nothing to cool my temper. Ginger was supposed to help settle my stomach but I found it completely disgusting. I’d told all my ladies a hundred times not to give it to me and yet they still insisted. It drove me up the wall.

That I was finding my temper short already should be obvious.

“Should I record this morning in the book Alannys gave you?” Maris asked, breaking into my thoughts. I wanted to screech and throw things. Another reminder, another thing to feed my rage.

“If you would. I would hate to disappoint Alannys,” I ground out. Alannys was very concerned about my morning sickness. And my eating. And my drinking. She seemed to be under the impression that if I was left to my own devices I’d whither away and die. So she’d recruited my ladies to record everything I ate and expelled so that she could keep a better track of my health.

Oh, how I hated the fact that I’d been wrapped in cotton wool from the moment Gerardys had happily announced I was expecting. The Crown Princess could not be given any chance to harm herself! So now I’m stuck twiddling my thumbs all day instead of ruling, like I was supposed to be!

Rhea arrived soon after and Maris took the opportunity to flee my obvious ire. I felt childish in one moment and ready to storm Viserys on his damnable throne and demand he remove the restrictions on me in the next. Doing so would be a terrible idea, of course, I didn’t have to be a psychic to know that.

“How are you this morning?” she asked, dropping into a chair by the fire grate. I sat opposite her and took a few deep breaths. Raging at Rhea would earn me nothing, she was genuinely supportive, genuinely interested in me and not just the babe.

“Well enough,” I said after I’d gotten my temper under control. “Tired. I had Maris up in the night. How are you?”

“Getting to know the court. Lord Gerold outdid himself here, he has left quite the role for me to fill!” she said cheerfully. “Have no fear, even in your absence and Lady Jeyne’s irritation the Vale lords are busily working with your Blacks.”

“How annoyed is Jeyne?” I finally brought myself to ask. Rhea chuckled.

“When I left she was allowing your name in conversation again.” I winced. “I do wonder what you did to prick her so?”
“I… I suggested she might start seriously looking into marrying,” I mumbled finally under Rhea’s hazel eyed look. The Lady of Runestone just sighed in response.

“I would have thought you would know better. She was due to marry my brother once. She’s your age, Rhaenyra. My brother was older than I.” I winced again. “He tried several times to bring her to the Sept as a child. Imagine that? My brother was twenty and two and she just six the first time he tried it. It was only the Queen’s intervention that prevented it the first time.”

I swallowed the bile that entered my throat at that knowledge. Every time Yorbert came up in conversation, I wanted to go back in time and punch him in the throat just a little bit more. I only realised I’d said that out loud when Rhea threw her head back and laughed.

“Oh! Indeed, you and every other lord in the Vale. Had he not died alongside Willem, his power would have been stripped from him eventually.” At my quizzical look she gave me a small smile. “Willem was my brother. His Father’s son. It makes me happy both would be horrified that I ascended after them. He… he would not have been a kind husband to Jeyne, I fear. He would not have understood her friendship with Jessamyn.”

Her voice was soft at that.

"I have become rather fond of Jeyne these past few months. I must thank you for that. I had thought we would remain estranged until one of us died." I smiled, despite myself. Rhea had adopted yet another young woman. No doubt Jeyne was thrilled by that.

“Speaking of terrible marriages that are the fault of your Father, what are you going to do about Daemon?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I wondered when you’d bring that up. Do you know why I never sought an annulment?” she asked, cutting me off. Bemused, I shook my head. “Because it hurts him so much more than me to be married to his Bronze Bitch. I wear that name like a badge of pride because it is a testament to how much it pains him to be bound to me.”

“But he is not bound to you anymore. He is ‘king’ of the Stepstones. All he needs to do is make ploygamy legal and find a suitably drunken Septon,” I reasoned.

“That is very true. You wish for me to push an annulment now? Spite him with what he prized most now that it is useless to him?” I could tell by the way her eyes were sparkling I’d appealed to her spiteful side.

“I would support you in it,” I told her. She smiled happily, eyes going distant for a moment. “You could be free of him. Take a man of your choice. One last bit of spite for Lord Yorbert.”

“An heir for Runestone that isn’t that fathead Gunthor. An heir without that infernal princeling’s blood like my father so hoped. An heir I did not have to sacrifice my dignity to obtain…” I must have looked puzzled at that because she shook her head. “It is not a tale for young ears such as yourself.”

“Alright, I will assume another unforgivable crime on Daemon’s part.” She smiled again. Not even the past horror of his actions could dim the hope I was beginning to see in her now.

“Yes. Support my annulment before Viserys and I shall support you to Jeyne.”
“… the lady did reply she was from Lys, and not Dorne! To which our fat septon pointed out she
would be from anywhere he wished now that she’d taken his copper!”

At the risque joke, half the court erupted into laughter whilst the other half looked completely
scandalised. I merely rolled my eyes. Mushroom’s jokes were hardly funny or that unpredictable as
they were nearly always about sex or naked women and these days, almost always included a ribald
nod to the Three Daughters or Dorne.

If he were being extra brave, which was not often, he’d made mentions of a pirate king. A pirate

Not that I am frustrated or anything.

The nasty little shit bowed at the reactions, a smile lighting up his face. It baffled me greatly as to
why Viserys kept him around. He’d never struck me as the lustful type many in the court were.

I did not think he even had a mistress, although from Joffrey’s cringe-inducing reports, there were
whores in his bed occasionally. Speaking of which, said spymaster was trying to subtly get my
attention.

Since the revelation that there were now three major players in King’s Landing, he had doubled
down on his work. Laenor had reported many times that he’d been forced to drag Joffrey away
from his desk or become worried about his protection as he left at all hours to coordinate those
loyal to him personally.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t a whole lot I could do beyond stripping him of his power entirely. The
gods knew I could not afford to do such a thing, not now, not when I was due to have a baby.

My hand drifted to my stomach. Seven weeks. Was it healthy to count them so? As if every week
that ticked by was another tick towards my doom?

I excused myself from Viserys’ side as he sat enraptured in another tale regarding the fat septon’s
adventures and slipped out, Joffrey in tow. Steffon followed, giving me a stiff nod as I waved for
him to stay outside of the room Joffrey and I eventually ducked into. He was worried, I noted. He
was always worried these days but this was different.

“We have a problem.” Wonderful!

“Go on.”

It did not do any wonders for my nerves that he didn’t immediately answer, I assure you. Instead,
he focused on his feet, projecting shame. “Joffrey…”

“It is Qarl Correy. He has returned.”

Excuse me? I thought I’d headed this one off?

“You did not kill him?” I hissed. His head jerked up and he met my eye.

“I did not know! I did not know why it was so important he not be near Laenor. I thought you
were… reacting badly to his unfaithfulness,” he sulked. “I merely had him put on a ship and
informed he was not to return.”

His tone had started out defiant but ended with a note of something I couldn’t identify. “His ship would have crossed the Stepstones.”

Horror bloomed in my gut and nausea forced me to drop into a handy chair.

“Where Corlys would have wondered why I wanted him gone and likely left him there when Laena fled. Probably imprisoned if he admitted to being Laenor’s lover,” I reasoned, feeling the blood drain from my face.

“And your uncle freed any man who swore to follow him,” confirmed Joffrey. “What is a disgraced knight when he’s hiring slavers and pirates to his banner?”

“Fuck. Fuck. Um...uh, how bad could it be? He’s just some middling knight, Laenor knows to stay away from him…”

“My men report he’s been spending a lot of money. New armour, new weapons and certain… creature comforts,” Joffrey pointed out. Qarl Correy was not an especially rich man, so this pretty much confirmed he was someone’s stooge. “But so far, that’s all he’s doing.”

“What is Daemon up to?” I wondered.

Did he hope that Laenor would wander right back to his old lover? I suppose he did not know that we knew Qarl Correy’s true allegiance but surely he should know Laenor would not be so foolish.

“Is it a distraction?” I finally reasoned.

“That is my worry as well, but what from?” he replied.

“There are two things he’ll want. The things he’ll feel we stole from him. He could not know where we... hid his prize. Laena then?” She wasn’t quite at her due date yet but... well, she was only a few weeks off.

Close enough to have taken her chamber and earlier births had happened. If he wanted to strike when she was at her most vulnerable this was the most opportune time.

Damn it, if I had my way she’d be giving birth in Syrax’s shadow. My hand traveled to my stomach again.

There was a very real possibility that Qarl Correy might be playing the assassin again.

“Travel nowhere without a reliable guard,” I let the commanding tone of a queen enter my voice and Joffrey sighed.

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“Do not mock me, Joffrey. He’ll want you dead, me dead, Laenor dead, Laena in his power...”

“I... you are right. I apologise.” That was the first time I’d ever heard him sound so shaken. When I stepped out into the hallway again, Steffon straightened and I sighed before turning to him.

“There is a knight I want nowhere near me. The kind of nowhere near me that ends with him dead if he tries to approach.” Steffon was my Father’s creature still, no doubt this would get back to him but it seemed like the height of idiocy to not warn a bodyguard of a threat.
“Your Grace?” he said.

“Qarl Correy. A thoroughly odious man unworthy of the title knight. I had him shipped off once and he seems to have found his way back here via the Stepstones.” Steffon’s eyes widened and he nodded seriously, for the Stepstones meant only one person after all.

“You have my word that he will be kept from you, Your Grace.”

As I returned to the hall, aware of the eyes that followed me, and retook my seat by Viserys, I played with the idea of allowing Ser Steffon to be more familiar with me. It might be worth letting him call me Rhaenyra if it bound him to me rather than Viserys.

Then I thought better of it, I’d thought the same of Cole and look where that had gotten me.

Viserys spared me a smile as Mushroom expounded on a ‘totally true story’ about a liaison he’d supposedly witnessed in which a noble lady had lain with her husband only to discover it was his sibling in disguise. For extra titillation, the sibling was a woman. Because of course she was.

Stay classy, Mushroom.

“Is everything well with you, daughter?” he asked, sympathy in his voice.

“Perfectly fine,” I replied as Mushroom somehow got another laugh from the crowd. “I merely needed some air.”

Viserys was momentarily distracted and chuckled slightly before turning back.

“Should you need to leave…?”

He was genuinely concerned and it was touching. Now that I was actually pregnant and suffering from it, the point I’ve been making about our family and childbirth had suddenly become real to him. It was why he was treating me as if I was two seconds away from dropping dead. He was suddenly very afraid he’d lose his daughter to childbirth, just as he’d lost his mother and wife.

I wasn’t sure how a white cloak was going to save me from that, but bless him, he was trying.

He wasn’t letting his fear dampen his excitement though. He was brave like that. Ugh.

Nausea made me tense in my chair briefly before my stomach settled once more.

Honestly, I could not wait for the twelfth week. The magical threshold where my stomach should finally have adjusted to having a baby nearby and quit being such a little bitch.

I eyed Alicent from the corner of my eye. She’d never had morning sickness with any of my siblings. Damn her.

My stomach rolled in nausea again and I gave it up as a bad job. I bid goodbye to Viserys and Alicent as politely as I could and made my way out of the hall, taking a litter to the manse. As Laena’s due date loomed ever closer, Laenor had been distressed to learn that men were not allowed to visit in confinement and had decided to take up residence at the manse in protest.

No one had tried calling him out on it yet, because honestly, they would have to be the dumbest person on the planet to argue against an expectant father, especially one who could order his flying reptile to broil them.

I’d seized the change of scenery with both hands and my teeth. Besides, I was allowed in the
confinement chamber. A small mercy, as Laena only had Rhaenys for company otherwise. Okay, I was exaggerating. My ladies had also been coming by to see her. Although they’d done much the same for her as they had for me.

Except Maris, who took endless joy in sending Laena into a fury and then fleeing before the girl could struggle from her bed to perpetrate some physical violence.

And also, weirdly, sometimes Rhea. Rhea was very interested in that babe, perhaps even disturbingly so. It was bizarre to me that she seemed fine.

A Westerosi woman, confronted with evidence of her husband’s unfaithfulness, and she seemed fine. Accepting, even. She laughed off my concern every time I brought it up. Apparently, girls heavy with bastards had been a common thing when Daemon had been in residence at Runestone.

Rhea knew of at least three bastards he’d left serving women with during the early years of their marriage. I had three cousins out there somewhere. Three more children shared the blood of Baelon Targaryen, but it didn’t really feel like it.

Westeros must be getting to me.

I think a good part of Rhea’s good humour came from the fact that Laena had ensnared his heart only to shatter it into a million tiny little pieces. And honestly, I think she just liked babies in general.

Laena was alone when I finally entered, flicking through a book that I vaguely recognised as one of the ones I’d taken from the library what seemed like an age ago. A familiar stack nearby confirmed my guess. I smiled, Laenor must have sent them over. She put it aside when she noticed me though and greeted me with a tired smile as I sat down.

“Good afternoon.” Gods, she looked exhausted.

“Laena, how are you feeling?” I asked. She sighed and fell back into her pillows.

“Do you have all afternoon for me to complain?” she asked. I ran a hand across her stomach, feeling her babe’s spirited kicks through the thin nightgown she wore. She grimaced. “He won’t stop. He’s eager to be out, I think.”

“Well, the time is close and any child of yours is bound to be impatient when there is exploring to be done.” She grimaced again and laid her hand on her stomach.

“Have you given much thought to names?” I asked.

“Joffrey thinks a traditional Velaryon name would be for the best. We have decided on Lucerys,” she told me. I raised an eyebrow and she rolled her eyes. She was so damn convinced it was a boy I honestly hoped she was a girl, just to see the look on her face when she realised.

Lucerys. The name a son of Rhaenyra would have borne in another life. Murdered by his kinslayer uncle, his body never found. I prayed this Lucerys would have a better fate.

“Will he bear a dragon egg?” Laena tensed at that. “He has the blood for it.”

“I do not know. Dragons are for Targaryens, but I am not a Targaryen. I am Vhagar’s rider though.” I smiled at the show of determination. “Mother has offered an egg from Meleys, but I do not know what we will do if the King says no. He has before.”
I scowled at the reminder.

“That is different. The lady in question was a Lysene whore and the babe a bastard.” I said with heat. Laena chuckled, although there was no real mirth in it.

“This baby is a bastard too unless you had forgotten?” How could I? I swallowed down the brief flicker of anger at its father and instead smiled at its mother.

“Not to my father.” Liar liar. I hadn’t been able to bring myself to tell the Velaryons that Viserys knew. I knew I should, I really should. He may intercede and order Rhaenys not give Lucerys an egg, he could blindside us at any time... “I will speak to him.”

“Thank you. It is kind of you to do so.” The smile she directed at me made my stomach do somersaults.

“It’s no problem, truly. Anything for a friend.” I stayed with her for an hour or two before leaving her to her sleep and heading back to the Keep. Viserys had requested a family meal and I, being the dutiful daughter, was rushing to obey.
My first hint that something might have gone terribly wrong was when I rode back into the Red Keep to guards in Targaryen livery swarming about and the bells ringing out to signal an alarm. It should say a lot about how much I was expecting something to go wrong that all I did was sigh in annoyance.

As long as it’s not Viserys everything should be fine. Laenor was at the manse, Laena was at the manse, Lord Corlys was engaging in a flying visit to Driftmark with Rhaenys providing the flying bit…

Where was Joffrey?

“Steffon, see if you can’t ascertain what has happened?” I ordered, suddenly worried, and the white cloak nodded, flagging down the nearest knight with a worried look upon his face. Noticing Ser Steffon’s waving, the knight braked hard and finally seemed to register my presence.

“Your Grace!” he said with a bow. “The King wished to see that you were safe at the first possible opportunity!”

That didn’t bode well. Please don’t be Joffrey…

“And I shall attend to my Father as soon as I am able but first I wish to know what has happened here.” The knight bowed again.

“A murder, Your Grace! In the Red Keep and so close to the King!”

“Who?” I demanded, heart leaping to my throat. Next to me Steffon shifted uneasily. A murder was no laughing matter. A murder when one of mine was unaccounted for…

Fuck.

“Mushroom, Your Grace. The King’s Fool.” That derailed my train of thought quite nicely. I stifled my need to sigh in relief it wasn’t Joffrey. Still, a murder would have me thinking it a Black and Green argument that got out of hand, perhaps some kind of daring assassination attempt against a rival but… Mushroom? Who would kill Mushroom!? And why!?

Okay, he was annoying as shit but… really?

Feeling like the world had gone a little mad I allowed a small escort of men to take me to my Father with no further protest. The idea of someone killing Mushroom was utterly bizarre. He was a court fool and a dwarf. He was literally not a factor in anyone’s plans.

I know he liked to overestimate his importance in his future works but he really, really wasn’t that important!

“Was the attack aimed at Mushroom?” I asked, feeling like I was missing something huge.

“There were no witnesses, a young lady discovered the body shortly after he left the hall.” I was told. I turned my eyes to Ser Steffon, who was frowning.

“Not much time to commit murder and escape,” he pointed out, tapping at his chin.

“Yes. No more than a few minutes. No signs of any struggle, it seems the attacker took him from
behind and left before he could be found. Quick, neat and silent.”

“Professional. Someone sent a professional after Mushroom.” I struggled not to laugh in disbelief as I said that. The idea was funnier than any joke he’d ever told! It could not be right. He had to have stumbled onto something by accident.

Viserys was quick to wrap me in a bone-crushing hug when I arrived before looking to Ser Steffon for reassurance I had not been in any danger.

“I feared it a distraction from an attack elsewhere,” he admitted after he’d wrung a report about my whereabouts and if there had been any trouble along the way from my bodyguard. It was gratifying to see he had looked to me before answering my Father’s questions. Worrying too, Criston had definitely seen that. No doubt he was already constructing some sort of twisted narrative in his head.

“A distraction for what I wonder?” I mused. A distraction definitely fitted more than someone spending actual coin to kill Mushroom. There were a lot of distractions floating about King’s Landing at the moment it seemed.

“The Red Keep is being searched from lowest basement to highest tower. We can find no trace of any other wrongdoing,” Criston intoned, voice neutral.

“So something elsewhere?” I had been at the manse when the attack occurred. I doubted it had been a strike at me or the Velaryons. Who else in the city was worth an attack in the Red Keep itself as a mere distraction?

“We have Ser Strong leading a search of the city,” Viserys told us.

“If this is Daemon’s doing the gold cloaks may not find anything,” I pointed out quietly. Viserys’ lips thinned as he thought that over.

“Ser Harwin has been cleaning Daemon’s scum from the Watch but I am not so arrogant to assume he has them all. I will instruct Lyonel to raise some of his men to temporarily replace the rank and file. At least until we have enough to completely retrain them.” I nodded along. It was drastic but we had all known Daemon still had some presence beyond Mysaria.

I did not want a house call from Blood and Cheese. Not with Laena so close to her due date and myself pregnant.

“Beyond a purge of the City Watch, we must remain vigilant. What of your defences?” His eyes travelled to my new white cloak which annoyed me slightly.

“Ser Joffrey has my defences well in hand. He handpicked a set of guards before we left for King’s Landing. Even if I can not see them, I have been assured they are always present,” I told them. I tried not to be angry that Criston perked up at that.

No doubt Alicent would know of my own little Secret Service by sun down.

“I suggest you up your guard then. I will not lose you and the babe you carry.” My hand fell to my stomach by instinct. He smiled gently at me and raised his own to cover mine. “Do you hear that, little one? If I have to fight the Cannibal itself I will keep you and your mother safe.”

That was strangely touching…

Ser Steffon coughed meaningfully and leant forward, interrupting the moment. I was sort of
thankful for that. I felt like crying and I refuse to cry because of Viserys being fatherly. Or grandfatherly… whatever.

It’s hormones, I swear!

“Should you not inform your Father of the knight?” he asked. I wanted to protest. Correy was Daemon’s but… but two distractions in the city at the same time? If they were both Daemon’s it was something big.

“A good point Ser Darklyn,” I said, making a show of leaning backwards and looking thoughtful. That got both Criston and Viserys’ attention.

“Daughter?”

“I had an encounter with a certain knight almost… hmm, has it been over year? Regardless, I had him shipped off.” Not mentioning Ser Joffrey here was probably a good thing. I wasn’t quite sure how much Alicent knew regarding his position in my court but I’d already given her one secret today.

“Define encounter?” said Viserys darkly.

“He had entirely the wrong idea about Laenor and I. I set him straight.” Viserys nodded. He was aware of the rumours but our performance over the last year had put a lot of that talk to bed. Joffrey’s rush marriage to Laena even more so. It was relegated to a belief only the hardcore Greens held. The sort of thing Mushroom made… had made jokes about. “He was a rogue through and through. His ship would have passed through the Stepstones.”

Viserys face transformed into a scowl at that. Everyone knew what Stepstones stood for these days. Actually maybe not, Daemon’s hold grew weaker with every report we received. The Dornish had piled in now, with considerable relish.

He may not have taken a knife to the guts but I’d be surprised if he held onto those islands for much longer. Caraxes could only be in one place at once, after all.

“He returned to the city recently. Spending money I know he should not have. It’s probably not linked to this but—” Criston cut me off.

“The timing is concerning,” said Criston, looking thoughtful. “With your permission, Your Grace, I will seize this rogue and have him questioned.”

His helpfulness is suspicious. Then again, Alicent generally likes Daemon’s assets far, far away from the city.

“Do so, Ser Cole,” said Viserys coldly before turning back to me. “I would ask that you continue staying in the Velaryon manse until we know precisely how this occurred. I know you are there whilst young Laena takes her chamber but perhaps it is best if you stayed there a little longer.”

Surprised, I nodded. He’d been keen on keeping me close since he’d finally decided to take his family in hand and gained something to beat me over the head with.

“Remember our conversation, Rhaenyra.” The reminder was hardly needed. “And I want updates on that babe. I’m quite excited for Rhaenys’ first grandchild.”

I got what wasn’t being said. Despite everything Daemon had done, his child was still something Viserys cared about.
“Speaking of children,” I began. “Have you given anymore thought to the annulment of Rhea’s marriage? She is getting no younger and it seems cruel to have her wedded to a man she will never see again.”

“Might I remind you, daughter, it is the High Septon that decides such things.” At my disbelieving look he snorted in amusement. “I’ve never met anyone who believed that.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking of Laena. “I have.”

“Ha! Fair enough,” he said, then leant forward and rubbed at his face. “Still, I will give the petition some true thought. You are right that it is cruel to keep her shackled to… to my brother after all he has done. You will have my answer in a few weeks, once this present crisis is over.”

That was probably the best I could hope for. Afterwards I gathered my ladies to me and sorted through who would move to the manse and who would stay here. In end, only Alys and Sera would be following me. Falena and Marya were given free range to work with their charities and Maris was to keep an eye on my household in the Keep.

And not, I told her sternly as the packing began, fleece everyone I employ out of their hard earned money via blackjack and poker. Honestly, if she carried on at this rate she’d be able to buy Gulltown back from the Arryns.

I didn’t ask to see Mushroom’s body or investigate the corridor in which he’d been killed because that was ghoulish and unfitting of a pregnant Princess but I was damn well going to get Joffrey on the case. The killing of Mushroom made no sense unless one bought the theory it was a distraction. A distraction for what though remained to be seen. Who wanted the distraction?

If it was Alicent… no that did not make sense even there. Alicent was not one to, in the vernacular, shit where she ate. The Red Keep was hers. She could engineer any number of distractions that would trip considerably less alarms than a murder three rooms away from Viserys.

Daemon then? He would not be above murder. He would not care about said murder taking place in the Red Keep. Blood and Cheese proved he had access to those who knew the tunnels. But if it was carried out on Daemon’s orders, why? And if it was his distraction, what was Qarl Correy?

If both were his distractions, what was he so desperate we did not uncover? He was weeks, possibly days, away from losing all control of the Stepstones bar a miracle. I could think of nothing in King’s Landing that would halt his fate. Was it a warning? Did Mushroom know something about his plans? If he did not, why pick Mushroom at all? Why not a random servant?

Argh! I was going to go mad like this!

I definitely needed Joffrey’s eyes on this, I thought, as I mounted up. He would know of any discrete schemes in the city currently. Mysaria was not so good that she could pull of something momentous without him noticing something amiss. I hope. She had once had men of the Hand murdered and arranged artistically outside the gates, I reminded myself.

Laenor seemed surprised to see me back so soon and then very, very grim when I explained what had happened. Joffrey was summoned. He also had no idea what Daemon was planning, annoyingly.

“Mysaria’s movements within the city are much reduced… I had put it down to Daemon’s weakening hold on the islands,” he admitted.

“But it could be the calm before the storm?” asked Laenor, looking worried. Joffrey had briefed
him on Qarl. Knowing the man who would kill you in another life was close would put anyone on edge. Frost certainly gave me the shivers despite being a small baby no taller than my waist and the wrong dragon to boot. The less said about Joffrey’s feelings towards Cole the better.

“It could be. I do not see what he gains. He is about to lose his kingdom, why spend resources killing a Fool here?” Joffrey mused. “It is a shame Qarl will be vanishing into the confessor’s domain soon enough, I wanted to ask him a few questions myself.”

“I’ll be sure to relay anything I learn from my Father to you. No doubt he’ll spill his guts the moment he touches the rack.” Laenor smiled at that, a predatory smile that sent tingles down my spine. Judging from the look on Joffrey’s face, I wasn’t the only one.

Then he caught us both admiring him and blushed such a deep, vibrant red I couldn’t help but laugh. After a moment, Joffrey chuckled along with me.

“Well, I can’t say much for you two but I’m waiting for the next disaster. These things never happen in ones.” Oh gods, why did I say that out loud, I’ve doomed us all!
That night proceeded relatively quietly even if I spent the entire time waiting for something bad to happen after my slip up. Laenor and I took our meal with Joffrey and made sure Corlys had been alerted that something was happening in the Red Keep. Corlys was still at High Tide and not due to return for some time, intent on milking what he could from the treasury.

Old Spicetown was built with what was on hand, natural growth spurring it on odd directions. New Spicetown was going to be glorious if the amount Corlys had leveraged from Viserys was any indication.

Joffrey went over my protection details again and grilled Ser Steffon for a good hour. The white cloak took it in good humour. It seemed he was declaring his loyalty to me because Viserys had insisted I have his total loyalty. According to Ser Steffon they’d all heard Cole’s rants about me in the White Sword Tower and he had no intention of going the same way.

It was nice to know Cole still thought about me. Constantly.

Joffrey had decided it to be good enough and was filling him in on the need to know details of my security.

I paid a visit to Laena once more to tell her about Mushroom. Surprise surprise, he’d been quite rude about her at times, mocking her to the court after Viserys had turned her down as a bride and after her fiance turned out to be a dud. He’d also coined her Mother’s hated nickname so it was safe to say she wasn’t grieving but like most she was startled and unsettled by the fact anyone would be so bold as to slay someone in the Red Keep and so close to the King. That we both suspected Daemon as the true culprit went unsaid but I knew from the way she clutched her stomach as if she could protect her unborn babe from his Father by will alone.

Alys and Sera arrived with my belongings and in good spirits but looking as if neither had slept. Laenor offered to watch me in the night, much to their badly disguised relief. Both had, apparently, only narrowly escaped Lyonel and Harwin’s overbearing protection and only because they were distracted by their scouring of the City and the Keep.

Still Laenor watching me did send me into a small pit of despair: Why did pretty people I liked insist on being in a position to watch me make a mess of myself?

I had a good night, even if I did wake up to my stomach rolling with a vengeance the next morning, intent on punishing me for getting too comfortable. After I’d dealt with that unpleasantness and drank the horrific brew once more Laenor brought me my Joffrey-enforced breakfast. Which consisted of bacon wrapped around small fishes and artfully placed fried eggs.

Alright, I’ll accept this as a compromise between my desperate need for fried food and the things I was supposed to be eating on Alannys’ orders. It actually wasn’t that bad to say I had no clue what type of fish I was even eating. Good enough that Laenor stole one before disappearing for his daily training.

Afterward, with my stomach’s cooperation, I enlisted Alys’ help to dress myself for court and made my appearance before Viserys. He seemed concerned, distracted. I could understand his worry. The Red Keep was still in uproar, still in the grip of rampant speculation. I heard no less than thirteen unique theories for who had killed Mushroom and why before midday.
Each one more lurid and ribald than the last. Mushroom would have been proud.

Alicent was late to court, something which did not usually happen. Even less reassuringly, she was smug. She was only ever smug when bad things were about to happen to me or those I liked. I glanced around for Cole but found the white knight conspicuous by his absence.

Gods damn it I knew I’d jinxed myself.

Still, it would not do to let Alicent see me panic. Instead, I forced myself to calm down and accepted some juice to settle my suddenly unhappy stomach. Laenor’s arrival, unharmed and freshly bathed, set me even more at ease. Although with the muscle he was putting on it would soon be time for a new wardrobe, I noted and most certainly did not drool over the fact. His doublet was looking a little… tight, that was all.

I’m getting very distracted. I mentally recounted where everyone else was; Joffrey was working from home today, Rhea was chatting with a few Crownlanders, Raenys and Corlys were at Driftmark and Laena was still safely tucked away in her birthing chamber.

So what was she planning?

I got my answer when there was a scuffle by the doors as the guards there prepared to stop an intruder. Panic rose through the crowd and both Steffon and Laenor drew me close, swords out to face whatever threat dared attack the Throne room whilst Court was in full session.

Viserys himself broke of a conversation he was having with a petitioner to stare in confusion but Alicent… Alicent looked almost serene.

The lack of the sounds of fighting saw Laenor sheathe his blade but Steffon remained alert at a nod from my husband. The crowd parted as a knight in very new and, to even my untrained eye, very expensive armour marched up the centre of the room and bowed low to the King. Viserys was red with anger at the disturbance, that did not bode well for this stranger.

“Your Grace! I present myself before the Iron throne to confess to my crimes!” He called, voice like melted chocolate. Besides me, Laenor stiffened and mumbled a nasty curse under his breath and I understood. A glance toward Alicent told me all I needed to know. She looked as if it were her birthday, Aegon’s coronation and my funeral all rolled into one.

“I must admit, Ser, it is a rare day a man confesses a crime in open court,” Viserys said icily. Ser Qarl Correy rose to his feet and pulled his helmet free of his head. Laenor’s hand tightened on my arm as his gaze wandered over to us, a nasty smile in place.

He’d clearly been handsome at some point but his adventures on the Stepstones had not been kind to him. He was gaunt, his eyes bloodshot and beady and his face unshaven, short beard patchy and unkempt. Had he not been wearing such armour I would have him pegged as a bandit.

Well, that was as good description as any. That armour marked him as Daemon’s. Alicent may be willing to use him but not even she would spend that kind of money on a man little better than a hedge knight. No, if I wasn’t mistaken, that would be Daemon’s money. Daemon’s plot.

What was he trying to do? Force Laenor into a duel he’d have lost a year ago? Or was he just trying to reignite those rumours once more and give Alicent fuel for her rumours? Was this one last stab at me before Dornish or slave spears extinguished him for good?

“I come because as shamed as I am, I can no longer allow a greater crime to fester away here in the Red Keep itself.” The court was paying attention now, dead silent at the show Correy was putting
on. I fought my nausea and tried to ignore how Laenor’s breath was coming fast in panic.

“Greater crime? You have not even confessed your own crime yet?” Viserys said, eyes flicking about the court before resting on Alicent. The Queen didn’t seem to notice, her green eyes were on me, conveying a savage glee. He scowled at the sight. New, competent Viserys was evidently aware of who had engineered this then. No doubt Alicent thought it worth the screaming match they would have later.

“I confess I shamed my name and my knighthood. I confess I engaged in sexual relations with Ser Laenor Velaryon in exchange for money and a place in his house-” He was prevented from speaking further as the courts whispers rose into a shocked roar. I allowed my face the transform into one of disgust and moved closer to Laenor. He’d evidently had the same idea, if his own shuffling to me had any indication.

No doubt everyone was conveniently remembering those old rumours right now. Old rumours that had died down to the glow of embers, fed only by Green desperation, now set to rise to the roar of a wildfire once more.

“I bedded him! I bedded him and he did confide to me he loved only men!” Correy continued once the roar had died somewhat. I looked towards Viserys, who was now so pale I was genuinely afraid he might pull a canon Viserys and hack his own fingers off on the blades of the throne. I let my face show the fury I was feeling. “Ser Laenor Velaryon is-”

Viserys cut him off with an incoherent scream of rage, pushing himself to his feet. Annoyingly, I noted blood running from his fingers. At least he hadn’t lost any? Damn, this is going to go in Eustace’s symbolism folder.

Correy backed off as Viserys advanced down the steps looking ready to tear him apart with his bare hands.

“How dare you!? How dare you!?” Viserys’ sounded on the verge of madness as he stopped halfway down. “My daughter is pregnant! She bears Ser Laenor’s babe unless you wish to accuse her of bearing bastards!? Do you!? I promise your, Ser, if you do you will face me!”

I winced as he said the b-word. Surely he could have let the implication go unsaid? Now everyone else would be repeating that particular accusation. It would not matter how Valyrian my children looked, unless all of them looked like physical clones of Laenor the word bastard would always follow them. In whispers to be certain but it would always be there.

I took a few deep breaths as rage clouded my vision.

“Guards, have this man taken to the dungeons. Introduce him to the rack, so that he may tell us of his relationship with Daemon Targaryen… and then cut his tongue out for spreading such disgusting lies regarding my goodson.” At the mention of Daemon, Alicent looked significantly less smug and a lot more worried.

Putting Laenor and I on the spot was one thing, humiliation and the hint my child was a bastard wouldn’t bring too much heat down on her head beyond an few arguments and tense nights. After all, Viserys hadn’t done much about that in canon and his grandkids were the only thing that got him angry in that time line.

But doing so via an agent of Daemon? Viserys was ready to kinslay his own brother right now, what would he do to the Queen that aided in his plots?
Correy panicked as the guards moved in, hand falling to his sword. For one brief moment it looked as if there would be a fight but then Laenor stepped forward, his face a mask of fury in a way I had only seen after Cole had nearly killed Joffrey, and hurled his glove at Qarl Correy’s feet. My stomach flipped and flopped in response as the chatter of the court rose to a roar once more.

I clenched my jaw as the urge to vomit hit me like a freight train.

“Honourless cur! Face me like a man for those lies you speak! I will have blood for this dishonour!” Correy stared at the glove and then stared at Laenor in shock. Alicent, despite looking more pale than before, managed a kind of distressed but satisfied smile.

I knew why she was so smug, of course. Laenor had the reputation of a man that only knew one end of the sword from another with a detailed diagram. The nobles liked to whisper that he had squired so close to home so that his Father could hide his shame when it came to his martial abilities. That he was no true knight, not really.

But Laenor had been improving since our visit to the Vale. The recent months since Daemon left Dark Sister behind had seen him go from better to good, if Joffrey was to be believed. Was he good enough to trounce Correy? Good enough to put two sets of rumours to bed?

Regardless of the sudden distress my stomach was causing me, I arranged my face into a vicious smile in approval of my husband’s actions and the evident confusion Correy was showing at Laenor’s backbone. I suppose that the last time Correy had spoken with Laenor, he’d still been the cringing boy afraid of his Father and terrified of his new wife.

That Laenor would never have fathered a child, even in the round-a-bout way we had managed to produce this one. That Laenor would never have dreamed of Dark Sister, never have put the effort in to have the skill to do it justice.

“And I have a mind to grant you the right!” called Viserys, joining us mere mortals at the foot of the Throne and reminding us all that he was the final arbiter of these things. His face was pale and he trembled with rage but I could see the way he was looking at Laenor. As if he was seeing him in a new light, unsure how he’d missed the man willing to hurl challenges about.

Then he smiled, grim and vicious, and what satisfaction Alicent had faded. It was Laenor asking for satisfaction. Not a champion on his behalf. I could see her thoughts following my own from a moment earlier.

This was sloppy. Very sloppy. Not having Aegon around had panicked her… and the small window of opportunity that Correy provided did the rest. It must suck for her not to have Otto in the capital. She’d always relied on him for her more ambitious schemes.

“Yes, I believe I will grant you that right. As long as this insult to knighthood wishes to accept it?” There was no mercy in Viserys’ face as Correy suddenly looked as if he’d realised he was missing something important.

He glanced down at the glove once more and one of the knights in Targaryen livery stepped forward and shoved him. The meaning was clear. After only a moment more of hesitation, Correy seemed to recover and scoop up the glove.

“I will prove the truth in the eyes of the Seven!” he told the court, attempting triumphantly and falling far short. “I will prove you a sword-swallow and a boy-lover. That you shame your name, your house and your wife!”
Alton checked and rechecked the armour that he was strapping Laenor into with a worried expression on his face. Like Correy’s, Laenor’s armour was new, heavily inspired by the old Valyrian armours and embossed with the Seahorse of House Velaryon. He was magnificent in it. My guts still rolled with fear, and maybe just plain nausea, though as he strapped on his sword but forewent a shield. No amount of chiding upon my part would have him take it. I will admit to knowing little about fighting but a shield seemed pretty important.

“Do not worry, Rhaenyra, I have Correy’s measure and I know I’m better,” he said confidently. I glared at the juice I couldn’t bring myself to drink. Alton bustled off somewhere else, leaving us alone. Laenor really should knight him soon, the gods know he’s talented enough for it.

“And what if you die? Alicent will have my child named a bastard. Laenor, I do not know what I would do without you.” He smiled sadly in response to that and spared me a kiss. It was not passionate or full of love but I was touched all the same. “It is not still too late to run away to Yi-ti. To leave all this behind. We could take Laena and Joffrey with us, have a grand adventure.”

I was only half joking.

“You always come up with the most delightful ideas,” he chuckled and pulled me closer. I rested my forehead on his breastplate and sighed. Which was naturally when Viserys walked in, face like a storm cloud and his hand thickly bandaged. I would have to keep Gerardys on alert for any sign of infection. The last thing I needed was him dying now of something completely stupid.

“Ser Laenor, do you mind giving me a few moments with my daughter?” he asked, voice tight with the effort of not shouting if I knew him. Laenor bowed in response before taking my hand and squeezing it. I got the message. Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.

“Yes, Father?” I asked politely after he’d left. Part of me wanted to let loose now but worry was winning out over the rage at the moment.

“Would you tell me the truth if I asked if there were any truth to his claims?” he asked, meeting my eyes with a stern gaze. I went to reassure him, only to have the lie die in my throat as I looked at him.

“I suppose Alicent told you,” I said. His eyes glittered dangerously.

“She did, yes. I’d heard the rumours… I thought it more court drivel,” he said finally. “Oh my girl, why didn’t you tell me? I would not see you dishonoured so!”

“It is a man’s prerogative to find pleasure in others. Tell me Father, how many whores have you had in your bed?” I managed finally, rage narrowing my vision and nausea roiling in my gut. He scowled at my answer.

“The whores I’ve had in my bed have all been women.” His voice was steel and I found myself sneering in response. He hadn’t cared when he’d given me to Velaryons to cover his own arse. He’d admitted it himself. I’d had to marry Laenor the moment he’d turned down Laena. The moment he’d banished Daemon the first time around.

“There are none, man or woman, in Laenor’s bed. How many can say that about their husbands?” I shot back. He pursed his lips, a speculative look in place. “I know who he shares his heart with,
Father. At least I know he will not bring disease into a our marriage bed or produce a few Velaryon bastards to threaten my own sons. He may not love me, Father, but he respects me. We are allies, friends and partners in all things. How many women would kill for that with their own husbands?"

“Not to mention,” I said testily, when he continued directing that look of anger and disgust at me. “That the moment you married Alicent, you had to marry me to Laenor. You had to unite Rhaenys’ claim to your own. How many times do you think she would be able to stomach being passed over?”

He flinched when I pointed that out and then went silent for some time, studying me through narrowed eyes.

“Not even Rhaenys could support this! I should have him exposed, have you married to a proper man. A man who will treat you like the Princess you are. Like the Queen you will be!” he said, venom entering his tone. As if my protests meant nothing. Pain in my fingers startled me and I realised my hands were clenched tight.

“Father, you understand you can not do anything about this. I love him, I’m having his babe,” When his face only darkened in response, I hardened my tone. “If you try for an annulment, you invite the rage of four dragons to your none.”

It was a struggle to keep my voice level, to not scream at him, but shouting never worked with Viserys and if he got the idea this was to be done… well, he would not stop until it was. I must have done something right because he took a physical step back as if I had struck at him.

“You speak truly… as much as it pains me to say,” he said and his voice was quiet. I’d not heard this tone in a long, long time. Not since… not since he’d come to me after Daemon’s banishment to beg for forgiveness. “Are you truly happy with this? Truly not disgusted? You do not have to pretend for me. You never have to pretend for me. I am your Father.”

He ended on a choked sound, as if he might sob if forced to say more. I took a moment to think on it, to think of Joffrey and Laenor. There was no burn of jealousy, no irritation or annoyance. Their romance made me smile, it made me happy to see Laenor and Joffrey happy.

But even if you ignored that, Laenor did try. He was going to be a great father and an ideal Prince-consort. He did not want to rule me, as another might. He was willing to work with me and not through me or around me. His family brought dragons and yet more legitimacy to my claim.

“I am not pretending,” I finally said. I did not want to contemplate Westeros without Laenor or Joffrey, Laena or Rhaenys… hells, it would even hurt to lose Corlys at this point for all the trouble he’d caused me.

“Forgive me. Last night was one of unfortunate revelations.” I blinked at how defeated he sounded. “I had thought Alicent tamed when I sent Aegon away. I thought she would end her doomed campaign.”

I snorted at that, went to respond, but he held up a hand. His gaze seeking mine looking almost desperate.

“Yet when she learned of Correy she arranged to have that show in the Court. She arranged to try and humiliate you,” he continued. “And then when I confront her, she revels in the fact she was only bringing to light what mistakes I had made. I can not apologise enough, daughter, for the impossible situation I put you in.”
I drank my juice angrily, it was sickly sweet and made me want to retch but at least it was better
than having to confront Viserys’ realisation that he was screwing me just as bad as Alicent was at
times.

“I’m so proud of you, Rhaenyra. You have taken a disloyal husband and wrung trueborn children
from him. You have taken Alicent’s challenges and gone from strength to strength. You will be a
Queen that can stand shoulder to shoulder with Jaehaerys… nay, you will be better than him.”

“And yet all of that could be for nought of you allow Alicent to keep attacking me so,” I pointed
out, voice sour and bitter. His eyes found his shoes and I swallowed back the urge to scream in
frustration.

“What would you have me do, Rhaenyra? Send her away? Imprison her? Kill her children?
Sending her away would work as well as it did with Otto. I do not think I need to explain to you
why imprisoning her would not go well and if you want your siblings dead I’ll have the title of heir
stripped from you by dawn tomorrow.”

Frustration boiled in me at that as his eyes came up to meet mine again. The sad thing was, he was
telling the truth, for the given value of it. Sending her away would give her leave to scheme in
peace, but like Joffrey’s marriage to Laena, he was justifying it after the fact. The fact was he loved
her and he could bear to send her away.

It was the same reason he would not imprison her. It invited the rage of her allies which included
some of the most powerful men and women in the Seven Kingdoms but he could weather that, it
was the fact she wouldn’t even pretend to love him moving forwards that made him hesitate.

Killing my siblings… I thought of Aegon’s smiling face, so happy after he’d tamed Frost. I thought
of Helaena’s fierce hug after she’d revealed her dreams to me. Not even Aemond, vicious child that
he was, deserved death.

“I thought she knew that no child of hers would ever sit the Throne. I made it clear after I found out
about Daemon.” Suddenly, a great many things have become so much clearer. At the look on my
face, he elaborated. “She threw it on my face. We were arguing about- oh I forget what and she
threw it in my face. She told me Otto should have pushed the annulment for Daemon whilst he had
the capital. She told me my brother should have been king over me.”

There wasn’t much you could really say to that so I didn’t bother saying anything. A really
vindictive part of me wanted to point out I had a happier marriage with a man that could not love
me than he did with a woman who should.

“I told her, Rhaenyra, that her children would never sit the Throne. That it was punishment for her
shame,” His voice was harder now. “And yet she still seeks to undermine me. I have forbidden her
contact with Aegon and when Aemond is old enough he’ll be fostering with the Tullys. Alicent has
ruined them both in this mad quest for the Throne.”

“And… you will not like this.” My heart lurched as he paused, looking at me speculatively. “I’m
sending Helaena to that cousin of yours, Jeyne. She did well when in your care and I have a mind
to give her back to you but she will do better away from the court, I think. Besides, you will soon
be busy with your own babe.”

I swallowed at that, grief rising up in my chest. Helaena was sweet and I loved her fiercely. I knew
Jeyne would not mistreat her but… but it was still a hard thing. He was certainly hitting Alicent
where it hurt. She loved her children. He was wrenching away three in total. Helaena would be
departing soon if I knew Viserys and Aemond would be going the moment he reached his sixth
nameday. She would be left with Daeron, not even two yet. One last thing for her to lose if she continued to step out of line.

A harsh punishment but still, it wasn’t enough.

“Cole is just as complicit,” I reminded him. His face darkened in response. “He took Correy to Alicent first, let him infiltrate the Royal court. He placed you in danger, placed me in danger, placed my unborn child in danger!”

“I will deal with him.” He placed a warm hand on my stomach and I struggled not to shudder in disgust. I did so hate people doing that. Laenor was the only exception and even then because it was his kid. You don’t realise it until you’re pregnant but a great many people seem to find perfectly acceptable to just start touching your stomach for basically no reason. “You will sit the Iron Throne. Your son will sit the Iron Throne. Rhaenyra, I may not have been the best Father but I promise you that. Please believe that.”

“Of course, Father. I do not doubt it.” I will sit the Iron Throne but if it’s something you did that ensures it, I’ll eat my non-existent hat.

“Now come, your young man must no doubt be eager to defend his reputation,” he almost spat, throat bobbing as if he were fighting back bile, ruining the touching father and daughter moment we’d been having quite thoroughly. There was an element of disgust in his voice that made want to start slapping and not stop. Had Laenor taken a thousand whores to bed and given me the pox to boot no one would bat an eyelid. He could field an entire army of bastards from his breeches and no one would really care. Had he been a typical Westerosi he could have forced the pregnancy the moment we wed as was his marital right.

But gods forbid should he give his heart to another knight. That was just too far.

We made our way out to the arena. During the lavish tourneys Viserys was fond of throwing this would be where the melee was fought or where knights would duel in one on one matches. This was where Laenor hoped to slay Qarl Correy. To turn the tables on his murderer and, a part of me whispered, at least die with a sword in his hand should he not prevail.

No, I could not think that. He had to prevail, he had to win. He had to for me, for the child we made together.

I wasn’t even allowed to look nervous. If I looked nervous then it implied I was worried he would not win. If I was worried he would not win then surely there were some truth to his allegations. After all, the Seven decided the victor and a man could not win a duel if he were not righteous…

Damn Alicent to all Seven Hells!

I noted that my Blacks had mustered in force, their presence outweighing even Alicent’s Greens. Although, I noted with annoyance, Joffrey was absent. He had thought it best he not set more rumours swirling about by letting anyone see his worry. I had told him to damn the rumours and damn the lords and come anyway, he’d apparently ignored that order. When Correy stepped out my lords booed and hissed fiercely. When I bestowed my favour on Laenor they cheered for the Relam’s Delight and her noble husband.

“Don’t die,” I told him quietly as I affixed the black scarf to his arm. “Please don’t die. If he beats you, yield. We will weather whatever storm comes but don’t die here.”

It set my stomach churning again that he did not answer me.
We took our seats in the King’s box. Alicent was already there looking constipated. I suspected that was the best she could muster. If Correy failed today she’d lost a son and daughter, danced to Daemon’s tune and incurred the wrath of her husband. She would come out of it with nothing but a few more points against me in a few people’s minds and Laenor’s increase in standing in turn.

I’d always held back, always refused to sink to her level. There was a chance, I told myself, that she might see she was going to lose and back out gracefully. A small one to be sure but if I never truly escalated, if I never started with the nasty side of court intrigue or started with assassinations, there was a chance this could end peacefully.

Not now.

She had threatened my child. A child I did not want but my child. My husband and my child. The woman I loved and her child. Even if I declared Aegon heir before Viserys was cold she’d kill me. She’d kill my children. She’d kill the Velaryons just to make sure. Either that or Otto would.

I took my seat as rage and fear boiled away in me, pushing me to do anything but sit and watch as my husband fought for his life.

I was so angry, plans whirling in my head to teach her the meaning of waking the dragon that the duel seemed decidedly anti-climatic in comparison. The two men started out slow, each testing the other’s defence and skill, or so Viserys informed me. It was soon apparent that Laenor had not overestimated himself or underestimated Qarl Correy.

Even my untrained eye could see he was almost playing with him, leading him about the arena. No blow touched Laenor’s armour and soon enough Qarl Correy’s strikes began to slow, becoming sloppy. Laenor danced around him, blade flashing.

Something inside me eased even if I still wanted to throw up.

“See that? He’s gone out and bought brand new armour but he’s never trained in it,” Viserys observed loud enough for both Alicent and I to hear. “I’d wager ten dragons it’s heavier than what he’s used too. Your Laenor may be wearing new armour himself but at least he’s trained in it.”

Alicent shifted in her seat, pale as she realised how badly she’d messed this up.

I watched with a deep, soul-pleasing satisfaction as Laenor reigned blow after blow, striking quickly at the head or the back of the knee, and as Qarl Correy became desperate and panicked in response. He could yield. He’d be hauled off to the dungeons, be given over to the confessor’s ministrations and if he survived he’d be separated from his tongue but he could yield.

He didn’t yield and then Laenor killed him.

He stopped playing, stopped taunting, and stabbed Ser Qarl Correy through the visor. One neat and easy movement and Qarl Correy died. He hit the floor with an almighty crash and then the crowd roared in approval. I stood alongside Viserys, letting the world see my glee, as Laenor bowed in Viserys’ direction.

“Heart’s sent back to his Father, if the man even wants it,” Viserys ordered. “Ser Laenor, there was truly no doubt as to the outcome of this duel. The Seven favoured you against this foul plot by Daemon, a foul plot aimed at the Velaryons.”

The crowd was nodding along now. Viserys was giving them a plausible way out. A reason Correy had said those things, a reason they weren’t true. It may not kill the rumours dead but it helped. He clapped his hand on my shoulder before making his way out of the box.
Alicent remained sitting, looking as if she were as close to vomiting as I was. I sensed ravens might be flying to the Hightower tonight. She may be Green-in-Chief but she was never above running to Daddy for help with her more ambitious schemes.

I gave her a smile that promised hurt in turn for today before making my way towards Laenor.
Lord Aron Dayne was unhappy with their new allies, he noted, as the man in question paced the deck of the ship. He would stop occasionally to direct a glare out at the spectacle before them before beginning once again. He did not need to ask why. Lord Aron was merely the most vocal of the Lords but he was well aware there were more who disliked the idea of working with slavers than who’d approved.

The Dornish fleet manoeuvred ever closer to the port of Bloodstone. Ahead of them, the Triarchy barges ferried men to land where they swarmed the gates to the Keep and were slaughtered in a deadly killing zone for their trouble.

For every man that died, one made it through. It would only be a matter of time before the gates fell and they could land. Land and show the world what the Dornish did to dragons. He would prove himself the warrior his brother needed him to be.

He had little head for politics, that was Qoren’s wheelhouse. He may be young but he was a father already and a good ruler to his people, he had won Dorne’s respect with wise decisions and hard work. He knew that the Dragons had been fermenting rebellion amongst the Stony Dornish, paying bards and singers to tell tales of the evils of slavery.

As for himself, he’d wanted to repay them in kind, send some of those poisoned words right back in the form of whispers about the fat King’s daughter or the Green Queen she threw herself against. Qoren had put a stop to it. His brother wanted the mad dragon on their border gone first and he wanted the honour of Dornishman doing the deed. It amused him. Would the fat King pay them the bounty he’d put on his own brother’s head if they tried to claim it?

He allowed himself to imagine killing the mad dragon personally. The glory, the accolades…

Perhaps Daemon was the worthier target. There was plenty of time to deal with the fat dragon, after all, and only a small window to claim the head of the mad one. The mad one that had tried to kill his own niece if the rumours were true. He smirked at that but it was a bitter one. The dragons only cared when one of their own were hurt. Where was the justice for the tens of thousands of lives taken in the Dornish conquests?

Yet one failed assassination had all the little lions, wolves and fishes scrambling to strike back, scrambling to please their scaled overlords. Let those lesser creatures bow. In his mind, the Targaryens were no better than the slavers they allied with now. Their kind had founded the Triarchy!

“Why are we waiting? They’re dying in the thousands,” demanded Lord Dayne, snapping the younger brother of the Prince of Dorne out of his thoughts.

“Let the Triarchy waste their men into Daemon’s defences. We will move in afterwards,” his brother said. Dayne coloured red.

“Those are slaves they’re sending into the meat grinder. Slave soldiers!” Dayne protested. Qoren frowned.

“It is distasteful but the Sea Snake knew what he was doing when he built up Bloodstone. Would you rather Dornish men marched into that death trap?”

“A shame he could not prevent the mad dragon from burning Spicetown,” he sneered and his
brother’s men chuckled in response. Qoren remained frowning, turning his face back to the bloody fighting in the distance.

“We have yet to see the mad dragon or his mount,” his brother pointed out. The chuckles died at that. Caraxes was a fearsome beast by all reports and Daemon had only grown more brutal with it as his support dried up. They’d all passed the destroyed ships, the burned wrecks, that he’d left littering the approach to Bloodstone.

A warning.

“Caraxes took a few bolts in his last flight, according to the Tyroshi,” grunted Waren Wyl. “It’s injured and ripe for the slaying. Care to end another dragon, Lord Trystane?”

As the Uller lord smiled, he considered the Wyl. He sent shivers up his spine. He’d never met a man from that family that wasn’t a nasty piece of work. If Dorne were to survive the dragons they needed that nastiness. They needed these slavers. A necessary evil, his brother had said. Daemon Targaryen was a threat to Dorne. If he somehow secured the Stepstones, Dorne would be next in his sights.

Qoren would not risk handing little Aliandra a smoking crater as her birthright. If they played this right, he may yet hand her a strong Dorne that had power over the Narrow Sea via the Stepstones. That would show those snivelling, cringing Braavosi and the too proud Pentoshi.

As they watched smoke began to rise, twisting into the air, as the Triarchy soldiers breached the port’s defences and what little men Daemon had left to him ignited the town behind them as they retreated to the Keep. Qoren smiled then and the signal went out.

He felt excitement coil in his gut as he readied his spear. The Dornish would land, they would storm the Keep and they would end one dragon. The others would come in time. The time it took to make the landing felt like an eternity, he wanted to be gone. Whilst he was stuck here another might claim the glory!

Finally, they disembarked. His brother by his side, wielding his own spear. Men in Martell livery flowing around them. Dayne had been right about one thing. The slave soldiers had died in droves to breach the gates. Their corpses slowed the Dornish assault but not even Balerion the Black Dread could stop them now.

This was a reckoning. Justice. There was a roar in his ears and it was echoed by the men he lead toward the Keep proper. They passed more dead slaves on the way and surrendering sellswords, pirates and slavers. He gave them no quarter. There would be no prisoners here.

They had been given months to run, to find new employment. Months to stab the man that led them in the back and claim the spoils of their rewards. They’d had days to open the gate to the Keep, days to sabotage the town’s defences.

No. There would be no mercy now.

He killed three men as they battled their way forward. One had been surrendering but the other two had come at him with death in their eyes. He stayed close to Qoren. For all his dreams of glory, all would all be lost if Qoren died now. Little Aliandra was only one.

He killed another as they began the storming of the Keep.

By the Seven, the Keep…
He forced down bile at the bodies. They’d all died hard. Some had been hung badly, some had been crucified, some had been burned, others left to rot in gibbets. Mad dragon indeed. What drove men to such acts?

There could be no doubt that this man needed to die. He followed the press of bodies, becoming aware of a distant roaring bellow. A dragon. His heart raced at the thought of meeting one. The Blood Wyrm. Caraxes.

Even injured it would sell itself dearly. It had sent thousands to their deaths. It had been the mount of two Targaryen princes. And, he reminded himself, where Caraxes was his rider would not be far behind. No doubt he thought he could flee justice on it’s back. Maybe he thought he could find sanctuary in Volantis, Braavos or Pentos. Maybe he would be foolish enough to go back to the fat king.

It didn’t matter. He would not get the chance. Qoren would ensure every man in Dorne knew what Daemon had done here, the horrors he’d perpetrated. Let the fat king think on that as he sat upon his pile of twisted, cursed metal.

The first of the explosions took him completely by surprise.
Another pained scream cut through the manse and I winced without being able to help myself. Across from me, Laenor tapped out an anxious beat with the heel of his boot. Joffrey was leant forward, eyes on the fire in the grate. Both were tense beyond measure and I could easily match them.

I should be in there with her. I was a woman, I was allowed. Yet she’d demanded Alannys and Rhaenys remove me the moment her waters broke. The beat Laenor was tapping out changed again and I flinched, grinding my teeth together in annoyance. The urge to strangle him peaked for a moment and I flexed my aching fingers.

Joffrey raised his head and caught my eye, a rueful smile growing over his face. Then the door banged open, all three of us jumping in fright, and Corlys stalked in.

“How is she?” he asked, breaking the heavy silence.

“We have as much news as you,” Joffrey replied, voice strained. Laenor stopped his tapping at my second heated glare and instead took Joffrey’s hand, dropping a kiss to his fingers.

My mind searched for a distraction as Corlys glared at Joffrey.

In the week since the duel, Alicent’s Greens had hemorrhaged supporters. It gave me hope that this may yet be resolved without war but that didn’t mean I wasn’t about to deliver a coup de grâce so to speak. I could wait it out. I should wait it out but a panicked animal backed into a corner was at it’s most dangerous. All she would need to do to rescue the Greens was wait and rebuild in the shadows. If Viserys drops dead at a similar time in canon it gives her nearly a decade and a half to turn it around.

So I was going to make damn sure they couldn’t.

“Have you given much thought to what I suggested?” I asked Joffrey finally. Another cry delayed his response and gave Laenor and Corlys time to turn curious eyes towards me.

“I have a few ideas. Are you truly sure about this? It is an escalation. You have always bee-”

“She could have killed him. If he hadn’t been training these past few months she may well have,” I said coldly. “She will be dangerous now, looking for the next opening and he will be by her side through all of it.”

“What are you planning?” asked Corlys, looking to me and Joffrey after he realised even Laenor did not know.

“It’s not a plan yet,” Joffrey assured him. Someone ran down the stairs and yelled for something voice indistinct and Laenor stood up, agitated.

“Are we seriously discussing schemes and plots whilst Laena is giving birth!?” he asked, looking aggrieved.

“Yes,” I told him, then turned back to Joffrey. “And it will be a plan.”

He sighed and rubbed at his face. Laena had gone into labour before he’d had the chance to shave this morning and it showed.
“This is revenge. It is not needed.” I was about to let him have it, pointed out that he would have lost just as much as I had Alicent’s scheme succeeded when Corlys cut in.

“Speak plainly!” he barked. I rubbed at my sore fingers and sighed.

“Alicent has lost her children, the good opinion of her husband and she’s losing lords at an astonishing rate.” Joffrey opened his mouth to interrupt but I silenced him with a look. “It’s true. She has only one person she can turn to in all of this.”

Corlys sat back in his chair. Steps pounded up the stairs and a scream sent us all tensing again. “Otto. You think she’ll bring Otto back to King’s Landing,” he said finally. Laenor looked as if he’d just been fed something foul.

“Viserys banished him. He won’t bring him back now. Not when Alicent has so fallen out of favour,” said Laenor, eyes flicking to Joffrey as if asking for confirmation. Joffrey returned the look with an unhappy one.

“Viserys has two blindspots of sorts. Rhaenyra and Alicent. Should Alicent play the good wife for a year or two… well, who knows,” Joffrey finally said as if it was dragged from him by Laenor’s gaze.

“And if he does come back he’ll retake control of the Greens,” my husband said, voice cold. “I have become quite tired of those rabble-rousers.”

“They threaten our child. Alicent will always threaten our child but Otto… Otto is the greater threat should she get him back to the capital,” I told him. Laenor nodded along with my words and Joffrey shot me a look.

“Otto Hightower is a menace, serving under two weak kings has given him a swollen sense of his own importance. Viserys should have never married Alicent, it only encouraged him,” opined Corlys but I could see he was interested. His scheming had been vastly curtailed under my control but the mind that would have seen a Velaryon royal house was still there and eager to chew over another problem. “You intend to remove him from the game permanently.”

I didn’t bother with assent. He knew, I could see the savage smile growing across his face in turn. Velaryon and Hightower interests had begun to clash shortly after Corlys had ascended to the Lord of the Tides. It had started with shipping and had only gotten worse in the years leading up to Otto becoming Hand. I do wonder if Jaehaerys had wanted him as Hand to counter Corlys’ influence, still strong even after the Great Council. If so, that was another thing I could blame on my Great-grandfather.

“Kill him? That is going a bit to far?” Laenor exclaimed. Joffrey looked triumphant.

“No. This is needed. Alicent will call him and he is a snake. If we kill him we end him as a threat and send a message to Alicent that I will not roll over should she try to hurt our child again!”

“A message…” he mused, scratching his chin. Then his eyes went to his Father. “What would you see done?”

“I’d see that wretch dead and his whore daughter too,” Corlys growled and Joffrey groaned, putting his head in his hands.

“Alicent is too well-guarded. Food tasters, Reach knights, intermediaries-” Joffrey started, cruelly stamping on my dreams.
“So is Otto,” Corlys pointed out. I smiled sweetly at Joffrey who just sighed, probably regretting telling me about a certain bit of information from his factor in Old Town.

“Not… necessarily,” he finally sighed as my smile didn’t fade. “He has a taste for women. He won’t find that in the Red Keep.”

“Oh!” breathed Laenor, that predatory smile growing across his features once more. Only for it to flicker and die as Laena cried out in pain once more.

“Do not worry for her. Rhaenys will fight the Stranger himself if he comes for her,” Corlys said, fondly. One day I would have to get the story as to how they met, agreed to marry and fell in love. Corlys struck me as a man who had wanted her for her royalty and she struck me as the person to hate that with every fibre of her being. “Now explain this realisation you just came to.”

“It has to do with the nature of my-” Joffrey started but I cut him off, not willing to dance around the issue for Corlys’ benefit.

“He owns brothels. It’s how he gathers a lot of his information.” Joffrey glared at me and I suppressed the urge to stick my tongue out at him. Corlys let out an explosive breath and stood once more, pacing back and forth.

“You have my support for this providing you can come up with a decent plan of attack,” he said finally. “If you should need anything, I am at your disposal.”

“You have mine too,” said Laenor and Corlys paused in his pacing to stare in bafflement. He frowned in response. “Otto and Alicent will kill my child, kill my wife, my sister and Joff as well! Why should I not help defend them?”

Corlys nodded and clapped his son on the shoulder again and Laenor looked ready to burst from pride at the action. Joffrey just sighed and looked tired.

“If this goes wrong we risk every single gain made in that duel,” he said. “If this goes wrong, your Father will likely strip you of your title.”

“If it goes right, we cripple any resurgent Greens. If this goes right, we remind Alicent that if she plays stupid games with us she will win only stupid prizes,” I replied and a ghost of a smile worked it’s way across his face. He rubbed at his stubble again, around us the house had gone quiet.

“I shall have to remember that turn of phrase. Very well. I will begin working on a method to bring Otto to King’s Landing and to his death.”

“Thank you, Joffrey,” I said and I meant it. A knock on the door and an exhausted maid peered in to the room.

It was hard to say who cleared the room faster. Probably Laenor but only because he had longer legs. Even Joffrey managed an impressive spurt of speed given his leg. It was frustrating to have to let everyone else go before me before I could wedge myself into the room that had been the extent of Laena’s existence for the past three weeks.

She was alive. Alive and conscious, even if she did look awful. I suppose nobody looked good after giving birth. She clutched at a sobbing bundle of cloth, fixing it with wide eyes as if she was not even daring to believe it real. Rhaenys, seated by her side, chuckled as we all piled in and immediately crowded the new mother.
“Seems you’re the proud father to healthy son, Joffrey!” she laughed. Laena finally looked up at us, an almost shy look in her eye as she moved the bundle forward a little for us to see.

Silver hair and violet eyes. Apart from that he looked the same as every other baby in existence. Small and pink. His low sobbing became a warbling cry and Laena pulled him back, fussing at him in an almost panic. That earned her another laugh from her mother.

“Don’t worry so much over him! Babies cry, it’s not a failing on your behalf,” she assured her daughter.

“I know. You’ve told me a thousand times,” Laena rasped back, her voice clearly not quite recovered from the screaming. “I never ceased crying and Laenor was as quiet as a door mouse.”

Then she turned her gaze back to her son with eyes full of worship and wonder. Corlys smiled indulgently at the sight. New grandfather and new grandmother. Joffrey shuffled forward then, a look I did not understand on his face, and peered over Laena’s shoulder.

She caught his eye and smiled, shifting so that he could see Lucerys once more. His brown eyes softened and he extended a finger. A small pink hand met it, flailing at the unfamiliar object. Then my spymaster smiled broadly.

“Hello Lucerys,” he said. “Welcome to the family. I’m the only sane one here.”

That sent Rhaenys into peels of laughter and even got a chuckle from Laena. Corlys just snorted and Laenor… Laenor looked as if someone had just kicked a puppy in front of him.

“Your Grace?” I blinked at the intrusion and turned. A maid stood in the door, worried look etched over features. “It’s… well, King Viserys is… here.”

I was out of that room so fast one might be forgiven for thinking I’d been set on fire. Laenor was at my heels looking just as worried. What the hell was he doing here!? The Velaryons did not know… surely he had not come to see his nephew?

Viserys was indeed standing in the drawing room, face a riot of emotions.

“Father!” I called and his attention fell on me. Before I could question him further he drew me into a hug and heaved a heavy sigh into my shoulder. “What is wrong?”

He pulled back.

“I needed to know you were safe,” he said finally. “I needed…”

“What has happened?” I said, fear spreading through my body. Laenor linked our arms and I let myself lean against him slightly.

“It is Daemon.” Laenor drew in a sharp breath. Daemon had been behind Correy, he was likely behind Mushroom’s death. I braced myself for bad news.

“The Triarchy and the Dornish launched an assault on that island of his, Bloodstone. He burned so much of their fleet that the harbour was nearly unusable until they brought Caraxes down.” I gasped at that. Rhaenys had grieved for that dragon a long time ago but I knew she would grieve anew for him. “Caraxes isn’t dead but it gave them an opening.”

“So they took the island? What news of that bastard?” I asked. Daemon fleeing was not ideal but his loss of the Stepstones was a bonus for us. Shipping would begin to return to normal now. My
heart dropped like a rock as Viserys shook his head again.

“I fear Bloodstone has earned it’s name. Daemon… the reports are not clear. We think he set off a cache of wildfire.”

“By the seven!” Laenor choked out. I could only stare in horror. Wildfire meant alchemists. The alchemists were mine. Was this what he intended the distraction for?

“He fled. Left the Dornish and slaves to their doom and he fled. We know not where he has gone.”
I walked into the rooms Laena occupied at the manse and promptly walked out again as her musical laughter followed me. I waited for a while before her still amused voice called me back in. She was seated on the low couch but fully clothed at least. Lucerys gurgled happily from her arms, clearly fighting sleep as his eyes closed occasionally.

I swallowed at the reminder. Gerardys and Alannys put me at around thirteen weeks. I was closer to the halfway point than not and it terrified me.

“You must knock if you intend to be so prudish about the matter!” Laena chuckled. I blushed a fiercer red in response. “Not even Falena is so disturbed by the sight of Lucerys feeding.”

“Look… it’s a thing,” I sighed. She chuckled, amused smirk in place, then gestured me over.

Gods, hadn’t that been a surprise.

Rhaenys was a big proponent of personally feeding your kids and not leaving it to a group of faceless women whose only qualifications were having the milk on hand. ‘Dragons need another dragon! Fish, lions and stags will not do!’ she growled when I’d push the issue.

She’d clouted me when I’d pointed out she had said Jocelyn had done the same for her and Jocelyn was a Baratheon.

Of course, she expected me to do the same with my babe. She had her heart set on the matter. I was less convinced. I’m sure everyone would definitely take me seriously and it wouldn’t at all get in the way of my duties as heir. I had a feeling it would be a wait and see matter. I did not know whether it was Rhaenys’ preferences or an actual thing after all. Valyrians were said to be part dragon and I did not know if I could forgive myself if something happened to the babe and I could have prevented it.

As I sat opposite her, Laena shuffled the sleepy child into my arms, leaving me to rock him gently as she got up to pour herself some of the fruit tea her mother had recommended.

A month had done a lot to change Lucerys. He now looked like an actual baby at least. He wasn’t even bad as babies go. Both Aegon and Aemond had never stopped crying, even Helaena had sulked endlessly, but little Lucerys seemed quite solemn. He cried when he was hungry or when he needed changing and that seemed to be it. Gods, I hoped I got that lucky with my own, especially if Rhaenys intended to knife me if I didn’t feed them personally.

I peered around her room, sad that I could no longer claim the manse as home, no longer invade to bother her when the fear become too much. With no more murders and the biggest suspect in the wind, Viserys had made it clear he wanted me back in the Red Keep. I had been reluctant to return but… well, my relationship with Viserys had been odd since Laenor had won his duel.

I’d expected him to make a comment about Lucerys or Laena, to use that stick he had so recently found, but instead he just took my reluctance like a bolt to the heart. It threw me off badly enough that I eventually agreed. Laenor was still in the manse though, ostensibly to help his nephew take his first steps into the world.

The rest of my ladies had been given the day off. Normally I’d stagger it so I always had at least two or three but when I went to visit Laena… maybe it was selfish but I preferred to have her to myself. I so rarely got to see her, even if she had technically returned to my service as a lady. The
few times I did get to see her... well, Lucerys was always in tow and she was quick to parrot
Alannys, Marya and even Falena’s lines about babes, being pregnant and the Mother.

It. Was. Weird.

I sulked slightly as stared down at the babe in question. That he had inherited the silver hair and
violet eyes of his parents wasn’t such an issue. It was simple to point out he favoured his Mother
and not his Stormlander ‘father’. Given that Alicent’s children were all Valyrian she couldn’t
exactly approach from that angle. Not that she was doing anything at the moment. She was in
damage mode, playing the Good Queen perfectly.

How many would remember Daemon’s face in a decade or two? How many would remember it
well enough to pick out his features in Lucerys? Did it even matter anymore? Daemon was gone.
No more did he crouch on the Stepstones like a gargoyle, waiting for a sign of weakness to strike.
The Triarchy and the Dornish had seen to that.

Daemon had seen to them in turn.

The Dornish were a nation led by children now, a potential civil war in the making, and the
Triarchy were already sizing each other up just waiting for a chance to plant a dagger in their
rival’s backs now that the man who had united them was gone.

Westeros was safer than it had ever been. Yet I couldn’t be happy, couldn’t take joy in any of it.
Because he wasn’t dead.

He’d be back. He couldn’t let go. He’d want Laena, he’d want his son. I needed to find him, needed
to kill him, before he returned at the most inconvenient time. Before he harmed my own child but
Ser Joffrey barely had a hold on Westeros, spies in Essos were a long way off.

“Rhaenyra?” Laena’s gentle voice cut into my musing. She was sat opposite me once more,
sipping at her tea, with a look of concern etched into her face. “You went away a bit there.”

“My apologies. I was thinking,” I replied, shifting my grip on Lucerys who cooed in response and
began chewing on my shawl.

“Brooding, you mean. You have been doing that a lot lately,” she said. “Alannys said it is bad for
the babe to brood as much as you do.”

“My babe can handle my brooding. They will be a dragon.” Laena snorted in response and I
smiled.

“Father is still furious,” she said finally, as if she were arguing with herself as to whether she
should even bring it up. I smiled thinly.

In the aftermath of the news about Daemon, I had brought the issue up with Laenor and together
we’d both gone to Viserys. My children needed to be dragons, not seahorses. Laenor had reasoned
that any child that inherited Driftmark would take the Velaryon name but my children deserved to
bear the name Targaryen.

Corlys had been furious. He’d wanted a Velaryon grandchild on the Throne but Rhaenys had
understood, had promised to talk him round. She knew that Laenor’s name had spoken against him
at the Great Council, that if I wanted every advantage I could get, I needed my children to be
Targaryens.

And I wanted every advantage now.
Viserys had agreed so readily I wondered if he had not had the thought himself at some point. I’d barely gotten through the request before his happy nodding had tipped me to the idea it would be far easier than I had thought it would be.

“Lord Corlys must have known that my child would take the name Targaryen upon inheriting the Throne. This is just speeding up the process. Besides, he has calmed a little these past few days.” By which I meant he had managed to say hello without looking to be on the verge of stroking out. Any good will my plan to murder Otto had brought me was likely gone though.

“The egg helped, I think,” Laena mused. Surprisingly, Viserys had brought up the egg situation before Rhaenys or Laena could. He’d been happy to approve an egg from one of Meleys’ clutch being given to the young boy. A happiness that had taken most of the Velaryons off guard.

I still hadn’t told them he knew. He hadn’t pushed the issue recently and he’d spent most of Rhaenys’ thank you speech looking at me like a puppy I’d just kicked.

Regardless, Lucerys was now the proud owner of a dark red dragon’s egg. Laena was desperate for it to hatch, I could tell she was, it was probably inconceivable to her that any child of hers would be denied the sky. Lucerys, on the other hand, liked kicking it and drooling on it and that was the extent of his expectations from the egg.

“Another Dragon rider for House Velaryon and the Blacks,” I said as Lucerys released my shawl and swiped at my hand as I shifted his position again, struggling to account for his wriggling. I moved my fingers over his face to distract him, dodging the pudgy hands attempting to seize them.

Babies were bizarre creature. He couldn’t even see my face or focus on my hand yet he was still doing his best to catch it.

“How goes your secret project?” I asked once I’d grown bored of the chase and surrendered my little finger to his toothless gnawing. Laena raised an eyebrow before snorting.

“It goes well, if you must know. But I’m still not telling you what it is!” I hadn’t even been able to pull it out of Joffrey beyond an assurance it wasn’t a plan to overthrow me and place her Mother on throne or anything equally as drastic. He seemed rather amused by it all, actually.

“I shall get the details out of you soon enough,” I told her. Laena smirked in response to my challenge and poured me some juice. I relinquished Lucerys back to her, grimacing when I had to wrestle him for possession of my finger.

“You’ll be a good mother, Rhaenyra. I know it,” she said as she calmed Lucerys’ fussing. I took a drink of the juice and suppressed a sigh. “Look how good you are with little Luke!”

“He chews on me, Laena, I’m not sure that’s the world’s greatest indicator of a good mother,” I said dryly.

“Luke loves you, he’s always smiling away when you hold him,” Laena said as if that was that on the matter. Said baby was snatching at his mother’s hair and still fighting sleep as valiantly as any knight. “Now, do you think we should have lunch?”

I groaned at the reminder. Breakfast had been an ordeal this morning and my stomach was reminding me of that fact as well as the fact that it still thoroughly intended to challenge anything I put in it.

“That depends, Laena, on whether it’s trout wrapped in bacon with a side of greens.” Laena had the sense to flush a little at the rebuke. “Because we’ve had that everyday I’ve been here this week.”
“We can have anything you want, Your Grace,” she said, voice as sweet as honey. I let her see my narrowed eyes before she broke down giggling. “Honestly, Rhaenyra, we can. I just want you well for when the babe comes.”

“I have Alannys to lecture me about food Laena, what I need is someone to bring me illicit bacon,” I grumbled. Old Laena would have brought me illicit bacon and eaten it with me as we hid from Joffrey’s all knowing eye and Alanny’s disappointment. New Laena was frustratingly responsible.

“You don’t need me to obtain bacon, Rhaenyra,” she said primly and I grimaced at the implication. Sadly, it was true I was putting on weight. It was starting to get just slightly noticeable. Dresses that needed to be let out, the slight thickening of my features, my stomach now more pronounced - it frightened me. Rhaenyra in canon had lost her looks in pregnancy. Admittedly, she had three in rapid succession.

I hoped I’d have as much ease losing the baby weight as Laena was having. I may have to start thinking on a change of dresses. My Vale style that served to show off my figure whilst leaving everything to the imagination with occasional reach cut thrown in was rapidly becoming unsuitable.

“What gave it away?” I asked ruefully and she snorted in amusement, wiggling her fingers and getting Lucerys’ attention away from her hair.

“We could stroll down to the bakery tomorrow? Something to look forward to after your check-up,” she suggested. I gave her a thin smile and finished my juice.

“You do not want me to stay in my room and panic all day and you are using unfair tactics to stop me.” I was somewhat grateful. She may not be willing to indulge me anymore but at least she wasn’t going to let me suffer alone. Also I really, really liked those honey almond tarts they sold.

“When it comes to your babe you lose yourself to easily to panic. It was why I was advised to keep you from Lucerys’ birth, you know?” I breathed in relief at that. I had not known but that sounded like something Joffrey might have done.

“Your husband?” I asked. Laena shook her head.

“Gerardys actually. Joffrey was the one who assigned Alannys to you. He said she was perfect for dealing with panicky new mothers.” she asked, handing Lucerys back over. He wiggled again as I held him close before chewing on my shawl once more.

“And here I was thinking I’d requested her. Remind me to punch him for it later,” I said, then bent my face to Lucerys, putting on a high pitched voice. “Yes! Remind me to punch your Father! Interfering little toerag he is! Yes!”

Instead, Lucerys punched me square on the nose with a ear splitting screech and Laena nearly fell out of her seat with laughter.

“How is Joffrey with Lucerys?” I asked when she, and my ears, had recovered.

“He’s fantastic. He reads to him every night. Little Luke loves him,” Her tone was quiet and soft. I was not sure of their relationship in truth. Joffrey played the perfect husband in the way Laenor did and Laenor had confided in me that Joffrey did not have the same issues with women that he had. Laena did, of course, but… well, it seemed terribly uncouth to just ask.

“I note Rhea is still showering him with gifts,” I remarked, causing the girl to blush a deep red. That Rhea doted on Lucerys like he was a favoured nephew of sorts was a source of endless
embarrassment to Laena and always fun to bring up in conversation. “Has she mentioned anything to you about marriage?”

“No, no she only asks about Luke,” she mumbled as I fought the urge to giggle.

With Daemon’s flight from the Stepstones and his destruction of the The Triarchy and Dornish troops, Viserys had given in. Rhea was a free woman now. The Lady of Runestone, heirless and still of childbearing age, was hot property on the marriage market. Rhea seemed to be enjoying being courted though, she was taking her time. I guess she didn’t want to risk another awful husband.

“I…” Laena’s voice caused me to glance up. “I never did thank you, did I?”

“For?” I asked, somewhat confused.

She flushed.

“You… you may have been after my dragon and I am still upset about that but… but it would have been bad if you had let me go to him. So… thank you. I do not know what I would have done had I been stuck on that island with him as he descended into madness. I… I can not say that I would not have followed him.”
Marya had been in my service just over a year and I had to say, I was beyond impressed with what she’d done in that time. I could even forgive her ongoing one-sided romance with Helaena’s sworn sword because she’d taken my vague ideas of charity and created… well, the best way I could describe it was a sort of proto-social care.

Clinics to help with family planning, several orphanages, soup kitchens and food banks. There were even talks of expanding the clinics to deal with minor injuries and sicknesses! All in my name.

No wonder the people of the capitol loved me.

The children of the Mother Ysella House for Orphans lined up before me, the boys and girls all dressed as neatly as they could be and freshly bathed. It was sort of sweet the way they all gave their clearly hastily taught bows and obeisances, sloppy but enthusiastic. Even if the Royal family lived in this city an orphan from Fleabottom was never likely to see a member in their lives.

“So polite and courteous, you have done well with these children.” At my praise the two septas blushed and stammered their thanks. Until Marya and Falena had gotten involved this orphanage had been run down and neglected, the bare minimum provided by the Faith to ensure the children did not die of starvation or exposure. At fourteen, they’d leave whether they had homes or not, jobs or not… as like as not half would have been dead over the next year. King’s Landing is not a nice place to be if you lack a home or income.

A grim reminder of how fortunate I was to be a Princess, even one that will face a succession war, than Joe Peasant on the streets. In truth, it still wasn’t that much better but the building was well maintained, everyone had sturdy and clean clothes and two warm meals a day.

“We are very proud of the children here,” said Septa Alayne. “And we can not thank Your Grace enough for the money and aid you have provided.”

“I hardly deserve your thanks, Lady Stokeworth and Lady Waynwood are the architects. I believe we all should attempt to be more like them,” I hastily assured the woman. Marya beamed and Falena smiled but I was honest enough to feel a twist of guilt. I was only here on this tour because my appointment was this afternoon and I desperately needed something to take my mind off of the whole business.

“And now we have… three such orphanages?” I said and Septa Alayne nodded. “Well, every little bit helps. I am always a believer in kindness to others.”

“Would you like to hear the children sing you a hymn, Your Grace?” Septa Alayne asked and I surveyed the row of hopeful faces and put a practised smile into place.

“Of course, I would be honoured!”

I don’t know if you’ve ever heard fifty children under the age of fourteen trying their best to sing a hymn most only know by memory but the result is… not that great. I recognised the tune at least. A hymn to the Mother. I suppressed the lurch of fear that bought and managed to smile throughout
Afterwards I lavished praise on them all, gave them all a silver star each and went to make my way back to the horses alongside Marya and Falena, both who looked more pleased than I have ever seen them.

“We’re hoping to acquire another by next month. Ser Joffrey has been endlessly helpful in that regard,” Marya told me as we began moving. Ser Steffon Darklyn and my men moving into position around us like silent but very well armed and armoured shadows.

Viserys had insisted he would not pry into what I did with Ser Steffon. That he was my white knight as Cole had once been but I was still hesitant to let him in on everything. It helped that Joffrey thought he was honest for now. He may not remain so if Viserys changed his mind.

“Truly a worthy endeavour. I must ask though, surely the funding I donate does not pay for all of this?” At my question, Falena snorted.

“In truth, your direct funding covers a quarter of the costs. Ser Joffrey gives us his excess budget but we also get donations from your Blacks and the Faith.”

“Falena is the one that covers our finances if you couldn’t tell,” chuckled Marya.

“And here I thought the Faith objected to everything I did these days,” I observed, noting the two ladies immediately scowl. Eustace had been on the High Septon’s business that day. Now the preachers whispered of unnatural potions and devices, of soulless women divorced from the Faith. My attempts to expand the midwives beyond King’s Landing and the Narrow Sea had foundered somewhat. What before had been a wildfire was now an uphill climb and they had not stopped there.

My association with the Wisdoms, my charities, the accusations surrounding Laenor’s tastes, Laena being pregnant before marriage… nothing was sacred to the rumour-mongering idiots. It was Alicent’s work, I was sure of it but in this case I could believe she had started it off long before Laenor had humbled her. It still did not make it any easier not to punch her teeth down her throat.

“Septon Eustace objected, Your Grace, but you will find more than a few members of the Faith in this city who appreciate the work those women do. That we do,” Falena told me, her voice hard. Even Marya’s permanently cheery face had gone dark.

“Have I kicked over a wasps nest?” I asked and Marya’s laugh was actually bitter.

“If it weren’t for Septon Patrek we wouldn’t even have the funding we get now!” she cried. I quirked an eyebrow up in interest.

“Septon Patrek?”

“He leads the members of the Faith that are willing to work with us. Something of a firebrand,” Falena sniffed. Oh? Division in the ranks of the Faith? Do tell me everything you know.

“It’s nothing too serious, Your Grace. Septon Patrek is… he is openly critical of the Faith but he holds a lot of sway in the city. He cares for it’s people in a way that most do not,” Marya elaborated at my raised eyebrow, misunderstanding my concern. Then she added in a guilty tone. “He preaches from Visenya’s Hill.”

“Critical?” I mused. That he preached from Visenya’s Hill was interesting. There was always
someone up there trying to raise a great scandal, either against the nobility, foreigners or the Faith itself. They usually burned themselves out after a few months. That or got themselves killed or arrested. Or, I reminded myself sternly, managed to raise such a crowd that they successfully invade the Dragonpit and end the lives of five adult dragons.

“It is… not quite respectable. But he believes in our cause, to feed and clothe the innocent. To ensure children can have a childhood and that women are not left to die!” I blinked in surprise at the normally taciturn Falena’s outburst.

“Perhaps I will meet with this Septon Patrek, if he is willing,” I said, in way of apology. Playing with the Faith was dangerous, Cersei had discovered that but investigating his whole deal might be worth it if it means I can get Eustace off my back. I just have to remember not to let him get within five metres of the words Faith Militant.

“I will ask him, Your Grace, the next time we meet,” Falena assured me, relaxing slightly. “He thinks well of you.”

“Thank you, Falena. Truly, I think I got the better of your father when you entered my service.” Marya giggled at that. It was hard to remember Falena was the giant Lord Denys’ daughter. Falena may be tall but she was slender. Lord Denys was a monster of a man. Rumour had it the Mountain Clans feared him more than the rest of the Falcons put together. The thought of the Vale brought a pang of loss. I already missed my little sister but Jeyne reported she had arrived safe and was doing well.

Jeyne had also reported that she would consider the marriage issue. Admittedly in a stiffly formal letter that had set my heart plumetting into my stomach. It had been far from the teasing tone we often took with one another.

“He hasn’t complained yet,” Falena assured me, startling me from thoughts about how badly I had messed up with my cousin. “Is it not time for your checkup soon?”

I suppressed the urge to bolt as I was escorted home. It made me wonder if the guards around me were for my protection or to stop me from bolting to Syrax and running away to live in Essos where no one would ever require me to have children.

A girl can dream.

Laena was waiting for me and Marya greeted her with a hug before cooing over little Lucerys. Falena was more reserved but most of my ladies, even the sharp tongued Maris Grafton, were enchanted by the little tyke. I honestly don’t know why, all he did was sleep and eat.

You know they’ve even stopped playing cards in their spare time? They just all moon over Lucerys now! It’s weird, okay?

Once Marya and Falena had relinquished me into Laena’s custody they were bundled off for a nice meal at Velaryon expense and I was all but frogmarched into my sometimes rooms and changed into the thin white gown that Alannys insisted I wear to every checkup. I tried not to resent the fact it felt tighter every time I put it on.

“May I?” asked Laena as I sat on the bed.

“May you what?” She gestured to my stomach and gave a limp wave of her hand. I got the meaning though. “Oh! If you want? Honestly, if even I haven’t felt anything I doubt you will.”

“It is odd to think it’s Laenor’s child, my niece or nephew, in there,” she murmured as her hand fell
to my stomach. “Rhaenyra, has he said anything to you about Lucerys?”

“No? Why?”

“He-” She was cut off as the door opened and Alannys stepped in. The maid who had escorted her bowed and then left.

“Your Grace, how are you feeling today?” she asked as she dropped her bag down. “How is the sickness?”

Straight to the point then. I could appreciate that.

“It is better but still not… great,” I sighed. She raised an eyebrow at my tone. “And everything itches, I’m swelling up, putting on weight, hair is growing where it shouldn’t and I still can’t be five minutes away from the privy at any given time.”

“Hmmm, that’s all quite common, pronounced but common,” she said and began rummaging in her bag.

“Why does anyone even get pregnant?” I groused. Alannys ignored me in favour of producing a leather bound book with a flourish.

“For the babe at the end,” murmured Laena. “For their own little Lucerys.”

“Of course and given how everything has gone so far you’ll have Westeros’ best behaved baby and I’ll have some screaming spawn of the Seven Hells.” Her hand fell on my shoulder as she attempted to comfort me. I caught it and tangled our fingers together briefly. “I am unsettled. Pay me no mind.”

“I understand your fear, Rhaenyra, I truly do. Please believe me when I say the babe is worth all the troubles pregnancy brings.” It was nice of her to try but I couldn’t see myself as a mother. Even if I fed him or her myself they would still spend most of their childhood being raised by strangers.

“Your Grace, do I bother asking you what you have been eating or should I simply request a report from Lady Laena?”

“I don’t have the chance to not eat what you require me too. Laena persuaded my Father to enforce a ratio of fried food to recommended food.” Laenor, Rhaenys and even Corlys might have helped. Traitors, every last one of them. Of course, that’s not to say I’m not bribing several of the kitchen staff to bring me the forbidden bacon… and egg and mushrooms and sausages.

I wish potatoes existed. Then I could have hash browns… Truly it is a mystery as to where this weight has come from.

Don’t judge me! Do you know what it’s like to have food cravings? That deep seated need for something and then when you finally get it… the satisfaction is toe-curling. It’s like a nice warm bath after a long day level of satisfying.

“Your Grace you must approach your pregnancy with restraint. I know common misconception holds you should indulge your cravings but this is simply not true!” Alannys told me, scribbling in her book.

“I have been eating fish and eggs and leafy greens and all that!” I protested. Alannys gave me an extremely doubtful look before producing her prized stethoscope. It was cold as she poked at my chest and then my stomach with it and noted something down in her records.
She had a frown on her face that I did not like one bit.

Next, she pushed me gently back onto the bed and pushed aside the gown slightly, hands resting on my abdomen before she began poking and prodding over the swell of my stomach. I glared at it, annoyed it was even there.

Damnable sweet tooth and damned craving for fried goods.

Honestly, if Rhaenyra in canon had to deal with this then I doubt it was pregnancies that ruined her looks because I very much doubted that woman understood restraint… or the concept of calories.

Huh, I should remember that. It’s not something I added to the book but knowledge of calories is probably pretty damn important. Another thing for Joffrey to stack onto whatever Wisdom he eventually recruits as a proxy for the iodine discovery.

I rely on that man too much.

I also really dislike the growing frown on Alannys’ face. Calories are not as distracting as I’d hoped they’d be.

I jumped as Laena’s hand slipped into mine and squeezed it reassuringly. She must have noticed me tensing as Alannys removed her hands and tugged the gown back into position.

“I think… are you sure you have not felt the baby quicken?” she asked, tone careful.

“Very sure but surely it is too early? This is my first time after all.” Alannys’ eyes flickered up to Laena and I wanted to throw up.

“Your Gra- Rhaenyra, I need you to stay very calm.” My heart leapt into my throat as my heart rate promptly went skyhigh. Why must people insist on saying things like that!? It was on par with ‘We need to talk’!

“I am not calm, I can not be calm! Tell me what is wrong!” I demanded, hating the way my breath was stuttering in my throat and the way I wanted to flee and cry.

“You are showing already. Most new Mother’s do not show until far after,” she said slowly. Dread pooled in my stomach and my laugh was a little desperate and high pitched. “Your symptoms are quite pronounced; the sickness, the swelling…”

“I am not showing! I’m not! It’s just… puppy fat! Laena is to blame for this! She buys me sweets!” Alannys bit her lip and I realised tears were forming in my eyes because I knew, I knew, what she was about to say and I wanted her to say anything but.

“Rhaenyra, we have to put forward the idea you may be carrying more than one babe.”
I awoke in my bed within the Velaryon manse, covers tucked up around my neck and sighed in relief. Clearly it was all just some horrible dream. I wasn’t carrying twins and I was definitely going to cut down on the bacon, eggs and sausages… and even those honey covered treats Laena keeps giving me!

Clearly this was some kind of divine intervention.

Well message heard loud and clear and I’ll stay away from anything coated in honey or fat going forward, mystery-god-who-is-also-very-benevolent-and-would-not-give-the-woman-terrified-of-childbirth-twins. I lay there in the covers, staring at the canopy of the bed for a while, mind blank.

And then I whimpered and immediately hated myself for it.

Twins.

I… I couldn’t do this! I couldn’t have twins! I’d only just gotten used to the idea of one! I can’t handle two! Oh gods, please, plea-

The door opened and I pulled the covers over my face to hide the tears streaking down my face. A tap accompanied the footsteps. Joffrey then.

“I thought it best if I kept Laenor, Laena and Rhaenys out,” he grunted, lowering himself into the chair by the fire, if the shuffling sounds were any indication. “Laenor and Rhaenys have not stopped congratulating each other since Laena told them.”

“She should not have told them,” I said in a sour voice. The effect was rather ruined by the fact my voice was muffled and slightly out of breath.

“Forgive her, I believe she would spontaneously set herself alight trying to keep that secret,” he said. I heard the sound of paper being turned and a quill scribbling. I lay under the covers in silence until finally I felt somewhat more put together. Cautiously, I poked my head out.

Joffrey was indeed sitting before the fire, an array of papers spread out on the table before him. He was eyeing the one he was holding critically and facing away from me.

“Does… does anyone else know?” I asked in a small voice. He put the paper down and twisted back to look at me.

“No. Only Laenor, Rhaenys and myself. Alannys swore herself to secrecy.” I rose on wobbly feet and dropped into the seat opposite, feeling as if I was in some kind of horrifying nightmare and any moment now I’d wake to better news.

“Viserys would probably throw a feast if he knew,” I said mournfully, staring into the flames. Joffrey snorted in derision, which managed to draw a smile from me. The knight had never forgiven Viserys for his actions after the Vale and bringing him up in conversation was bound to get a frown out of him at least.

“Alicent will be furious at least. How do you wish to proceed? Does it change our plan of action?”

“You’re trying to distract me?” I realised and he gave me a guilty smile. I took a few deep breaths to centre myself. When I spoke again, my voice was still breathless. “Alright, I’ll play ball… First,
“Well enough. Alicent’s Greens are making themselves scarce but the previously most vocal ones are falling to me easily,” he explained. “Court gossip does well to hide my actions.”

The less cautious speculated it was Alicent behind Correy and not Daemon. The downright stupid suggested Daemon had been working with Alicent to bring me down. I say downright stupid because if that ever gets back to Viserys tongues will start coming out.

Very fond of cutting out tongues is my dearest Father.

“Be careful with that, Viserys will put a stop to it eventually and I want Alicent to be the guilty looking one,” I warned him. He smiled and nodded, making a quick note on one of his sheets. “Ultimately, my goal is to secure the Red Keep and the Small Council to myself. Like Laenor says, once we have the capital the rest will follow.”

“You have something in mind for Otto?” My voice was eager and vicious.

“I do, even though I must once again point out that this is revenge. We stand upon the precipice of victory and this foolhardy action may set us back to the beginning.” His tone was harder than usual and I flushed under his gaze but held it.

“She would have killed Laenor. She would have had my child declared a bastard. If this is revenge, Joffrey, it is well earned,” I said finally. He just sighed in response and glared at the wall two inches past my ear.

“Very well. Understand I am only doing this because you’ll do something regardless and it is my son on the line should you fail,” he said finally. “I will require some action on your part.”

“As for securing the Small Council, that will be more difficult. Mellos will have to die for a new Grand Maester to be appointed and even then our ability to influence the choice of his replacement in non-existent. Criston Cole is on his last warning, Ser Darklyn tells me Viserys is looking for an excuse to remove his cloak from him but that relies on Viserys. The only one we can really attack right now is Jasper Wylde,” Joffrey told me, leaning back and tenting his fingers. “But the man is annoyingly clean. He doesn’t even frequent the brothels and my counterpart will be eager to protect him.”

“Find something. The damnable Harlsbury case is still going on and it would be nice to settle that in the daughter’s favour.” At this point, settling it without bloodshed would be nice. The nephew, we had discovered too late, had arranged to marry the daughter of a knight sworn to the Brackens.

The daughter had recently declared herself Lady Harlsbury and married a minor cousin of the Blackwoods. You can probably guess what happened next. The Brackens had gotten involved claiming they needed to protect their vassal’s rights, the Blackwoods had declared they would protect Lady Harlsbury from her cousin…

Yes, no bloodshed would be good. Being able to even sit in these meetings would be better. Corlys
was an adequate go between though, even if he did deliver his reports through gritted teeth.

“I will. Even if I have to escort a pair of whores to his rooms myself,” he promised. “My acquisitions proceed at a excellent pace.”

“Good, do you own all the brothels in Westeros now or just most of them?” He threw his head back and laughed at that. That smile that flickered over my face was mostly relief.

“I think you underestimate how many brothels there are in Westeros, Rhaenyra,” he chuckled. “But I own a good few and they have proved extremely useful. I actually bring it up because Maris Grafton came to me with an interesting idea.”

“Maris? Ugh, I still haven’t decided if I forgive her for the rumour business yet. I can not believe you did not pick up on that,” I said, slumping back in my chair and feeling more and more like myself as my mind turned from panic to politics.

“I also… struggle to believe I did not. Regardless, the idea has merit.” Which was Joffrey for ‘It’s a good idea and I want to do it but you explode when not consulted about these things’.

“Go ahead then, what is this idea?” I asked.

“Gambling.”

Ah. Something tells me that if half of Joffrey’s activities ever get made public I’ll be the ruler blamed for all of King’s Landing’s future addiction problems. Taverns, brothels and proto-casinos.

“The House always wins,” I said before I could stop myself. At Joffrey’s raised eyebrow, I snorted. “The idea that when it comes to gambling, the only one who wins in the long run is the one running the whole show.”

“Of course. The only people who make money gambling are those who never place a bet, after all.” Joffrey said. “But I’m not too interested in the money. I care about encouraging the bad habits of noblemen and learning their secrets.”

“Surely not outright blackmail?” I asked, suddenly worried but he shook his head.

“Nothing so crass but noblemen in debt, seeking out a sympathetic ear…”

“Point taken, Joffrey,” I said. “Do it then. Get Maris involved if she’s passed your stringent tests. She has been lost since my ladies stopped playing cards.”

“Poor Alys,” Joffrey sighed. “She’s lost a Lord’s ransom in silver to Maris.”

I snickered. I was pretty sure both Strongs had lost a lot of money. So had Laena, actually. Marya and Falena less so because they didn’t bet as much and were much more risk averse. I worried less about Maris these days. Joffrey had turned her life inside out and all he’d found was a slightly worrying loyalty to Jeyne Arryn rather than me.

The kind of loyalty that would see her take a trip out of the Moon Door than risk betraying her. Given that Jeyne had ended Grafton power in Gulltown I did wonder where that came from but Joffrey had assured me she was loyal to me as long as Jeyne was.

“How go the Wisdoms? Jerrett has been silent for too long, I fear,” I asked dragging my thoughts from the Vale, Jeyne and Helaena.
“The crops have gone through their first rotation. Local farmers are reportedly impressed by the increase in yield and a few of the more adventurous ones are seeking to copy it. Only a small fraction though. The rest have adopted a wait and see stance.” I nodded along. We had predicted this so it wasn’t too upsetting.

“The Seaweed farm is still being set up but the samples Laenor had harvested from Driftmark have helped in their mission to perfect the glass.” I waited for the ‘but’. “But they are having issues with the quality at the current time. The glass shatters too easily.”

I sank down into my chair and glared at the fire. I had introduced the book over a year ago now and I still had nothing meaningful from it. Actually, no. I was overlooking my midwives and the germ theory but damn it all, I had hoped for more.

“And the less said about the printing press the better,” I said firmly, cutting off Joffrey as he was about to launch into his next topic. Gods, that was embarrassing. I’d been so concerned with my plan to print the Seven-pointed Star and win the Faith I had neglected to look into supply.

Specifically, paper and ink. More specifically, there wasn’t enough of it. There weren’t enough paper mills or ink makers to feed even one press. Not to mention that acquiring experts to set up our own supply was proving… difficult. Guess where all the paper and ink makers lived?

If you guessed the place where most paper and ink is consumed, right next to Westeros’ biggest centre of learning and repository of books, you guessed right! I really shouldn’t need explain how the chief Black was having a hard time extracting people and skills from the heart of Green territory.

“The marriage game then?” Joffrey asked. Fear pooled in my stomach once more. The knowledge I was having twins at least… I took a deep breath.

“If they are boys the first goes to Borros Baratheon,” I started, voice shaky. “The second… I am not sure of. I only planned for one.”

“If they are girls?”

“The Reynes. I want that check on the Lannisters.”

“I suppose it’s too much to hope for a boy and a girl?” I smiled in response.

“Then we are the luckiest people in Westeros,” I chuckled, not really feeling all that mirthful.

I’d spent a lot of the last month thinking on marriages. My firstborn daughter and firstborn son would set the tone for the rest of my children. It should revolt me to promise away children not even born yet but… but if I did not play the game they would die.

I had to tell myself that. I had to remember that.

I could promise the Lannisters a Queen or promise the Baratheons a Queen. Alicent would take the one I did not in all likelihood. Maybe it was a book bias that made me gravitate toward the Baratheons and I was just rationalising but I didn’t have a balance to the Baratheons in the Stormlands. I could check the Lannisters with the Reynes.

And also, now that I think on it, if I had the Stormlands, the southern Crownlands would fall in line too.

“Interesting.” Was all Joffrey had to say as he noted it down. “I’ll put forth the offer to both of
them, quietly and discreetly. I wouldn’t expect much back until you birth the children, then expect both to send answers.”

“Because I’ve proved myself fertile.” That came out more bitter than intended and Joffrey’s eyes softened.

“It is distasteful but it is expected. We can change the dance eventually but for now we must follow the steps.” His tone was sympathetic.

“That was very poetic,” I teased and he flushed slightly.

“Laenor has been trying his hand at composing poems,” he admitted. “They’re awful.”

I laughed until I cried. I couldn’t help it. It was probably hysterics or a mental breakdown but I really couldn’t help it. A knock on the door sounded as I finally managed to get myself under control.

“Joff, is everything well?” came Laenor’s strained question. “I heard… laughter?”

I sighed and took a few more deep breaths, letting the warmth of the fire wash over me. I was having twins. Hopefully just twins. Laenor knew. He was happy. Laena was happy. Rhaenys was probably at ‘invent aerial advertising and tell the whole of Westeros’ happy.

The door cracked open a bit and Laenor’s face poked around the door, his eyes seeking Joffrey and then myself. Myself who sat frozen in my chair, tears streaking down my cheeks once more. He moved so swiftly to my side that my brain almost didn’t process his movements, taking my hand and tangling our fingers together.

“How are you? Laena says you were quite overwhelmed.” Probably an understatement, I’d fainted in a panic. “It will be okay. I will be with you every step of the way. Our babes will be perfect. You will be a fine mother.”

I let him hold me as the tears and the shaking came again. I really shouldn’t keep doing this. He wasn’t ever going to love me the way he loved Joffrey. He was making an effort but I would never have his heart. Not truly and yet I still clung to him, sobbing into his shoulder, because at least when he said it would be alright I could kind of believe him.
Court was busy the next day. Viserys sat atop the Iron Throne and Alicent below him, still playing the good queen. Still on her best behaviour. It should not be a surprise she was clutching Daeron and Aemond close since Helaena’s departure for the Vale.

Rumour had it that Aemond had grown even worse since he learned he was to squire with the Tullys. Not even the lure of friendship with a Prince would see other children flocking to him anymore. Hopefully, a good few years with a family that prized Family, Duty and Honour above all else would straighten him out, turn him from the course of the monster he had been in canon and looked set to become now.

Gods, he was only five.

We made our obeisances before the twisted monstrosity forged in Balerion’s flames. Viserys greeted me loudly and proudly but frowned when I asked to speak with him in private. It certainly got the rest of the court muttering away to themselves.

It seemed like everyone was holding their breath. Viserys had torn Alicent’s children from her and the Greens had lost immense amounts of prestige as a result. The Blacks were triumphant, the only question for the court now was how I would deliver the killing blow.

They would learn soon enough.

We both followed Viserys as he lead us into the empty Small Council chamber with a worried look on his round face. Ser Steffon and Ser Arryk guarding the door as we made our way inside. According to Laenor it had been Ser Steffon who had carried me to my rooms after I had received the news.

Suddenly sick with nerves once more, I tried to focus on his rage inducing moustache and not the news I had to deliver. It didn’t quite work.

“Daughter? Is everything well?” he asked, face shining with genuine concern as he lowered himself into a seat. I opened my mouth to speak but the words died momentarily and Laenor took my hand, kissing the back of it gently.

“Take your time,” he murmured. Viserys watched him with an odd expression before turning to me, eyes soft and an encouraging smile in place.

“I had a checkup by a midwife yesterday,” I managed. “Everything is well. More than well. There is some news you need to hear though. Suspected news.”

At that Viserys looked reassured and leant back in his chair, attentive for any information about his future grandchildren. Something tells me he’s going to spoil them rotten. Hell, in canon, he had to have known the Strongs were bastards and he still spoiled them rotten.

“The midwife believes there is a possibility that I am carrying more than one babe. Just a possibility though, we may yet be wrong,” My voice was shakier than I wanted it to be and Laenor squeezed my hand again. I risked a glance at his face and tried not to smile at the pride and happiness I saw there.

Something told me these kids wouldn’t only be spoiled rotten by their grandfather.
“Twins,” repeatedly Viserys faintly. I nodded and watched as his face went through a journey of emotions. Delight, happiness… fear. I tried not to feel satisfied at that last one. Finally though, he settled on joy and struggled from his seat. “Twins!”

He picked me up and twirled me around, almost bear hugging me, sending my stomach churning in unhappiness. Then he advanced on Laenor, much to my husbands bewilderment and discomfort. I fancied I heard the breath leave his lungs and Viserys failed to hold back as he did with me, twirling him around with evident glee.

“Twins, Rhaenyra!” he repeated when Laenor finally wriggled free. I forced a smile at the joy on his face before remembering Joffrey’s request from the night before. Now seemed like the best time to enact that particular part of the plan.

“Twins. Yes. I’m very excited. Daunted but excited.” I began and he nodded, smile so wide I wondered if he’d break his face. “I was wondering… if it is not an imposition…”

“Nothing could be an imposition now! Two sons for House Targaryen!”

“Or daughters. Either would bring us all great joy!” Laenor hastily cut in and Viserys nodded in response.

“Or daughters, indeed. Tell me what you were hoping for Rhaenyra, if it is within my power I will deliver it to you.”

“I was wondering if we might not have a small tourney to celebrate my pregnancy?” Laenor’s eyebrows shot up at that.

“Small! I shall throw the grandest tourney in your name, daughter!” Oh, I should have seen that coming. Vision of having to wait for months before it was thrown danced before my eyes. Joffrey would need it much sooner to draw Otto to him, not that I could see how a tourney would help.

“Perhaps not that large! A reasonable affair, my stomach is still delicate,” I said and Viserys beamed at me once more, nodding, before he laughed again.

“Twins! Will you announce it to the court yet?” he asked, eye bright. I caught Laenor’s eye.

“It is not confirmed yet. It is only the midwives suspicion,” he told Viserys. Viserys raised an eyebrow at that but the grin didn’t fall from his face.

“Oh yes, I’ve heard all about those midwives from Eustace. Old bore that he is. If one of these ladies can figure out you’re having twins and get you through that birth safely I’ll pull a Queen Elinor to support them if I have too,” he boomed. “If you announce it, I’ll back you to the hilt in this, Rhaenyra.”

“That is very kind, Father, but I think I will wait.” The thought of everyone knowing… It made my stomach turn in terror once more. He nodded, smile dimming a little but then cheered again.

“Well, we’ll still have your tournament though!” He said. “Anything for my girl and her future children!”

That would have to be good enough. He held me close one last time and once again waxed lyrical about how proud he was. He even extended that pride to Laenor, which sent my husband blushing. Once word got out I was having more than one babe, Laenor would be considered the manliest of men. I, of course, would not tease him about it at all.
We followed Viserys out back towards the court, our respective Kingsguard falling in behind us, listening to him chuckling to himself and occasionally repeating the word ‘twins’ like some kind of maniac.

“It may have been a mistake to tell him so early,” I murmured to Laenor, low enough so that only he could hear it.

“It definitely was. He’d sulk if we did not though. Why a tourney?” he asked back in an equally low voice. “You have never been fond of them in the past?”

“Joffrey asked for one. I’ll explain back at the manse.” I did not want to risk Ser Steffon or Ser Arryk catching onto our plot.

Then we were back in the Throne room, watching as Viserys ascended to the Iron Throne once more in a clearly good mood. Alicent’s suspicious gaze turned to me and I gave her a sweet smile in turn. Her eyes narrowed and she turned her gaze back to Viserys.

Silence fell as the court picked up on his changed mood and an air of expectation grew. His smile only grew wider in response which fed into the expectation. A vicious circle only Viserys could break.

“Attention all!” he called, not really needing to as he had the undivided attention of everyone in the room. “It has come to my attention that we never truly celebrated my daughter’s pregnancy! Now that she is well once more, let us rectify that with a tourney!”

A cheer went up throughout the hall at that news. Viserys certainly attracted courtiers that loved parties, feasts and tourneys. Well, one would not last long at court if you did dislike them. It really put into perspective just how badly Littlefinger fucked the realm that Viserys’ treasury was… not healthy, perhaps, but we wouldn’t be going bankrupt if there was a war or some kind of disaster.

We were certainly not five million dragons in debt, that was for certain. How nobody had sounded the alarm about that sheer mind-boggling number was bizarre. Lyman would have raised the alarm at half a million and not rested until the debt was wrestled down.

Then again, Lyman Beesbury was a saint and he needed to be protected at all costs. Actually, I should probably make sure I have a successor to him. Even if I manage to avoid his death in the Dance he still might not live that long afterwards.

Say it with me: Something to put to Joffrey.

I should probably get another Joffrey too. I should at least give him a push into expanding his full-time employees somewhat. If this plot against Otto is to go off without a hitch, he’ll need all the help he can get. There is his friend to consider too, the one that plays with him. Maris may be a good start if she proves loyal enough with those gambling dens. She has a sharp mind.

“Off in your head again,” came Alicent’s voice. I turned to her with a smile, noting Laenor was distracted with a group of Doves all eager to congratulate him on the duel. A good sign, it meant the Doves were looking for an in with us.

A bad sign for Alicent though.

“A bad habit I’ve yet to break,” I replied stiffly. “Like your bad habit of associating with our mutual enemy’s agents.”

That did crack her facade a little and she half turned away to avoid showing the court her little slip.
I caught the rage in her stance though. As I suspected, it was the sting of being Daemon’s pawn
that hurt more than the failure. Probably not the punishment though, I reminded myself.

“You have claws today it seems,” she said finally. “And here I thought I would never miss the little
girl who would follow me around, begging for attention.”

“You were older, mature and impossibly clever.” I wasn’t lying. Young alicent had been good
company and always eager to read with me and share theories back and forth. “Growing up has a
way of ruining such perceptions, does it not?”

“I did not come here to trade barbs with you, Rhaenyra,” she started and I interrupted.

“No, you want something else. What I told Father? Or is this about my siblings?” I could see I’d
hit the mark when she failed to suppress the look of chagrin.

“He is taking my babes from me,” she hissed. “He will not let me see them, will not let me write to
them without my letters being examined! You love your siblings, Rhaenyra, at least speak out for
their sake.”

“Oh but he’s right,” the echo of Viserys’ own reasoning for protecting her in turn after her stunt
with Correy had her smile become strained once more. “You have ruined them. Poor Aegon is
terrified of most things to do with me and Aemond is so quick to violence other children are scared
of him.”

“Sending them away will not help that. Do you wish me to beg? I will if it gets me my children
back. I will get on my knees before this court and beg you for your help,” she hissed, moving a
little closer to me and attempting to seize my hand.

Somehow I don’t think Viserys would take that well, so I moved my hand away and stepped back.

“Alicent, Rhaenyra, is everything well?” Viserys’ call had us both looking over to him and
realising the entire court was almost completely focused on us even if they were pretending to
maintain their own conversations.

“Do not worry Father, I will tell her the news!” I called back. That set the court a-chattering again
and Viserys smiled at the reminder.

“What news?” demanded Alicent. “Is this what you told him?”


“What? What coul- Children. Plural.” She paled at the realisation and became even paler when I
smiled in satisfaction. Oh, that was almost worth the panic building in my gut. “How could you
possibly know?”

“We do not for sure. My symptoms were more pronounced, I’m already showing about a month
and bit early… if the pattern holds they will quicken sooner than most,” I explained, doing my best
to seem the pleased mother and not the terrified young woman.

“Twins,” she said faintly.

“Indeed! Alannys is quite experienced in these matters. Honestly, I do not know why Septon
Eustace would speak against her and her kind.” In Alicent’s shock, she failed to cover up the slight
flinch at Septon Eustace’s name.
Well, if anything this conversation had been productive. I would definitely need to meet with Septon Patrek now because if I wasn’t mistaken the push back from the Faith was push back from the Hightowers. Well, Joffrey had said half the Most Devout were Reachman. I couldn’t recall if the High Septon had actual links to Old Town or whether he was just a puppet but well, the Hightower’s had held the office so much in years gone by that it wouldn’t surprise me if he was a Hightower cousin of some description.

I really need a PA or something to keep track of this stuff.

“Still, if true it is joyous news. Laenor is over the moon,” I blathered on, doing my best to look like I hadn’t noticed Alicent’s barely concealed look of horror. I was willing to bet she actually knew they were Laenor’s in truth and two trueborn Targaryens to bring to bear against her own two sons?

One of which may well be my future heir? One of which may be Laenor’s?

That was worth more than a second son and a third son on the marriage market and she damn well knew it. I wonder if she had been relying on those marriages to some degree? Given that panic I would bet the contents of my jewelry box she had.

And to think, that wasn’t my only surprise.
When Falena had called Septon Patrek a firebrand, I had assumed him the type of preacher that could set his audience alight with religious fervor. One who preached the Seven-pointed Star and actually believed the words he was saying, believed them with such an intensity, you wanted to believe them too. Perhaps those words would be slightly provocative, railing against the corruption of Faith.

And to be fair to Falena, that’s exactly what he was.

But slightly provocative to the Faith was the understatement of the century! How had the two even got involved with the man that stood before me?

He was a man of contradictions, dressed in a Septon’s vestments that were closer to rags yet clearly kept clean and well-maintained. His hair was a vivid red, but clipped short and neat, to match his beard. Happily for my peace of mind, he at least wore shoes.

“People of King’s Landing! I stand before you as an unworthy follower of the Seven-who-are-one! Will you, good people, lend your ears to me and listen to what I have to preach!?” Around me the crowd roared it’s affirmative, setting me shivering.

The crowd reacted to his every movement, pressing in closer as he raised his arms as if to embrace someone. My guards, Ser Steffon in particular, had not liked my idea to visit the Septon in disguise but I’d pushed the issue. Alicent had the Faith her last true redoubt that I could not influence. Now that her Greens were on the back foot, she’d be relying on the Septons and Septas preaching against me more than ever.

I owed it to those who followed me and to my unborn children to at least investigate the possibility of push back in that quarter. Marya and Falena had dutifully reported that Septon Patrek was very interested in meeting me, that my charity work had caught his interest long ago, which did not mean I was about to be as blind as Cersei. The moment he said the words Faith Militant I was out, out and having a word with Viserys about the whole matter to boot.

And so I was cloaked and cowled amongst a crowd of smallfolk, looking up at the latest rabble rouser to preach to his followers on Visenya’s Hill. Next to me, Ser Steffon was dressed in leather and mail, clutching at his sword and eyeing the crowd suspiciously. More of Joffrey’s men were dispersed at points, ready to swing into action if something should go wrong.

I think holy men playing at politics disturbed Ser Steffon. He was a rare breed of knight that took his vows seriously and the idea that his Faith could be bought and sold was not pleasant to him.

“I come to speak to you good people today about justice!” He called, commanding the attention of the crowd once more and allowing his hands to fall to his sides. “What is justice!? For I say to you good people that I have never seen it! That I have spent four and forty years upon this earth and I have seen not one shred of justice!”

The crowd murmured amongst themselves after that and he let them, surveying them all with stern eyes. Clearly not as mad the man that would arise on Rhaenys’ Hill a decade and a half into the future. He knew damn well how to play a crowd too.

If he was not a blind fanatic, as I suspected, he would be useful beyond measure.

“Is it justice that the common man should pay for his sin in silver whilst the Septon who judges
him debauches himself, shames himself in the eyes of the Seven!? Is it justice that the man who is
supposed the guide the Faith sits in the Starry Sept growing fat off of the gold of evil men who
seek divine approval for their actions!? Is it justice that there are those of us who starve whilst the
Faith give us the scraps off of their richly laid tables!?”

His face showed clear fury and anger. The crowd hissed and booed along with his words as I began
sorting through plans in my head. He let them mutter and growl as he paced up and down.

“Are those cloaked and crowned fools in the Starry Sept truly worshippers of the Seven-who-are-
one!? When they sell what little is left of their souls for comfort!? For power!? For hedonism!?” he
bellowed. “And their rot only spreads! It spreads down through the Faith poisoning those beneath
them! It poisons the Septons and the Septas! It poisons the nobles that lend their ear to them! It
poisons the common folk that follow them!”

I’m honestly surprised that this guy has not had his head hacked off by the Faith yet. This is heavy
stuff. I might not be overly attached to any particular religion but even part of me wants to gasp in
shock. And Ser Steffon is gripping his sword so tightly I fear he means to draw it and start hacking
through the crowd.

I think I’ll be having stern words with Marya and Falena about this. Something of a firebrand my
arse! Did… did they agree with him? They were quiet and devout ladies, always there. Reliable
and dependable. Had they gotten caught up in his rhetoric or were they dancing with him for his
money?

“Good people we must reject the creature in the Starry Sept! We must reject the impious and
corrupt Most Devout! We must reject the debauched Septons and disgraced Septas! We must
embrace our own love for the Seven-who-are-one! We must embrace the teachings of the Seven-
pointed Star! We must embrace our own Faith once more!”

The crowd let out a bellowing cheer and the applause was raucous. I joined in, mostly to not stand
out. Next to me, Ser Steffon followed my lead, staring up at Septon Patrek with an expression I
could not identify. Said Septon was drinking in the adulation of the crowd, raising his arms and
beaming at them all like a proud father.

I wanted this man on my side.

Waiting afterwards felt like agony as he made his way through the endless sea of people that
wanted to speak to him. Some sought blessings, others sought advice and others still sought aid.
Across the entire square begging brothers rattled their bowls, earning a copper or two from those
leaving. Even a copper or two was enough for me to wonder at how much he must take with every
sermon.

This was how he was helping Marya and Falena pay for their charities, I would assume. I was still
having a hard time reconciling this wild Septon that raised such hell against the Faith and the two
devout ladies.

I waited until most had gone before approaching him. I had to hand to him, I’d be exhausted if I’d
had to deal with half the people he had, yet when I approached he looked completely unaffected.
His blue eyes were bright with enthusiasm as he beamed at me like I was his own child.

“And how might I help you, child of the Seven?” he asked, his smile warm and benevolent. I
twitched my hand so that he could the ring I wore and I knew he’d understood when he drew a
sharp breath and his smile wavered for a moment.
“I find your views on the corruption of the Faith very interesting. Might we discuss it further, Septon?” I asked, hiding my hand once more. “My friends have told me oh-so much about you.”

He let out an explosive breath and peered at my face under my hood before nodding.

“For you? We may discuss it as long as you wish.” We followed along as he led us away from the main square and towards the less ostentatious but still solidly built manses.

The dwelling he did lead us too was clearly the basis for his own ‘Faith’. A large yet austere manse on the very edge of what would be considered the ‘Good’ part of King’s Landing. The manse boasted dormitories for his Septas and Septons, a large meeting hall for him to preach in and from what I could see, quite a few areas for storage.

He led us into what I would assume to be an office of some type. Ser Steffon explored the ‘office’ thoroughly, poking through every corner with a grim expression. Septon Patrek endured his suspicion with an equally grim look but did not comment until my white cloak took up his post outside the room and we both settled into the slightly uncomfortable wooden chairs.

I shook my cloak off, revealing my face in truth.

“I dared not believe…” He murmured. “Falena and Marya are nice girls, dedicated, but I dared not believe they told the truth about the heir to the Iron Throne interested in poor old Septon Patrek.”

“Poor old Septon Patrek? That does sound like the description of a man who delivered a thundering denouncement of the Faith,” I observed and he smiled widely.

“You have me there, Your Grace. I see so much injustice in this world, it feels impossible for me not to speak out about it,” he replied. His voice wasn’t even hoarse and I had to admit I was quite impressed. “Might I congratulate you on your pregnancy, Your Grace?”

“I accept those congratulations gratefully, Septon Patrek,” I replied, hand finding my stomach almost unconsciously. Fifteen weeks in. It seemed time flew by now but I couldn’t think about that. Right now I had to focus.

I thought back to his speech. Manipulating the Faith, or trying too, could make or break a ruler. Jaehaerys had managed it with aplomb, even before he was out of his regency. Cersei had been less so.

I wanted to be Jaehaerys in this situation, if it wasn’t obvious.

“I see similar injustices. It is my fervent hope that my reign as Queen will help the poorest in Westeros,” I said and found I was being honest about that least. “I have begun work to that goal already.”

“You charity or your alchemy? I confess Marya and Falena have been quite tight-lipped on the subject,” Patrek said, leaning forward. I restrained a smile at that. My ladies kept my secrets then, even when in the presence of their ally.

“I accept those congratulations gratefully, Septon Patrek,” I replied, hand finding my stomach almost unconsciously. Fifteen weeks in. It seemed time flew by now but I couldn’t think about that. Right now I had to focus.

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“Both feed into one another, Septon, but I will set your mind at ease. Alchemy is the study of magic using the scientific method. There is no magic involved in what my Wisdom’s study,” I said and he nodded, first hurdle negotiated. “No, what we study is how to improve Westeros. My midwives are the first of many planned improvements!”

“Your midwives have saved many a life, both mother and babe have lived where others may have seen them die. They tell me their ways were taught to them by your own Maester,” he told me and
I inclined my head to acknowledge the praise. “Might I speak plainly, Your Grace?”

“Of course, Septon, I would not have it any other way.”

“I am aware of the grudge that the Faith proper seems to bear you currently. I consider it further proof of their divergence from the true path that the Faith should follow,” he said. “I even have an idea of who bought and paid for your spiritual assassination.”

My answering smile was strained. He knows exactly what I’m doing and why then. As I suspected, no blind fanatic.

“You speak truly,” I admitted. “But it seems that our goals do align and I would still seek your aid in this. I hope to be a monarch that works closely with the Faith to strengthen my people. I want to make Westeros a better and kinder place.”

His almost fatherly smile was back in place as he ruminated on that declaration. Finally he nodded, coming to some sort of decision.

“I have not found any fault in your actions so far. The Faith as it is now is a rotting bloated thing. If we can put it to rights together, you shall have my endless loyalty, Your Grace,” he promised. I restrained my sigh of relief and gave him a more genuine smile. Still, there was one more thorny issue I needed answers on before I could conclude this an entirely successful meeting.

But how to bring it up without offending the man…

“It occurs to me, Septon Patrek, that your sermons atop Visenya’s Hill may attract unwanted attention soon enough,” I prompted and he gave me a pained look in turn.

“In truth, Your Grace, they already have. The City Watch endlessly harass my people, knights in the service of some unknown lord frequently threaten violence.” His face was troubled and I nodded along.

It would only be a matter of time before someone killed him.

“Perhaps I could arrange for some sort of guard. A way to start our relationship, with the heir to the Throne protecting the heir to this dying Faith.” His answering smile was sharp.

“I have no swords in my service and do not intend on raising any. The Faith’s time of violence and war is long past. If you would protect me and mine, Your Grace, I would be happy for it.” Oh, thank the Seven.

“To the future and an ever closer relationship then?” I offered, extending my hand.

“Indeed, Your Grace, indeed!” he affirmed, taking my hand in turn and shaking it.

Hopefully, he wouldn’t lead an armed rebellion, finish off my dragons and then take half my city to boot.
“Security is heavy today,” I remarked. My companion made a disinterested hum, too busy scanning the crowd around us. For what, I did not know.

The tourney grounds were already heaving with spectators, peddlers and the usual crowds that the prospect of seeing men knock each other into the dirt would bring. Even trailed by a white cloak and several guards didn’t garner us any particular attention. They had not come to see me or even the King, they had come to see knights from all over the Seven kingdoms and the sheer spectacle of the Court on full display.

Speaking of chivalry, according to Joffrey, Criston Cole was on his last legs in Viserys’ favour. He’d earned so much from his defence of me in the face of Daemon, I would have thought that after that particular incident he could have killed a man in open court and Viserys would have overlooked it. Even publicly switching sides to Alicent had done little to dent the esteem Viserys had held him in. Yet since my return and Viserys’ little awakening, Criston Cole had become less and less secure at court.

If Laenor had lost that duel to Correy, I do not think he would have enjoyed the consequences. He’d made it apparent his loyalty was not to the King when he’d given Correy to Alicent and not the Confessors as ordered but getting my husband killed or setting forth a chain of events that would see my child a bastard?

I do believe Viserys would have torn him apart. It probably explained why he’d been on his best behaviour recently. A loyal Lord Commander was a massive boon to the Greens. Canon told me it would ensure Alicent’s control of King’s Landing just after Viserys death and end in poor Lyman Beesbury being executed for his loyalty to me.

I owed the old man enough to at least get rid of his future murderer.

“Probably because of the recent robberies,” Joffrey replied finally, nodding as he evidently found what he was looking for. I would have responded but we’d reached our destination. Joffrey had probably timed his answer on purpose to annoy me.

Viserys was already present in the royal box, sipping wine alongside Alicent, who was relaxed and smiling, the first time I’d seen her as such since Correy’s duel.

I did not believe her little act for a second. She had to be panicking, her Greens were fragmenting around her. I had her on the ropes and yet here she was, smiling at a tourney to celebrate the death knell of her little attempted coup?

Aemond was unhappy to see me but then Aemond was always unhappy to be reminded I existed these days. He was only just out of confinement, having thrown a tantrum a week ago during which he had apparently bitten Viserys and kicked Ser Erryk Cargyll hard enough to bruise him.
“Good morning, Daughter! Ser Velaryon!” Joffrey bowed low in response as I made my greetings in turn.

“Might Joffrey sit with us today? Lady Rhaenys has taken her children in hand and we are both mere refugees, hiding from her gaze.” Joffrey had come by to collect me that morning with Laena and Laenor conspicuous by their absence. At my questioning of why they were missing, he hadn’t managed to hide his annoyance.

According to him, the Velaryon siblings had started a row with each other whilst preparing to meet me this morning. Laenor had let on his true feelings towards his nephew, Laena had responded predictably and Rhaenys had been forced to come down on her children like the wrath of an angry god when they’d started talking about an aerial duel.

Laenor’s feelings towards Lucerys had taken me entirely by surprise and I was somewhat worried I had managed to miss what was obvious in retrospect. No doubt I’d be dragged into it at some point.

At my heavily edited explanation, Viserys looked a little put out but motioned for us both to sit down, ignoring Alicent’s brief sour expression. Annoyingly, the first thing he did was drop his hand onto my stomach and give me a wide smile.

“How are they this fine morning?” he asked.

“Well. The quickening was earlier than Alannys expected. I do believe if it’s not twins she may quit the midwife business for good.” Viserys chuckled at that, broad grim lighting up his face.

They had quickened a week ago. I had laid in bed, contemplating having another hour or so when a fluttering had begun in my belly. I had thought it nerves at first, butterflies in my belly, and spent an age trying to think about what I could be nervous about. At least until the answer had hit me like a freight train.

To say I had mixed feelings was an understatement. Alys had to coax me through two panic attacks, one storm of tears and hysterical giggles. The fact she does not think me a mad woman is probably a miracle. The fact she did it without joking or attempting to cheer me up is nothing short of divine intervention.

I would have to give her something nice in thanks.

I was saved from the need to speak further about the subject by the start of what seemed like an endless crowd of lords, all eager to get to Viserys through me. Even being away from the Throne room did little to dampen their enthusiasm for pushing their various pet projects. I even got a few gifts out of the whole thing.

Not that it was a bad haul. Plenty of expensive trinkets and such. Materials for dresses, a beautifully crafted bow, a collection of books I fully intended to devour and rare and expensive alcohols I had no use for since I’d stopped drinking the moment I’d realised I was pregnant. A fact, I should note, everyone at court had already remarked on so why I was getting bottles upon bottles was mind-boggling. All of this alongside the usual gifts a babe might receive, much in the same vein as the ones I’d bought Daeron over a year ago.

Gods, it felt so much longer, like an age had passed since I’d returned to King’s Landing that first time. The me back then would be horrified by the fact I hadn’t waited until my twenties like she had wanted to. She’d also be horrified about my complete lack of Black Powder. I smiled ruefully at that.
Then it was time for the joust itself. I will admit to a certain childlike wonder whenever Viserys held jousts, a wonder that had never gone away even as I had grown into a woman proper. I had spent over a decade as Rhaenyra and yet it was at these events that the surreality of the situation sank in for me. I was a princess, an honest to the gods princess, watching real knights in a joust.

Those of middling talent were eliminated pretty quickly with the usual names rising to the top. Stokeworth, Belmore, Cole, the Cargylls, Hightower. The only surprise for me was that Jaremy Corbray made it reasonably far in the lists. He may be a lousy Master of Whispers but he wasn’t a half bad knight.

I let myself relax and enjoy the show. It would not do to seem tense or nervous. Joffrey had something planned. He had asked for this tourney and implied he needed it to go ahead as part of his attempt to kill Otto but I could not make the connection in my mind. Even if I couldn’t now, however, I did not want anyone to look back and wonder.

Aemond was also enjoying the show, laughing and cheering for his chosen knight in each tilt. I found myself smiling a little. It was easy to see he was five when he was like this and not the sulking monster that fell to easily to violence that he was normally.

Hooves thundered once more and one more knight crashed from his horse and met the ground. The crowd cheered but not as loudly as they would have done for the favourites of the tournaments. The unfortunate mud-caked knight clambered to his feet and trooped from the field, waving to the crowd as he did so. It was considered the height of rudeness to be a poor loser.

As the tourney went on and no sign of Joffrey’s plan coming to fruition appeared I found myself even more on edge and tapping out an annoyed beat on the arm of my chair. The small smile that grew across his face in response to my annoyance had me grumbling to myself. I couldn’t ask with so many around us and he was enjoying it.

“How is Lady Laena and little Lucerys?” asked Viserys as another knight bit the dust to the roar of the crowd. I tried not to choke on air as Joffrey gave the King a surprised look.

“Well enough. She has her hands full with him. He is quite the active one,” Joffrey said, pride in his son winning out over caution. “I once again thank Your Grace for your kindness in regards to the egg. Laena very much hopes it will hatch soon.”

At the soft smile on Joffrey’s face, Viserys looked almost puzzled. I saw the moment Joffrey realised why and sank into my seat as my spymaster turned to me with a single raised eyebrow.

Damn.

I was saved by Viserys remembering himself a moment later and clapping the unfortunate knight on the shoulder with a laugh.

“I would be happy for him to share some time with Daeron,” he said cheerfully. “They’re not too far apart in age and I have to decide on who to foster him with!”

I risked a glance at Alicent as Joffrey stammered out his thanks. She looked ready to strangle the life from her husband for once again reminding her that he was in control when it came to my siblings. Then she was distracted as they announced the next riders. A small, fond smile grew over her face as Gwayne Hightower was to tilt against a minor Belmore cousin.

As Viserys’ attention was pulled away, by Jasper Wylde, Joffrey turned to me. I grimaced at his raised eyebrow and meaningful look.
“You did not mention your Father’s interest in Lucerys.” His voice was low and I caught a hint of danger there. I looked around the box at those closest but Alicent and Viserys were absorbed in whatever tale Lord Jasper was telling.

“It did not seem prudent,” I whispered back. His mouth morphed into an unhappy slant and her turned his gaze to the spectacle before us, leaning his face against his hand.

“I had wondered what he was holding over you,” he murmured, low enough so that only I heard it over the chatter of the crowd. “I had thought you smart enough to inform me if it was something like this.”

“He brought it up once,” I told him. “He has not again.”

“I dislike him even knowing,” Joffrey said. “Lucerys is my son.”

I watched him for a moment. It did not surprise me, I had seen Joffrey’s reaction to Lucerys at the moment of his birth. I had seen his loving glances, heard Laena’s reports. He had been married to Laena on the idea that he would be the father to her child.

Did he play out that role in other ways too? Burning jealousy squirmed in my stomach at the thought.

“Of course,” I said and turned back to the tourney ground. “No one doubts that.”

“Ser Velaryon!” called Viserys, pulling us from our conversation. “You were quite the tourney knight once I recall.”

Joffrey nodded and grimaced, face a brief mask of pain. He misses it, I think. He trained for it his entire life and he had been good at it. Even Corlys had said so which was high praise indeed for a man like my goodfather.

“How do you place my goodbrother in the rankings?” he asked, oblivious to Joffrey’s pain.

“He has the makings of an excellent rider, Your Grace,” said Joffrey after some thought. “But he lacks experience I fear. He will find his skill will only take him so far in this competition.”

“My brother has been trained by the finest the Hightower could purchase,” said Alicent, smile sharp. “Are you implying we wasted our money?”

“Of course not, Your Grace. He merely needs a year or two to find his stride. I predict he’ll be quite the fearsome opponent soon enough,” Joffrey told her, extending his peace offering.

“Better than you would have been? Before your injury, I mean?” She asked and Joffrey’s smile froze. It was long practice of putting up with her insults that kept me in my seat. Instead, I settled for imagining the slap such a comment should rightly earn.

“It is hard to say. Perhaps Her Grace would like a bet? Twenty five dragons on Ser Belmore.” The tone in his voice set my heart racing. He was angry. Very much so. Alicent did not see the trap, did not know him as I did, and accepted his bet with a smile.

I turned my attention back to the tourney grounds. Joffrey was not a gambler as a rule. If he was making a bet then he knew something. I wanted to drag him off and question him until he folded but Ser Gwayne and his opponent were gearing up for the first tilt.

“I should not have done that,” he murmured a moment later and I turned towards him to ask him
why when I was interrupted. Alicent screamed as Gwayne was sent flying from his horse, a spray of blood following him down.
“Hah! That’ll bring Otto scurrying back. Well done lad!” crooned Rhaenys, after we’d finished our explanation of why we had returned from the tourney much earlier than expected.

He’d explained just why Gwayne Hightower had to be horrifically injured in a joust before we’d arrived at the manse because I’d been very vocal about wanting to know. Alicent’s storm of grief as Gwayne was borne from the field almost, almost, made me rethink my plan. I had spent the entire trip back alternating from guilt-stricken and ready to end it all to hardened determination to see Alicent pay.

I’m blaming the hormones again.

Still, I had been moved enough to offer Gerardys’ aid. The seven know that Mellos does not even come near my Maester’s skill even if he was leagues ahead of that idiot Runciter.

I was also glad for Joffrey’s earlier warning regarding Velaryon family drama once more. Laena and Laenor might not be screaming anymore but they were still occasionally casting suspicious glances at the other and Laena was clutching her son to her chest as if she feared someone might appear to take him away. Joffrey and I had taken the safe option of sitting next to Rhaenys to avoid seeming like we were supporting one against the other.

“You caused Ser Gwayne’s accident?” asked Laena from the corner. Joffrey turned to her and nodded.

“You know why, Laena. Should Alicent win and crown Aegon, it won’t just be Rhaenyra’s children that are quietly removed,” he told her, crossing to her and lifting Lucerys out of her arms. Lucerys fussed momentarily before settling again and Joffrey watched him like he’d hung the moon.

I winced as our agreement of neutrality was shattered almost instantly. Laenor scowled and I shot him a look. He had the good decency to flush in response.

“And killing Gwayne helps? Bringing Otto Hightower here helps?” Laena asked, gazing at him as he cradled their son, as if desperate for some kind of explanation.

“Now I haven’t been let in on this plot of yours but I’d assume Otto being here is the point,” Rhaenys said. “The High Tower might as well be painted Green. There would be no touching Otto on Battle Isle.”

Rhaenys wasn’t fond of the cloak and dagger schemes but that did not mean she was not adept at them. She was every inch Corlys’ equal in politics and most other things, that she’d guessed Joffrey’s scheme did not surprise me.

“Well, we will have to see if Otto takes the bait now,” said Joffrey, rocking Lucerys back and forth as the child let out a stream of babble. An errant leg kicked his stick away and Laena bent down to retrieve it. When she came back up, she had controlled her expression somewhat.

“I can not keep up with you all at times,” she sighed. “Rhaenyra is off playing with the Faith, Joffrey is arranging murders and Laenor is fighting duels for his honour.”

“Hardly by choice” said Joffrey, tartly and I sighed in annoyance.
“We have been over thi-”

“And I am committed. My Princess has ordered me and I have obeyed,” he said cutting me off. Rhaenys made a small sound of amusement before leaning forward and clapping her hands on her thighs. We all jumped and turned to face her. There was a nasty smile in place and I was reminded that Otto had done as much to sabotage her as he had Corlys during his reign as Hand.

“So,” she said and I could see where her children got their occasional predatory grins from. “What is the plan?”

“Ser Gwayne is badly injured. He shouldn’t die, especially not now that Rhaenyra has offered Gerardys’ aid but it will give Alicent an opportunity,” he began. We all stared at him, intent on his explanation, his little sulk about being forced to plan it over or vanished in the face of his terrifying mother-in-law. “Viserys is likely to give in to Alicent’s request to have Otto return if only to attend to his son.”

“That was a nasty accident you arranged,” I said for the benefit of those who hadn’t seen it. “I would have thought him dead from the sight of it alone.”

“Indeed. I could not tell you before hand, I wanted your reaction to be real yet I allowed Alicent to bait me. It was ill done, the bet will stand out in her mind. She will be paying attention to me now, if only for a while,” he said. “I will not collect on the bet, of course. That would be rather crass and would only draw more of her ire.”

I bit back the response that he should, just to rub it in.

“Once Otto is back I expect him to be on his best behaviour. He won’t want to risk Viserys’ wrath again. His goal will be worming his way back into politics and likely, seizing control of the Greens from his daughter. This is when I will launch the second part of my plan,” Joffrey continued to his enraptured audience. Laena was staring at him with her mouth open, Rhaenys looked suitably impressed and Laenor… nope, still looking like a kicked puppy.

“It better be good. Alicent will be all over any suspicion that her Father died on Rhaenyra’s orders,” Laenor interjected, tone sulky.

“Alicent will suspect us regardless of how her Father dies. She will believe it retribution for Correy,” Joffrey told us, shooting me a meaningful glance. “Which it is.”

“I have gone over my reasons-”

“Regardless!” he said, cutting me off again. “We need Viserys to believe it wasn’t us. We need Lyonel Strong to believe it wasn’t us. That is what I am planning for.”

“I see,” I said. It made sense. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’m afraid I won’t be laying out my master plan,” he said, much the everyones annoyance. At our reactions, he frowned. “Like Rhaenyra today, I need you all to react in a consistent manner. The more you know, the more weight you will give certain events. Viserys will be looking at you all when Otto dies.”

“I dislike not knowing but your reasoning makes sense. I’ll abide by it.” grumbled Rhaenys. Then added “For now.”

For some reason he looked quite nervous at that pronouncement. Laena raised a hand to his shoulder and chuckled, whispering something in his ear that had Joffrey blushing. I swallowed my
jealousy once more but it seemed Laenor was not quite as adept at doing so if the way he stood and stormed from the room was any indication.

I followed him before Laena or Rhaenys could. Or, gods forbid, Joffrey.

“They’re sleeping together,” he told me in a hurt voice as I caught up with him. “They play happy families with Daemon’s son.”

“That was the whole point of marrying them, Laenor,” I pointed out. “Why did you suggest it if you were going to react badly to it happening?”

His subsequent blush and downcast gaze told me he hadn’t thought it through at all and that it had been as Joffrey theorised, he had just wanted Joffrey close and bearing his name. I groaned at the realisation.

“Laenor-”

“I know! I shouldn’t be jealous. I shouldn’t take it out on Lucerys,” he said, the threat of tears in his voice. “Mother made that quite clear.”

“I’m not asking you to deny what you feel,” I told him gently. He glanced up at me, surprised. “We agreed to sacrifices when we made our agreement the day we were married. Did you ever have that same talk with Joffrey?”

“No,” he replied, sounding miserable and I sighed. His much larger hand enclosed mine and he brought it to his lips. I blinked as red made its way across my cheeks. “Is this what it’s like for you?”

“Not with you,” I told him, conscious of my musing on their relationship recently. “I feel the same way about her though.”

He didn’t need to ask who I meant by that, he just pulled me close. I buried my head in his shoulder and we stayed like that for a little while.

“What a pair we make,” I mumbled and a small laugh caused his shoulders to shake.

“I shall speak to Joffrey and make my peace with Laena,” Laenor said finally, releasing me and looking a little happier. “And you should speak to her again.”

“I do not wish to make her uncomfortable. She has made herself clear,” I said and he gave me a pained grimace. “Now, I do believe your mother mentioned something about a meal earlier.”

Corlys arrived to eat with us and gave us an updated report about the goings-on within the Keep. Gwayne was out of immediate danger thanks to Gerardys and Mellos. He still may die from his wound going bad or any number of complications but he was stable.

Alicent was not taking it well. She’d reportedly grabbed Daeron and Aemond then sealed herself in her rooms so that the court would not witness her grief. I felt guilt churn in my gut once more, as much as I hated it. Gwayne was decent sort of guy. I got the feeling he was always slightly exasperated with his sister’s scheming, he was just happy she was Queen and his nieces and nephews royalty in turn.

Then I felt bad for feeling guilty. I did not know how Gwayne died in canon but I very much doubt it was when he supported Rhaenyra instead of Alicent. Gwayne’s reluctant sword would take my life as surely as any enthusiastic Green’s blade.
And anything was worth finally getting rid of that snake, Otto.

After the meal, Rhaenys and Corlys retired together and Lucerys was handed over to the maids to be dressed and readied for bed. It left the four of us alone and suddenly I couldn’t tell if the kids had gone absolutely wild or if I was very nervous.

I’m lying, I’m pretty sure it isn’t the kids.

“Well,” said Joffrey. “Today has been eventful. We need to dis-”

“I apologise,” said Laenor, interrupting whatever Joffrey had been about to say, eyes on his sister. “I lashed out. I should not have done.”

“We’ve all said things we regret to one another recently,” said Joffrey, his eyes softening in response to Laenor’s apology. “But I wanted to-”

“I do not regret them,” Laena cut in, causing Joffrey to clench his jaw. “I have spoken only the truth.”

“You told me that I was spending too much time bedding Joffrey!” Laenor cried. Laena opened her mouth to respond and promptly got interrupted by Joffrey before they could start bickering once more.

“Enough!” cried Joffrey. “I am not your nursemaid! I do not exist to be pulled between you every time you argue over something!”

Both of them flinched at that and directed guilty looks his way. I grimaced as he glared at them both until each looked away and then turned his gaze on me.

“We have a bigger problem than whose bed I sleep in as it happens,” he said finally and I did my best to sink into the furniture once more. “Viserys is well aware of the true father of Lucerys.”

“You jest,” said Laena weakly. Her face was pale and her hands were shaking. “Joffrey, if he knows Alicent does.”

“No,” I croaked and she turned her attention to me. “I begged him not to reveal it. He agreed as long as I ‘remembered I was a Targaryen and not a Velaryon’.”

“When did you find out?” Laenor asked, eyebrows furrowed.

“I would warrant she’s known since we returned,” opined Joffrey and I nodded, grudgingly admitting he was right.

“By the Seven,” Laena murmured, her breath coming fast. “By the Seven.”

“What are his intentions?” Laenor asked and I was gratified to hear some worry in his voice for all that he claimed his disliked Lucerys. “Does he wish access to Luke? Does he intend to expose him?”

“He’s using it as blackmail so that I am on my best behaviour. No running off into wars or openly fighting with Alicent,” I told him.

“But he doesn’t have anything to blackmail you with!” Laena burst out, eyes on me. “He has a truth that would destroy me.”

“Right,” drawled Laenor, suddenly amused. “And as we have all established, she doesn’t care
about you in the slightest.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” she demanded. I opened my mouth to cut them off only to close it again when Joffrey caught my eye and gave me a solemn shake of his head.

“She has told you what that means herself!” Laenor bellowed. Curiously, in response to that, Laena turned to look at Joffrey like a lost puppy instead of responding.

“We have spoken about this, Laena,” he said. “I will not lie to you.”

“I’m lost,” I said, wanting some semblance of control when it came to this conversation. “We are referring to my interest in Laena, correct?”

“We are,” replied Joffrey, focusing on Laena.

“It would be so much easier if she would spend time with you when I was with Joffrey,” groused Laenor and even I choked on that a little. “What? Even Joffrey said the symmetry was pleasing!”

I suspect both Laena and I were the same colour right now. I dropped my face into my hands, despairing and embarrassed that we’d even managed to get to this topic from an argument about Viserys.

“Would you agree to such an arrangement, Rhaenyra?” asked Joffrey, frustration in his voice evident. I almost didn’t want to reply. It was too mortifying to admit that I would but a small hope this wouldn’t blow up in my face forced me to nod. Then I flinched as Laena let out an explosive breath.

“Truly?” she asked in a small voice. “I had thought I destroyed all possibility.”

“When she called you a whore and kinslayer,” Laenor helpfully informed me. Happily for him, the murderous look Laena threw him was one of annoyance at an interfering sibling and not an actual promise of murder.

“Yes, truly,” I said and managed a rueful kind of smile. “It seems I am quite taken with you still. Despite the insults.”

The smile I got at that inspired a broad, happy one of my own as my heart sped in my chest at the possibilities it brought.

“Excellent, we have finally arrived at a solution for our personal lives. Now perhaps we can finally discuss a way to negotiate the fallout from Viserys revealing what he knows about our son?” growled Joffrey.
Court was afire with whispers as Otto Hightower made his way through the hall. He’d aged considerably, I noted, in the decade he’d spent banished from court. Once dark hair streaked with silver and much less of the talented knight he had been once in his frame now. His green eyes, the eyes of his daughter, were still as keen as ever though.

It was not his sword I needed to fear but his mind.

That mind had made him the de facto ruler of the Seven Kingdoms for nearly six years after all. Not bad for a second son, even one born to House Hightower.

It still made me bitter in the extreme to think of it. Jaehaerys’ steady decline had started soon after he’d given my grandfather to the flames of his pyre and the old king been all too happy to start handing more and more power to his Hand. As the illnesses and mental fog each took their due from him only Viserys could have matched Otto for influence over both the capital and the Small Council.

Viserys had done nothing of the sort, of course. He was still in hysterics that he would take the throne ahead of Rhaenys. Joffrey wasn’t the only one she low-key terrified and in those early days, Viserys had been convinced Corlys or Rhaenys would raise some kind of rebellion in turn. The fact that Corlys had raised his fleet during the Council itself was not reassuring in the slightest. Even less reassuring was that the only dragon Baelon’s line had at that point was Caraxes, which meant Viserys was relying on Daemon defending him.

Honestly, I’d be terrified too if my last line of defence against a fiery death was Daemon Targaryen.

When Viserys had ascended to King, things had continued as they had done under Jaehaerys’ twilight years. Otto took most of the important decisions and Viserys went along with whatever he decided, much in the way I imagine Robert did with Jon Arryn in that future that would not happen. In fact, the only one fighting Otto had been Daemon. Daemon who considered himself his brother’s heir and responsible for smacking down uppity Hands. Or perhaps Otto merely insulted his haircut at one point, it was hard to tell with Daemon.

Otto must have been on top of the world after Daemon had been banished and Alicent had married Viserys. His daughter the Queen, his most hated enemy cut off from what he desired most and most importantly, Hightower influence ascendant in the face of an all but banished Velaryon family.

And then it had all gone wrong for him in the space of a year.

Aegon born and Viserys keeping me as heir. That had to have stung, I was only heir in the first place because Otto had pushed for it. Then Corlys and Daemon had allied and forged their conquest of the Stepstones. A victory there would push the Velaryons to yet new heights of power and give Corlys a hell of a lot of control over shipping in the narrow sea to boot. Shipping House Hightower relied on greatly. It would have ravaged Otto’s pride to pay Corlys’ tolls.

He’d reacted by preventing any meaningful aid reaching Daemon and Corlys and by making it his goal in life to discredit me. Viserys had not cared about the former but Otto’s attitude to me revealed by some well-timed theatrics on my behalf? Viserys had banished him so fast he’d barely had time to collect his belongings. Stuck in Old Town, he’d had to watch as Alicent took over as
the sole Green leader in King’s Landing and he was relegated to an adviser, his schemes at the mercy of his daughter.

Otto was an old school misogynist, of the belief women should be quiet, supportive things. Seen and not heard. That their only duty and purpose in life was to pump out babies. I can not imagine how much it hurt that his daughter led the Greens and not him.

I can not imagine how smug he was now, knowing she’d fouled it all up and had been forced to come to him for help.

“Your Grace,” his voice was smooth as he bowed low to his daughter and goodson. Memory of it castigating me over the years caused me to shudder. “I come to hear news of my son.”

“Lord Hightower. Be welcome in this court, please accept my invitation to stay in the Red Keep until his recovery is complete,” Viserys intoned. Otto bowed again.

“I would be honoured, Your Grace, truly. Please do not take offence when I say I hope my son’s recovery is swift, however.” At the little joke, many in the court chuckled and I wanted to scream. Even Viserys’ lips quirked up at that.

“I take no offence, Lord Hightower. Truly it is my most fervent hope that Ser Gwayne recovers with haste as well.” I watched as Alicent’s smile became a bit strained at that. Interesting.

With that out of the way, Otto began his mingling. I tracked his progress across the court as I set to my own politicking. Even if most of my time was spent fending off questions about my babe with a stick. Many, many people already wanted to know whether there was likely a royal marriage up for grabs or whether it was already decided.

At least I did not have to worry about a last minute decision to marry them to Lady and Lord Nobody. Viserys had always made it quite clear I had the honour of planning their future matches and dealing with the consequences should the match prove disastrous. Given that my children would be dragon riders and their spouses would not be, I was pretty sure they’d be fine with their eventual partners.

“Your Grace,” Otto Hightower said, voice mild and yet conveying how much he’d rather have me dead than have power over him. I stamped down the small heart attack his sudden appearance caused and forced a smile to my face.

“Lord Hightower. Welcome to King’s Landing! How goes the day?” I asked, voice pleasant and not at all forced.

“Well enough,” he replied. “My Daughter tells me that you are to thank for my son’s life?”

“Maester Gerardys is skilled, my lord, he is the one that saved your son’s life,” I said, false modesty suffusing my tone. It would kill him to feel indebted to me but then again, I doubted he actually cared if Gwayne lived or died. He wasn’t even the spare after all. He could be relegated from tool to dead easily enough.

“I thank you all the same. I’m told Grand Maester Mellos was entirely inadequate.” Bait. Steer around it.

“I could not speak to the skill of the Grand Maester in healing,” I replied diplomatically. He smiled broadly then as if acknowledging my avoidance of his little trap.

“I must admit I have sorely missed all of this,” he said after I did not engage in conversation once
more. “It is pleasant to be back in King’s Landing, even if it is for such grim reasons.”

“Truly all here wish Ser Gwayne a swift and full recovery,” I said warmly. Ser Gwayne would be back to Old Town once Otto had met his fate.

“I am glad that the heir to the Iron Throne is so generous and warm to my own kin. Perhaps I might seek your opinion on a certain matter?” The change in topic had my smile become strained a little.

“Please, Lord Hightower, I am happy to help in any way I can.” He beamed at that and it was almost genuine.

“I do wonder if I could your opinion on this business about war with Dorne?” he asked and I froze without meaning to, mind searching desperately for where this had come from. There had been some call for war with Dorne in the aftermath of Daemon’s final goodbye but that had died long ago.

So where had he gotten this from?

“Dorne is desert,” I said finally. “Still half destroyed from years of being burned in the aftermath of Rhaenys’ death. All we will find in war with the Dornish is death and dishonour.”

“I shall bear that in mind. My apologies, Your Grace, you are looking rather pale. Do your children trouble you? I would not wish to distress them.”

My hand found my stomach and the lives that grew within. If Alannys was right, and I did believe she was, I was fast closing in on the halfway point of my pregnancy. Still smack bang in the middle of the second trimester and suffering from pronounced symptoms that usually were a good indicator of twins even if I could stomach food without the threat of meeting it again now. Mostly.

I’d even developed that weird little line along my belly. Along with itchy and swollen feet, ongoing weight gain, my still intense cravings, the really fun mood swings and the ever present need to know where the nearest privy was at all times.

They still fluttered away in there. Mostly they did it in the morning and at night but sometimes they decided to have a party during the day just to spite me. I wanted to meet them, I wanted to hold them, I wanted them out and in my arms and that want scared me.

“My children are better than well,” I replied, tone harder than I intended. “They are dragons and not so easily distressed.”

“Oh, I understand, Your Grace, but it remains fact that both your Mother and Grandmother struggled in birth. Died in birth,” he replied, tone so falsely sympathetic I had to literally swallow my rage. At least rage at Otto was better than fear he was right.

“My Daughter worries so for you. She was quite distressed to learn you would not visit Mellos at all!” Otto was continuing, well aware of my anger and fear if the nasty smile in place was any indication. “I, myself, was quite distressed to learn you were relying on these new ‘midwives’. Truly, I wonder how appropriate that is?”

“They are trained by my own Maester. Gerardys is one of the finest healers the Citadel has a ever produced I am told. And my midwife has the experience of more babes than she can count backing her skills,” I boasted, enjoying his brief look of chagrin. “I would warrant my birth will be easier than many. Even with twins.”

“We can only hope, Your Grace. We can only hope.” Then he gave me a small bow and
disappeared into the crowd, shaking hands and greeting those lords he knew from his Handship.

What a bastard. A smooth bastard though. Every inch the danger I know him to be. If anyone could rescue Alicent from the hole she dug herself into with that duel it was him. It was why I had to kill him. Instead of dwelling on his cheap shots, I sought out Lord Corlys and his wife.

My thoughts drifted to their daughter as I searched the small crowd and I smile touched my face, one I couldn’t have fought if I’d even wanted to try. Since Laenor had managed to push the issue in his own ham-fisted manner, Laena and I had actually managed to sit down and have an honest conversation which did not end in a screaming match.

She had kissed me. I wanted to giggle like a maiden at the memory of it.

“Your Grace,” murmured Corlys with a solemn nod as reached them. “I hope your friend has his ideas in order because he could well rescue this mess.”

All three of us watched as Otto greeted yet another Dove lord with an exclamation of surprise and delight, clapping a hand on his shoulder and introducing him to a hesitant Green. Although I suppose that didn’t count really, all Greens were hesitant these days. Otto, though, was fully capable of reinforcing that wavering support.

“Such grim faces. Otto is less than nothing,” murmured Rhaenys, her good humour today evident in a teasing smile. “I could always pick a fight with Alicent to cheer you both.”

“Wife, please do not,” chuckled Corlys and I allowed myself a smile at the thought.

“It would be fitting revenge. She was always so keen to taunt me regarding my children.” She half sounded like a child pleading for the latest toy and I had to cover my mouth to hide my laugh.

“Save your taunting for when we’ve beaten her, Rhaenys. It will be all the sweeter,” Corlys told her, also struggling to hide his smile.

“Speaking of my children, where are they today?” I took me a moment to realise Rhaenys’ question was addressed to me.

“Laena is at the manse, Laenor is training,” I replied easily.

“And where is my goodson?” she asked, earning herself an odd look from both Corlys and I. Honestly, her tone was warm and happy. She hadn’t even choked on the word goodson. Given that he had been the subject of Laenor and Laena bellowing at one another just a week or so ago, I was extremely surprised.

“He’s a clever man. A good man,” she said defensively when I continued to look baffled. “Have you seen him with Lucerys?”

“He dotes on him,” I said, smiling a that. Now that Joffrey had made his stance on his wife and lover clear and the two had managed to work out a pseudo-custody arrangement of him, Laenor had softened to little Luke by a startling amount. The babe spent a lot more time with his father and uncle these days.

I would be lying if a little bit of jealousy did not burn in me whenever Laena and Joffrey were together, just as Laenor still felt the same. It would take time to ease those feelings, to feel secure in this new paradigm.

She did not love him, she had told me, she did not even desire him. She had not bedded him since
the ceremony. He was kind to her, he played the father to her son so well she half wished he was the boy’s true father at times. They would lay abed together and talk. She liked that she could say anything to him and he would not judge her, she had insisted.

Velaryon family politics made my head hurt at times. Still, at least it wasn’t Targaryen family politics. Those ended up in continent spanning barbecues and tears.
“You seem to be in fine mood recently, Your Grace,” said Alys Strong as I sat down at the table where Maris was dealing cards. At the reminder, I struggled not to smile again, struggled not to turn to Laena and see if she had reacted as well.

Maris was perceptive enough to spot such a red flag, Falena too. I was less sure about Marya and the Strongs but I did not know their stances on lovers. Especially lovers of the wrong body type, so to speak, and as such I was keen to keep them from figuring it out. So I dropped my hand to my stomach where the babes were, thankfully, silent for the moment.

They were most active in the morning just after I’d awoken or just before I was to sleep. Honestly, if I were a modern mother I’d be taking that as a bad sign. Still, it was nice to lay there for a while and just feel them moving about. It also gave whatever lady slept by my side a little more sleep. I’d been informed by Laena that the truckle bed was extremely uncomfortable and sleep never came easy on it.

I’d invited her to sleep next to me and she’d blushed such a deep and fierce red I’d been genuinely afraid she might actually burst a blood vessel or something. I enjoyed her blush, especially when she was genuinely flustered and not feeling guilty that she was.

“Perhaps I am becoming my accustomed to the idea of pregnancy,” I said, somewhat truthfully, and Marya beamed at me. I would warrant it wouldn’t be long before she asked my leave to marry. Two pregnancies in the same time frame had her eyeing one of her own. “Now that they are moving, I am more excited for the babes.”

Lucerys’ sudden fussing gave me an opportunity to glance at her. She had her head bent low, silver ringlets hiding her face from everyone. The tips of her ears gave her away though. She knew precisely why I had been so happy lately. I’d told her as such at every opportunity.

The fact that I was more excited for the babes did not mean I wasn’t scared out of my mind still. When Joffrey was with Laena, Laenor had started coming to me. He’d curl around me and listen to all my thoughts and fears and soothe them away with murmured reassurances. He’d brush his hands through my hair or wipe away my tears when they fell.

And I’d had at least one grovelling apology for him acting like an arse when it came to dividing his time between Joffrey and I.

“Oh! We are so excited ourselves!” said Falena, smiling broadly in contrast to her usual solemn nature. She was doing that more often, I’d noted. Ever since I’d approved of Septon Patrek and we’d gone into business together, so to speak.

My guards reported seeing off more than a few of these mystery knights and city guard. A word with Harwin had called off the Gold Cloaks but not even Joffrey had been able to figure out who was paying the knights. Concerning, given he’d almost certainly ruled out his friend and the ghost of Daemon’s influence.

“I figured. You dote on Lucerys enough,” I said with a smile to the boy’s mother. “Not that he isn’t worthy of all the attention he receives.”

In her arms, the subject of our conversation gave his Mother’s hair a painful wrench and she grimaced, proud smile fading. Several snickers of amusement sprang up around the table as she
attempted to disentangle herself from his grip.

“He is an adorable babe,” enthused Marya as Laena failed to escape and glared at us all with her head at such an angle so that he could no longer properly pull.

“At times,” I said then leant over to help, prying a few pudgy fingers open.

“Would you take him?” she asked, once she was free. I held my arms out in reply and received a wriggling bundle. Luckily for me, I wore my hair in a braid and Lucerys far preferred my shawl anyway and unlike some of my ladies, I’d known from the beginning that dangling jewelry would be dangerous to have around him.

“Thank you,” sighed Laena, as he settled in my arms.

“It’s no issue,” I said, favouring her with a smile as she massaged her arms. Marya and Sera immediately bent over to fuss at him. Alys merely pulled a face at her sister’s delight then snuck a peek at Sera’s hand.

I rocked him back and forth as my ladies played a few rounds, occasionally cooing to him. I had to admit he’d grown on me these past few weeks. Maybe I was finally getting baby brain or maybe Laenor’s reassurance over my own pregnancy had removed a source of stress. He would be raised alongside my children, I had come to realise. Where I went Laena would inevitably end up, whether it was me or Joffrey she was following, and Lucerys was a package deal. It felt odd to picture this silver haired boy and my own children playing so I settled for poking his nose, taunting him as he attempted to seize my finger.

“Ah, I forgot to mention. Lord Hightower has asked to pay a visit to my Father,” Marya said as Maris began dealing again. My head snapped up, thoughts of my future forgotten as I focused on the present. Lucerys warbled unhappily at losing my attention.

“Lord Hightower has been courting your Father?” I asked sharply and Marya nodded, face grim.

“You need not worry, Your Grace, he is loyal to you. He made that quite clear but it was not concerning the Greens,” she assured me but I was still discomforted. I shifted my hold on Lucerys and he began making attempts to pull my mantle off.

“Did your father tell you what it was regarding?” I asked.

“Father said it was about his opinions on a war for Dorne,” she replied. “He said Otto was looking for the general view on it to better advise King Viserys.”

Bullshit, this is part of his play to save the Greens. There was no call for war in Dorne. Why was he so obsessed with something that the Blacks, Greens and Doves had no desire for? The War Hawks were too small a part for him to be courting surely?

“Gwayne is no longer in danger,” said Laena sourly “He should be gone already.”

She knew, of course, that he would not leave willingly and that we wanted him to stay long enough to engineer his death. She was her Mother’s daughter though, at heart, and disliked the cloak and dagger scheming. She’d much rather invite him to speak with Vhagar, a dangerous thing to do in a post-Maegor world.

“Are you not a fan of Lord Hightower?” asked Maris, any pretence of actually playing the card game put aside for her second greatest love, gossip. Laena gave me a hesitant look and I shrugged. I suppose a marriage to Joffrey had taught her to be extremely careful about what she said to who.
“It is no secret, Maris. Otto Hightower hates Father and the feeling is mutual. When he was Hand he tried to block the charter for Spicetown!” She sounded so outraged I had to bend my head over Lucerys slightly to hide my amusement. He managed to pull my mantle over his face and then gave startled cry at the sudden darkness.

“Is it true that Lord Corlys raised his fleet during the Great Council?” asked Sera as I desperately shushed him. “Father would never tell us. He said it was casting aspersions on loyal lords.”

“Daemon and Corlys came close to starting a civil war, yes,” I replied, Lucerys successfully calmed. “Lord Corlys was full of wrath at having his wife passed over the Throne twice. Daemon—”

Daemon had coveted the Throne even then. He’d wanted Viserys close to it because he would be Viserys’ heir in the same way many argued Aegon was Viserys’ heir. Not precisely acceptable to say even amongst friends though.

“Daemon wanted to take his revenge for the loss of Vhagar,” I said, finally. Laena blushed at that as my ladies showed confusion. A flicker of amusement ran through me. “As you are likely unaware, when a rider dies the closest unbound member of their family is supposed to have the first refusal on their dragon. Technically, I should ride Vhagar.”

Laena went even redder at that as my ladies tittered, taking the teasing smile on my face to mean I had no hard feelings about the matter.

“I could not imagine you with each other’s dragons, Rhaenyra,” said Alys. “They suit you both so well!”

“And I could not imagine our situations reversed either. Just think, had Rhaenys ascended to the Throne, we would be playing cards with Princess Laena!”

That got a laugh out of them, even Laena joined in although her blush was very much still present.

“I would forgo the title with happiness. Had Mother been made heir she likely would have insisted Laenor and I marry,” Laena said firmly, eyes on me. Ah, she was feeling brave today. The knowledge made me feel too big for my skin and restless to boot. She was my attendant tonight but I wanted to send them all away now. I couldn’t, of course, so I settled for smiling back.

“Is that not… odd to you? The idea of marrying your brother?” asked Alys and received several warning looks from my other ladies. It was Marya that showed how uncomfortable she was most but I could see most of them shifting. Incest was the elephant in the room when it came to non-Valyrians.

Honestly, the idea made my skin crawl. I had this vague idea of establishing cadet branches but first I had to figure out just how dragon riding worked and there never seemed to be enough time. Then as Laena finally seemed to have formulated an answer to that, I had an idea.

Laena had complained of needing something to do, why not put her to work researching dragon lore?

“In truth, it is. Laenor is my best friend but I could not marry him,” she admitted, eyes finding mine again.

“He is not Ser Joffrey?” asked Sera, teasing smile lighting up her face. Next to her, her twin adopted a similar smile.

“No. He is not the one I love, that is very true.” Oh, yes, she was very brave today. It was all I
could do to keep myself from blushing like a maiden at the insinuation.

“And you, Rhaenyra? Had your older brother survived? Or if His Grace asked you marry Aegon?”
I blinked at the question, train of thought about Laena thoroughly derailed. Falena had asked, surprisingly, she was normally given to silent judgement and disapproval.

“If I was told to by my Father there is not much I could do to argue against it. I must admit I’d never willingly choose it,” I replied and Falena nodded in acceptance. I noted a few of them unable to hide looks of relief. I could understand that. Nothing weirder than someone you know and like wanting to marry their own brother.

We played cards for sometime after that and passed Lucerys around to receive fuss. It became an unofficial competition between us all, who could earn the most smiles. Surprisingly, that was Maris. Laena’s face was quite the picture as she realised that. Maris also, as usual, won quite a bit of money from us all. Laena, Alys and Sera all lost the contents of their coin purses to her and Marya and Falena came away slightly worse off but not much poorer.

I know she’s cheating.

Still, her skill at gambling, and cheating, had at least begun benefiting my cause. Her first gambling den had opened in the city with a few more planned soon depending on how the first was received. Joffrey had made sure she would not be managing them personally and had provided her with a middle man as to better keep an eye on her, but I was given to believe she ran it all the same. Quite professionally, I was told. Well maintained with just enough cheating by the House to ensure her luckless patrons never got too wealthy off her back.

Regardless of her work for Joffrey, the point I’m trying to make is that nobody should ever play cards with her because she cheats. One day, my ladies might just realise this. I’d solidly resisted all of Maris’ attempts to draw me in with a Lucerys-based excuse.

She knew I knew.

It felt like an age before Joffrey came by and collected his son, leaving Laena free for tonight. Soon after my ladies trailed away to as the evening began drawing in. Laena and I were left alone with the usual card-based detritus Maris tended to leave behind.

“Are you still intent on sleeping in the truckle bed?” I asked. She blushed a deep red in response, earning a chuckle of delight from me.

“Must you?” she asked plaintively as we made our way to my bedroom. “You only do it to see me blush.”

“I do. Do you wish me to stop?” At that question her blush deepened and she busied herself with finding a nightgown for me. My chuckle became an outright laugh and she shot me a look that promised vengeance, much to my delight.

“I do not want you to stop,” she said finally as I clambered into bed, careful to avoid toppling myself over as I had done frequently in the past. Or pulling a muscle, another thing pregnant women apparently did frequently.

“But I shall not,” I said in reply, shooting her what I hoped was a cheeky smile. Her answering smile was cheeky in turn and I was about to ask her what had her so amused when she crawled into bed alongside me and my question turned into an odd choking sound at her bravery.

I slept like a baby that night with her hand resting on my stomach and her breath warm in my ear.
The next morning, I awoke to an empty bed and the babes fluttering away in my belly. I was about to start panicking that Laena had gone somewhere to brood, that I had pushed too hard when I was proved wrong.

She entered, still in her night gown and carrying a tray that wafted a heavenly, heavenly smell through the room. I pushed myself into a sitting position and eyed the bacon, sausage and eggs that she’d bought me with a sudden hunger.

A smile twitched across her face at my immediate reaction.

“When I was pregnant with Lucerys the thing I wanted most in the world were Dornish Oranges. Mother was of the opinion that they weren’t good for the babe but Alannys disagreed so I got my oranges,” she said, placing the tray down on the bedside table. “I wouldn’t have traded them for all the gold in Casterly Rock.”

“Oranges would probably be a healthier thing to crave,” I mumbled, sleep still making my voice raspy, before snagging some bacon and sighing in pleasure at the satisfaction it brought. “Thank you.”

“I want to be useful, Rhaenyra. I do not wish to be a liability anymore,” she replied. Then she dropped onto my bed with a sigh. “I tried so hard to fix the damage I have done to you. I showed you Lucerys, I made sure you ate well, I tried to get Laenor to do his duty.”

“Oh, that’s why you were being so infuriating,” I said around a mouthful of bacon. It earned me a glare in turn.

“I thought I led you astray. I have been informed, repeatedly, that you did that entirely by yourself but I meant what I said. If I am not your role model, I want to be something.”

I remembered my little brain wave from yesterday.

“I have an idea,” I said, finally as I selected the next bit of the fried heaven to attack. “Leading on from my ladies absolute horror at the idea of brother-husbands...”

Laena snorted at that.

“If Mother heard them she’d park Meleys atop the Red Keep as a reminder of their places,” she said.

“Hmmm, Rhaenys is a big believer in traditional Targaryen values. Pure blood, dragon ascendancy and all that,” I mused. “But it did make me wonder something. Why do we marry to keep the blood pure?”

Laena stared at me as if I had gone slightly mad.

“Rhaenyra, it would be disaster if we lost control over our dragons!” she cried before lowering her voice. “You know as well as I that our power comes from our mounts.”

“And politically it keeps claims within the family,” I added and she rolled her eyes. “But here’s the thing, Aegon can ride a dragon. He tamed Frost. So can Helaena because she tamed Morghul.”
Laena nodded, looking puzzled and then her eyes cleared.  

“Oh! You’re wondering how much blood is needed. Both of them are half Andal!” she exclaimed.  

“I’m half Andal,” I informed her dryly. “But that is the point I’m getting at. You have dragon blood on both sides but far less on your Father’s. If we threw Corlys to a dragon would he be able to tame it? Or do you get your ability to command Vhagar solely from from Rhaenys?”  

“Well… I’m not sure, actually,” she said, tapping a finger on her face. “You aren’t half Andal though, your mother was half Andal. You’re a quarter Andal.”  

“How dare you! My mother was every inch the Arryn,” I laughed, munching on eggy bread. Laena leant past me and stole a sausage, ignoring my look of complete betrayal.  

“You ride Syrax and Laenor rides Seasmoke. So I’m not sure if it matters,” she said. “What does this have to do with me though?”  

“I want to know how much Valyrian blood you need to control a dragon. If I can move our family away from the more egregious incest it would work well towards putting a lot of minds at ease in both the nobility and the Faith. I believe Jaehaerys made a mistake when he attempted to justify it so badly,” I told her. “But also dragons are the source of our power. We lost much in the Doom and we were not that powerful amongst the forty families to start with. If we are to survive in Westeros we must know everything about the dragons, everything.”  

“Oh,” she said finally, frowning. “I have a confession to make.”  

I tried not to feel dread at that admission. Given that Laena merely looked abashed and not overly guilty or scared, I was somewhat reassured.  

“I may already be doing something similar,” she admitted after I raised an eyebrow in questioning. “It was supposed to be a gift of sorts. For my nieces and nephews.”  

“Really?” I asked, recalling her trips to Dragonstone and the material I’d liberated from her for Aegon’s going away present. “That is very thoughtful of you. I suppose me stealing your research didn’t help.”  

“I was already done with it by that point,” she chuckled then became more serious. “I just wonder how wise it was to give him access to it. He may well be your foe one day.”  

Ah, her Mother’s daughter in more ways than one.  

“He is my brother now. Kindness may cause him to hesitate to fall to cruelty later,” I said, diplomatically. She regarded me for a good long time then.  

“Might I ask you a question?” she asked finally. “You do not need to answer. I know I am not… I am not the one you would trust unconditionally. I hope that will come in time but I do not wish to upset or unsettle you…”  

“Ask away. I can not think of anything you could ask that would upset me,” I told her, taking pity as she floundered to find the right words.  

“A long time ago, Laenor thought… Laenor thought you could see the future. He said you knew things you should not. I thought it was odd. I thought he was coming up with reasons to avoid you. Then when we visited the Wisdoms… you said that you wrote that book..” She started and I wanted to groan, tensing without meaning to. “Oh, you don’t want to talk about it.”
And she’d spotted it. Damn.

“No, no. I do, it would be good to clear the air but I would prefer Laenor and Joffrey present.” At my lack of explosion or immediate shut down of the conversation she sighed in relief. “It is a long and complicated topic. I fear you will not think well of me afterwards. I fear you will need someone to talk to.”

She regarded me for a long time and then nodded.

“Might I ask… If you could see the future, if Laenor were right, might you have seen something in mine had I gone with Daemon?” she asked, tone careful.

“I might have,” I replied and her eyes went wide before narrowing. “I might have seen children. Happiness for a while. And then death. A cruel one.”

“I see,” she said finally, after mulling that over for a while. We sat in silence for a while as I ate. The kids were active that morning, fluttering away. Truly, I was dreading the home stretch so to speak. When they would be large enough to distinctly kick and punch. I had been told that it could hurt and Laena’s experiences only seemed to back that up.

Eventually my eyes drifted closed, almost against my will.

“I will work on your dragon lore, Rhaenyra,” said Laena, interrupting my half doze. I forced my eyes open to stare at her in surprise and she smiled, placing a hand on my stomach. “I’ll make sure the little ones know everything they need to know about dragons. I’ll be the second coming of Septon Barth should you need me to be.”

“Thank you. If you need any permissions for the library in Dragonstone—” A yawn forced me to cut that sentence off. “—don’t hesitate to ask.”

With that problem out of the way, we laid together for a little while longer. Then I made to get up and she chided me about not sleeping enough and we ran through the usual routine I had with any of my ladies. Alys and Maris arrived soon after to relieve her and she left me to them, off to check on her son and ensure he was fed.

My feet took me to court eventually, with my ladies in tow and ready to enforce bed rest at the slightest issue. Again, I struggled not to rant and rage at the cotton wool everyone wanted to wrap me in. I could understand it. The heir’s heirs were very important but I’d had quite enough of being babied.

And my mood was not terribly improved by an encounter with the ever smug Otto and his announcement he was now advising Viserys on certain subjects. Like Dorne.

Fuck.

“Nasty bugger,” remarked Maris the moment he was out of sight. Maris was very adept at reading between the lines. “We’ll be well rid off him.”

“Father dislikes him. He says he should collect his son and go back to Old Town,” Alys added, fidgeting with her dress. Lyonel enjoyed his neutrality so I was more surprised she’d actually told us than the fact she’d kept silent yesterday. “He says he is upsetting the court more than the Blacks and the Greens do.”

“He won’t leave. Gwayne is not even his spare, he cares little for him beyond the in it gives to Viserys’ inner circles once again,” I retorted as we began our way back to the Throne room where
Viserys was hearing petitions.

“Could the man truly be so cold?” asked Alys.

“You are too innocent. A man cares about his standing in life above all else,” snorted Maris, probably remembering her own Father’s manipulations and the following attempted sacrifice of Roland to get out of the consequences.

“I can’t believe that. My Father certainly doesn’t. He has given Sera and I leave to do as we wish. To remain at Rhaenyra’s side or seek a marriage,” Alys argued. Maris raised an eyebrow at that. “He has given the same leave to Harwin and Larys.”

“Our Hand is a better man than most,” Maris admitted grudgingly. “Were my Father Hand he’d have been worse than Lord Otto. Truly, Jeyne insulted the Black Brothers when she sent him to them.”

I winced. Alys didn’t have anything to say to that and so we made it to the Throne room with no further interruptions or debates on Westerosi morality. I was starting to dislike coming here without Laenor in tow, mostly because the moment Viserys was finished prodding at my belly, I was swarmed by lords.

Annoyingly, I could now clearly see that there was a will for war with Dorne. As I might have predicted had I been paying attention, it was the Stormlanders and Reachman but some of the Crownlanders, Westermen and even Rivermen were keen on it. My own loyal lords wanted direction and I found myself at a loss.

I hadn’t lied to Otto. Dorne was a mess, anti-Targaryen sentiment at an all time high and dancing on the precipice of a civil war between the painfully young daughter of a popular Prince and a proven warrior in said Prince’s youngest brother.

So I stuck to my non-committal answers. Viserys would not allow war with Dorne, surely? It risked the dragon riders most of all. We would be expected to siege castles, to drive back armies and the Dornish had slain a dragon once before.

Joffrey caught me by the arm as I was reassuring Lord Wendwater and steered me away, making his apologies. I was more than a little annoyed but swallowed my anger at the excitement in his shuffling gait.

“I have a lead,” he told me, the moment we had a little privacy. When he saw my confusion, he elaborated. “On Mushroom’s murder.”

That definitely got my attention.

“Tell me everything,” I demanded.

“I finally located the professional that carried out the murder. Or rather, I found what was left of him. He was known enough to the Gold Cloaks that his disappearance raised some alarm. Well known, in fact. I had a brief word with our favourite Strong about him.”

“I doubt any words with Harwin can be brief but keep going,” I said, unable to resist the barb.

“Well, the assassin was thug by all accounts. A star for six in Flea Bottom but two things set him above the others; a certain low cunning and the fact he’d do anything if the price was right. Harwin says his men reported him spending big money after the murder, boasting of a new business opportunity and a lucrative future. His men tried to discover who was paying him but obviously
they did not suspect he was even capable of gaining entry to the Keep. They did point me in the direction of one of his associates though. One who was also reportedly flush with cash after the fact as well.”

I nodded along.

“Surprise, surprise after his associates death he went to ground. In one of my brothels as luck would have it. He used to be one of your Father’s grooms here in the Keep. He agreed to tell me everything in return for a ship to the Free Cities and a bag of gold. He was hired to make sure the assassin reached one of the outer towers.” Joffrey was slightly breathless now. “Rhaenyra, they were hired by my friend.”

“That’s impossible,” I breathed. “That would mean Alicent was the one who killed Mushroom.”
The idea that Alicent had killed Mushroom for some unknown reason taunted me for quite some time. It couldn’t be over some rude joke or mocking nickname, Mushroom had always avoided angering her, which is the second biggest reason anyone would risk killing Mushroom. I’d briefly dwelt on the idea he’d seen something, overheard some plot, but whatever it was it would have to be big to risk killing him in the Red Keep itself.

So I’d set Joffrey to tearing apart his life in response, desperate for some reason Alicent would possibly want him dead and we’d come up with precisely one surprise. Mushroom had been Alicent’s creature, spreading her rumours about the court and feeding her every overheard conversation.

While that had some chilling implications for canon Rhaenyra, I’d never interacted with him that much and I had never truly trusted the foul mouthed little demon. He certainly hadn’t been privy to anything I hadn’t wanted him to be.

The discovery of his true allegiance just further muddied the waters! He had been the perfect spy; none suspected him and for all intents and purposes, he gave her some of her most useful information. Even Joffrey and I had not suspected his involvement with her.

Why would she kill her own most effective operative?

I suppose he could have been getting ready to jump ship but- no that did not make sense. Her Greens had started abandoning her after the duel. Mushroom’s murder had led to the duel when Cole had been alerted to Correy’s existence.

I swear the idea that it was Alicent of all people just makes this mystery more infuriating!

Despite that ongoing question, the year ended anti-climatically in defiance of all the plots that swirled around the court of King Viserys the Idle. Otto remained moving ever closer to establishing himself as a full time player in King’s Landing once more with his advisory position on the Small Council. I remained in a holding pattern, making sure my loyal lords felt appreciated in addition to looking for new ones to forge alliances with.

And yet despite all that, the Greens and Blacks were hemorrhaging members. Oh, don’t get me wrong they were still loyal to their factions, just not as eager to play the game anymore. They had a new game to play, one more violent than court posturing.

The clamour for war with Dorne had not died as time had gone on, instead it had grown to a fever pitch as more and more lords nominally joined the War Hawk faction. Viserys was even losing Doves. Those that had been focused on Alicent and I’s struggle for power were now much more interested in justifying a decisive strike, wishing to complete what Aegon had started.

It was so serious that Viserys had even broken his ‘keep Rhaenyra out of government’ rule to invite me to the Small Council meeting on the matter.

“Father,” I said by way of greeting as I arrived to the chamber. Otto was already there, beating even Lyman, brown-noser that he was.

“Rhaenyra!” His face lit up and he made to hug me, unusually gentle and mindful of my swollen stomach. I kind of missed his bone-crushing hugs actually even if I would never ever say that out loud. Otto gave me a bland smile as I noted he’d stolen my usual seat.
Not that it bothered me, I was not about to bicker over a seat. I wasn’t that petty.

Okay, I totally was but the kids were raising hell and my feet were swollen and I justed wanted to sit down.

Apparently Viserys was petty enough and turfed Otto from his seat a moment later, indicating I should retake my usual position by his side. That was reassuring. I had feared he would fall into old and comfortable patterns, letting Otto puppet him so he did not have to think about the consequences of his actions.

It seemed my Father’s spine was here to stay.

Viserys took my hand as I settled next to him and I gave him a smile in thanks. At least he was trying and who knows, if I failed to spontaneously drop dead in this meeting he might start letting me back into the others. Gods, relying on Corlys was starting to grate! He wasn’t bad at his job but he liked to paraphrase and it made my teeth itch.

The rest of the Council trickled in with only Jaremy showing any real surprise I was present. It really was depressing that the spymaster was the only one who failed to find out I’d be there before hand. At least he was carrying the documents I’d come to associate with Joffrey and wouldn’t be embarrassing the Blacks with his incompetence.

“Welcome, my lords. It is time we discussed Dorne and war. Jaremy, did you complete the task I gave you?” Viserys called once we were all seated.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Jaremy replied and it was the work of the moment not to giggle when I realised he was imitating Joffrey’s calm and stoic demeanour as best he could. He began handing out sheets of paper, reports on Dornish troops and politics.

“Excellent work!” Then Viserys turned to us all, serious expression sliding into place. “My lords, I have received petition after petition for an attack on Dorne. Something has to be done, a decision has to be made!”

“I have a report on the potential for the civil war we were hoping for,” Jaremy told us.

“Well, get on with it!” barked Otto, eyeing him with disgust.

“Now, Otto, I know this is a personal issue for you but do treat your the councillors with respect. You are not the Hand now, you are an adviser,” drawled Corlys. Otto went red with rage and prepared to retort.

“Enough. Jaremy, the report?” Viserys barked, cutting short the entertainment.

“Yes, Your Grace! As you all know the current ruler of Dorne is Princess Aliandra, only two years of age. For a while we had hope that a civil war would see her struggle with her Uncle, Prince Garin, but it seems he has declined to press his suite. Lord Aron Dayne remains Aliandra’s regent and is in good standing with most of Dorne.” Garin had been the youngest of the late Qoren’s brothers, barely out of childhood himself. “In response to this, Garin has chosen exile. Or rather, had exile chosen for him by Lord Dayne. He has all but fled overseas to the Disputed Lands with a compliment of second sons, bastards and Dornish troops. They have raised a mercenary company named the Sunspears.”

“Lord Dayne was on Bloodstone, was he not?” I asked, ignoring the bit about Garin. Mercenary companies came and went like the seasons in the Disputed Lands, I cared about the man who held Dorne for a toddler. Surprised eyes turned to me. No doubt Viserys was wondering how I knew. I
would warrant I’d known before he had given Joffrey was the one who fed Jaremy his carefully curated reports.

“He was, Your Grace. He escaped with minor injuries along with Lord Trystane Uller. He beat out the new Lord Walter Wyl for the regency,” Jaremy informed us. “It would seem Lord Wyl holds us responsible for Daemon Targaryen’s actions and Lord Dayne disagrees with him. Lord Wyl was a supporter of Prince Garin and reportedly, only just escaped being asked to leave with him.”

“A Wyl is no easy enemy to have,” said Jasper Wylde, face grim. There wasn’t anyone in this room who would forget the deeds of Wyl of Wyl. The widow-lover. “This Lord Dayne may not last long.”

“I have a mind to hope he does. Lord Dayne is eager for peace,” said Viserys. “He has sent a few missives so far. He has offered us Aliandra’s hand in marriage for any of my sons or grandsons and her dowry includes a sizeable amount of gold and gems.”

I swallowed down bile. A son as prince-consort of Dorne or a Dornish princess as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. No, as ‘attractive’ the idea of drawing Dorne into the Seven Kingdoms peacefully was it would likely destroy the Blacks chances for alliances in the Stormlands and the Reach.

“I think I’ll turn down that generous offer,” I said dryly. “I would be better off marrying my future son to a viper I think.”

The rest of the table chuckled merrily but Otto merely scowled.

“If your Father decides it appropriate, you will do as he says,” he snapped. Corlys clenched his fist and got ready to let insults fly.

“You will mind your tongue, Lord Hightower,” Viserys said coldly. “My daughter gets first say on who her children marry, just as Alicent decides for hers.”

“I apologise, Your Grace,” Otto said quickly, bowing his head.

“Dorne is in pieces. Qoren did much to buoy it’s economy but the infrastructure it uses to export it’s goods has only just begun recovering from the Dornish Conquests,” I pointed out. “It would be ruinous to attack it, difficult to impossible to hold it and would take even more money in investments to make it profitable.”

“Her Grace speaks truly,” Lyman agreed. “I’m only using estimates, you understand, but Dorne has never truly recovered from Queen Visenya and King Aegon’s reprisal for the death of Queen Rhaenys. It’s income is massively reduced. Further war will only eat into what is left. If we destroy too much we may cause some sort of famine.”

“They’ve also got a knack for disappearing into those deserts of theirs,” observed Corlys with the tone of a man who’d heard of deserts and wanted nothing to do with them. “Or caves in the mountains.”

“Be that as it may,” said Otto, finding his voice again. “The fact remains that the Lords of Westeros want this war. It will not be a popular move to block it. I have received multiple petitions myself. I have been receiving them since the day I arrived.”

“Lord Hightower speaks truly,” said Jasper. “Lord Baratheon and Tyrell are eager for an invasion. Lord Lannister offers his fleet and the Ironborn offer theirs. I’m told there are Riverlords and Valemen eager for battle as well.”
“The only ones who aren’t are the Northmen and nothing gets them out of that frozen hell they call home,” sneered Otto. “Lord Rickon is old and his son a mere babe.”

He was also a die-hard Northern isolationist for all that his brother, Bennard, pushed for an involvement in southern politics. The Starks still stung over the New Gift, over Walton Stark. Everything Alaric, Edric, Ellard and finally Rickon had done since had only reinforced that quiet anger, reinforced the separation from Westeros at large. If they must get involved they would do so as little as they could get away with and they would complain about it the entire time. No wonder they’d been an afterthought in the original Dance.

Viserys let out an annoyed breath and massaged at his temples. Finally, he looked up.

“Can the Iron Throne afford this war, Lord Beesbury?” he asked. Lyman pursed his lips.

“At present, no.” At the aghast looks, he continued a little hastily. “Winter swiftly comes. Spending always spikes during this period and income always falls.”

“After winter then?” asked Otto, leaning forward with an eager expression on his face. “If we can reinforce the treasury, perhaps ask for some donations towards a war fund, we could invade once Winter is over.”

“If the will for war is still there,” I said. “It may well whither and die as the winds of winter blow.”

Damn it. Damn it all. If this war for Dorne kicks off it’ll set us my Blacks back years.

“My daughter speaks correctly,” said Viserys and my heart jumped in delight only to drop a few moments later. “But so does Lord Otto.”

We all waited in silence as the King thought through the best responses. If he said yes, it would be the Black dragons on the front line. Laena, Laenor and Rhaenys for certain. Yet if he said no, he would be leaving himself open to political turmoil in the form of the Marcher Lords going wild.

Damn Otto for stirring this up.

“Should the will for war with Dorne still exist after winter has passed, we shall launch an invasion of Dorne,” decreed the King and my fingers gave a painful jolt as they curled into fists. There was a note of finality in his voice, his face grim. I could understand why.

I did miss Otto’s victorious smile. He had his promise of war, all he needed to do now was stoke the flames through winter. Moving his assassination forward would be unwise and yet I wanted to. He was dangerous, he was running rings around me.

Damn him.

Viserys called for me to stay as the rest trooped out. I forced a smile. I needed to get to my people, needed to discuss how we would counter these calls for war. Yet when the King called, I had to answer.

“How goes your attempts to put together a household for the twins?” Viserys asked once we were alone. I restrained a sigh at the question but just barely.

It was beyond frustrating. I was expected to find nursemaids, maids, stewards, knights, ladies and tutors all before they had even left my body. My own household numbered nearly two hundred, most of which were back at Dragonstone, and Viserys seemed to be under the impression that I would need half of that again to manage the twins.
Not to mention the current argument going on between Viserys and Rhaenys about nursemaids in general. Rhaenys was still adamant I should feed them myself as she had and Laena had. Viserys argued otherwise. Aemma hadn’t, Alicent hadn’t, Alyssa hadn’t - honestly it was getting quite heated and I really couldn’t tell who was in the right.

I’d asked Laena to look into it for me, I’d written up a fancy proclamation she should be allowed access to any book on Dragonstone she so wished and then pointed her at our ancestral home. I had been told by Joffrey she’d been gone a day and returned with every half mangled dragon manual she had been able to find.

Well, at least her High Valyrian is bound to improve.

Despite the bickering over who was feeding the kids, the Household was a delicate thing. A role serving the newborn babes would be considered an honour, no matter how small the babes were. I charitably overlooked the fact it would bring much prestige and opportunities with it.

No one was going to be taking advantage of my kids, not unless they wanted to meet Syrax up close and personal. Still, as much as I wanted to tear my hair out over the whole thing, I had to take it seriously.

“Well enough. I have a few maids being trained up by Alannys so they can respond to emergencies. I have some loyal Dragonstone men and women being shipped over.” He frowned and I sighed. “I have not decided on a noble compliment for them yet.”

“You must consider it soon be they boys or girls.” His face softened when he saw my scowl and he drew me into another delicate hug. “I’m proud of you my girl. So proud.”

I let myself return the hug, pulling comfort from him in a way I never usually did when he started with the hugging.

“How is young Lucerys?” he asked when we pulled apart.

“Well enough. A normal baby. He has quite the set of lungs on him,” I reported. Viserys smiled sadly.

“I know I never did right by Daemon but I can do right by Lucerys. If he ever needs anything you tell Lady Laena to come to me.” I winced.

“Yes, I will absolutely tell her,” I said, being very careful not to tense up and then relax. Viserys gave me another sad smile.

“How is… how is your young man?” Oh, he’s trying for fatherly again.

“Well enough. Quarrelling with his sister at the moment over dragon formations. I think Rhaenys is ready to feed them both to Meleys and have done with it.” Viserys chuckled nervously at that and I smiled in amusement. Like Joffrey, Rhaenys still made him nervous.

“Is that usual? I mean, do the Velaryons often quarrel?” he asked eventually. I couldn’t help it, I threw my head back and laughed until my sides hurt.

“Oh gods, it comes to them as easy as breathing. All of them could be excellent mummers. I think you dodged the proverbial arrow when you failed to marry Laena!” He gave me a pained smile and his patented kicked puppy look and I sighed, my own amusement fading.

“Father… I love them all dearly. I would not give them up for the world but that does not mean I
think any less of you. If Corlys and Rhaenys were my true parents I’d have run away to Yi-ti years ago.” I only felt a little guilty that I was hiding the truth from him. For all that he genuinely tried, I struggled to love this man as a Father. I struggled to see him as my family.

Telling him that would break him asunder and so I smiled happily as he beamed at me and said nothing.
Like the Starks are fond of warning us, Winter had come. The White Ravens from the citadel going out to inform everyone that the three year Summer we had enjoyed was over. The once pleasant heat of King’s Landing gave way to a slight chill and I got to enjoy more fires and cocooning myself in blankets.

Even if the sudden change in temperature made my fingers ache terribly.

In the Vale, the Mountain clans were in disarray. Jeyne had stopped the Falcons from chasing them into the Mountains despite Lord Denys’ desire to take the fight to them. Instead she’d ordered them to patrol, to prevent their usual raiding for food and supplies. With Winter bringing freezing winds and snows to the Vale now, the Mountain clans looked to be in for a harsh time.

I learnt all of this after the fact, Rhea giving the report in an amused voice.

“She has forgiven you but that does not mean she will not try and make you suffer for it,” the lady of Runestone told me as we relaxed by the fire.

“She wants revenge for my teasing about Maris,” I said, well aware Maris was sitting within earshot. The Grafton snorted oddly and a glance told me she’d just inhaled her juice, much the Sera’s amusement. Then she gave me a look of warning, I smiled sweetly in turn and returned to my aunt.

“Speaking of marriages… I note a handsome young man has being paying court to you?” My aunt, all of three and thirty years, blushed like a maiden. I threw my head back and laughed in delight at the sight.

“I should not be surprised you noted that,” she muttered sourly, face still flushed after I’d calmed down. “I am taking my time.”

“I understand why but Torrhen Manderly seems a charming man.” The fact that he was young enough to be her son went unsaid, even if it was muttered about at court. The Manderlys wanted to make clear that they would not be rallying to the deposed Graftons and they were doing so by literally courting Jeyne’s principal bannerman.

Not that Rhea did not want to be courted by the dashing second son. He had yet to gain the weight he would later on in life and was well-spoken and polite.

“He is charming, well-mannered and clever besides,” she admitted, a small smile growing on her face. I had worried about his suit initially, finding out if he had been serious regarding it had been Maris’ first real assignment as a spy.

He was, as far as we could tell. He was genuinely fond of Rhea despite her age and whilst he was eager to call himself a Lord he was happy to do so as a Royce and not a Manderly. I hadn’t told Rhea I’d had her love interest stalked but it was nice to know for sure.

She’d kill me if she thought I was worrying about her.

“I am happy for you. Regardless, has Jeyne spoke to you about marriage? For all that our correspondence has resumed normalcy this past month or so, she has not mentioned it.” I was well aware pushing the issue with Jeyne would get me back in her bad books but Rhea and Jeyne’s relationship had grown into one of mutual fond exasperation. As a result, Jeyne was sometimes
freer with information than she was with me.

“I do not bring up the topic. It is a sore one,” Rhea told me. “I fear it will just bring to mind old fears of hers. Old nightmares. The letter I sent on your behalf… I fear she will not be as quick to forgive me as she did you.”

Ah, Willem. Being asked about marriage by his sister must bring it all back.

We lapsed into silence for a while, listening to the background chatter of Maris attempting to draw Sera into a card game and Sera showing good sense for once and refusing. Rhea smiled softly to herself and I found myself dozing in the peace that followed.

It all seemed so domestic, so warm, that not even the fear of the children’s coming could touch me. Not even fear of Otto, not even here a month for all that it seemed like he’d been here an age. He was still on his best behaviour but Joffrey had predicted that.

Corlys had become more interested in Joffrey’s work now. Something told me that if Maris was to be Joffrey’s first partner-in-crime, Corlys would be his second. Not that Maris was involved in the scheming. She ran the rapidly multiplying gambling dens, her job being to filch as much information from her patrons as humanly possible.

That Joffrey was thinking of handing her the brothels spoke well of her. I trusted his judgement of people. It would also free up a lot of Joffrey’s time and give him a break from sifting through the proverbial crap for the odd diamond.

“She seems fond of your sister,” Rhea said finally and I forced my eyes open with a yawn in response. “Jeyne that is. She says Helaena is a delight but something of a handful.”

Jeyne had written something similar to me in her letters. Helaena wrote of missing home and missing her siblings and parents. She liked the sights though and Morghul liked the mountains. The fact that Jeyne allowed her to keep practising her bow was another bonus.

That girl was going to be a terror with a bow when she actually reached an age to have a proper one.

“Sheelaena could win anyone’s heart,” I said, blinking sleep from my eyes. Had I actually dozed off? Another yawn caused my jaw to crack.

“She does complain frequently of housing Morghul though.” I smiled. If the Eyrie had not been built for dragons then the Gate of the Moon were even worse. Morghul was still small enough to fit in the courtyards but that presented a whole different set of problems.

She would only continue to get larger with the whole of the Vale to traverse and no pit to keep her in. Jeyne was already fielding complaining shepherds and goat herders. Viserys had promised a royal allowance to both the Vale and the Westerlands to pay for dragon-related incidents.

Speaking of which, Aegon had actually written to me directly. Not just a few lines in his usual letters to Viserys and Alicent but to me. If he was to be believed, Frost had undergone a similar growth spurt to Morghul and he was curious about why.

I doubt my reply had even reached him yet but combined with Alicent’s declining Greens and Otto’s upcoming death… well, the Dance was looking less and less likely.

“Dragons are certainly not easy mounts to train and control,” I said diplomatically.
“I’m given to believe you barely house your own in the pit anymore?” Rhea said although it was more a question that statement.

It was not strictly true. As my pregnancy developed Syrax was rapidly becoming my refuge as everyone and their mother crowded me day and night, attempting to wrap me in more and more cotton wool. In the sky, I could escape everyone but Rhaenys and her children.

Rhaenys approved of the practice I was getting in. Laena and Laenor had both tried to object, worried about the twins, and I had gleefully thrown Laena’s own late pregnancy riding right back at them. With Rhaenys backing me up, they had no choice but to let me fly. Not that it stopped them arranging a schedule as to who would be following me up and when.

The increased time in the air had seen me claim a stretch of abandoned beach for Syrax to nap on. Whilst the surrounding livestock farmers and fishers no doubt hated her, it was easier than the spectacle of the Dragonpit over and over again.

“I pay for the food she hunts,” I mumbled, feeling a little guilty. I actually paid above market price, it seemed appropriate.

“So you do,” murmured Rhea, smiling. “I will depart, niece. I have lords to corral and you can barely keep your eyes open.”

“You do not need to!” I protested as she rose and I struggled out of my chair to follow her. “I am quite able to remain awake.”

She drew me into a hug. She’d become much better at giving them recently, considerably less elbow than the first few I had received from her.

“Go to sleep. I do remember lecturing you about invincibility. I do not need a repeat of Runestone, especially when you are pregnant.” Then she swept off and I dropped back into my seat and sighed, trying to shake of the exhaustion I felt.

“And tonight was the night I would tell Laena everything. She had not asked again or pushed the matter since but oh, how I wanted to tell her, to have no secrets between us.

“Don’t be so boneheaded. Cancel the meal and sleep,” Maris said hotly. “Else I shall tell Ser Joffrey and he shall set Lady Laena on you.”

“Lady Laena does not scare me,” I declared, visions of enforced trout dancing across my minds eye. If Laena thought I was dodging needed sleep she’d chain me to the bed. “Perhaps a compromise and we can have the meal here.”

“Does she not? Normally threats such as that work. After all, Jeyne is terribly susceptible to that same threat in regards to Jessamyn Redfort.” I felt the blood drain from my face at that, hand finding the back of the chair.

Oh gods, how long had she known?
“Sera, could you go and inform Ser Laenor, Ser Joffrey and Lady Laena to attend on Her Grace here tonight?” The Strong bustled off, looking worriedly at my pale face. I waited until she was long gone before turning back to Maris.

“How long-” I started but she cut me off with a wave of her hand.

“Oh, since you two started I’d warrant. I didn’t care when it was Jeyne and certainly do not care when it’s you. I think it goes without saying that others would not be so forgiving though.” Breath came a little easier at that and she guided me into my seat and brought me some juice to sip at.

“You need not fret so much. Ser Joffrey has already taken me to task on it.”

“Is that so?” I asked, dazed, as she pushed the cup towards my mouth.

“Marya and Falena are the ones you want to watch out for,” Maris said after a while. “To caught up in their Faith, they’ll expose you in a heartbeat regardless of the good will you have built with them. I’m not sure about the Strongs, they’re harder to get a read on.”

I nodded and continued sipping my juice, heart still pounding in my chest.

“I’ll run interference for you, of course. Jeyne would sulk if I failed to help along such a love story,” Maris finished and a moment later Sera returned.

“I sent a runner to the manse,” she told us. “Do you need the Maester, Rhaenyra?”

“No! No, it is fatigue. I just need good company and then some sleep,” I hastily assured her and she smiled.

“Very well then. Should I call a maid for dinner to be taken here?”

I nodded.

“Tell them to bring meals for you and Maris as well,” I said, regaining something approaching equilibrium. Gods, how I wish Joffrey would tell me when he’d picked up on things like this! Words would be had. “I would not have you both starve because I failed to make my appointments.”

“Oh! Can we break into your liqueur collection?” Sera asked, shooting a covetous glance past me. I glanced at said collection and then shrugged. I’d not drunk in any great amount since I’d found out. The gifts had been checked thoroughly by the Kingsguard and then stacked into the cabinet for decoration mostly.

“If you so wish.” Sera gave a squeal of happiness and began poking through the bottles. Eventually Maris meandered over, drawn by some of the more expensive drinks from Eastern Essos. They’d settled on a type of pear liqueur when Laena entered with Laenor on her heels, both looking beyond worried.

Joffrey hobbled in soon after as they fuss over me. The winter air had the same effect on his leg as it did on my fingers. Laenor was all for him never leaving his offices in the manse and the large fire they boasted but Joffrey had put an end to being babied with aplomb.

I wish I had that skill.

“I’m fine, just tired and wishing for company,” I said, derailing Laena and Laenor’s questions.

“I thought it might be something like that but you know how those two are,” Joffrey told me,
sitting down opposite and stretching his leg out. Laena snorted and rose to go to his side, falling into Laenor’s usual pattern of massaging the broken limb. I caught Laenor’s eye but there was no jealousy there. That was something at least. Instead, my husband dropped his head onto my stomach, pressing his ear to fabric as if he sought to listen for it’s occupants, and smiled shyly at me.

I returned it happily as Maris and Sera began pouring out some of the drink for everyone but me and passed it around.

“To Princess Rhaenyra!” called Sera. “Our future Queen!”

The rest followed toasted along with her and I raised an eyebrow. That was brownnosing I’d expect from Otto Hightower.

“What?” she said in response to my questioning look. “This is Alys and I’s favourite drink. Do you know how expensive it is? Father only lets Alys and I have one small glass about once a year!”

“It’s very expensive. Which is why you should never let Alys at it, Rhaenyra,” Joffrey told me from his own seat as Laenor donated his own glass to Sera with a screwed up face. Evidently not a fan. He laid his head back on my stomach and two seconds later the kids started their usual nighttime party. Startled, Laenor drew his head back.

“Was that…?” he trailed off, hopeful look on his face. I smiled and drew his hand down to where they kicked out once more. Tears sprang to his eyes as his hands roamed over my stomach. Then he giggled like a maiden receiving her first kiss.

“Hello, little ones,” he choked through his tears then dropped his face low to my belly. “I’m your father!”
I was awoken the next morning to Sera’s pained groaning as she shielded her eyes from the sun that streamed through the not quite drawn curtains. I pushed myself up, trying my best to ignore the kids and looked at her with some concern.

“I should not have drunk so much last night,” she said finally becoming aware of my gaze. “I feel awful.”

“I had not thought you had drank so much?” I said, bemused. She had finished her own and Laenor’s pear liqueur and had partaken in a few cups of wine alongside the rest of us, bar me and my juice, but… well, my ladies own drinking habits had declined with my own. Alys was the binge drinker of the Strong family, Sera had probably lost a great deal of her tolerance.

No doubt her sister would work to remedy that after the babes were born. She groaned again and I fought a chuckle, swinging myself over to pull the bell chord. A maid appeared a moment later and was dispatched to retrieve a volunteer replacement for Sera. I was due to have Alys and Falena today, perhaps one of them might make their way over early.

“When I am clothed you may use my bed to sleep off your hangover in. I will have some water and food sent to you.” When she opened her mouth to protest I raised a hand. “Sleep, Sera.”

“Thank you, Rhaenyra. Truly you are the Mother reborn,” she whimpered, hands covering her eyes again. I smiled and leant back into the pillows, enjoying the feeling of the twins moving about as they were wont to do in the hours after I awoke.

Laenor had finally felt them! That left me smiling widely for some reason I couldn’t quite put my finger on. The usual chill of fear the morning brought seemed so distant as I lay cocooned in my blankets, stroking my stomach.

Falena turned up a moment later, covering the ground from my ladies room to mine so fast I wondered if she had access to Littlefinger’s teleporter. She tutted in disapproval at the groaning Sera but helped me dress with only a few acidic comments. Then, without my prompting, helped the Strong girl into my bed without complaint. We left my old friend the chamberpot nearby as well as the water and bread we had requested and she thanked us profusely for it.

“Sots, the both of them,” Falena growled as I seated myself for my own breakfast. “Alys was drunk herself last night.”

“What she does in her off hours is no business of mine, Falena. Besides, Sera’s predicament is my fault.” Falena said nothing in response to that but gave me her usual raised eyebrow of silent disapproval. “How goes Septon Patrek’s work with the charity?”

Her demeanour changed in an instant and she beamed.

“Oh very well! Your excess food from the test farms have worked excellently in supplying some of our worse supplied food banks and kitchens. Septon Patrek can not stop singing your praises,” she said. “I know you still have your reservations but allow me to assure you he only cares for fighting the corrupt Faith.”

Surprisingly, that reassurance meant something to me. Falena was an astute judge of character in the way only Laena was amongst my ladies. Marya was too inclined to fall for a sob story, Maris to cynical and the Strong to naive.
“It is very easy to turn that to criticisms of the nobility. Might I remind you there are as many corrupt nobles, eager to exploit the smallfolk, as there are corrupt Septons?” I said and Falena nodded.

“I have brought similar worries to the Septon myself although about those who do not follow the Seven. Lord Redfort is a great ally and friend of my father and yet the Redfort boasts a Godswood,” she explained. “I would not see the Faith attack him for that nor would I see them cause issues elsewhere in Westeros.”

“And what did the Septon say to your worries?” I asked, taking a bite of the little fishes wrapped in bacon.

“He said that the Seven must be spread through learning, understanding and love for our fellow man for we are all children of the Seven,” she said proudly. I smiled without really feeling it. It seemed to good to be true, a Septon whose ideals aligned with mine perfectly, who did not desire the Faith militant or political power.

“He said that having blades at it’s back only encouraged the High Septon to act as a King would. He thinks King Jaehaerys did not go far enough when he banned the Warrior’s Sons and the Poor Fellows,” Falena continued. “He thinks he should have rebuilt the Faith, changed it from the High Septon downward. He has been working on his manifesto.”

Septon Patrek was a fanatic but a clever one. The best I could hope for is that he would use me, I would use him and our goals would never wildly diverge. Still, the men I had posted to him agreed with Falena so far. It did not mean he was not hiding his desire for power but it spoke well of him. I would wait and watch him. When I knew what made him tick, what he truly wanted, then I would sleep easier at night.

“Perhaps a lighter topic to eat breakfast over?” I suggested and Falena nodded in turn. “My sister’s nameday approaches and I have yet to find her an acceptable gift!”

“Something archery related is bound to impress her,” drawled Falena, amused. “But there are other options she may enjoy. When she was at Dragonstone with us she seemed fond of tales about adventures.”

Helaena did like stories.

“And I do have a good father who knows an adventure story or two,” I murmured in thought. Not that Corlys hadn’t storied Helaena’s ear off about his adventures already but hiring a scribe and artist to set them to paper with illustrations might be nice gift and if I ever managed to get paper and ink manufacturing up and running it might prove a popular book to sell.

“Yes, I think I shall bother Lord Corlys for his stories once more,” I said with a nod at my lady.

“Lord Corlys does not need bothering much to launch into a recount of his brave adventures. The true comedy occurs when Lady Rhaenys seeks to correct him,” Falena chuckled and my smile grew to match hers. A maid entered and bowed low before announcing the arrival of Laenor, still glad in his training gear. A part of my brain was drooling at the sight of him.

“Good morning, Rhaenyra!” he said cheerfully before dropping to his knee. “And good morning twins.”

They were silent in the face of his greeting.

“They’ve gone shy,” I told him and he beamed at me before standing up again. “What brings you
to my rooms so early? You might well have stayed the night and saved Sera the fallout from her hangover.”

“Laena and Joff are hungover as well. Joffrey decided working on the Mushroom conundrum would be soothing and Laena has declared herself your Master of Dragons. Both of them have sealed their office to me,” his smile was rueful and I suspected he’d been locked out more to his exuberance exacerbating their headaches rather than any particular bad feelings on their part.

“Well, it’s nice to see Laena is enjoying the duty I set her,” I said, amused as Laenor dropped into one of the couches with a sigh.

“She enlisted Mother’s help as well. Might I bathe here, Rhaenyra? I still have my chest in your rooms, yes?” I tried to cover my amusement at how full of beans he seemed today but couldn’t quite. Falena seemed to be struggling as well. This was pure Laenor, not the mask of prince-consort he often had in place. Dork.

Falena had the maids heat some water for a bath and we sent him off into my bathing room with a change of clothes from his chest. Falena and I relaxed in front of the fire, her resorting to stitching and myself reading a book I’d received as a gift a month or so ago at that fateful tournament. It wasn’t particularly interesting but it did pass the time well enough that it didn’t feel like an age before Laenor emerged, clean and dressed.

“Falena, could I prevail on you to leave me with my husband this morning? Perhaps go and remind Alys she was supposed to be here quite some time ago.” She drew herself up at that and I mentally apologised to Alys Strong. Laenor took Falena’s vacated seat with an amused smile on his face.

“That was cruel,” he said and I pulled a face at him.

“She would have loomed over both our shoulders all day,” I complained. “I have nightmares about that disapproving sniff she has!”

He laughed at that although not before a pained expression flickered over his own fine features. Falena was well-aware of Laenor’s ill-done dalliance with Jon Hardyng. She had to suspect Correy had also been telling the truth. The duel had proved before the eyes of the Seven that Laenor was not in the wrong but I suspected her grudging silence had more to do with the horrendous double standard between men and women in Westeros than any particular loyalty to him.

“How goes Joffrey’s search for our mysterious friend?” I asked after we’d finished chuckling. Laenor pulled a face in response.

“I haven’t said this to him because it seems to me to be a bit… unsettling but…” he seemed to struggle with his words for a moment. “It seems to me this friend is… well, courting him.”

“Courting him,” I repeated, disbelief entering my tone. Laenor squirmed in his seat before shrugging.

“His friend makes comes up with some scheme, forcing him to respond. Then he prepares some other scheme in reprisal and his friend effortlessly avoids it. Until recently they never actually damaged one another in this… game, they would simply come close, acknowledge the damage they might have done and let it drop.” He scratched at his chin, embarrassed. “It seems to me it’s more about ensuring Joff sees him than a battle for control of King’s Landing.”

“So you think Alicent’s factor is… trying to get Joffrey’s attention? Would this not imply he thinks Joffrey knows who he is? That he would know who Joffrey is?” I asked. As oddly as Laenor
phrased it, it did contain a smidgen of sense.

“I do not know. If Alicent knew who Joffrey was she’d want him dead, whether he held the esteem of her own spymaster or not. I have warned him about such several times,” Laenor said sourly. “I worry for him. Mysaria’s influence has left the city but this friend of his was able to snatch as much of her people as he was.”

“Joffrey is well capable of holding his own,” I said and he nodded, miserable. “But… you might be on to something there.”

Whatever had begun niggling at me the moment Laenor had finished his theory danced annoyingly out of reach and yet I felt it was just on the tip of my tongue, that one more bridge of logic would take me to a realisation that would help Joffrey in his dance with Alicent’s man.

“That he is danger?” said Laenor. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“No,” I murmured. “No, something you said has my thoughts racing but… they refuse to tell me what has them in such a state.”

Laenor hummed in thought and the creak of the chair told me he’d settled back himself. I poured over what Laenor had said. Alicent’s spymaster had seemed to flirt with Joffrey. It may not actually imply he knew who he was, just that he had seen his effects on the city. Joffrey had said it started after he’d purchased more than a few brothels and knocked out a few low-hanging Greens.

So our friend had seen that and liked his style, bringing his own spy ring to bear in response. Which implies that up until that point he didn’t have it or if he did he was not so invested in it… so had Alicent found him as he’d played with Joffrey? Or had he found Alicent when he realised Joffrey had me? Which would explain…

“Oh,” I breathed, eyes snapping open. Understanding flowed through me like a freight train. “Laenor get me some paper, I need to write this down.”

He hastened to obey and soon we were both bent low over it as I put ink to paper.

“I think our friend started his own spying before Joffrey but not, as we thought, as Alicent’s agent. I think he found Joffrey later, initiated this game as a way to impress him, to spur him on!” I started. “I think Alicent came later after he realised Joffrey was my factor. I don’t think he actually knows who Joffrey really is, I think he just likes his style. I don’t even know if our friend would tell Alicent because I don’t think he’s hers.”

“You think they are merely allies?” Laenor said, picking up and I nodded.

“Allies and uneasy ones to boot. I don’t think Alicent killed Mushroom, Laenor. I think our friend was creating his own job opening.”

“He kills Mushroom, makes himself Joffrey’s counterpart in the Greens… He is courting him!” said Laenor, frowning.

“Which means soon enough, I think he’ll reveal himself whether we unmask him or not.”
That realisation had Joffrey scrambling for the information he’d collected on Mushroom once more. He was determined not to be blindsided if our theory proved correct. It was also somewhat hilarious to see Laenor’s outright offence that someone would court the man he loved when they would have to know the truth regarding the two men.

Although, given the ongoing power struggle between Otto and Alicent, I had to wonder if Joffrey’s friend would remain Alicent’s for much longer. A spymaster with that kind of skill and resources at Otto’s beck and call would be a dangerous thing indeed. I was starting to suspect Joffrey was right, that bringing Otto to court where there was enough political upheaval for him to take advantage of was a horrendous idea.

Okay, I know Joffrey was right. I was wrong and Joffrey was right. But now that Otto was here he had to die before he managed to salvage the Greens entirely. No doubt this war for Dorne was his grand plan. Already he was revealing his hand with the plans he was drawing up for the invasion and it’s aftermath. He was advising Viserys to appoint several Stormlanders and Reachman as governors to prevent further rebellion. I was no expert on Dorne, as he was fond of repeating to all and sundry, but that seemed like a bad idea to me.

He’d picked Marcher Lords like the Peakes and the Swanns, lords with grudges who would be happy to avenge a thousand years of raiding and skirmishes on the innocent and vulnerable. If he had his way, Dorne would be bathed in blood for generations.

“Take him away, Laena. He is making too much noise,” I hissed into my pillow, twisting the covers over my head as the sound of Lucerys rolling his egg about drove spikes of pain through my skull.

Time marched on despite my renewed desperation that it should not. The Third Trimester loomed large and my sickness returned with a vengeance, intent on punishing me for getting comfortable. My weight gain continued its steady siege on my good looks despite both Laenor and Laena assuring me I was still the Realm’s Delight. It was hard to feel that way when I had gained the start of a second chin.

If the sickness ruined my day, the the twins ruined my night. If they did quiet down sleep was slow to come and not especially restful. I frequently awoke in the morning drained and empty. My entire body seemed to ache in pain with the effort of holding the babes that grew within me and part of me was starting to hate them, hate Laenor and hate the society that was forcing me to carry them.

Exhaustion, sickness and hormones created a potent cocktail and my mood became black. In one moment I would snap vicious insults at my ladies, my husband or my good family and in others the guilt would bring storms of tears and self-hatred. Otto and Alicent capitalised on it with glee, spreading rumours of my rages and my difficulties. Most of their stories seemed designed to give the impression that I would die in childbirth like my mother before me and if I did so it would be the punishment of the Mother for my midwives.

“He is a babe and you agreed to have him in here for the price of having me,” she replied, tone verging on waspish. Then she sighed, pried the covers off of me, chivvied me into a sitting position and laid a hand on my stomach. The children kicked out joyfully in response to my movement and she smiled, then dropped a kiss to my lips.

“You will be fine. This is the worst part and then you will have two babes in your life. No one will
ask for another heir for a long time,” she murmured, breath hot on my ear. Then she retrieved Lucerys and his egg from the floor and settled him between us, curling around him and into my side with a satisfied smile.

“Two years. I do not care if they are boys or girls I’m not having another for at least two years. Longer if I can manage it,” I groused as Lucerys slapped at his egg happily and then drooled on it. She stroked at my hair, unbound after I had been ordered to bed by Gerardys. When I remained unmoved she pulled me close and laid her head on my shoulder. I smiled, even after all this time she still smelt of dragon and sea salt.

“No one shall demand. I shall set mother on them if they do.” A threat that would work on even Viserys I thought with a smile then I grimaced as my headache decided I was not allowed a moment of peace and flared up again.

“If my next pregnancy is as bad as this one I’ll never have a another,” I whimpered, covering my eyes once more. Nausea swirled in my gut and I forced my jaw to clench tightly. Laena would not appreciate me throwing up on her or her child.

“Joffrey says I am to distract you when you’re like this,” Laena said, poking at my cheek. She was trying for an impish smile but I could see the worry in her eyes. The sudden return and worsening of my sickness and symptoms had everyone scrambling. The subsequent babying and enforced bed rest had not helped my mood. Something told me that if I threw a tantrum when Lucerys was in the room she wouldn’t speak to me for weeks though.

“Joffrey is interfering again,” I mumbled and lay down. My change in position sent Lucerys sprawling in the sheets, flailing as the pillow he had been propped up against shifted. His egg went in the opposite direction, rolling towards the end of the bed and prompting his face to screw up in grief and fear. Laena scooped him up and hushed him, rocking him back and forth. Thankfully, he never started wailing and instead stuck to little sobs which soon died.

“Ah,” she said. “He’s gone to sleep.”

“Is that such a problem?” I asked, trying to poke his egg back towards us with my feet.

“He won’t sleep later but perhaps I should put you both down for a rest now.” I raised my eyebrow at that as she laid him next to me. The egg bumped his toes a moment later and she scooped it over, placing it next to him. His small pudgy hand came to rest on it and I sighed, rolling onto my back. My stomach was aflutter with fear again and I brought my hands to rest on it, chewing my lip without meaning too.

“Go to sleep,” Laena said finally. “I will be here when you awaken. Perhaps, I shall even secure you some treats.”

“That’s bribery,” I muttered, mind going to the potential treats she could get me. Nothing too sweet or anything with a powerful taste which ruled out my usual fare but she had persuaded the owner of the bakery near the manse to experiment a little to produce things I liked.

“I am quite confident it will work;” she said, dropping her head to kiss my temple. I smiled in response and let my eyes flutter closed.

“You have been brave recently. I like it,” I told her and she laughed in response.

“I have kissed you and the world has not ended. You have not sent me away,” she whispered.

“And Joffrey has a way of getting through your thick head,” I mumbled and she scoffed in mock
offence before her hands found my hair.

“I will admit to enduring more than a few of his lectures even before I decided to be ‘brave’ as you put it.” A yawn was her answer as I snuggled deeper into the sheets and she huffed in laughter again.

When I awoke, she was gone. Lucerys was still here, curled up next to me, so she’d likely just stepped out or gone to deal with something. Unfortunately, I awoke said child as I pushed myself into a sitting position and was forced to prop him up against me as he wobbled about trying to roll over. Then I had to chase the escaped egg, still warm from both our bodies, across the sheets and return it to him. He wrapped his arms about it and laid a still sleepy cheek against it.

Me and you both, buddy, me and you both.

A nap had done wonders for my mood, I reflected as I smiled against my own will, had I been left alone with Lucerys before said nap I’d have likely sulked about it for at least an hour. The worst thing was that I knew when I was being unreasonable. I knew it was unfair to take it out on everyone else and yet I did so anyway. Only for the guilt later to drive me to distraction and frequently tears.

The next time I get pregnant something tells me my ladies will resign on the spot.

An odd scratching sound drew me from my thoughts and my eyes found the door. It remained unopened and besides it was unlocked. One of the castle cats maybe? But they so rarely came to private rooms, they’d long since learned they’d be chased away. My heart sped up a bit as I twisted round to look at the window. It was covered by heavy curtains but we were quite far up so that was an unlikely source as well.

Then Lucerys let out a frightened sob and my eyes drifted down to him and his egg. His egg that boasted a spider web of cracks.

The cracks that were spreading, slowly but surely as the contents of the egg struggled to freedom. I lifted him gently away from it, heart pounding fast and settled him on my knee before rolling the egg a little further away. Lucerys’ frightened sobbing stopped as a wing pushed it’s way through the egg and into the air only to vanish into the egg again.

“A dragon,” I said to him, feeling a little stupid for saying something so obvious. “It will be yours. Your birthright.”

He seemed transfixed as a dark red head of a hatchling pushed it’s way through the gap, the rest of the body trying to follow. When it got stuck, it snapped it’s wings out again, shattering what was left of it’s confines across my sheets and bedding. Much to my annoyance, a great deal of egg goop followed. The hatchling let out that strange gargling screech I’d come to associate with younger dragons and crawled forward, smearing the unnamed goop around it.

It was pretty enough for a dragon. Dark red, verging on burgundy in colour. It’s horns and eyes were darker still, almost black yet I could just make out the red tint to it in the light of the fames that lit my room. It’s eyes and head bobbed about and fixed upon the babe in my lap.

Lucerys reached out with his pudgy hands and the tiny dragon’s tongue darted out across his knuckles at the before rearing back from the excited flailing with another surprised gargle. Lucerys laughed and slapped his hands together and the dragon settled on nibbling on Lucerys’ foot, much to my own heart stopping terror. My heart ceased trying to beat it’s way from my chest somewhat when it failed to draw blood and Lucerys did not indicate pain.
“Laena is going to kill me when she realises she missed this,” I told Lucerys as his happy giggling rose in pitch again. This was early for an egg to hatch, she likely hadn’t even given thought that it might when she’d nipped off to run whatever errand she’d gone on. Normally, they hatched between six months and a year. A year and half would be the absolute cut-off, the deadline for removing the egg from the child.

There seemed to be no rhyme or reason as to which egg would hatch for who. Laenor’s egg, once belonging to Rhaenys, had hatched giving him his beloved Seasmoke yet Laena’s had not and she had later tamed the mighty Vhagar. Rhaenys had tried oh so hard to hatch the egg her son had, using every method she could lay her hands on apparently, refusing to give it up until she had exhausted every avenue only then had she given up and mounted Meleys. Aemon, her Father, had hatched Caraxes and spent many years shying from it yet it had remained true only to him despite his rejections.

This is why Laena’s work would be invaluable. The work she did here might be more valuable to House Targaryen than my own rule, I realised with wide eyes.

The dragon continued his destruction of my sheets, claws cutting wide gashes in the fabric and Lucerys watched, completely enraptured by his new dragon. Taking care to not disturb them, I leant across and pulled the bell pull. Moments later, the door was opened by a maid who quite impressively got through half her usual niceties before noticing the real life dragon destroying my bedding and trailed off with a frightened squeak.

“Perhaps you can find Lady Laena and a platter of charred meat for me,” I suggested, as she stared pale faced at the newborn. She nodded and fled, leaving the door wide open. I snorted. Something told me she might be tendering her resignation soon. From my lap, Lucerys giggled once more as the dragon made it’s way to end of the bed and nearly toppled over the edge.

“Is that Lucerys I hear giggling?” came Laena’s cheerful voice from somewhere out of sight. “Is your Auntie Rhae taunting you again?”

It was all I could to contain my own giggling when she stepped into the room and stopped dead, eyes wide as she took in the destruction and the dragon.

“Surprise!” I called cheerfully as her startled face turned to me for an explanation.
“I can not believe you missed it, Laena,” said Rhaenys, as the brand new as of yet nameless dragon attempted to snatch some charred meat from her hands. It was not doing well, baby dragons weren’t known for their grace or athletics.

“Neither can I,” she sighed before smiling at me ruefully. “It will be good for my work though.”

“Ah, you were the one who set her onto this, weren’t you Rhaenyra? It’s good to see someone cares about the source of our families power!” I didn’t need to ask to know who she was referring too.

“Dragons are a sore point for him. Balerion died at the same time as my brother, Aemon, and I think a part of him died then.” Defending Viserys was a weird feeling but… well, maybe I was softening towards him. His proud father routine, that he hadn’t dropped once since he learned of the babes, was starting to get to me.

Rhaenys was silent for some time until she finally let the hatchling seize his meal, then she looked up with an expression I had never seen on her face before.

“Perhaps I am too harsh on him at times. I know it must seem that way to you. I do love him, he is my cousin but he is not fit to be king.” I shrugged in response and she snorted. “He should have married Laena, he should have married you to her son. He should have taken control from Otto the moment that man seized it, he should have sent Alicent from the capital the moment she sought to influence you.”

At my silence, she continued, head tilted to gaze at the clouds.

“There is a softness in him. Not nearly like Aenys but it is there. He lets it rule him too often, he hates the pain it causes him too much to go against it.” She looked down at me. “He could not marry Laena because she reminded him of Aemma and because he feared she would meet the same fate.”

“And because he feared having you as a goodmother,” I pointed out, not wanting to start an argument over whether Rhaenys feared the same fate for Laena. Rhaenys snorted in amusement, lips quirking up at the thought.

“I am glad I did not marry him, Mother,” Laena said, her ears red as Lucerys gurgled happily from her lap.

“You would have been Queen,” Rhaenys pointed out but there was no real heat in her tone. I got the sudden sense they’d had this conversation before. ‘Bah, I know what you will say. I am happy enough to see Laenor by Rhaenyra’s side. Happy enough to see the Lords of Westeros bow to a woman.’”

Laena smiled at that and Rhaenys hummed before procuring another cube of charcoal meat for the dragon. Lucerys laughed as it once again began it’s back and forth scrabbling for the treat Rhaenys dangled in front of it.

I let my thoughts wonder. Alicent and Otto had been up in arms about another Velaryon dragon. It was one thing to let Rhaenys’ children have dragons but their children too? It meant that for at least three generations the Velaryons would have access to power no other house but the Targaryens did. It was establishing them as a cadet branch, the optics were not great for House Hightower. Viserys
had defended Lucerys though and he’d managed it without making any referral to Daemon, which I considered impressive.

Annoyingly, the birth of a new dragon so soon after the decision to go to war with Dorne once winter was at an end was being viewed as some sort of blessing by those who cared about that sort of thing. I would have to be careful of that or I may just end up getting sucked into a war I did not want. Still, I had dug out those long forgotten plans for a procession across Westeros once more. Now that my due date loomed ever closer, it seemed like a good idea to start planning once more.

The Stormlands would likely be first, then the Reach. Followed by the Westerlands, the Iron Islands, the Riverlands and the North. The Vale would be my happy ending to the whole thing, providing Jeyne didn’t strangle me or Helaena didn’t plan my assassination. There were still the little details to hammer out of course but the rough plan had been easy to assemble.

“Mother could you look over some of my research tonight?” asked Laena, breaking the awkward silence. Rhaenys paused in her teasing of the young hatchling and raised a black eyebrow.

“What subject?” she asked.

“General hatching methods. Aelyx’s writings disagree with Aenar’s originals.” Rhaenys hummed at the question. The hatchling apparently sensed her distraction and scrabbled off around her elbow to lay siege to the platter. Both Laena and Rhaenys seemed intent on the conversation and so his feast went undetected by them. I almost had to cram my fist in my mouth to stop my giggling.

“What does Gaemon write?” asked Rhaenys.

“Surprisingly little so far. He agrees with Aenar at times though.”

“Hm, I’ll look it over. I would have thought the man who hatched Vhagar and Meraxes would have more to say on the matter.” The current rider of Vhagar beamed and nodded, then noticed the hatchling and my evident amusement before frowning.

“Mother, he’s had the entire platter!” she exclaimed as I got witness a dragon vomiting for the first time ever.

Merriment over we trooped inside, Laena cradling a very unhappy hatchling and Rhaenys carrying the sleepy Lucerys.

“You should move back to the manse for your pregnancy,” Rhaenys said, making me pause in surprise.

“I’m not sure Father will put up with that. He wants me close.” Laena tensed a little, well aware of the consequences that Viserys could bring down for disobedience.

“Oh course he does. Worry wort,” she smiled fondly, “He was all of fourteen when I fell pregnant with Laena and yet I swear he fretted over me more than my father did.”

“That’s surprising,” I said as we reached Laena’s room and deposited Lucerys in his crib and the dragon in his wicker cage. “Besides, if I moved here again I might miss out on those wonderful family dinners he keeps planning.”

It was one dinner but he’d ambushed me with it after Alicent’s meltdown about the egg. Naturally I was thrilled about that and approaching it in a purely rational manner. Ugh, it was part of his ‘repair family bonds’ attempts and I’d agreed to drag Laenor along with the caveat that I could leave if I became overly ill. He’d agreed with a look that said he’d better see some real evidence of
illness if I decided to bounce halfway through.

Marya and Alys helped me dress that night, fastening me into a dress reminiscent of the Riverlands style with a dash of Westerlands in the layers. I even elected for a little bit of bling. Tasteful though, I wasn’t going to weigh myself down with an entire mines worth. Experience had taught me Alicent was happy to wear something bordering on scandalous to rub in the salt about the changes to my own figure. I scowled at myself in the mirror and then more deeply when the twins started up with their shit. I laid a hand on my stomach.

“You better be well behaved tonight or you’re being born grounded,” I told them.

“Your Grace?” Alys called from the other room and I blushed at being caught.

“Nothing, Alys. I was talking to the children,” I called back and she laughed.

“I can not wait to meet them,” she said, entering behind me with one of my nicer mantles. “Twins like Sera and I!”

“If they’re half as rambunctious as Sera and yourself I’m running away to Essos. Lyonel probably considers his position as Hand a respite from the two of you,” I commented dryly. The girl just laughed.

“We do like our pranks and we’ve even gotten Larys one or two times!” she said, grin stretching her face. “But… well, it’s the greatest thing in the world to have a twin. It’s another part of yourself. We even had our own little language when we were children.”

“Oh, do tell me about catching Larys out,” I said. Larys only grew more serious as the months went on, not that I saw him that much these days.

“Oh the classic water over the door, once we painted ink on that Myrish far-eye he so loves and another we covered him in flour!” I laughed along with her. “You think he would be grumpy with us but he would just smile and promise to get even with us someday.”

There was a fond smile on her face. Larys may be the butt of all jokes in the Strong family but anyone of them would happily kill an outsider who mocked him. I liked that about them.

“Did he ever?” I asked as she fastened the mantle.

“Oh! No, never. We’re much too good!” she chuckled. “Sera says she doesn’t even think he ever tried.”

“Well, you shall have to invite him for a meal after I have had the children. He is a friend and we haven’t spoken in so long,” I said finally as she straightened the mantle to sit properly on my shoulders and stepped back.

“I’m sure he’d like that,” Alys said with a smile.

“Who would like what?” asked Laenor, stepping into the room and looking as handsome as ever. He’d had a haircut recently, I noted, his silver hair had been cut to shoulder length and he was in the process of tying it back. He had people to do that, of course, but his insistence on staying at the manse meant they weren’t here.

“Inviting Larys for a meal,” I said, coming over to help him with his hair.

“Oh, he seemed quite nice. Quiet fellow though. Thank you, Rhaenyra,” he mumbled and let his
hands drop. “Oh how I wish we did not have to attend this tonight.”

“You and I both, husband,” I said. “But when Father calls we must answer.”

“We can always set mother on him,” he suggested and I laughed. Rhaenys had become a go to threat for her children in recent months.

“That would be cruel. Your mother is a force of nature.” That made him cackle.

“There is a reason that Father married her. He says every time he is with her he is reminded of sailing through a storm.” That was positively romantic from Lord Corlys.

“Well, I know what drew your father to your mother but honestly I don’t understand what her stake is,” I said and Laenor smiled, eyes gleaming with mischief, stepping away from me as I finished his hair. Then he laid his hands on my hips and planted a kiss on my lips.

“And here I thought Velaryon men were irresistible for you Targaryen women,” he teased and I realised I was blushing a deep and vibrant red. Oh, he’s back to playing that ridiculous game of his.

“Not so irresistible that I will not slap you if we are late,” I mumbled back, placing my hands on his cheeks. I let him initiate another kiss only to pull back as Marya and Alys got the giggles at our display of romance. Or rather, Laenor’s display of teasing me. It was, I’d come to realise, something he took immense pride in beyond the obvious alibi it gave us. My blushes were a source of ongoing amusement for him. Joffrey and Laena too.

I could understand his position. Blushes won from those three on my part were always satisfying too. Admittedly, I won them from Joffrey and Laena in the privacy of the manse lest Alicent decide to concoct another little story for the court.

Not that her control of rumours should be so complete these days, I mused as we began our journey arm in arm. We now knew that Mushroom had been the progenitor and purveyor of many of her more damaging rumours. Without him at hand... well, court gossip was hard to control. Mushroom had a talent that I doubted many others had. Our friend had struck a massive blow to her and still managed to forge an alliance.

I wonder if he lied to her? Told her some story about Mushroom betraying her to justify his actions. I had not heard any Blacks speaking of Mushroom or any kind of mole so I doubted he had actually been planning those things. It could be our friend killed him to create a job opening or Mushroom made a joke about it. We’d answered a few questions and yet were just as in the dark as when we started.

“Brooding?” asked Laenor.

“No, thinking about Joffrey’s friend.” Laenor laughed at that.

“Joffrey will have him soon enough. Do not doubt his skill,” he assured me.

“There are too many mysteries in this world at the moment, Laenor. Can you blame me for tackling the one that I have a chance of solving?” I asked as my mind went to the foundations of Runestone, Joffrey’s friend, the reason Black Powder did not work on Westeros and everything that ever came out of Wisdom Jerrett’s mouth regarding magic and alchemy.

We came to halt in front of the doors that led to another fun family dinner and paused to compose ourselves before one of Viserys’ men pulled the door open and we were announced. Greetings were called as were shown to our seats and we’d barely sat down before another two guests
arrived.

Ah, great. Viserys has invited Otto and his son.
We started off with a small bowl of pumpkin soup and fresh bread. The pungent aroma set my stomach rolling the moment it was placed before me and that, combined with the initial distinct lack of alcoholic drinks, tipped me off as to who was likely involved in choosing the menu. I sighed, resigned myself to an unpleasant night, and forced a few spoonfuls down before Daeron’s fussing gave me an escape I seized with both hands.

“It does not seem like it has been a year since I first saw him.” I said, attracting the tables attention. “He has grown so much and already walking!”

In truth, he was as average as toddlers got but the implication that walking at about sixteen or seventeen months was special had Viserys preening as he gazed at he third son with evident love and pride. Alicent merely gave me a tight smile, Otto looked constipated and Gwayne took the opportunity to drop his spoon with relief. I frowned at that. The accident Joffrey had arranged had damaged his arm most of all, forcing him to use his off hand. Ambidextrous this boy was not yet Otto did not seem to care his son could barely feed himself.

“He will be a fine addition to House Targaryen,” said Otto after a moment of evaluating what I could possibly mean by my phrase. There were a small crowd of nobles Black and Green both that figured I couldn’t possibly love my siblings, Otto was evidently a member.

“He cries too much,” groused the only sibling I’ve ever given an actual thought to physically harming. Aemond was taking this whole dinner as well as Daeron which was impressive given the almost four year difference in age between the two. The time of Aemond’s fostering was looming ever closer and his behaviour continued to degenerate. I had to wonder if Alicent was egging him on. If she was, Viserys would have her measure soon enough.

“He is a babe. They cry, Aemond. You and Aegon did so endlessly. Lucerys does so. When he is older you will think differently.” My voice managed to hit warm despite the smell of pumpkin making me want to vomit but all Aemond did was clench his fists and stare at his own untouched soup. Viserys cleared his throat.

“Well said, daughter,” he said, smiling. The others at the table made hasty nods whilst Otto barely covered up his utter disgust with his second grandchild. Another thing they’d disagreed on, according to Joffrey’s spies, not that one needed spies to hear of the arguments between father and daughter these days. They were quite happy to bellow at one another within earshot of even hardcore Blacks. Otto found the mess she’d made of Aegon and Aemond alarming. He’d also pointed out Helaena’s obvious attachment to me as a problem. Honestly, Daeron was the only grandson who did not meet with scorn and that was because he was too young to have managed to disappoint his grandfather yet.

We carried on eating, or rather everyone else did. I took the opportunity to let my stomach relax a little. It very much did not approve of the pumpkin soup. As the awkward silence descended once more, Laenor gave me a pleadingly look. I gave a half a thought to vomiting all over the table but I couldn’t do it on command and whilst the pumpkin soup was pungent it wasn’t enough to truly set it off.

“Do you not like pumpkin soup, Rhaenyra?” asked Alicent as the rest finished up. Minus her brother who’d gotten through half his dish and gotten most of it down his doublet. I felt a pang of sorrow at that. He’d used to be such a lively lad, the apple of many a woman’s eye. Now… now he could barely raise his eyes from his soup and could barely hide the embarrassment at being so
helpless.

“My stomach does not, I fear,” I replied, immensely discomfited. I had caused Gwayne’s accident. Indirectly but I still had. Alicent’s thin smile would have made me angry were feelings of guilt and nausea not conspiring to make this dinner extremely unpleasant.

“Rhaenyra and I are very glad to see you on your feet, Ser Gwayne,” Laenor said smoothly, giving me time to grab some juice in attempt to settle my stomach.

“Thank you, Ser Velaryon. Thank you also for the help of Maester Gerardy, Your Grace. I am in your debt,” he said in reply, eyes flickering up. Otto’s thin smile dropped back into place but curiously, Alicent’s smile was a lot more warm. He was her baby brother after all and I imagine that Otto was not the warm and friendly father figure Viserys was. I felt a pang of something at that and turned my attention to him. He caught my gaze and smiled, so I returned it, causing his own to widen in turn.

The servants came and collected the dishes and went off to prepare the next course.

“Have you given anymore thought to the recommendations I provided on Dorne, Viserys?” asked Otto. It was odd to see him referring to Viserys in such an informal way. I was used to the simpering your grace’s that seemed tailor made to set my teeth on edge.

“Hmmm, I’ve given them a look over Otto, but truly I think we should wait before we decide on any solid plans. The war may not even happen yet,” he rumbled by way of reply. Otto nodded and took a drink of wine. “Besides, I do believe I requested no politics. This is a meal to celebrate our family!”

“Of course, Viserys, I apologise. This business has me out of sorts I suppose,” Otto replied after he’d placed his cup back into place.

“Oh I quite understand. This business with Dorne seems to have come out nowhere.”

“Marcher Lords are a proud lot. They see a weakened Dorne as an opportunity and things seem to have spiralled from there,” Otto said. “They are eager for glory.”

“Revenge,” I said. “They are eager for revenge.”

Otto smiled that thin smile as even Gwayne’s head shot up to stare at me.

“They want to repay the Dornish for their raiding and rapes, for the pain they’ve caused in the marches over the years. If any one of those houses are placed in charge of Dorne after we win, there will be a bloodbath.” I was surprised by how heated my own tone was. Otto went to answer but Laenor cut him off.

“I agree. There is a lot of bad blood in court right now, all of it aimed at the Dornish. I dread to think what may happen if those men are given innocents to rule.”

Viserys stroked at his moustache and hmmm’ed thoughtfully.

“Something to bear in mind, Father,” I said, cutting off Otto once more. Then Alicent joined in, leaving her father floundering somewhat.

“Please, there are children at the table,” she said, smile strained. “Viserys, we agreed no politics.”

I let my eye wonder to Daeron, who was still chewing on some left over bread and Aemond, who
was scowling at his shoes as he kicked his feet back and forth. I arranged my face into a smile and
gave her a nod.

“You are right. My apologies, my Queen.”

“Indeed, daughter,” Otto managed to choke out. The next course interrupted whatever she was
going to say to that and my stomach gave an almighty heave as pork seasoned with mind boggling
amount of spices were laid out before us. A dazzling array of vegetables, also well seasoned,
provided a side.

“You have gone pale, Rhaenyra, are you well?” asked Alicent, eyes twinkling with amusement. I
clenched my fingers around my fork and forced a smile.

“Well enough.” Nausea forced my voice into a half-whisper which drew Viserys’ concern.

“If you need to leave…” he said, frowning.

“Pungent and strong smells make her sickness worse,” Laenor explained to Viserys. “I am
somewhat surprised the kitchens did not know. They have been instructed in the past.”

Viserys suspicious violet eyes travelled over to Alicent who was poking at her pork and looking
shocked. I had to hand it to the bitch, she was certainly an excellent actor. She feigned that shock
so well even I wanted to believe her.

“But I was very clear who would be attending!” she gasped. “Rhaenyra, you have my word I will
speak with them about forgetting such a requirement.”

“Thank you, my Queen,” I mumbled. Then my throat clenched and I nearly did retch all over their
meal. Laenor stood up swiftly and pulled me up with him. Viserys followed him up, eyes wide with
concern.

“I shall take her back to her rooms, Your Grace, else I fear an accident.” Viserys nodded then
turned his eyes back to Alicent who looked very concerned. So concerned it wasn’t possibly real
concern in fact.

“Do you require any help, Ser Laenor?” asked Gwayne, also rising. Laenor took pity on him and
Gwayne joined me a moment later, both men almost hauling me along in a way I wanted to protest
I did not need and yet… yet doing so would see me throw up on them. When we were safely away
and by a window, I was allowed to lean my head out for a while. King’s Landing was not fragrant
by any stretch of the imagination but it beat Alicent’s idea of a hearty family meal.

“You may escape, Ser Gwayne,” Laenor was saying. “Thank you for your aid.”

“I should thank you, Ser Laenor. I have no idea why Father dragged me to that dinner but it was
quite excruciating. Truly, the confessors must weep to have never devised a torture so painful,” he
retorted. I laughed and then groaned before pulling my head back in. Sweat was prickling across
my forehead and the little pumpkin soup I had forced was suddenly sitting very uneasily in my
stomach.

“We need to go,” I gasped out and Laenor’s widened with alarm before he scooped me into his
arms, called a good bye to Ser Gwayne and took off at full speed down the hallways. If I weren’t so
damn sick that might just have induced a case of the vapours. As it stood, all I could lament was
that every jolt and jostle sent my stomach spinning even worse.

We eventually reached my rooms without me soiling myself in public but it was a near thing
because we’d barely stepped inside the room when it did come up and I was left covered in it due to the angle Laenor was carrying me at. Which naturally did not help matters and left me retching more. To his credit, he did not drop me in disgust although I could tell the thought had crossed his mind.

Instead he left me to Marya and Alys’ ministrations as he went off to change his clothes. The two women had rushed from their seats the moment Laenor had slammed the door open with me in his arms and were quick to strip me to my shift and small clothes and reintroduce the chamber pot to my life. Then they called for the maid to draw some hot water for me with emphasis on hot. I gave them both a grateful smile. Laenor returned a moment later, dressed in fresh clothes and looking worried.

“I knew you did not wish to attend the meal but this was a little drastic, no?” joked Alys as we waited for my bath to be filled.

“Everything served tonight read like a list of what would set her off,” said Laenor stiffly. “And Alicent very much planned it that way.”

At that both my ladies gained dark looks on their faces. Laenor nodded in response to their outrage.

“I am going to fetch Alannys to give you a look over, Rhaenyra. I know it’s just sickness but we do not know what those seasonings were. If it is something dangerous to you or the child…” he trailed off and I nodded. I suspected it was the smell, tailor made to send my stomach spinning by Alicent because she was a vengeful cow that couldn’t let things go even when it would be healthier for her too.

“We will keep a close eye on her, Ser Laenor,” promised Marya. He bid them both goodbye and disappeared out the door. We waited in silence and as time went on, my stomach slowly settled.

“I’ll kill that woman one day,” I vowed as I settled into a low couch with Alys’ help. Then at, at Marya’s stricken expression, I elaborated. “I jest. I would not kill her but when she is as petty as this it is hard to remember the Seven and their teachings of forgiveness and compassion.”

An awkward silence descended and Alys Strong rode to my aid.

“Well, generosity is part of worship and a certain sister of mine tells me you have a certain bottle in your collection,” she said, eyeing said bottle, and I laughed.

“Alys that is completely inappropriate,” Marya gasped, thoroughly distracted from my momentary slip by how gods-damn rude she was for asking.

“You may have some, Alys, as long as you understand that if you drink it all your sister will gut you,” I told her, remembering the storms of panic and tears she’d coaxed me through in recent months. She could raid that alcohol all she liked for the friendship she’d given me.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she replied. “I’ll definitely leave her some. Half a glass should be fine, right?”

I was saved from replying by Marya helping me to my feet as a maid announced the bath ready. Alys tipped her glass to me and took a gulp as the door shut. I was helped into the warm water and sighed at how heavenly it was.

“You better keep an eye on her,” I murmured finally.

“Someone needs to keep an eye on you,” said Marya and I could picture her worried frown.
“I will shout should I require aid. Truly, if you do not watch her she will have the entire bottle and half the cabinet to boot.” Marya groaned, no doubt remembering the morning Alys had been found half-conscious in the stables at Dragonstone.

“Very well, Rhaenyra, but you are not to climb out of that bath without aid!” she told me, eyes serious. “You will hurt yourself… Seven help me if you fall!”

“Go,” I chuckled. “You have my oath that I will call for you should I need to get out of the bath.”

She went and I sighed happily, settling myself in for a long soak. Then I would be due a poking… sorry, a visit by Alannys that would no doubt result in her chiding me about fried goods. Ah well, I could deal with that. At least I was out of that awful dinner.

And then I heard Marya scream.
The fear the scream brought drove me upright and sent water splashing over the sides of the bath,
drenching my surroundings. My heart beat like a drum in my chest as I listened for any indication
what had happened. There was nothing but silence, no sound of metal on metal, no sound of any
fighting…

“Marya!” I called, wondering if Alys had decided to play some cruel prank on the woman yet Alys
was not given to doing so if she was ‘on duty’. “Marya! Alys! I am getting out of the bath!”

A crash of the door to my rooms slamming open and Ser Steffon’s shout to raise the alarm was my
only answer. I climbed to my feet before my mind caught up with what a stupid idea that was. By
the time I realised how fucked I was it was too late, the world seemed to move beneath me and like
the queen of all idiots, I toppled backwards over the rim of the bath.

I saw stars for a moment as the back of my head bounced off the floor. My legs seemed to be afire
as I struggled to pull them over the rim of the bath. Tears burned in my eyes at the pain. The pain
in my legs, the back of my head and the pain in my back.

A fluttering feeling caused my stomach to tense into a cramp and I raised a fearful hand to my
belly.

Seconds later, Ser Steffon Darklyn reached me, eyes wide with worry. His white cloak was draped
over me and to my horror I discovered that my legs weren’t quite up to the task of holding me
upright. I whimpered as I realised I likely had a whole host of pulled muscles. But my pain was not
important.

Marya had screamed.

“Your Grace-”

“I fell when she screamed. By the Seven what happened!?!” At my question he gave me a pained
glance and I became aware of Marya’s sobbing. “Marya! Alys!”

“Rhaenyra! Do not… Do not leave the room. Ser Steffon has sounded the alarm.” Was Marya’s
choked reply and I could tell she was sobbing. Fear boiled within me and another spasm, another
clench, had me bend over with a groan.

Alys had not answered me, I realised.

“Your Grace… the babes?” he asked, eyes wide. “It is too earl-”

“No. Not this early. False contractions. Take me through there,” I told him. It had to be false
contractions. If they came now, they would die and not even my midwives would save them. So it
had to be false contractions.

“Your Grace, you must not,” he said, then his eyes went even wider and a look of horror grew over
his face. “Your Grace, you are bleeding.”

He raised a shaking hand to the back of my head and withdrew it, fingers red with my blood. I
groaned at the sight.

“I do not care about me, tell me what has happened or take me through there!” I commanded him.
The sound of more men pouring into my rooms was my only answer as Ser Steffon closed his eyes and helped me along, like I was somehow leading him to his execution. My legs burned with pain as I forced them the bear at least some of my weight and now that Ser Steffon had pointed it out, I could feel the blood on the back of my head and soaking into his cloak.

Another false contraction made me grit my teeth but I was not about to let that stop me.

“Where is Her Grace!?” demanded the voice of Criston Cole.

“Right here, Lord Commander. Now will somebody tell me what is going on? Where are Alys and Marya?” Cole turned at my voice, full of barely suppressed panic, frowning when he saw my nudity covered only by Steffon’s cloak but my eyes weren’t on him.

They were on Alys Strong.

Or the body that had once been Alys Strong.

“No,” I moaned before I could help myself. No, this wasn’t real. This was some head-wound induced punishment. My legs gave way and Steffon caught me, picking me up bridle style as tears blurred my vision and my heart ached fiercely. “No, not her.”

It wasn’t real.

“I found her- I went to prepare a night gown- she was just lying there,” Marya choked out. Tears made it hard to see but the last moments of Alys Strong’s life had been panicked. The glass of liqueur she had been drinking had spilled across the floor and I could see blood where she had clawed at her own throat. Her eyes were still open and her expression told me she’d died terribly afraid. Then one of the guards laid his cloak over her as if noticing my horror.

It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real.

“It doesn’t matter about me!” I screamed at him. Cole’s gaze shifted to me in surprise. “I’m not dead!”

“She struck her head attempting to get out of the bath,” Ser Steffon replied as if I hadn’t just screamed at his superior. He kept an expert hold on me as I struggled to launch myself at Cole. Another contraction made me gasp and stop my struggling, Cole’s expression went from cool and blank to worried.

“Take her to the Grand Maester. Now!” the Lord Commander ordered in a thunderous tone. Ser Steffon nodded and I struggled in his arms once more.
“No! No! You will leave me here! I will stay with her!” I ordered but was ignored. Fresh tears streaked down my face as my struggling amounted to nothing in Ser Steffon’s arms.

“Ser Darklyn!” Steffon paused and glanced back at Cole. “You will stay by her side until you are relieved. No matter how long this matter takes.”

My white knight half bowed in response and we stepped out into the corridor. The ache in my heart burned once more. I wanted to struggle but yet another contraction ended that plan as soon as it entered my head.

It could not be real. It was not real.

Lorent Marbrand met us half way down the corridor, his eyes wide with fear as he saw my form wrapped in Steffon’s bloodstained cloak. Behind him, panting and struggling to draw breath was my father. The King did not look well, his skin blotchy as he choked and wheezed.

“Your Grace,” Marbrand started. “Princess Rhaenyra—”

Viserys head snapped up and he surged forward, hands finding my cheeks and looking half out of his mind with worry. His placed his forehead against mine and provoked fresh round of sobbing from me.

“Rhaenyra! Rhaenyra, what happened!?” he gasped.

“They killed her. They killed her.” Was all I could sob out. “She’s dead and it should have been me.”

Viserys went pale at that but I couldn’t see his expression through my tears. His hands left my cheeks and I sobbed again at the loss of contact. I wanted, for the first time since Daemon, for him to hold me close and tell me everything was okay.

“Ser Marbrand, oversee Ser Cole in his investigation. I will take my daughter to the Grand Maester,” Viserys said finally and lifted me gently from Steffon’s arms. I curled close to him as my back and legs screamed in protest, sobbing into his fancy brocade doublet.

“What happened?” he asked in a low voice, once we were moving again.

“Alys Strong appears to have been poisoned. According to Lady Stokeworth, she was drinking alcohol meant for the Princess,” he reported. I heard Viserys’ breath leave his body in a single explosive breath and he was silent for sometime. I clutched at him tighter and he responded in turn.

“And the head wound?” he asked, voice a whisper.

“She fell—” A contraction made me cry out in surprise and Viserys swore. “She said they were false.”

“It does not matter. Take me back Father, I don’t want to leave her,” I choked out and Viserys shifted his hold on me. I wasn’t even sure where we were in the Keep currently. “I should be there. I should tell Lyonel. It’s my fault.”

“It is not your fault, little fire. It is not,” whispered Viserys. The old nickname Prince Baelon had once used for me set me wailing into his shoulder. “Alys Strong was every bit a good woman as her father is a good man.”

“She’s nothing because she’s dead!” He winced at my volume and I buried my face in his shoulder
once more. We reached the tower soon after and he placed me oh-so-gently down on the bed Mellos indicated.

“No! No! Gerardys,” I gasped, barely able to see the old man through my tears.

“Maester Gerardys is not here. I am quite adequate,” I could have sworn his voice was a sneer. Viserys curled his hand in mine.

“I will be here, little fire. Should he fail you like Runciter I shall have his head along with whoever did this,” Viserys assured me. I leant into his shoulder once more and he dropped an arm round my shoulders.

“She struck her head on the floor. I fear she has injured her back and pulled the muscles in her legs. She also told me she was experiencing false contractions,” Ser Steffon was saying.

I was pulled forward so the Maester could get a look at the back of my head. Something damp and cool dabbed at it and I sobbed in pain rather than grief this time. I did not know if it was my tears or the head injury but a fierce headache had started up and showed little signs of abating.

“Hmmm, not as bad as it looks, Your Grace. Head wounds bleed a lot.” Mellos’ voice was calm and cool as he gave his judgement and I wanted to scream at him for being so calm when Alys was dead. Viserys’ warm hand folded around mine and I settled for another choked sob. “It will heal without stitches.”

“Her back and legs?” His hands settled on my thigh above my knee and it was all I could do to not scream at him for an entirely different reason. Alys had once said he had the eyes of a pervert and that thought had me struggling from him and my crying renewed. The blurry figure of Mellos raised his hands in defence at Viserys’ and Steffon’s unseen reaction.

“I can not examine her if she struggles,” he whined.

“Then we will wait for her Maester to arrive,” said Viserys coolly.

“I suppose she does not wish a cervical examination?” he sulked and if I had not been unable to move I would have flung myself at him. As it was both Viserys and I were prevented from doing such a thing by Ser Steffon seizing the grey rat by the front of his robes and frog-marching him out of the room.

“She must rest but do not let her sleep! If she vomits call me back in! And keep an eye out for behaviour changes!” he shouted through the door.

“I should have prevented this. I should have ensured the bottles were double checked. I will submit to whatever punishment you deem fit, Your Grace,” Ser Steffon said as his blurry form crashed to a halt at the end of the bed. Viserys’ hand rubbed a comforting circles on my shoulder, then it stilled. I caught his fingers with my hand and he dropped a kiss to my forehead.

“Who was responsible for checking them the first time around, Ser Darklyn?” From the dangerous tone in his voice he already knew and merely wanted the confirmation. I should feel sorry for him. Viserys was likely to kill him or worse and Joffrey had brought in people to check those bottles after he had and had found nothing amiss.

Alys Strong was dead.

“Ser Criston Cole,” said Ser Steffon. “He had them checked after the tourney.”
“I see,” He moved from my side and I whimpered at the loss even as he dropped another kiss to my forehead. “Little fire, I shall find who did this. I’ll find who tried to kill you and I shall see justice done.”
He had worn his white cloak for over a decade. He had been Lord Commander for three of those years. He had replaced the finest knight to ever serve, he had been destined for great things.

He tried not to think of her. Tried not to think of the blood or the poison. Tried not to think of how helpless she’d looked in Darklyn’s arms. His mind would not obey. It taunted him, bringing her broken form across his mind’s eye again and again.

He hated her and loved her. He wanted her dead and wanted her alive. He wanted her at his mercy and wanted to follow her once more.

When had he become so twisted?

“How did this happen!?” Viserys scream was filled with rage. “You were in charge of checking for this precise situation!?”

He had no answer. He had checked. He’d done his due diligence. He’d missed something. He’d failed. Only luck had saved the Princess. Luck and not her white knight.

“Your Grace,” said the queer little Ser Joffrey when he had nothing to say in his defence. “I independently had the bottles checked.”

His King was pale with rage yet the knight seemed to not to care, he did not quail in the face of it. Lesser men had. Joffrey forged on with an officiousness that he wanted to sneer at. That was no true way for a knight to act. Yet this one had never acted like a knight, he recalled with disgust. That this Joffrey should have her esteem when she would not even look at him. This knight had more carnal knowledge of her husband than she likely did and she did not care. She held him close. She held that disgusting excuse for a lordling even closer.

He burned with jealousy at the both of them. Those children should have been his. He had been hers in spirit, why not in body too?

Both are more of a knight than you have ever been, whispered a voice from the recesses of his mind. The dark part that taunted him with his mistakes and failures.

“Ser Steffon gave me access to the work Ser Cole did in regards to checking for poison. The bottle was not listed amongst the items checked.” Terror squirmed in his gut. Was this the bastard’s revenge? Was this how he would get even for the blow that had crippled him? “I compared it to my own lists. Curiously, the bottle was not listed there, either.”

Confusion replaced the fear and then shame. This Joffrey Lon- no, Velaryon, wanted only to protect her. Protect her in a way he had failed to. Shame burned in his gut then.

“So you both failed,” his King said, hands clenched so tightly on the arms of his chair he feared they may break under the pressure. The other man shook his head. He was brave, this little knight.

“It was added to the cabinet afterwards. I do not know when but with Ser Steffon’s aid I am undertaking a thorough questioning of everyone that had access to that room.”

“You are my Daughter’s creature, Ser Velaryon,” said the King, his knuckles white with the effort of restraining himself. “It is the only thing that has saved you from punishment for this failure. She will punish you herself, I have no doubt about that.”
The King paused as Joffrey seemed to realise the danger he was currently in. He tried not to feel satisfied at the fear he saw there for a brief moment. Then anger coursed through him. She would not punish her husband’s lover. He would not share his fate.

“You were both in charge of keeping her safe!” he yelled. “Do either of you have any idea as to who did this!?"

He felt his heart speed up at that and hoped the King could not see his fear. Alicent had been unworried recently, happy even. She’d been so sure Rhaenyra would no longer be threat. He’d assumed it was her father, that even if the two quarrelled, Otto was good enough to ensure Rhaenyra never laid a finger on the Throne.

It should be her throne, came the traitorous whisper, you swore to win it for her once.

“Your Grace, I have not had tim-” The King’s hoarse yell prevented him from speaking further.

“I don’t want your arse licking! I want to know who tried to kill my unborn grandchildren!? Whose head do I need to put on a spike!? Yours!?” He screamed and the knight recoiled slightly. Cole wanted to laugh, dealing with her temper was no true test for dealing with the King in a rage.

“I do not know. There are too many suspects! I have no proof either way! I need time to gather it!” Joffrey almost babbled. The King was two seconds away from leaping up and braining the little knight, he sensed, he wanted answers not excuses.

None of them said what was obvious to them all. Had the Queen been responsible? She had the most to gain. The moment he had returned from seeing his daughter to the Maester’s Tower he’d had the Queen placed under guard. Not arrested but… under guard. Otto too. Had she done it? Finally tried to kill her hated rival?

Was it his fault?

No. No, she would not have done. She would not strike and risk him. Not without telling him, he had to believe that. He had her ear, he heard her commands and councils. .Who? Who could he offer up instead?

Ah.

“Daemon,” he growled, attracting the attention of his King and Laenor’s man once again. Viserys face twisted in anger and hatred and he did not know whether it was directed at him or the brother he had come to despise.

“The Mushroom business,” he forged onward, aware of how unwise it was to remind his King of what happened after yet being pushed to do so regardless by his own battered honour. “It was a distraction. What if it was a distraction for the placement of the bottle?”

“It would make sense,” said Joffrey, spotting a lifeline. “One last trap to remind us all we are not safe even if he has been forced to retreat for now.”

Should he keep his head, he would find some way to reward the man. He may be a sword-swaller but he had proved he had honour. He had not let a grudge cloud his judgement.

How amusing, whispered the dark part of his mind, that this man would have more honour than you?

He swallowed hard at the thought as his King digested the information. He was still angry, still
ready to tear a man apart with his own hands. Finally, he slammed his hands down across the table.

“You,” he said to the Velaryon. “You find me who did this and you find me proof.”

The man got halfway through a bow before Viserys screamed at him to go. He hobbled off at speed, one last look directed his way. It was full of hate.

He told himself he had needed to cripple the man. He had needed to shame Laenor Velaryon into doing his duty. It had worked. She was going to birth Velaryon babes! If he had not, the Velaryon cunt would still be carrying on with the knight, still be shaming the woman he lo- he served once with every breath, with every beat of his heart.

It was spite, murmured that same dark place, you tried to kill a man out of spite. There was no honour in what you did. Had you succeeded it would have been murder.

“Do you remember the day you entered my service?” asked Viserys and Cole felt fear prickle across the back of his neck. The King seemed almost calm, completely at odds with the rage he had displayed a moment earlier. “You asked me if I would allow you the honour of pledging your sword to my daughter.”

He did not answer. This was a trap. He was to be his King’s scapegoat. The focal point for his anger. Not even the Queen, even if she had been at her most powerful, could save him now.

He swallowed hard as the King drew Blackfyre. The smoky metal seemed to eat the light. A Kingsguard serves for life and his King would end his soon enough. What would they write of him in the White Book? Would the new Lord Commander, whoever that would be, look upon him as a failed brother? Or would they remove his page and burn it with his cloak?

“Is it still an honour? I saw you rise to defend her from the world. Yet when she needed you the most you abandoned her.” He did not add that he had left her to play lapdog to Alicent. He did not protest he had saved her from her hated Uncle. His fate was sealed the moment the Princess uncorked that bottle. The King drew in breath. “You bring a cunt like Correy to the court itself, you put her and my grandchildren in danger!”

Correy had told the truth but he could not protest that fact now. It had done Alicent little good and the King loved her. Instead, he swallowed his retort and bore the King’s anger. Bore the sight of Blackfyre unsheathed.

“You failed her at every turn. You have failed me at every turn. Had those babes died tonight, I would have had your head. As it is, I am forced by custom to offer you a choice,” the King’s voice was low and dangerous. He screwed his eyes shut but the vision of Blackfyre remained. How had he fallen so far? How had he failed so badly? He could not blame the Queen, he had gone to her. He could not blame her, she had done everything required of her.

That left one person. One person to blame.

He opened his eyes once more. Grief became a storm inside him. He had failed to uphold the oaths he had sworn when he had been elevated to the Kingsguard. Yet redemption was not beyond him yet.

“If Your Grace permits, I wish to take the Black.”
I spent the next few hours in a kind of disbelieving daze with only Ser Steffon’s presence to keep me from a complete breakdown. Although he did little to keep me from my grim thoughts, likely too lost in his own. I had stopped crying a while ago. It felt as if I had no more tears left to cry and now all that was left was some vast, gaping hole in my chest and a dull aching pain. At some point a servant arrived with a night gown but I barely remember putting it on.

She’d died because she’d drunk from a bottle intended for me.

She’d died instead of me.

That was all I could think. All my mind would allow me to think. The knowledge danced across my thoughts, wrestled any attempt to think about anything else back to itself again and again and again…

Shame and guilt warred in my gut and I threw up into the chamberpot Mellos had provided. Ser Steffon was at my side immediately, his own eyes tired and red rimmed. He opened his mouth to call for Mellos and then paused when I flinched.

“Call him,” I finally managed to say. “I owe her more than dying from a head wound sustained falling out a bath tub.”

That’d be the stupidest Targaryen death in existence and one of them had drunk wildfire on purpose.

“Grand Maester!” called Ser Steffon. A minute or so later, Mellos shuffled in. When he realised why he had been called in he hastened to my side and began his poking and prodding, occasionally pausing to ask me questions.

“Humph. Likely your birthing sickness rather than your head,” he grumbled. “Stay awake for a while longer. If you manage that it will be safe for you to sleep.”

I nodded at his advice and he shuffled out again with a nod to Ser Steffon.

“I already miss her,” I whispered to my white knight. A spasm of pain twitched over his features.

“It does not seem real.”

“She and her sister were the highlight of my day,” he admitted. “Did you know they once dyed Cole’s cloaks pink?”

That startled a laugh from me and then a grimace as my headache objected to any levity. My heart ached; Alys would want me to laugh at her pranks. She had loved the reactions she got whether it was confusion, anger or joy.

“He stole Willis’ spare to cover it up but we all knew,” Steffon finished and his small smile flickered as we both remembered she would not be playing another prank. There would be no more watching her lose at cards, no more watching her wind her sister up, no more witty word play with her. I wanted to cry again but the tears would not come. After a while of waiting, my face pressed into my knees as I tried to make myself weep for her once more, Steffon brought me some water. It was teeth-achingly cold and I drank it gratefully.

The headache did not ease but I felt somewhat better.
I was about to settle back down in my vigil of misery when the door was practically knocked off its hinges. Ser Steffon was between it and I in a second with his sword drawn but he needn’t have bothered because it was Laenor in the doorway. When I saw his panicked face, I let out a low moan as my tears finally came again. Steffon backed off without needing to be told as my husband threw himself forward and engulfed me in a tight hug.

I clutched at him and buried my head in his chest.

“They said there had been an assassination! They said you were injured! That the babes were coming or lost!” he babbled, terror in his voice. “They barred us from the Keep! By order of the King!”

“Ser Velaryon, Lady Velaryon,” Ser Steffon started. “There was an an attempt on her life tonight but it did not take her.”

I pulled my head back in surprise and found Laena hovering in the doorway, her face pale and looking as if she wanted to embrace me as Laenor was doing. A brief glance at Ser Steffon told me why she would not. I reached out my hand and she moved over and took it as Laenor shifted to give her room. I heaved another sob. Did she know? Alys and her had been friends, united in their attempts to beat Maris at her own game.

“How?” asked Laenor, voice cold and angry.

“The pear drink,” I mumbled. “Oh gods, she’s dead! She’s dead, Laena!”

“Who?” asked Laena, pale once more. “Rhaenyra, who is dead?”

“Alys,” I told her and she recoiled as if I had just physically struck out at her. “I said she could have some. It was poisoned. I did not know!”

“Shhh, shhh,” murmured Laenor, pulling me into the crook of his neck. “We know. She was your friend, you did not kill her.”

I only had eyes for Laena as the reality hit her and tears trickled down her face.

“Oh, mother’s mercy,” she whispered and then clenched her fingers tight around my hand.

“It’s my fault. I let her have that drink.” Was all I could say to her grief and Laena shuffled a little closer, as close as she dared with Ser Steffon there. “I killed her. I let her have that drink.”

“You did not know. It was her favourite,” said Laenor. “It was not your fault. You did not kill her.”

“Why did this happen? Why did this have to happen?” The new tears were leaving warm trails over my face and a part of me revelled in them. I should feel bad. I should. I put Alys in that position. Laenor shifted again, trying to give Laena a little more room and keep me against him at the same time. Then he drew a sharp breath.

“Her head is bleeding,” came his alarmed voice.

“I fell. Like an idiot I fell.” My voice was bitter. The door swung open and Mellos stuck his head inside.

“Oh, you have visitors. Well, Her Grace may sleep now if she likes,” he said with another nod to Steffon. This time it was Laenor’s gentle presence that kept from screaming at him.
“I don’t want to sleep,” I mumbled after he’d gone. “I can’t sleep. How could I sleep?”

“We will stay with you for as long as you want. Mother said she would watch Lucerys until the matter was solved,” Laena told me. Then she glanced at her brother. “Perhaps you could send a runner to inform her?”

I didn’t want him to move and tightened my grip on his arm. He blinked at me in surprise then turned to his sister with a helpless shrug. She sighed and reached over, attempting to get me to relinquish my grasp.

“Please,” I whispered and she paused.

“I can send the runner,” said Ser Steffon, making them both jump.

“Yes, thank you, Ser Steffon,” Laenor said, repositioning himself on the bed so I was laid against him. I whimpered as my back and legs reminded me of the damage I had to them.

“What hurts? Your head?” asked Laena. She was not crying anymore but I could tell she wanted to. I could tell she was holding back for my sake.

“Back and legs,” I mumbled and buried my face into Laenor’s side as her hands probed my back, causing me to flinch. “Fell out of the bath tub when Marya screamed.”

I laid there for a while, bouts of weeping interspersed with the numbness of disbelief. Laena and Laenor held me through it all, wedging me between them and keeping me safe and warm. Soon the lack of sleep combined with my swollen eyes meant I was struggling to stay awake. Laenor and Laena’s comforting presence only helped in dragging my eyelids further and further down.

When I awoke, Ser Steffon was in the room once more and the morning sun was streaming through the window. My body felt like one giant bruise with everything aching. I was laid on Laenor now with Laena on my other side. She was sniffling and my heart hurt again. I wanted it to be a dream. I wanted Alys to stumble in and be scolded for being late.

I wanted…

“She’s awake,” murmured Laenor. Ser Steffon shifted, standing a little taller. I opened my mouth to ask if he knew… something… anything but all that came out was a raspy groan. Laena rose and retrieved something from out of my sight, returning with a cup full of water. I drained it, spilling a good amount over Laenor’s doublet.

“You want the news?” Laenor asked quietly, lowering his hands to my stomach after I had settled in the bed and he was free of my weight. The children kicked out and I wanted to cry with relief they were okay. Judging from Laenor’s own smile he felt the same way. A moment later, Laena’s hesitant hand joined her brother’s. All three of us laid there for a while.

“Tell me what you have learned.” I owed it to her to find out who did this. When I did, they’d die slowly and screaming.

“Alys was drinking that same liqueur we were. As Sera said, it was her favourite. She’d already had quite a bit by the time you gave her permission to drink it according to Marya,” he began gently. “It was Alannys and not Mellos who enlightened us to the poison used…”

He trailed off and grimaced.

“If she is right then we were all in more danger than we knew,” he finished. “The babes
“Explain,” I rasped, some of the guilt easing in me leaving me open to rage. I let it fill me up, let it tint my vision. It was better than grief and self-pity.

“We think the bottle was poisoned before it was ever opened,” said Ser Steffon, voice solemn. “I will understand if Her Grace chooses that I share the fate of Criston Cole.”

I blinked at that and Laenor shook his head.

“We all had some bar you. You do not know how lucky you are that you did not even sip at it,” Laena explained. “Both Joffrey and I awoke with headaches the day after. Sera Strong awoke with what seemed like a terrible hangover but these all match with the side effects of mild consumption of a poison called Hag’s Grasp.”

“Hag’s Grasp?” I echoed. “I do not understand.”

“According to Alannys it is used to… remove unwanted children. It is dangerous though, it can leave a woman infertile with just a small ingestion,” Laena explained. I stared at her, blood cold with fear.

“No… no. Laena, you drank a glass. Maris… by the Seven, Sera drank two!” Horror coursed through me in waves, sending my skin prickling with sweat and nausea squirming in my gut once more.

“It is… it is too early too tell if it has effected us.” There was the wobble. There was the worry. Would Lucerys be her only child? Were three more of my ladies to fall victim? Laenor placed a hand on his sister’s wrist and she grimaced before steeling herself.

“Regardless, it was almost certainly aimed at you. Even a small amount of the poison will kill children in the womb,” Laenor said after his sister nodded for him to go ahead. “Alys drank too much, too fast. It is only fatal in high doses. Had you drank it we would not have detected the damage until much later on. It would have…. It would have looked natural. Like they had… merely not made it. As you were heavily pregnant, it would have almost certainly rendered you… unable conceive.”

There was rage and grief both in his voice. The twins were his children. Any future children I would bear would be his as well. He leant forward and took my hands in his, his violet eyes boring into mine and his mouth set in determination.

“We will find out who did this. Joffrey is working on it now.” His head pressed against mine. “But for now, you must have a visit from Alannys. We must double check the babes are well.”
“I do not see how it could have been her!” Joffrey finally burst out from his seat in front of the fire. It startled me from my half doze and brought that familiar pain to my breast once more.

“It must have been,” I replied. I was too tired for anger. I hadn’t been able to force down much breakfast this morning and had barely slept the night before. “No one else benefits.”

“Hundreds may benefit,” he said. “But I confess she would benefit the most of all.”

“She is the only one bold enough. The only one desperate enough.” Joffrey just sighed in response and rose from his chair to come to my side. He had drawn the short straw when it came to watching me today.

I could not stay in the Keep after Alys’ death and so I did not protest when Laenor ordered my belongings moved to the manse. Oh, my Father had protested. He’d begged me to stay, offered new rooms, new servants and as many of the Kingsguard I wanted but I had turned him down flat. I hoped he understood. I knew he wanted to protect me. This attempt had come so close to reaching me and it had panicked him. He wanted me close and wrapped in as much cotton wool as he could find.

But I couldn’t stay in the Keep. I just couldn’t.

There was another benefit to the manse as well. It meant I had a reason to retire my ladies for now. It hurt to consider them in danger just by being at my side. So they were currently furloughed and I had no intention of bringing them back into service. A nice payment to their dowries should buy off their Fathers well enough and no doubt they would all be happy to be away from my moods.

And the danger I had put them in.

“And yet I can not get over the fact she knew. She knew alcohol would not be an effective vector. Her factor had to know as well. Hells, even Otto knew,” Joffrey told me, voice gentle.

“Alannys said it would have only required half a glass or so,” I pointed out. “It is not unlikely I might have a glass to calm my nerves after a stressful day. Like the one I had because of that dinner.”

“I take your point. Why that bottle though? You have not been able to stomach pear since the babes were conceived. Might I also point out that Alicent also knows you’ve always favoured Arbor Reds? Why not poison a particularly nice vintage from the Reach? No, it had to be someone who knew enough to know of your love for pear but not enough to know of the details of your pregnancy,” he reasoned. It made sense, a twisted type of sense. Alicent knew much about me and my tastes, that much was inevitable from sheer proximity over the years.

“Do you believe Criston’s theory that it was Daemon?” I asked and Joffrey sighed once more. Cole had raised Daemon as a potential perpetrator and it was currently accepted he had been the most likely candidate with the murder of Mushroom being his cover. He had no reason to lie, he had known his service as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard was coming to an end. By all accounts, he had chosen the Black on his own terms.

I tried to ignore the pang of sorrow that brought. I hated it. He had betrayed me for his own selfish reasons and yet he had been by my side for nearly a decade. I missed the Cole that was just as much as I hated the man Cole became. He was my failure.
“No. I do not believe Cole, I do not think I have to explain why,” he told me. I understood.

There was no denying Cole’s theory about Daemon sounded right if viewed superficially. Daemon hated me. He had proved he access to the Keep via the tunnels. The poison used was found most commonly in Dorne and the Stepstones. Yet the holes rapidly became apparent if you had any knowledge of the man Daemon was, poison was not how Daemon operated. He was big, loud, in your face. He’d want the physicality of a violent death, spectacle of a Princess being brazenly murdered in daylight. He was proud too, he’d have already claimed the crime if it was him although… well, no one had seen him since his flight from the Stepstones. Mysaria’s presence was no longer felt in the city, indeed, Joffrey and his friend had cannibalised much of her network for themselves.

One of their more infamous duels... or dates.

Could Daemon really have contented himself with leaving that bottle there knowing I might never drink it? Could he be content knowing that if I did he would have brought about the deaths of my children in another way than a dagger through their hearts?

“You know we can not kill Otto now,” Joffrey said, finally breaking the silence. Disappointment twisted in my gut, something akin to loss rocked me and I closed my eyes to prevent tears. I should not weep at the idea I could not a kill a man.

“I know,” I said finally. “The timing is too suspicious. I know.”

He nodded, seemingly suspicious at my agreement but I understood his logic. If Otto died now it would look like retaliation. It did not matter how accidental his death looked, it did not matter who killed him, we would be blamed.

“I want who did this,” I told him, numb emptiness giving way to a brief burn of anger. “They killed Alys. They could have killed the twins.”

I cradled my stomach but the babes were silent. I squashed the momentary panic that bought. To think I’d once cursed their frequent activity. Now every time I did not feel them I panicked that my would-be poisoner had succeeded despite Alys’ sacrifice. I did not know how much longer I would have to wait to meet them. Ten weeks had been Alannys’ guess but twins were frequently born early.

That would be the most dangerous part. I had insisted they prepare the incubators in case they were far too early. Laena had offered to play wet nurse should anything go wrong, she had been unable to find any basis in text for her mother’s insistence that I should feed my own babes yet I still fretted. I had decided to do so out of some belief I was missing something, some belief I would condemn them in some way.

“They did not. They will not. Not here,” said Joffrey. He’d gone through everything I had brought with me to the manse with a fine-toothed comb after Alys’ death. My dresses, my books - everything I owned. No more poison, no more danger, had been found.

I cradled my arm around my stomach again and willed them to move, to give me some sign they were alive and well. Gods, I felt fit to burst already. I was almost as large as Laena had been in the final month. Joffrey’s hand hovered a moment over my own and I caught it, bringing it down.

“I will find who tried to kill them and I will make sure no one ever tries again,” he said quietly. “I came so close to failure.”
“It was not your fault,” I told him, then used the headboard to pull myself upright, grimacing as it sent spasms of pain through my back. “I feel so helpless.”

“I know. I am sorry. I will find who did this. I swear to you.”

“Thank you but I was thinking more about my current inability to walk,” I said, smile somewhat sheepish. Joffrey was not given to overt displays of emotions, even during his days as the knight of kisses. I was touched.

“Gerardys’ orders, I’m afraid. You are to rest and recuperate, else you risk making your legs worse.” I smiled at him and he gave me the best approximation of a smile he could give back before standing to return to his reports. “I must get back to work or else your Father shall have my head.”

“You’ve read them a thousand times. Maybe you could read them to me, perhaps I shall spot something you have not?” I suggested, mostly wanting the company, not wanting to fall back into the numb haze. He shrugged and soon he was stretched out next to me on the bed, reading about the goings on of the court since the attempted assassination and the death of Alys Strong.

Most of it was court scrambling and the upset caused by Viserys’ investigation into the poison. He’d hit a dead end and everyone was feeling his wrath. More than a few servants and underlings had faced… pointed questions yet nothing had been thrown up so far. As for the Green Elephant in the room; Alicent was under arrest without actually being under arrest. Her father much in the same boat. Aemond was ready to be set on the road to Riverrun within the week, his escort of knights being finalised as we spoke.

He couldn’t kill her, not without proof she did it. His own love for her wouldn’t let him but she would remain a prisoner in all but name for a very, very long time. No communication would go unexamined, she would have no time alone as she was always accompanied by at least two Kingsguard and she could forget about having Viserys’ ear any longer. He’d been to her rooms once in the time since Alys Strong had died and had left a few minutes later in a rage.

Oh and Lorent Marbrand was the current favourite to ascend to Lord Commander now that Cole was gone. No hint on who would take Cole’s place though.

Apart from that, there was only the weirdly persistent rumour that the plot on my life was Dornish in origin and that the calls for war was greater now than it had ever been. Joffrey had explained why they believed that, of course. Hag’s Grasp was mainly Dornish, the Dornish were known to use poison, we had actively decided to war against them recently. If I died or my babes did, war would erupt across Westeros and not even Viserys could stop it. It would allow Dorne time to prepare, to neatly step out of Westeros’ focus.

I doubted it. I really did. Yet, as Joffrey had pointed out, it was yet another theory that made more sense than Alicent.

“Your Grace!” called Ser Steffon through the door. “Lady Strong is here to see you!”

“Sera,” I breathed as she was shown in. If she was bothered by Joffrey next to me on the bed she didn’t show it as she came to stand at the foot of it. She did not look well but that was not a surprise. Her face was paler than I’d ever seen it, her hair was pulled into a braid without any of her usual style and her eyes bore the evidence of a long time spent crying. I swallowed down the ache and grief, she had more of a right to it than I did.

“Your Grace, I am here to rejoin your ladies once more.” Her voice broke on ladies.
“Sera, n-” She cut me off with a raised hand.

“Your Grace, I assure you I am fully capable of serving as your lady,” she said.

“My ladies are on furlough,” I told her, my voice gentle. “I have yet to call anyone back to service.”

“You have Lady Laena.” Her tone was desperate and I grimaced.

“That is somewhat different-” She moved around the bed and dropped to her knees, taking my hand. Her eyes brimmed with tears and her breath stuttered.

“You will not call them back but I beg you too. I beg you not to draw back. Alys would not want that,” she muttered. “Please… Rhaenyra, please.”

Her grief prompted fresh tears of my own and I tugged her up. She got my point and rose, dropping down on the bed next to me. She directed her next attempt at Joffrey, looking over my swollen stomach to meet his eyes.

“Tell her it will fine. Tell her to summon us back,” she begged. “We are her ladies. Alys would not want her to set us all loose. She enjoyed her time with you.”

“After the pregnancy,” I said finally. “I’ll call you all back after the babes are born. I will need the help and… it will give you all time to consider whether the danger is worth being by my side.”

Sera was silent for a while, jaw clenched as she thought that over.

“Father would not have me return. He fears for me. He wants me to marry, to produce children.” I swallowed again as I remembered Gerardys was still waiting to see if the Hag’s Grasp had damaged her ability to have children. She smiled sadly as she noted my reaction. “Father has not received many offers so far. Nobody wishes to risk a childless marriage.”

“Should… should it have rendered you barren I would have you back,” I said finally. “Or I shall ensure you make a good marriage. It is your choice.”

It would be hard to tell if it had effected them in truth, the signs of infertility were sometimes not as simple as a lack of monthly bleeding. Certainly, it was a not guarantee that it had effected any of them. They were not pregnant at the time of consumption after all and Gerardys’ research did indicate that was a factor that greatly influenced the outcome. Gods, the thought alone made me shudder.

Hag’s Grasp. I had questioned Gerardys on the matter and then Alannys for good measure. It was made from the root of a flower that grew mainly in arid places. Used as a last resort version of an abortifacient. Many had taken it and died, or taken it and lost their babes only to discover they would never have another. It was infamous in certain circles for how unpredictable it was in it’s results from person to person.

Symptoms included headaches, thirst, dry mouth, slurring of the words, blurred vision, vomiting, heart problems, drowsiness, infertility, confusion, hallucinations, convulsions and finally death. Mellos had been unable to even tell just how much had been dropped in the drink, useless sot that he was, so we could not even tell dosage - we could not even ballpark the damage.

Maris and Laena were playing it off as if it were no big deal but I could tell it was worrying them. Maris liked to pretend marriage was not on her mind, that it had ceased to be a true possibility the moment her father had disgraced the Grafton name in the way he had. I disbelieved her; marriage was her only realistic way back into the ranks of the nobility, a woman with the ear of a Queen was
no small prize to the right people, yet if she could produce no heir then she would be forever barred from it once more.

Laena pointed to Lucerys, pointed to the fact she’d already had a child. She would tell me she had no desire for any men, that she only had eyes for me. Yet she clutched Lucerys close and she was appalling at hiding the tears. I could pinpoint the exact times she wept to Joffrey about the matter. The two would always gather around their son the next morning with Joffrey providing reassuring words.

Did she wish to bear another babe in the future? Joffrey’s babe? He loved Lucerys like his own son but did he want a child of his blood?

“I wish to return now,” Sera said quietly. “Alys wanted to see the twins born. She wanted to teach them our particular brand of mischief.”

I smiled at that but it was with a significant amount of pain. She had mentioned that on that fateful night. She had wanted to meet them and she had been denied that. Something in me gave in and I sighed.

“Very well,” I said and she pulled me into a tight hug. I would not normally allow that but I could not bring myself to scold her for it. I rubbed a comforting circle on her back and she sobbed into my shoulder.
“You are hiding yourself away,” said my aunt and I grumbled at the chiding tone, burying my head further into the bedding. “You survived an attempt on your life. You must show the realm you are alive and still pregnant. There are many who say you lost them.”

I scowled at that and then scowled even more fiercely as she wrenched my blanket from me. I glared at her. She should be enjoying herself being courted by her Manderly lordling, not harassing me about whether I retreated from the public eye after a fucking assassination attempt. I shifted so she could see the swell of my stomach where the kids were raising hell inside.

Apparently they liked to pick any time I was lying down to start whatever it was they did in there. Given I had done little but lay down, I had plenty of time to feel them kick away.

“They are well and fine, as you can see,” I told her sourly and her hand came to rest on my belly and a small smile grew over her face as she felt them. “Making my attempts at sleeping hell.”

“I know that well. Your loyal lords know that well. Yet the court mutters on. Alicent and her father under arrest in all but name, you being here and not the Keep...” She trailed off and shrugged.

“Let them speculate. They will know the truth soon enough.” And it was better than them seeing their Princess practically unable to walk. I was exaggerating, I could walk but it was painful and I was forced to take my steps slowly and carefully. The pregnant woman waddle did not help either. Rhea’s hand left my stomach and smoothed back my hair from my face.

“Jeyne is beyond furious at the attack,” she said finally as I let myself enjoy her messing with my hair. At the mention of my cousin I peered at her curiously.

“I did not doubt she would be,” I finally said. “She has thrown her lot in with the Blacks. If I die now, it will be for nothing.” Rhea snorted at that and left my hair alone to scoop up her cup of wine and take a sip.

“Jeyne is your cousin, she loves you for more than the political power you can bring her,” she said. I swallowed hard before I asked the next question.

“And Helaena?”

“Had to be physically persuaded not to try and mount that dragon of hers and fly to King’s Landing,” replied Rhea and I groaned. Morghul wouldn’t even make it off the ground with her on it.

“I will write to them both, let them know I am well,” I promised.

“Better yet you could see them,” Rhea told me.

“I intend to return to the Vale during my Grand Procession,” I assured her. “But it won’t be for a while yet. There is still much to plan.”

My aunt smiled and blushed, causing me to frown in confusion.

“Surely my niece does not intend to miss me wedded?” she asked, coyly and a grin split my face before I could stop it.
“You finally said yes!” I laughed. “Of course I shall not miss it! Not for the world!”

“I had a feeling you might say that,” said Rhea with a smile. “Now, do consider rising from that bed at some point. You can not mope forever. Even walking around the manse will do you some good.”

She rose as I chuckled at the almost motherly tone she’d taken. Whenever her or Rhaenys were present, I missed Aemma Arryn fiercely. I wonder what she would have to say about all this?

“Now, I do believe I have another to visit in this manse. Where has that young lady gotten to with Lucerys?” That did make me laugh. Then something eased in me and I pulled myself upright. A task that took considerably more effort than I wanted given my stomach and legs were not keen on cooperating. Rhea took my hands gently and helped me stand.

“Ser Darklyn, your charge needs your arm,” I called and the knight appeared at the door a moment later, bustling over and allowing me to lean on him.

“Laena is likely with her brother and mother in the garden,” I told my aunt.

We made our way down slowly and I had to stop to sit several times. The burn of pain in my legs had settled into a dull ache and stiffness. Rhea was right, I needed to stop hiding here, needed to actually get out of bed. Sera had returned to my service and she had lost a twin.

The sun was bright even if the day was chilly. Laenor and Laena were gathered around Lucerys and his hatchling, both laughing as they played. Rhaenys was seated on a bench nearby, watching her children with a smile on her face even if she had a distant look in her eye. It was she that spotted our little party first and beckoned us over.

Lucerys gurgled happily when he saw me and the little hatchling copied his happiness with a screech as I was lowered to the grass by the combined efforts of my Kingsguard and my husband. Rhea joined Rhaenys on the bench and the two were swiftly embroiled in conversation.

“It is good to see you up and about,” Laena said, resting her hand on mine. “How are you feeling?”

“Aching and tired,” I replied, truthfully. She gave me a pained grimace that I think she intended to be a smile. “How goes the day?”

“Colder than we are used to now winter is here,” said Laenor. “But Lucerys enjoys playing with the hatchling and if we do it inside it destroys the furniture.”

I was happy to see the fond look on his face at the mention of his nephew. Less happy to see the brief vision of pain that danced over Laena’s. Yet she hid it from me, tilted her head away so I could not see.

“I… Laena.” She turned back. I fought for the right words to say and settled on. “I am here if you wish to speak.”

They were close enough to right because she nodded, smile a little watery. Laenor leant forward to place his forehead against my shoulder and snaked his hand around to my midsection. I felt his grin form as they kicked out against his hand.

“Now, here is the little man I came here to see!” crooned Rhea, frightening us all. Given the wicked looks both older women bore I’d bet that was done on purpose. Lucerys screeched happily in response to Rhea leaning down towards him and lifting him into the air. “My how you have grown!”
I shot a look at Laena and found her blushing once more. Rhea was not married to him anymore, she had no way of knowing if Daemon would even know she still spent time with the lad and yet… the Lady of Runestone had gotten genuinely attached. I wriggled my fingers from where she pinned them to the grass and she blinked before her gaze met mine.

We watched in silence as Rhea and Rhaenys took turns in seeing who could dote on Lucerys the hardest, watched them guffaw with glee every time they won giggles and smiles from him. Eventually, it got a bit too cold to keep Lucerys outside, even swaddled as he was and we were forced to retreat back to the manse. Rhaenys took custody of the hatchling and the maids whisked Lucerys away leaving us alone after Rhea bid us good bye.

We ended up in the drawing room and the siblings set to building me a large fire and ensuring I was swaddled in blankets.

“Have you thought on names?” asked Laena, after we’d all settled. Laenor caught my eye at that. We hadn’t talked about names, I doubted any of us had even sat down and thought about it individually. Taking the sudden guilty looks on our faces as her answer she laughed. “You must think on them soon. Father will have his own ideas and he will be insistent.”

A good point. In canon, he had named Jacaerys and Lucerys. No doubt he would have ideas of what would constitute a good name now as well.

“A Targaryen name will be necessary for the firstborn,” I said finally. “But I want it to reflect Laenor’s Targaryen heritage as well. Perhaps Aemon, for a boy? Laenor’s grandfather and my… my brother.”

“Mother would love that!” said Laenor. “But what if they are both boys? Baelon?”

Baelon had been the name of my younger brother. He’d lived for all of a day. They hadn’t even let me see him before they’d taken the body to be burned on the pyre. I shook my head mutely at that, shocked by how much the memory had upset me. Aemon was a distant tale but Baelon was too caught up in the loss of Aemma Arryn.

“Jaehaerys?” asked Laena, interrupting Laenor’s ‘deer in the headlights’ look.

“Ugh, no.” Was my answer to that and I received two sets of raised eyebrows. Then I felt the need to defend my position. “He once walked in on grandfather reading a letter to me and told him that he should stop ‘encouraging me’.”

They sighed at that, likely remembering why their own mother had been passed over despite being the legal heir by Andal succession at the time.

“Joffrey?” asked Laenor with a grin and Laena groaned and I smiled.

“Mother would kill you,” she said. A part of me wanted to. Joffrey was the reason I hadn’t fallen flat on my face by now, he was the reason Laena was still a Black, the reason Corlys was mine in truth. Yet others would not see it that way.

“As much as I want to, I have to agree with Laena,” I said and Laenor shrugged. Unlike in canon, he still had Joffrey this time around. There was no pressing need to honour a dead lover.

“Viserys?” suggested Laena and caught my look before dissolving into giggles. “Well, Aegon, Aenys and Maegor are right out.”

She was right. I thought ahead, to Kings that would come after in the canon timeline. Who stood
out? Not many not called Aegon, Daeron or Viserys. Damn it. Aerys I and II had ruined the name thoroughly, Rhaegal had been mad… Maekar? No, too close to Maegor and too close to said King’s reign.

“Baelor?” I asked finally. Close to enough to Baelon to honour both my brother and grandfather, close enough to remind people he came from both lines of Jaehaerys’ sons. Laenor wrinkled his nose, likely remembering Baelor the Blessed in my tale. I had been thinking of Baelor Breakspear though. Was that a bad omen, to name him after the perfect prince felled by his own brother?

“Baelor,” Laenor finally agreed. Laena clapped her hands together with delight and I dropped my hand to my stomach. Did I carry a little Aemon and Baelor in me? Then a broad smile split my face as excitement coursed through me. It felt more real, they felt more real with names.

“What if they are girls?” asked Laenor.

“Alyssa. Alys for short,” I said, almost before Laenor had finished his question. They nodded solemnly at that. I could not name her Alys in truth but I wanted to honour the woman who had died so that they could live. Alyssa honoured quite a lot of avenues; there had been more than a few Alyssa Arryns and Alyssa Velaryons and my own grandmother was named Alyssa. “Yet I confess little clue as to a second girls name.”

Part of me wanted to suggest Daenerys to honour the girl who would become the Mother of Dragons in a world that would not be. Another wanted to say Rhaenys to honour the Queen Who Never Was but I’d noticed a trend with Rhaenys’ across the books and they never seemed to die of natural causes. Visenya was the mother of Maegor, still to divisive and I had no desire to tempt fate. Alyssanne was tempting, Alysanne and Alyssa.

“What about a Velaryon name for a second girl?” asked Laenor. “Valaena Velaryon was the name of the mother of Aegon and his sisters?”

“Alyssa is a Velaryon name as well,” Laena pointed out dryly and Laenor shrugged. “We have two Cousin Alyssa’s right now!”

He blushed. Honestly, I couldn’t keep track of the extended Velaryon family either. It was endless source of fascination as to how Laena could.

“Do we have a Cousin Lianna?” asked Laenor tartly and Laena shook her head. “What about Lianna?”

“It’s a nice name,” I said after thinking for a while. “Do you want to name our daughter Lianna?”

“Lianna and Alyssa,” said Laenor, rolling the names about his mouth as if trying them out. “Or Valaena and Alyssa for the two Velaryon women important to the dynasty?”

Now that he mentioned it that did have a nice symmetry to it.

“I prefer the second,” I told him. “But I will leave the choice to you.”

He beamed at me before stopping to think on it some more, trying out the different names in different tones.

“Valaena and Alyssa,” he said finally. “And should they be boy and girl, Aemon and Alyssa.”
Scrutiny - Chapter 76

Lorent Marbrand’s promotion to Lord Commander was celebrated quietly by most. The court was still tense, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Otto and Alicent had yet to be seen. I knew, of course, that they were both under guard in their quarters but the incautious went so far to suggest they had been sent to the Black Cells or the Confessor’s tender mercies.

My Father was silent on the matter. He’d set Joffrey to investigating as well as Jaremy and Ser Harwin. I doubted either would come up with something Joffrey had failed to see, which meant he was angry and he couldn’t do anything about it. Frustrated with no one to direct that frustration at. My return to court had done much to ease some of that away but he was still waiting for someone to let loose at.

“Congratulations, Lord Commander.” Lorent Marbrand bowed in response.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I am deeply honoured. I hope to restore the honour of the Kingsguard in your eyes,” he replied and I could see he was serious. Blond haired and brown eyed he was about Cole’s age. He’d joined before Cole had though, taking the place of Clement Crabb. The first Kingsguard my own Father had appointed as Ser Crabb’s death had occurred not even a month after Jaehaerys’.

I hoped that meant he was a Viserys loyalist. I hoped that meant he would rally to my banner and not Aegon’s.

“I assure you I do not consider the actions of one man a stain on the honour of the whole,” I told him and he smiled.

“I thank you for your open-mindedness in this,” he said. “Do you wish to keep Ser Darklyn?”

I glanced at said knight, who kept his gaze riveted to the wall. Rumour had it Ser Steffon had been in the running for Lord Commander also. He was older than Marbrand by half a decade and had been one of Jaehaerys’ last picks for his white cloaks. I would not be sad Steffon had lost out, being Lord Commander would take him from my side and interrupt the work I was putting in to secure his loyalty to me and not my Father… as bad as that sounded even in my head.

“I have found him to be a great balm to my troubled mind since… since Alys died,” I told him, choking slightly. His eyes softened at my grief and he nodded, bobbing his head once.

“Then I shall leave him at Your Grace’s disposal as long as His Grace agrees,” he replied and bustled off, nodding to Ser Steffon. Steffon nodded back, stiffly. I strangled the urge to ask him if he regretted he had not earned the spot of Lord Commander and instead decided to hobble over to where Father was having serious words with several Stormlords I vaguely recognised as Marchers.

“-vesty! That they would be so bold. We must strike, Your Grace. They have less food in the winter, a few well placed raids would leave them a ripe target for our armies,” said one.

“We do not yet know the cul-” Father’s eyes flickered to me then and he smiled. The men turned and promptly gave their greetings as I hobbled to their King’s side and earned myself a tight hug. “As I was saying, we do not yet know the culprit behind this attack on my daughter. It may well be the Dornish but I want to know who, for sure, is responsible.”

“Who else but the Dornish could have done so!” burst out one man, garnering angry looks from his compatriots. The only other suspects where the King’s brother and the King’s wife. Reminding
him of such did not seem prudent. Indeed, Father’s face darkened in response.

“The life of a royal is never safe,” I interjected. “There are many potential culprits. We must be sure we deliver justice and not vengeance.”

I’m lying of course. Revenge is very high on my list of things to do when I figure out who tried to kill my children and did manage to kill one of my ladies in the process.

And… and has likely rendered her twin infertile. Laena and Maris had bled, normally, thank the Seven. It was a good sign. I had let myself hope that Sera would escape it too yet she had confessed to Gerardys that she had been due to bleed and it had not come. Then it had and it had confined her to bed for three days. I did not need Gerardys’ grim looks to confirm what I had deduced.

It was very unlikely Sera Strong would bear a living child.

“Well said, Rhaenyra,” came Viserys’ voice, warm with pride, knocking me clean from my musing. His hand came to rest on my shoulder as the Marcher lords nodded in agreement, likely internally praising the fact they’d been saved from their King’s wrath. After they’d beaten a hasty retreat he drew me to the side and studied me intently.

“You do not look well,” he said finally and I strangled a laugh at that. Of course I did not look well. I was heavily pregnant, tired out of my own skull and I’d had to endure two rounds of Gerardys’ gross post-vomit flask today already.

“I never look well these days yet I must come to court. I can not lie about all day,” I told him, making light of it. His lips quirked up in response and he took my arm. We set off down the gallery, ignoring the curious bystanders.

“Lorent Marbrand seems diligent,” I started and he nodded.

“He has sworn to uphold my choice of heir,” he said and I smiled. So had Cole once upon a time. Only time would tell if he were serious about such an oath. “But you did not come here solely to talk about Lorent, I imagine?”

Ah, he did have me there.

“I wanted your permission to speak to Alicent,” I said as we reached the open air and a tad more privacy. He crashed to a halt and turned a surprised gaze to my face.

“Alicent?” he asked, as if he’d misheard me.

“Yes, your wife. The Queen. Alicent Hightower, mother of my siblings.” His lips pursed at my tone and I gave him a strained smile.

I needed to know. I needed to look her in the eyes and I needed to see her reaction for myself.

“I will not brook revenge Rhaenyra,” said Viserys, voice sour. “If it is a screaming match you desire I shall not allow it.”

“I will not indulge in a screaming match. I just wish to speak to her,” I protested. My father did not look convinced. “Please.”

“Ser Darklyn, you are to escort her out of the room the moment either of them raise their voices,” Viserys ordered, eyes meeting my guardian’s over the top of my head. I sighed in relief and stood
on my tiptoes to drop a kiss to his cheek. He caught my shoulders and met my eyes before I could leave. “I mean it. You will keep the peace. We will pursue justice together.”

“I just wish to know the truth,” I told him quietly and he nodded, jerking his head in dismissal.

“And where will the Queen be at this time?” I asked Ser Steffon as we left him to his meandering about the balcony.

“ Likely with the Prince in the nursery,” he replied, voice even and calm.

She was indeed, watching him toddle unsteadily from toy to toy with a look of utter delight on her face. I paused in the doorway, fighting the urge to be sick. Had she really tried to kill my babes? Had she killed Alys and rendered Sera infertile in the process? My gut says it was her and yet nothing about the assassination makes sense if she was the culprit.

Ser Arryk and Ser Erryk stood as her guard and when they both reacted to my presence, she glanced up. Then her face went pale as she met my gaze. A quick conference between the three knights saw me admitted to take another of the plushly upholstered chairs. At my presence, Daeron paused in his playing.

“ Ma?” was his curious enquiry, his violet eyes turning towards his mother in confusion. I felt a flicker of guilt, quickly squashed. I had not visited Daeron during my time in King’s Landing and I only ever saw him on special occasions. I should change that, he should know me as well as his siblings do.

“I am Rhaenyra, your sister,” I told him and he was quick to scuttle into his mother’s skirts. She gave me a rueful smile and sat him upon her knee where he curled closer to her and watched me with wide eyes.

“It takes him a while with those he does not know well,” she said. “He does this with my father as well.”

Her green eyes met mine and I sensed she was desperate I not take offence to that. Any negative report from me now could have dire consequences, especially if Viserys decided he did not need proof it was her that had laced that bottle with Hag’s Grasp.

“It is no issue. Children will be children.” It was a platitude but I hadn’t come here to discuss Daeron and she knew it. Our eyes met again and she took a deep breath.

“I did not do it, Rhaenyra. Please believe me about this. I did not order that bottle placed in the cabinet. Please believe me,” she almost whispered and there was a desperate look in her eyes. When my face remained impassive, she changed tact. “Surely you must credit me more intelligence than such an easily botched attempt.”

I… well, the fact that it was so badly botched is the only thing stopping me from outright accusing her in open court. I just could not understand how she could so badly mess it up. Damn her, I could not tell if she was lying or not. If she was telling the truth, I did not doubt she had some other scheme in the making.

“I am sorry for what happened to Alys Strong. Truly, I am. Should there be anything you need my help with - be it investigation or-” She paused and her eyes flickered to the Kingsguard not so subtly listening. “Or petitioning the king to see justice done, I will aid you.”

Subtle, Alicent, very subtle. No doubt that’ll get relayed to my father within the hour. A more suspicious part of me was happy to point out that was probably her plan. Then she could point to
Viserys’ increased vigilance as a reason she could not help. She was always good at leaving herself a way out, wasn’t she?

I was silent for a while, churning the meeting over in my mind. She was desperate to convince me she hadn’t been behind the plot that had killed Alys Strong, the plot that had been aimed squarely at my babes and only at my babes.

Yet she was the one my gut says was behind this.

“You were behind Correy. You would have my children labelled bastards,” I said bitterly. “That was the logical conclusion of that plan. What is to say you would not stoop to killing them.”

“Correy I will admit to. Cole brought him to me, he told me he was Laenor’s ex-lover. That you had gotten rid of him. Correy swore he would make the accusations if I provided him with payment afterwards. He asked for land,” she said, keeping her voice level. “But you, Viserys and I both know Correy told the truth. There is a difference between exposing the truth and murder.”

I could feel Ser Steffon’s gaze boring into the back of my head. No doubt he was waiting for the explosion that would have prompted had my father not made himself excruciatingly clear on what would happen should I explode. I set my thoughts in order and drew in a deep breath. I had more to get out of her yet.

“If you are truly not involved, what of that dinner? You expect me to believe that was not all crafted to stress me?” Her eyes flickered from my face to the floor.

“It was petty; petty and wrong. I wanted to make you sick, I had heard from the kitchens as to what would make the sickness worse. It was done to make you uncomfortable and maybe see you put on bed rest once more.” Daeron struggled in her grasp as she pulled him tight against her. Then her eyes rose and she met my gaze with a defiance that only years of knowing her told me was false.

“Joffrey and Laenor. I had information that your goodbrother meets him sometimes after he is finished in the practise yard. I was in the process of selecting a few amenable men and women to catch them in the act.” My fingers ached as I clenched them hard. Then I forced myself to release them. Her information was faulty. Joffrey rarely met Laenor in public, alone, without a very good reason. It was also rare to find him anywhere near the practise yard. The memories were still painful for him. “Viserys could not hide what they are doing if there were that many witnesses.”

I remained silent processing that. She had been plotting against me in truth as well as lowering herself to such petty actions like that dinner.

“When Aegon is King I will see that you are well-treated,” she almost babbled when I did not break the silence, prompting Ser Erryk to shift in surprise. “You could not remain in Westeros but I would arrange for an allowance to be paid through the Iron Bank to you wherever you decide to settle. Laenor and Joffrey Velaryon would have to be sent to the wall but I would imagine that a relief by now. You are an excellent mummer when it comes to him, Rhaenyra, but it must be grating. I’ll even let the whore keep her bastard spawn as long as she names it as su-”

“Enough,” I said, being sure to keep my voice level. “I have heard enough.”

“Your Grace, the King was very clear-”

“And I have remained polite,” I said and Ser Steffon nodded, falling silent. “Aegon will not take the Throne. You know why. As for my husband, I love him. My babes are his and you know that. You will not do anything to hurt him or my goodbrother. And as for Lucerys… I highly encourage
you to mention this plan to Father, see how he feels about it.”

Her jaw clenched tight and her eyes flashed dangerously but she said nothing. I didn’t bother saying goodbye as I turned and left and she did not call out to stop me.
I did not wish to attend a feast, not with all the question still swirling about as to just who had tried to kill me. None of the obvious candidates made sense. I believed that Alicent's plan had been to expose Laenor and Joffrey, I believe that poison would never be a vector of death that Daemon would ever stoop to and I can’t believe Dorne would strike against the faction calling for peace with them before they struck at the man behind the scenes so to speak.

“Her Grace, Princess Rhaenyra of House Targaryen!” called the steward. “Accompanied by Ser Laenor Velaryon!”

We were shown to my Father’s side and he immediately turned to me and smiled, dropping his hand to my very, very large stomach. I clenched my jaw and bore it. It was not a habit he seemed keen on letting go any time soon.

Thankfully, the twins did not do their best to batter my insides in response and I fancied he looked just a tad disappointed at the fact. Just past his shoulder, Alicent peered at me. She was pale and drawn, the makeup she wore doing little to hide the strain of the three weeks since Alys Strong had died. I gave her a nod in greeting that she returned, not hiding her surprise.

I had made my decision though. I would have peace with her for now. I would focus on finding my potential poisoner and if she played nicely, I might even let her have a turn on the rack with him. Then I would deal with her petty, twisted, delusional self.

Viserys smiled but it was strained. I still think he suspects her. After our little talk, I had gone to Father and laid out what she had intended with the dinner and with her ‘discovery’ of Joffrey and Laenor. He had sulked about my husband once more but that sulkiness had been quickly driven away by his anger that she was unable to leave the whole matter alone.

It helped that the three Knights had backed up everything I had said.

He only had Daeron left to hold over her head now and he had sworn that he would allow me to decide if and who Daeron would go to. Then he had told me he would give Alicent this information and make sure the point was finally rammed home. I was not convinced it would prevent her pettiness, Alicent was a mistress of it after all, but I did think the threat of losing her final child would stop any larger schemes.

Regardless though, it was an advantage I could hold over head. A stick to the carrot of finding out who had set her up as the obvious candidate to a poisoning. It was only how badly they had fouled it up that had saved her from the consequences. After all, had she not been ‘acquitted’ in Joffrey’s eyes and mine, I would be pushing Father for punishment right now. Had I succeeded she would have lost her head, not even Father’s love for his second wife would have protected her.

Gods, the Dance would be back on in truth then. In a twisted kind of way, I was thankful it was not Alicent. Aegon and Aemond would blame me, I was certain of that. The initial blame would only be reinforced by the lords that had been in her confidences, all of which would have known she was not responsible. They would paint it as a lie on my part, capitalising on my own friend’s death to murder their mother.

To them I would be a heartless bitch who’d proved herself intent on killing them.

Helaena would be grief-stricken. She loved her mother and she loved me and the knowledge that
one had died because of the other would kill her inside. It hurt to think she might have looked at me with hatred or seen me as a constant reminder of the loss of her mother. A prisoner in all but name and Aemond being shuffled off early was the only blow back so far. Aegon and Helaena had not seen it but Aemond had to know.

His goodbye had reminded me he was still a boy for all that he was angry and quick to violence. He had broken down into tears. He had begged his father not to make him leave. He had begged his mother not to send him away. He had even begged me to help him. He had wrapped his arms around Ser Thorne’s leg and it had taken Ser Steffon and Father working in tandem to remove him without hurting him.

I felt like a monster.

Putting aside my feelings of crippling guilt over Aemond, ruling out Alicent had left us with a dearth of suspects. It would be nice if I had the first clue as to where else we could look but I did not. Joffrey had even gone as far as to look into my more far-fetched fanon based suspects like the Maesters or Braavos and their Faceless Men. Certainly nothing on those fronts so far. We were stuck combing through every rumour and report for the one little hint, the one tiny overlooked clue, that could give us a breakthrough or something to aim at.

“How goes the day, Ser Velaryon?” asked Viserys with false cheer, as if trying to distract himself from his thoughts. Laenor smiled warmly in response.

“Well enough, Your Grace. We have both been looking forward to Rhaenyra’s nameday feast for quite some time!” he enthused and also lied through his teeth. Both of us had been dreading it. The poisoner was still out there for all Father had ramped up security to a truly frightening level. Honestly, I half-suspected he’d be setting up checkpoints next, searching the poor staff for suspicious objects.

We made tense small talk for a while longer as the guest began to arrive. Then we were forced to sit through the endless line of lords who were eager to give their gifts -to be searched twice for anything suspicious and definitely no consumable goods-, congratulate me on reaching nine and ten years before gratefully shuffling away from the suspicious glances they were all receiving. Even Alicent appeared to be studying the guests with an intensity I rarely saw from her.

In a small window of peace, Laenor leant over to me.

“I was unaware Alicent would be here,” he murmured. I smiled as if he had just told me an amusing joke and leant over to whisper back.

“So was I but I believe she desires peace between us for now. She wants to know who left her to take the fall for this poisoning. She may even hold our cloaks as we put them to the rack,” I told him and he nodded, eyes going serious.

“Joffrey has never believed it to be her. Did she so convince you with her words? You have not told me what she said.” I thought about that. Before I had her confession from her Joffrey and I had disagreed on Alicent. He believed that she and her factor had been planning something far less… destructive than a brazen poisoning in the centre of the Keep. Yet I had argued her to be desperate, backed into a corner and willing to do anything as she was confronted with the prospect of becoming nothing more than her father’s puppet and less than that should Aegon take the Throne in a regency.

He had been right, annoyingly.
“She had a different nasty plan in mind. Not nearly as fatal either, although had she pulled it off Joffrey and yourself would be a little chilly for a while.” He nodded along, looking unsure. “As weird as it sounds, I do believe her.”

“And Otto?” he whispered.

“She said nothing on that front. In fact, she did not mention him at all. At this point I would count them as two separate entities. Our only question is which way Joffrey’s friend has gone.”

“I dislike this,” he groaned, a little too loudly and attracted Viserys’ attention. He flushed at the raised eyebrow like a child caught doing something wrong.

“Is the food not to your liking, Ser Velaryon?” he asked in an icy voice.

“I apologise, Your Grace,” he said. Those violet eyes remained on him for a little longer and then he turned away and began shovelling food into his mouth at a rate that made me feel quite nauseous. Or maybe that was the babes, who knew these days.

I was so ready to give birth and have my little Aemon and Baelor or Valaena and Alyssa out of me already.

I never thought I’d say that, let me tell you.

“Something tells me your father still dislikes me,” Laenor mumbled, looking like a chastised boy. I grimaced at the plate.

“He believes I am forcing myself to be with you for the good of House Targaryen. He will realise in time. Probably right around the time the twins are born,” I mumbled back. Almost as if they had sensed their mention, the twins began kicking and I winced. “Calm your children before they bruise me.”

He placed his hands on my stomach and grinned like a complete dork when he felt them moving and kicking, even through the relatively thick velvet I was wearing. Then he frowned.

“Is this a new dress?” he asked. “It’s different from your old ones.”

I glanced down and the black and red velvet, surprised he’d even noticed my change in style.

“Somewhat new. The old ones were not exactly accommodating to my pregnancy,” And this style hid my figure much better. I wasn’t going to try and show off what I did not have anymore, only grief lay down that road. Bemused, he took his hands off my stomach and began eating again, occasionally shooting me thoughtful glances.

“Surely my change in dresses does not disturb you so,” I teased.

“It seems so odd now that I think about it. You always wore a particular style.” There was a blush on his face and I stamped down on the urge tease him further. It seemed some of my passion about how someone should dress had gotten through, then.

“Do not worry yourself about it. I promise I bought my new wardrobe with my own money.” He gave me a thin smile in response but our conversation had drawn the gaze of my Father once more.

“I note Lady Rhaenys and Lord Corlys are not present tonight,” he said and managed to make it sound like an accusation, as if it were some sort of personal insult.
“They are seeing to an issue with the rebuilding of Spicetown, Your Grace,” he told him. “They sent their apologies to Rhaenyra directly.”

Rhaenys had wanted to stay here so that Meleys was in easy view of Alicent. My dear goodmother did not believe her to be as innocent as I did and was just waiting for an excuse to have Meleys make a meal of her… or burn the High Tower with it’s occupants still in it as a message to anyone who would strike at her family. To be fair to Corlys as well, he had also wished to stay. He wanted blood just as much as Rhaenys did yet he also wanted Spicetown rebuilt and this conflict was delaying everything. Since Vaemond had proved completely unable to deal with it, he’d been forced to ask his wife to take him home for a few days.

“How goes the rebuilding?” asked Alicent.

“Father says it goes well. I have yet to visit,” Laenor replied. There was a pang of sadness in his voice and I slipped my hand into his.

“Once the babes are born it’s only fair they should see Dragonstone and Driftmark.” Which naturally had Viserys scowling at the thought I was going walkabout’s once more. Well, he’d have to get used to it. Once the babes were old enough I was having my damn procession. I’d waited long enough!

As he struggled with some sort of objection to that, I focused on Laenor’s smile at the thought. Spicetown and High Tide held a special place in his heart. One of my children, the potential Baelor inside me now, would inherit it one day. He wanted to leave them a shining beacon of prosperity, not the sad and damp island his own Father had once inherited.

I wanted the same, in fairness. I wanted to leave my children a Westeros that was better than when I was given it. A better King’s Landing, a stronger monarchy, a kinder peoples - actual dragons instead of twisted and deformed monsters.

Perhaps it was time to start thinking just exactly how I was supposed to do that. To finally make a plan for the future. A road map of what reforms I intended to bring in. Once Corlys and Rhaenys returned I would gather my little small council and we would decide together.
“Ooooooh,” I moaned as Laenor’s hands pressed into just the right spot. “Yes, keep going.”

He chuckled and did as he was told, earning a happy sigh from me. Joffrey and Laena were together today doing only the gods knows what in their shared office. I had decided I’d done enough hobbling around lately and stayed in bed, only to be joined by Laenor after his training. After one to many complaints about my feet aching, I’d managed to finagle a foot rub out of him and boy was it worth the whining.

I let my eyes flicker closed as I groaned in happiness again. He snickered in response but I did not care, not as long as he kept this up. The muscles in my stomach fluttered, cramping briefly, as I relaxed.

“What exactly is Laena doing anyway? She came by and stole some of my notes, you know,” he said after a while as his hands moved up to my swollen ankles.

“She’s working on producing a compre- yes, just there- a comprehensive guide on dragons.” He made a small noise of disbelief at that.

“The notes she stole were not on dragons,” Laenor told me. I opened my eyes and stared at the canopy of my bed before sighing.

“What were they on?” I asked. Surely she hadn’t gotten side tracked already?

“Remember those books you borrowed from Mellos?” I nodded. “Well, she wanted my notes on those.”

“She’s read them herself surely,” I said, frowning. He nodded. “What is she doing with notes about Yi-ti. Did they mention dragons at all?”

“No. Well a little, it was mostly about culture, really. A bit of history, some legends… there was a really interesting one on festivals. Father got to witness-” His fanboying was cut off by a disturbance in the hall.

“I must insist you do not-” Came Ser Steffon’s voice.

“His Grace has summoned the Princess to the Red Keep. She does not have a choice!” barked Lorent Marbrand. It took quite a bit of effort to push myself up onto my elbows and peer over my stomach. Laenor and I shared a puzzled glance before someone, probably Marbrand, pounded on the door.

I let me head fall back onto the pillow as my stomach cramped again. Honestly, if I never had another cramp as long as I lived it would be too soon.

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“Your Grace!” Laenor clambered to his feet and unlatched the door, pulling it open as Lorent’s fist came up to knock again. The Lord Commander paused at the scene before him, as if he had not been expecting it. Me sprawled on the bed and Laenor half dressed in training gear.

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“On behalf of His Grace, King Viserys, I am to escort you to the Red Keep immediately,” he said, recovering a moment later.

“In my nightgown?” I asked, pulling myself into a sitting position. Lorent flushed.
“I will allow time for you both to dress and bathe,” he finally said. Laenor reached over and pulled the bell pull as worry wormed its way into my gut.

Being marched to the Red Keep under guard implied I had done something wrong recently. A maid appeared in the doorway and was ordered to prepare two baths and to rouse Lady Sera to help me dress and bathe. Then Laenor, ignoring Lorent’s judging eyes, helped me to stand.

“Any clue what this is about?” he mumbled, as he made a show of keeping me steady.

“Not at all,” I replied. He grimaced.

What could Viserys know that would have him this angry? Gwayne’s accident? That had been months ago, Joffrey had long since cleaned up evidence of that plot. It couldn’t be about the poisoning because he was angry at me, not whoever had carried it out.

Sera appeared soon after, provoking the usual surge of guilt when I saw the pain spasm over her face at my swollen belly. Ser Steffon remained with me and Ser Lorent left to keep an eye on Laenor as he prepared himself.

“What is happening?” asked Sera, when he’d disappeared. “Is it regarding Alys?”

When a glance to Ser Steffon elicited a genuine shrug, I rubbed at my temples with a sigh and shook my head.

“I do not know. I doubt it is about Alys though. The King is angry. With me, specifically.”

“He has sent guards enough for Ser Joffrey and Lady Laena too,” Ser Steffon said after a moments hesitation and my stomach plummeted down to somewhere by my knees. That Viserys had figured out enough to know Joffrey was more important than I let on was a given - to drag him along with Laena to the Keep…

Gods, had he figured out our arrangement? Was this to be a public humiliation? What could he do to me in that situation? Strip me of my title for sure. It was not against the law, per say, to have a lover of the same sex but that would not save me. Not from Viserys or the court.

I did not stay in the bath for long, worry and the occasional cramp or jolt of pain making the whole process less fun than usual. Still, it was enough to be clean. Sera helped me dry and then dress myself before pulling my hair into my usual braid.

Somehow, despite my haste, I managed to look halfway presentable as I met with Laenor, Laena and Joffrey under Lorent’s steady gaze. Then all four of us were escorted into litters and the journey to the Red Keep began. I found myself tapping out a nervous beat on the lacquered wood as we travelled. If he stripped me of my title, exposed my affair with Laena and Joffrey’s with Laenor, Rhaenys would go nuclear and he had no counter bar holding us hostage.

No, I was certain now this wasn’t about who slept in my bed. Not that Laena and I had slept together but you get the point. He wouldn’t risk publicity for it.

What had roused my Father’s anger then?

What if’s of varying degrees of possibility taunted me until we reached the Keep itself, then all thought was banished by a freezing dread that made my movements clumsy with fear. What had I done? Was this Joffrey’s fault? I wanted to scream and demand someone tell me what I was in trouble for - what I was to be accused of. Yet my escort was silence as we were led not to the Throne Room but the Small Council chamber.
The Small Council, or a small part of it, were arrayed before us. Otto, Corlys and Jaremy were all missing. Alicent was present, pale and grieving. I felt my stomach plummet again. Which one had been hurt? Aegon? Helaena? Surely not Aemond but would he would still be on the road to Riverrun? I was not sure, excessive travel by dragon had spoiled me on travel times.

I took a deep breath and steadied myself as Laena, Joffrey and Laenor lined up next to me and we were stood before them all like naughty children receiving judgement for what we had done. I allowed myself to examine Viserys in the following silence. He was pale and furious, looking to be struggling with his words.

Lyonel stood next to him, his eyes impossible to decipher. Just looking at the Hand made my heart ache so I allowed my gaze to travel on. Lyman was trembling in his seat, looking at me like I’d gravely disappointed him. Jasper looked afraid. That was my first thought when our eyes met. Angry and afraid. Mellos was doing his best to keep out of my notice, to not catch my eye. Afraid also.

What. The. Fuck?

“Father, you req-”

“Silence!” My greeting was immediately halted as I flinched at the volume of his bellow. I swallowed again, fear turning my blood to ice now. I hadn’t seen him this angry since my return from the Vale. An ache began in my fingers, my stomach clenched unpleasantly and my breath came a little short as the memories of that particular meeting rushed back.

“I trust you have heard the news?” he said, finally. His voice was shaking with the effort of not screaming at us.

News? At my baffled look, he raised a single silver eyebrow.

“Do not play games with me, Rhaenyra. The assassin referenced the Greens in his attack!” he barked. Confusion and fear made my breath come quickly. What fucking assassin!? We’d called Otto’s death off and yet… And yet he wasn’t here was he. I’d assumed he was still under guard but if Alicent was here and grieving like that it was because someone close to her had died. Not her children… her father…

Oh fuck.

“I… I truly do no-” Viserys cut me off again.

“Last night,” he began slowly. “Otto Hightower was permitted a walk in the gardens. Several men, disguised as servants, ambushed him.”

At the acknowledgement I’d been right in my guess, I swallowed hard again. Otto dead and I was the only real suspect. Just like Alicent had been the only suspect for my attempted poisoning. Was someone trying to set us against one another?

And these fucking cramps! Could I get a break for five fucking minutes!? I needed to think and they would not let me!

“They slew his guards and then turned their blades on him. They specifically referenced his association with the Green faction. They claimed to follow their Queen,” Viserys continued, heedless of my no doubt wide-eyed stare of fear. “None of them were caught at the scene.”

The silence that followed was deep and terrible. I wanted to crane my head round, to look to Joffrey
and just what the hell he was playing at. Some indication of whether this was some sort of sick joke. Had he gone ahead regardless?

“Well!!?” Viserys demanded.

“I did not do this!” Was my somewhat heated response. He glared at me.

“Do you expect me to believe this is not revenge!? I swore I would find who was responsible for the poisoning! Yet you decide to ignore all of the evidence pointing elsewhere at strike at Otto!?” he bellowed.

“I did not think it was Otto! I believed Alicent when she said it wasn’t her!” I cast a desperate look at the Queen. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she was staring at me in a way that took me by surprise. There was no hatred there, just weird mix of emotions. Grief, shock, anger and more.

“I will ask once,” Viserys intoned, drawing my attention back to him. “Are you behind Otto’s murder?”

“I am not,” I said firmly. “I had no reason to kill him. Every reason to want him alive. At least acknowledge if it was me I would not have my assassins announce who hired them to all and sundry.”

Perhaps that was not the best defence I could have mustered. It did, after all, imply I had assassins.

“You will all remain in the Keep. You will be given separate rooms. You will submit to my guard. I will examine your communications. Rhaenyra, you will summon Lord and Lady Velaryon back to court where they will agree to similar restrictions.” I gaped at him. There was no way Rhaenys or Corlys would agree!

“Father-”

“No.” My mouth snapped shut. “I will not have this court turn into a bloodbath. I will not have you start a war in King’s Landing!”

“Husband,” Alicent said in a soft voice. “If you would still hear my council, I believe her.”

There was a surprised silence after that where both Mellos and Jasper turned to gaze at her in surprise. Even Lyonel looked momentarily startled. We normally only agreed when it came to Daemon and even then it was tenuous alliance at best. Viserys placed a hand over hers and nodded.

“But that as it may, you will still-” The door was thrown open and several Gold Cloaks marched in, Harwin Strong at their head. His handsome face bore a fierce grin, one of triumph, despite the grim tidings he likely bought.

“Your Grace,” he said and dropped to one knee. “Father.”

“Rise, Ser Strong. Have you found the men who murdered Lord Otto?” Harwin rose and nodded.

“We even left them alive for questioning. Larys says they sang like songbirds for him,” Harwin told us. I frowned. He was too happy for that torture to have resulted in my name being spoken…

“And what did these murderers have to say?” asked Viserys, hand still resting on Alicent’s hand but his eyes were on my face.

“They described the man who hired them in great detail. Your Grace, I recognise the man in
question. He is a Dornish merchant who operates near the docks!” Harwin told us all, breathlessly. Viserys rose to his feet, face red with rage.

“It makes sense,” said Joffrey, voice soft. Then attention of the room swivelled to him and he straightened his shoulders. Viserys hasn’t bought you here to hear you speak, I wanted to tell him, he bought you as a threat to me. “The Dornish set the Blacks and the Greens fighting and we take our eyes from them.”

“The man speaks sense,” said Jasper. “We must make war on the Dornish as soon as winter comes to an end. To avenge Alys Strong and Otto Hightower!”

“Oh, do not worry Lord Wylde. The Dornish will have their reckoning.” Viserys’ growl set chills down my spine, even as his distrusting eyes lingered on me.
“Do not worry, wife. We will teach them how they have erred here,” Viserys assured the pale and tense Alicent as the rest of the councillors filtered away. We remained, still arrayed like naughty children until he gestured at the recently abandoned seats. We sat.

“I will require Velaryon dragons,” said Viserys. Laenor nodded, seriously. His sister followed, less assured. Joffrey remained grim. He had no dragon to offer, no sword to swear - only his mind. Judging by his unhappy look, his mind was telling him war with Dorne was not the path we should be taking. Yet blaming the Dornish was the only thing we could do in this situation unless we wished to be blamed for it ourselves.

“You have Syrax as well, Father,” I said. He studied me for a moment and then shook his head.

“No, I will not. You will remain in the capital.” I goggled at him before rage hit me like a hammer blow. Another cramp hit me but I was too angry at the thought of not going to let it show on my face.

“I will not be left behind!” Much to my annoyance, I sounded more like a whining child than a Queen. “I will have given birth by the time the banners have mustered. I will be with you!”

“No,” said Viserys, his face grim. “You will be here. You will have the babes to look after and I will need someone to be my voice in my absence.”

“You would send those I love to Dorne! Dorne!” I needed to draw back. I needed to be careful but fear pushed me on. I glared at Laenor and his sister, willing them to say something to my Father, to support my need to go. All I received were twin looks of concern from two sets of violet eyes. I felt helpless, if either of them died there… Gods, what would I do with myself?

Laenor’s death would see me forced to marry once more. To who, I do not know. Tyland Lannister was yet to find a bride; there were a few Velaryons free; Aegon was an eternal possibility. None of those options appealed to me, none failed to make my skin crawl at the thought. Laena’s death… It would hurt me so deeply I doubted I could bring myself to find another. We were so early in our relationship and yet I knew that losing the only woman I’d managed to find that excited me would change me on a level I did not want.

Just like losses of her loved ones had changed the original Rhaenyra.

“I would give you the capital. I would have you rule in my name. If the Gods be good, the conquest will be over before long.”

“It will not!” I cried and Laenor caught me gently, pulling me close. “Aegon and Visenya failed, Rhaenys failed! The Dornish will unite against us and nothing, nothing, is too dishonourable for them!”

“Then you have also argued for your exclusion from this!” barked Viserys. “I will not have you die to poison or an assassin. Be safe in the capital! Raise your babes! I will ensure your husband returns to you. Now, my wife is grieving and I must begin the process of Otto’s funeral rites.”

He would be laid out for a viewing in the Sept for seven days and seven nights. Then he would be sent to the High Tower to be interred alongside his family. After, Viserys would gather his lords. The prospect of war with Dorne would bring them to the capital in droves. The invasion would be discussed, planned and finalised in those days.
“Do not leave me out of this,” I croaked through tears that threatened to fall. “If I can not go myself, let me attend the planning. Let me do something!”

Viserys paused in his efforts of helping Alicent rise and eyed me with pursed lips. Then finally he sighed.

“An extra set of dragon riding eyes will not harm discussions,” he admitted. “I expect Lady Laena and Ser Laenor as well.”

And then we were dismissed.

I was numb by the time we made it back to the manse. Numb mentally and emotionally, feeling like my brain was working at half speed. The accusation of Otto’s murder had come out of nowhere and then been so easily disproved. War with Dorne was now a certainty and short of some sort of apocalypse, I had no way of stopping it. Those I love would be stripped from my side and I didn’t know how long for or if they’d even come back to me.

Was it truly the Dornish?

Did they truly seek to set Alicent and I to war in order to distract Westeros as a whole from themselves? Surely they are not so foolhardy. The men hired to kill Otto had spilled their guts about who had hired them within seconds. All had told the same story. The Merchant accused would soon be captured and brought to the Keep to face Larys and his confessors. Then the truth would be known.

I curled into Laena’s side as she half carried me into the drawing room that was fast becoming a conference room of sorts. Gods, I was so tired. Everything was happening too much, too fast. I wanted sleep yet my mind would not stop whirling with possibilities. She was gentle as she hauled me along, mumbling reassuring nonsense as I tried to get my legs to cooperate with me. I was lowered down into the couch closest to the fire, needing comfort, I tugged her down next to me and laid my heavy head on her shoulder. She began unpicking my hasty braid, massaging my temples as my hair came loose.

Was this how Alicent had felt when she’d been accused? Lost and frustrated?

I curled my hand around my stomach as the cramps picked up again, refusing to give me any rest from the reminder I was heavily pregnant.

Joffrey was the last to enter the room and he promptly picked up a discarded book and hurled it at the wall with enough force the crack of the impact made me jump. Three sets of violet eyes turned to him in shock and horror as he remained still, eyes wide and breath coming fast.

Then he screamed in frustration and anger, snatching up another book. I curled closer to Laena at the noise, flinching, remembering another scream of anger long ago. I grimaced at the accompanying pang of pain from my fingers. Laenor caught his wrist before he could throw the book and pulled his lover close.

“What has gotten into you?” murmured my husband. I heard the noise of frustration Joffrey let out. He was a Stormlander. A proud martial man at heart. That his anger could explode like this did not surprise me yet it still left me quailing a little internally.

“We’ve been played and I don’t even know by who,” choked Joffrey. His stick hit the ground as he raised his hands to Laenor’s waist and clung to him like a storm raged around him. Laena and I watched, not daring to interrupt the scene in front of us.
“It wasn’t the Dornish,” he continued after a moment, Laenor stroking circles on his back. “I know it wasn’t the Dornish. Someone is playing us like a fucking fiddle and I have no clue who!”

He pulled back, wobbling a little, and gave Laenor a broken look. My heart clenched at the distress I saw there.

“I failed to find a poisoned bottle of wine even after I’d drunk some of it! I failed to stop Otto from dying and triggering a war with Dorne! Everything might have been over today and I could do nothing!” he wailed. “How am I supposed to protect you if I can’t even prevent an obvious plot like this?”

Laenor pulled him close again and mumbled reassuring words to him.

“We were played,” Joffrey said, tone miserable. “This war can not be stopped now. You will be on the front lines and I can not even lift a sword to defend you.”

“Yet you can defend my wife and children, Joff. You will have stay with them here and look after them for me,” Laenor mumbled. “You know what we’re all like without you. Witless idiots chasing smoke.”

I wanted to protest my exclusion once more but was prevented from ranting by Laena’s arms clenching tightly around me.

“Rhaenys was lost due to luck and sloppiness on her part,” murmured Laena, sensing why I was so distressed. “You may be assured we will not fall prey to arrogance.”

“I order it. You are both to ensure you come back to me.” Laenor’s chuckle was my answer, at least until Joffrey reiterated the order to his lover, sounding like he was on the verge of some kind of breakdown.

“I suppose this means you can not avoid Mother’s armour fittings anymore, Laena,” Laenor said, trying to lighten the mood.

“I can not contain myself in excitement.” Her deadpan tone sent me into fits of almost hysterical giggles which set her sulking. “I detest the thought of flying whilst encased in metal.”

“It’s not too bad, Laena. You’ll need to get used to it anyway if you think Mother will allow you to set even a toe in Dorne without it. Besides, Mother has been flying in armour for years.” His eyes were bright but he was worried.

We’d both flown in… well, the Fall of Gulltown was not war. Not in the way Dorne would be. Gulltown had been opened to it’s besiegers. Our presence had been surplus to requirements, mere bonuses that had saved lives rather than the cause itself.

Yet we’d both taken lives. Neither of us had enjoyed it. Laenor would be forced to deploy his dragon in battles and sieges, to kill with Seasmoke in a way he never had before. If he hesitated, if he let on how much the thought disturbed him, he would be labelled a craven.

“We need a strategy to take to the war council,” I said finally. “Otherwise they’ll use Otto’s as a foundation.”

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Laena, resting her hands on my belly. “I admit I am not all that martially minded but surely he wouldn’t have created a plan that would fail?”

“He wanted the Reach armies and Stormlanders taking point,” I said, ignoring the scoff that
elicited from Joffrey. Andals. “It would be a bloodbath. Marcher Lords especially are very unreasonable when it comes to the Dornish.”

“Centuries of raiding will do that,” muttered my spymaster.

“He wanted,” I said, ignoring him. “The Dragons to burn every castle from here to Sunspear to prevent lengthy sieges and he wanted land for the Reach and the Stormlands after the war was done. I dread to think at the atrocities they would commit on innocent people should they be allowed their shot at glory.”

“So we need lords without bad blood with the Dornish leading the charge,” mused Laenor. “Rivermen, perhaps Valemen. Might we call the Falcons to negotiate the Red Mountains?”

I blinked at that suggestion. It had no crossed my mind. I had been of the mind to build on the strategy Daeron the Young Dragon had used to conquer Dorne in the canon timeline. Something about goat paths and Alyn Velaryon… Or were the goat paths Robb Stark?

“Have them scout for the main invasion force through the Boneway and Prince’s Pass?” He elaborated. “It would do much to counter the Dornish strategy of bleeding our men slowly through ambushes and skirmishes.”

“Plus it will demonstrate Rhaenyra has military sense even if she is not physically present. Everyone knows the Falcons are hers even if they are nominally there to control the Mountain Clans,” Joffrey said. “Though if we pull too many from the Vale the clans will respond.”

I closed my eyes and let Laena cradle me, thoughts of Jeyne and Helaena, left virtually undefended against those murderous rapists playing before my minds eye. If too many men left the Vale seeking glory, the Falcons may be the only thing to prevent a resurgence of the Mountain Clans and their raiding.

Invading Dorne was such a bad idea. Too much danger, too much to lose - not enough reward to justify it.

“Hmmm, if we can break Planky Town we could control the Greenblood. We’d break Dorne in half, shatter their united front.” I cracked open an eye as memories of the Young Dragon’s strategy finally formed and I giggled without meaning too. All three of them peered at me.

“Alyn came up with that same plan,” I told Laenor and he promptly flushed a deep red. “You can tell who you both learnt your trade from.”

“Alyn? But he is a babe?” I stiffened in Laena’s arms. I had never gotten to tell her that night. I had been too tired and after it never seemed to be a good time.

“A future thing,” said Laenor, still red.

“Perhaps I should be told about that,” she said dryly in response.

“I will give you the details later,” Joffrey was quick to interrupt even as Laenor opened his mouth to tell her everything. She nodded in agreement and let the matter lie.

“I will see if I can’t come up with someway to subdue Dorne. It will do much for our cause if I am seen as the Warrior Prince to your Good Queen,” said Laenor, blushing when Joffrey directed a look of pride at him. I smiled, to be fair to Joffrey, that was something he’d likely learnt by spending time in his proximity.
“And what would my Princess have me do? I can focus on battle; I have acquired texts detailing the Third Ghiscari war,” asked Laena, sounding almost eager. At my baffled look, she blushed a little and I was reminded of Laenor’s enthusiasm regarding Yi-ti. “The Third Ghiscari war saw the most dragons downed during the fighting. Nearly more were brought down than the other four put together. Mother and I can use it to develop techniques against siege weaponry to avoid such fates.”

I decided a history lesson would too much for tonight. If Laena were anything like Laenor, I’d be getting one soon enough.

“Your Princess would have you take her to bed and lie with her whilst she passes out for the rest of the day,” I grumbled, causing her to laugh. “But figuring out how to ensure you all return to me alive is your highest priority.”

She smiled.

“Far be it from me to deny my Princesses commands,” she purred and it was a testament to how uncomfortable I was that the voice and accompanying throaty rumble did precisely nothing for me. Then she pouted. “It’s a shame though. I really thought I was on to something with the hatching process.”

“Is this why you tore Dragonstone’s library apart looking for an unedited copy of Septon Barth’s work?” I asked, ignoring Laenor’s snickering. “Because I had to field that particular complaint. The Castellan was most displeased with the mess you left.”

“Laena is like that when she gets stuck on a topic. Our Maester once had to chase her halfway across the castle after she looted a good amount of his maps to chart an optimal air route to Braavos.” Her leg shot out and kicked at his knees in response to his teasing and he danced backwards, grinning widely.

“Don’t start this war, Laenor, you can’t win,” she warned. “I know far more about you than you do about me!”

“Yes but Joffrey already knows all that. Rhaenyra, on the other hand, has yet to learn about your belief cats were female dogs until long after you rode Vhagar. Or-” I was gently pushed aside as she wriggled around me and darted after her brother. His laugh became a screech as she jammed her fingers into his side, sending him flailing sideways in a vain attempt to escape.

I laughed at the siblings antics before pain spasmed through my stomach and I was forced to lean over and groan as the pangs and cramps I had been ignoring all day made themselves known in a way that brought tears to my eyes. Laenor was at my side in an instant, his eyes wide and concerned as I breathed through the pain. Then I tensed as I felt warm liquid trickle down my leg and my face burned with the humiliation of wetting myself in front of my husband and my lover.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly.

“I… I had a bit of an accident,” I admitted in a whisper, cheeks burning. “I may need some help cleaning myself up.”

His eyes widened as he nodded, going to stand to call a maid when Laena leant past him, evidently having seen the small puddle that must no doubt be forming. I wanted to melt into the floor, wanted the earth to swallow me whole that she should see it.

“Blockhead! Call Alannys! Her waters have broken!”

Oh.
Rhaenyra was not beautiful like this.

She was not beautiful drenched in sweat and tears with her braid a mess, sending her hair frizzing about her face. She was not beautiful crouched on all fours, screaming and sobbing in pain, begging for someone to make it all stop. Yet she could not have loved her more in that moment. She curled her hands down her bare sides and kneaded at her back and sides, trying desperately to relieve some of the pain the woman she loved was feeling. It had been easier a few hours earlier, before the contractions had started in truth.

“Seven help me, Gods help me,” sobbed Rhaenyra and she wanted nothing more to cradle her until it was all better. Her lover’s pain burned at her, pulled at her heart, in a way she could barely stand.

“Breath with me, Rhaenyra. It’ll all be fine. You were made for this. You just need to breath,” she murmured, bringing a hand over her hair and pushing it back from her face. Rhaenyra’s eyes flickered close for a brief moment and then she nodded with a grimace, attempting to follow the breathing that she laid out for her. They were supposed to teach her this in confinement. Yet the babes had come early. Too early, she feared. Rhaenyra was still over a week away from taking her chamber.

“The baby is close to crowning, get her to do several smaller pushes,” ordered Alannys from her position at the other end of the bed. Rhaenyra must have heard her because she gave a choked sob before wailing in pain.

“It’s too much! It’s too much! I can’t!” No, she could not let her go down that path. She had to stop her, she had experienced this.

“It’s fine. Breathe with me. We’ll breathe together, then you push when I say.” Her breath stuttered when Rhaenyra’s eyes met hers, a haze of pain in them. Yet also trust. Complete and utter trust. She would not betray that trust, not again. The urge to drop a kiss to her brow rose strong inside her and she quashed it, she could not do that in front of the midwives.

“With me,” she murmured into those trusting eyes. “Ready?”

The first babe came into the world ten minutes later, a loud wail announcing their presence.

“A girl!” called Alannys, handing her off to a waiting midwife. She could not watch for long, Rhaenyra had yet more work. She knew it too, had realised it, because she was crying and begging once more. Invoking the names of Gods that Laena had never heard of to spare her, to make it all end. Swearing in a manner she would not have expected from a highborn woman, swearing in a way that turned her pink despite the circumstances.

“You can do this, Rhaenyra, you can. Are you going to prove Alicent right? That you will fail here? Will you let the one who sought to harm your babes win?” From the clenched jaw she received in turn, her comments had hit the mark as she braced once more, trying to recapture the rhythm they had established. Alannys gave her a nod of respect. The babes coming so soon had been a surprise. Rhea was not here, Mother was not here.

Only she was here. Her hands kneaded at her back once more as Rhaenyra wailed and pushed.

“You are doing so well,” she told her, as the babe already born was attended too. Gods, she was so small. Lucerys had been a giant compared to this babe and yet she struggled against the midwife
that was holding her, screaming up a storm. “A little more. A few more pushes. You will have two
babes then. Little Alyssa is already here. Her sister or brother should join her soon.”

She doubted Rhaenyra was actually listening to what she said now yet the sound of her voice
brought those pained eyes back to her and her lover pushed her forehead into her midsection,
bringing her hands forward, under her skirts, to clench at her thighs. It drew a hiss of pain from her
and she was certain that she would draw blood before the end. She would bear it. If it scarred her,
she would bear the scars as well.

She owed her that much.

She had borne pain from someone she loved before. She could bear yet more from Rhaenyra.

“Ah, shit,” muttered Alannys and her eyes found the midwife in horror. Alannys, as a general rule,
tried not to swear. Especially not in front of a woman already given to panic in the throes of of
birth. “Get her to push, Laena, now!”

She did, coaxing action from the Princess with a calm she did not feel. When the second babe
crowned once more, Rhaenyra screamed louder than any time before, twisting her nails deeper into
her flesh. Then she vomited into her lap. Bile rose to her throat yet Rhaenyra kept her pinned in
position, the tearing feeling in her thighs growing worse.

What had happened?

There was no cry from the new babe and her heart flew into her throat. There was no cry, no sound.
Below her, Rhaenyra seemed not to have realised as her sobbing continued with no change in pitch
or rhythm. Alannys turned away from them, hiding the child from view but Laena saw. It was even
smaller than the first. Was it dead? Had Rhaenyra struggled so hard, survived so much, only to lose
one of her babes before they even lived?

Then a reedy wail split the air and her sigh of relief must have been audible even to Alannys and
her compatriots.

“Another girl,” said Alannys after a moment.

The new babe was quickly weighed and examined then placed in a waiting tank. She fought the
worry in her gut.

Then the midwives finally noticed the position she was in. They were swift after that. They pried
Rhaenyra from her, and yes she had drawn blood, allowing her to get free. Then she was sent from
the room to change whilst they ‘stitched’ the damage. She felt ill at that. She had needed no
stitches afterwards. She swallowed back bile as she remembered how scared she’d been, how
terrified birth made Rhaenyra.

If anything happened now, could she forgive herself?

Laenor and her mother met her half way down the corridor. What a sight she must have been,
covered in vomit and her own blood. Exhaustion hit her as if she had run a footrace and she sagged
into the wall.

“Girls,” she told her brother and his face lit up.

“Girls!” he repeated at volume, like some kind of mimic bird. Could she forgive him if Rhaenyra
died?
“What’s wrong?” asked mother. Laenor paused, his glee flickering into worry. “You look grim.”

“One of them… they put one of them in the tank. She was so… so small and she did not cry until a while after the birth. Alannys says Rhaenyra needs stitches,” she babbled, worry making her nearly incoherent. Laenor looked to their mother like a lost puppy and she sighed, aggrieved.

She could not forgive him if Rhaenyra died, she decided.

At her look, mother took Laenor by the arm and sent him off to see the new babes and his wife. Then her own arm was taken and she was marched to her rooms and stripped. A damp washcloth was pushed into her hands and she cleaned herself the best she could. Rhaenyra had torn her legs open and the cleaning renewed the dribbles of blood, prompting mother take cloth from her and press it too them.

“She will be fine. More women than not need stitching back up after birth,” mother said, as she moved the cloth to the basin and back. “The Seven know I needed it with you and your brother.”

“I did not,” she mumbled and her mother chuckled.

“Your pregnancy was about as good as they go,” she was told. There was a tone she did not recognise in her voice when she spoke again. “It will take Rhaenyra longer to recover. She will need time and rest.”

Rhaenyra was not the type to rest for long unless she was feeling sorry for herself. She hated her like that, her black moods that could bring anger or self-recrimination.

“Did you see much of the babes?” Her mother’s voice was anxious and she smiled despite herself.

“No. But what I did see… they were so small. Much smaller than Lucerys,” she mused and her mother snorted in amusement once more.

“Twins are small. Twins that come early smaller still. Come!” her mother stood, depositing the bloody washcloth in the basin. “Let’s get you dressed. Then we shall go and see your new nieces.”
"Please do not remove the babe from the tank," came Alannys’ voice. It was hazy and indistinct through my exhaustion and I forced my eyes open, entire body aching and in pain. I wanted nothing more to sleep yet they would not let me. They had changed the bedding, cleaned me up and forced me into a new, clean gown but they would not let me sleep.

I had struggled with the twins for hours. Long enough for Laenor to fly to Driftmark and back. All I wanted was sleep and yet they insisted I must feed the twins first.

“But… I wanted to hold her…” Laenor whined and I grimaced at his tone. I had bore them for nearly thirty five weeks. I had pushed them from myself, I had bled and cried as they left me.

“She can not yet regulate her own body temperature,” chided Alannys. “Rhaenyra’s body will help whilst she is feeding but she must remain in that tank at all other times.”

When Laenor did not answer, Alannys tried a change of tact.

“If you parade her for all and sundry, you may kill her!”

One of Alannys’ midwives pulled my gown open, earning them a pathetic whine that I would have been humiliated for anyone to hear except I was too tired to care. It got Laenor’s attention though and he dropped himself to my side, excited look in his eyes.

“Girls! Girls, Rhaenyra!” he giggled, then dropped a few kisses across my brow as the midwife tried to pull me up into a sitting position. He earned a few sour looks from the woman I did not know the name of until he eventually helped, hooking his hands under my arms and hauling me up with a surprising gentleness. “Although I think we may need to revisit names.”

Alarm flickered through me, pushing me a little more into wakefulness. Targaryens had a history of dodgy pregnancies, all dotted about the family tree. Canon Rhaenyra had given birth to a half dragon monster just before the Dance itself. Canon Rhaenyra had given birth to a half dragon monster just before the Dance itself.

“What? Why? What is wrong?” Realising he had alarmed me, he raised his hands.

“They are fine. Fine babes. It’s just-” He was interrupted as Alannys handed me the first babe, laying her across my chest. She was awake, unfocused violet eyes moving back and forth, seeing nothing. Unfocused violet eyes… under a head of wispy black hair.

I swallowed. That would be the subject of some gossip if I knew Alicent. Hopefully she would grow to resemble Rhaenys.

“I don’t think this one is an Alyssa,” whispered Laenor with quiet reverence.

Gods, why was I already finding fault with them? They were my children. Not political pawns. Then I felt guilty anew because one of them was already promised to Lord Reyné’s firstborn son. No. Stop. Don’t think about that. Focus on the babes here and now. The Reynes could and would wait.

“This is my firstborn?” I asked and he nodded, causing a pang of sadness in my gut. I had wanted my firstborn to be Alyssa but I could agree with him. It did not feel right to name her after the grandmother on my side when she so clearly took after Laenor’s mother. “Rhaenys then? Rhaenys the younger?”
“I had a different idea,” he said. “Something that will have mother over the moon with joy.”

“Go on,” I said as she began to wiggle against me, seeking out a source of food. He was distracted for a while, watching as his firstborn child began her feeding with a look of wonder in his eyes and his fist crammed into his mouth, presumably so he didn’t giggle like the absolute dork he was.

“Jocelyn,” he finally said. “We name her Jocelyn and the other Alyssa. She has our hair.”

“Hello, Jocelyn,” I said. She ignored us both in favour of her meal. “You’re right, your mother will be over the moon. Where is she now? I expected her to arrive with you.”

“Oh! Cleaning Laena up. You… made quite the mess.” I didn’t have any answer to that. She had been there through it all and yet I could barely remember her through the haze of pain and the feeling I was being torn open from the inside.

I cradled Jocelyn close for a long time, long after she’d finished feeding. Both of us just watching her eyes open and close as she fought the need to sleep. Finally, she was taken from me to be placed in her cradle and Alyssa was handed to me.

She was small. Heartbreakingly tiny. Smaller even than Jocelyn. Like Laenor had said she was violet eyed and silver haired and I wanted to clutch her close as if my will for her to live was all that was keeping her alive. I understood their unspoken worry now. Babes this small did not have a high chance of surviving to see their sixth month. It took some persuasion on my part to get her to latch on and when she finally took her first few swallows she coughed and sputtered, prompting a wailing cry. I soothed her as best as I could, coaxing her back to her meal as Laenor fretted over us both. She did take her fill in the end and Alannys had her back in the tank with speed that spoke of practise.

The tank was an incubator really, the first one ever to be used. It was too expensive to commission many yet, not before the Glassworks was up and running. The design was based off of the one they had used for chickens since the Andals came to Westeros and brought it over with them. Yet no one in all those years had looked at the chicken incubator and gone - hey we can use that for our babies too!

It was a similar story on earth, that such a simple idea could not be put into use until the 1800s. It was also very, very useful in the matter of premature babies. They could lower the chance of death by one-third. That had been the statistic I had written down in my papers. I had to remember that, I had to believe that. A warm box, heated by a hot-water bottles with a glass lid could be the difference between my babes living and dying.

Laenor took my hand and smiled. I could see now that he had been crying, I could see the tear tracks on his face.

“Ready for some visitors? I have no doubt your Father resents being held in the drawing room for so long.” I managed a weak chuckle at that. I had no doubt he’d be ready to kick the door in with impatience.

Visitors I would likely receive aplenty in the coming days. Anyone who could justify access to the Manse would be eager to meet the children. It was only proper though that Viserys and Alicent were the first. It did not take long for them to get to the room after Laenor gave the order for them to be fetched.

My father arrived pale and worried and upon seeing me awake even if barely, he sighed in relief. Even Alicent, who arrived at a more sedate pace, managed a tight smile. Although she no doubt
wanted time to grieve for her father, she did not want to be here celebrating my children’s birth.

I saw the exact moment she laid her eyes on Jocelyn though. Her eyes lit up as if she had just been given some grand present completely unexpectedly. No doubt the black hair - let her try and capitalise on that. Rhaenys would feed anyone who dared imply her a bastard to Meleys.

“Black of hair?” she asked, feigning a puzzled look and immediately bringing Viserys bustling over to examine her. Alicent’s green eyes swept from Jocelyn to Alyssa, where they narrowed. “Oh but this one has the Targaryen look.”

I wished I had the strength to rise from this bed and kick her teeth in. Her Father’s body was not even cold and she was preparing for her next scheme. Viserys winced and Alicent realised her mistake a moment later as Laenor frowned.

“She takes after her grandmother. I trust you do not intend to tell her she does not have the Targaryen look,” he said and Alicent was quick to back peddle. Not even her status as Viserys’ wife would save her from getting drop kicked into the Blackwater by an enraged Rhaenys.

“My mistake. It was merely something of a surprise. You both bear the classic Valyrian look,” she said hastily. “But the Baratheon colouring has proved persistent in the past!”

“Have you decided on names?” asked Viserys, hopeful for any distraction from the sudden awkward turn the conversation had taken.

“Jocelyn, for my firstborn,” I told him. He dropped a hand to the wooden rail of the crib and smiled down at his firstborn grandchild.

“Jocelyn, for Rhaenys’ mother I presume?” he asked, then turned to the tank and moved on without waiting for a reply. “And the second?”

I gave him a broad smile, sensing his reaction to the next next name might be slightly less restrained, even if it were not for the same reasons I had wanted my daughter named as such.

“Alyssa.” He swallowed at my pronouncement and turned a teary stare on the smaller twin, still nestled in her box.

“You have named them after the great grandmothers, I see?” said Alicent as Viserys tried to recover himself, tried not to breakdown over the name of his grandchild. Laenor nodded my answer for me, even if it had not been intentional, the symmetry was still as pleasing as Valaena and Alyssa.

“When they are bigger, I expect plenty of attention from their grandfather,” I told him and he laughed.

“The Stranger himself could not stop me! Grandchildren! Look at them. My little dragons! I wish Aemma could have met them.” The reminder of her loss so soon after new life made my insides twist. Judging from the look Alicent shot him, she hadn’t taken that any better than I had.

“I wish that too,” I said hoarsely. “But I will read to them like she did for me in her memory.”

“As long as they do not invade the library half as much as you did,” he laughed. “Nothing was as troublesome as you deciding to use some new phrase you’d read in front of the wrong people.”

Haha, all of that was on purpose.
“They are her children,” said Laenor, shooting me a fond smile. “They will be terrors but they will be clever and fierce as well.”

“I hope they take after you instead. Giving me children just like I was seems too close to punishment.” Viserys roared with laughter at that and even Alicent’s lips twitched into an unwanted smile. She and I had gotten into our fair share of mischief when I had been just a child, desperately trying to make her love me. I watched as Viserys’ eyes drifted back to Alyssa, softening with love.

“Your Grace, it has nearly been an hour since the last feeding,” Alannys informed us, making us all jump with the reminder of her existence. Had it truly been an hour? Did I really have to feed them every hour?

“Of course,” said Viserys before making his way over to me. He bundled me into a tight hug, burying his face into my hair. “Be well, daughter. I shall visit as soon as I am able tomorrow. You focus on the children, focus on healing. There will be much to be done in the coming months.”

Of course. Dorne. The war that would take Laena from her son and Laenor from his daughters. The war that would take them from me.

“Of course, Father.” Laenor saw them out with a bow before making his way back to my side. Alannys waylaid him with a bundle I could only assume was Jocelyn. I watched as he practically melted as he brought her over, violet eyes threatening tears. Alannys helped me with my gown and soon enough Jocelyn was back on my breast.

“You will only need to do this for the first few days. Then it will be every three-to-four hours,” she told me and I resisted the urge to groan. Why had I agreed to feed them myself? Oh yes, knicker-wetting terror that I’d somehow kill them by giving them over to nursemaids. I examined the tiny child at my breast and couldn’t quite suppress a smile as she wiggled against me.

“They’re beautiful,” said Laenor.

“Of course they are.” Was my reply. “They’re ours.”
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“Jocelyn…” repeated Rhaenys, faintly. Behind her, Corlys’ face lit up with a smile that he directed squarely at his wife’s back. With shaking hands she leaned over and took the child from her son. Then she sniffled. Laenor caught my eye and smiled as if he wasn’t teary eyed himself. As if I weren’t teary eyed myself.

“Hello Jocelyn,” she murmured, a tiny fist was waved at her and the tell-tale sounds of Jocelyn about to let everyone know she was unhappy were the only sounds in the room. The Queen Who Never Was stared, entranced for a while, as Jocelyn continued to fight and struggle.

And then she broke, cradling the babe close to her chest as she stared at us with tears running down her face.

“She’s perfect,” she managed to say after a moment. “She’s perfect!”

Gently and reluctantly she handed Jocelyn to Corlys, who took his first granddaughter and gazed at her with a smile. Rhaenys stepped forward suddenly and flung her arms around her son, pulling him close until I heard the whoosh of breath out of his body. Then, after a moment where I thought he might actually start struggling against her, she released him.

Her arms were around my shoulders next, a fierce hug but much gentler than the one Laenor had been subject too. I let myself sink into it, missing my Mother and remembering those days where Rhaenys had been the only one I could trust in the face of a fate worse than death. When her love had not been conditional on what babes I pumped out.

“They’re both perfect,” she whispered before pulling back and giving me a watery smile. “Let me give her an egg from Meleys.”

That caught me completely by surprise and I felt a pang of loss. I had wanted to give them eggs from Syrax but looking at Rhaenys’ hopeful face… I couldn’t say no. Besides, I could give Alys an egg from Syrax when the time came. When they were both able to be placed in the crib.

“That would be wonderful,” I said and a grin lit up Rhaenys’ face. I was saved from her overwhelming happiness by Laena stepping in.

“Rhaenyra! Oh, hello mother.” She looked completely taken back at how emotional her mother was. Even more so when she too was swept into a bone crushing hug.

“Rhaenyra, your ladies are here,” she managed to say when she’d wriggled free of Rhaenys, who was right back to cooing over Jocelyn with her husband and son. I swallowed thickly and my eyes met Laenor’s who had evidently overheard Laena’s information. He gave me a nod and then raised his hand to his Mother’s elbow, steering her and Jocelyn over to the crib.

Corlys seemed to get his son’s plan a moment later but it still took a few minutes for her to finish her gushing goodbye to both the babes. Not that Alys noticed. Alys was fast asleep. Then Laenor herded them out, dropping one last kiss on my forehead as I rearranged the silk robe I wore over my nightgown. The one decorated with Seahorses and silver because I’d stolen it gleefully from Laenor.

I’m sure I looked a fright. I’d managed a few hour long naps, broken only by the need to feed the babes. Even then I did that zombie-like and only half aware of Alannys and her co-worker doing most of the work for me. I would have to do something nice for Laenor. It had been his brave and
much appreciated sacrifice in the face of his Mother that bought that time.

Still, I was sure my ladies had seen me looking worse.

“Rhaenyra!” Marya threw her arms about me as best she could. It startled a laugh from me. “We feared for you after Laena told us the babes came early!”

Oh, did she now?

“I am well enough now. The babes too,” I told her, nodding in their direction. She gave the tank a puzzled look and Laena launched into an explanation of their purpose. I noted, with a smile, how her hand rested protectively on it.

“Might we see them? When are they being announced?”

I smiled at the anxious tone and the way my ladies were trying their best to not overtly peer to intently.

“By all means. Just do not remove the glass over Alyssa. She was born too… too small.” Laena dropped into the chair next to the bed as I seated myself somewhat gingerly on the mattress. As the small crowd drifted over the newborns and the exclamations of delight sprang up, a wailing cry of unhappiness told me they’d woken Jocelyn from her sleep. I grimaced.

“What are their names?” asked Falena, after spending a few moments cooing to the wailing Jocelyn. They wanted to lift her up, I could tell.

“Jocelyn, for the black haired babe. You may hold her.” This provoked another round of cooing as Jocelyn was passed back and forth, screaming the entire time. “And Alyssa for the silver haired babe.”

I waited until they were distracted before meeting Sera’s eye and summoning her over with a quirk of my head. Laena watched her carefully as she reached me, looking decidedly puzzled at why she’d been called away from the babes.

“I ask your permission but I had hoped to refer to Alyssa by a shortened version of her name. Alys.” The Strong girl’s eyes widened and then she turned away to hide the tears that threatened and I had to dab at my own eyes in turn. Thankfully, the rest of the ladies attention did not waver from my babes as they pointed out little details to each other. Although how they could do so over the racket Jocelyn was making was beyond me. Judging from Laena’s grimace she was thinking about profusely thanking the Mother for Lucerys’ lack of tantrums. Jocelyn could even wail whilst feeding, a feat Laena assured me was quite impressive.

“She would… she would have loved that,” Sera managed after a moment. “Oh, I wish she were here to see them. She’d love them, Rhaenyra, she really would.”

A moment later, Laena surprised me by standing and drawing the Strong girl into a hug. Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised, given that I could just hear her own sniffles alongside Sera’s.

“I miss her too,” my lover mumbled and Sera nodded. Then they broke apart as Falena cleared her throat.

“Septon Patrek sends his regards, Rhaenyra. He says that he and his followers pray for you and the twins. They wish you a fast recovery,” she said. I was willing to bet he did. The Gold Cloaks my no longer be an issue but those knights had not ceased their harassment and with Joffrey focused on Alys’ killer, the mystery of who sent them was still unsolved.
“Enough of the religion, Fal,” said Maris, passing Jocelyn to her. “We are here for the babes."

Surprisingly, that did not provoke an argument between the two. Instead, Falena took Jocelyn and smiled at her, ear-splitting cries and all. My ladies stayed for a good long while and I realised, much to my surprise, I’d missed them all fiercely. So when they left, I told them in my best commanding tone that I expected them to return to their roles as soon as they were able. From the reaction, I deduced they were quite happy at the prospect. I still missed Alys, it felt wrong not having her there to teach the twins some diabolical trick I’d inevitably fall for but… well, Sera had been right. Alys would not have wanted me to drive my ladies away.

At least Jocelyn had gone back to sleep, lulled there by Maris singing Vale lullaby’s until even I’d felt somewhat sleepy.

“I feared you would never call us back,” said Laena, reminding me she was still there lest I spend the next hour lost in my own thoughts. “How are you feeling?”

“I am sore. Very sore,” I told her and she ran her hand down my arm as if she could drive away the pain. “Your mother wants to give Jocelyn an egg from Meleys.”

Her lips quirked into an amused smile at that.

“She’ll spoil Jocelyn rotten,” she told me.

“I know. Still, Father will spoil Alys rotten so I imagine it will all balance out.” She laughed and then her face went thoughtful as she gazed at me. “What? Do I have something on my face?”

Oh no, did I do my gown up after I fed Alys and Jocelyn? A quick check told me I had so why was she-

My train of thought shuddered to a halt as she clambered onto the bed and laid next to me, dropping a long kiss to my lips. I groaned at the feel of it, burying my hand in her ringlets and pulling her further down, feeling as if my heart might beat out of my chest.

When I accidentally pulled her hair, she froze, going still as a statute next to me and I drew back. She seemed far a way in that moment and then a moment later her eyes met mine and she was back in the present.

“What is it?” I asked, concerned. She smiled, aiming for reassuring and falling far short of the mark.

“Nothing. Nothing,” she said when I continued to look unconvinced. “I am fine.” As to prove her point she leaned towards me once more, pressing into me as if she could use her body to convince me I hadn’t seen what I thought I had. Fear.

Before I could pull away again to confront her, an obviously fake cough made us both freeze. My heart practically stopped and from the whoosh of breath that left Laena, I guessed she was in the same boat. The silence felt like it went on forever but it was only a second or two before the interloper spoke.

“You really should latch the door if you intend to do that,” came Joffrey’s clearly amused voice and I groaned in relief. That could have been… bad. Latching the door would be a high priority for the future.

“Joffrey, I’m going to kill you,” Laena whined, swinging herself off the bed with a sigh. My
spymaster’s grin only widened in response, then he limped over to the children and examined them in the same way he looked at Lucerys. I didn’t miss the fond smile on Laena’s face as she watched him.

I would have to create a will, have Laena and Joffrey named the chosen guardians should Laenor and I die before their majority. The fact that it was a real possibility made me want to throw up a little. I did not want what happened to Aegon Dragonbane to happen to any of my kids. They’d be cared for by someone who loved them. Someone who could tell them about me without the bias and the politics.

“You have quite the serious look on your face,” observed Joffrey as he made his way back to both of us. “What has you brooding now?”

“I’m not—” I started much to both Laena and Joffrey’s amusement. “I was thinking on who would be the guardians of my children if something should happen to me.”

“Ah,” said Joffrey.

“Is this because of… what was his name? Aegon? His regents caused him endless problems, yes?” Laena seemed proud that she could finally engage with us on that level and I couldn’t help sending a raised eyebrow Joffrey’s way.

“She was fretting whilst you slept. Telling her what you told us was a better method than physically sitting on her,” he explained with a shrug, sending Laena a vibrant red.

“You couldn’t sit on me if you tried,” she mumbled when she saw my evident amusement. At the comment, Joffrey grinned again before his eyes became serious. I tensed without meaning to and even Laena focused on him in the wake of his change in demeanour.

“I expect we’ll hear from Lord Reyne within the next few weeks but I would like your permission to invite him to the capital to negotiate the finer details of the betrothal in person. The War Council will be a fine cover,” he said. Breath was hard to draw for a moment until Laena dropped a hand to my shoulder.

“Worse betrothals have been made for worse reasons. Think of my own unfortunate one? Tycheo was a…” She paused, struggling for the right word.

“I believe you referred to him as ‘Braavos’ Village Idiot,’” Joffrey supplied and she nodded violently, sending her mussed ringlets dancing about her face.

“Yes, thank you, Joffrey. Do you know he once got drunk, came to my rooms, stripped naked and lay on my bed? He passed out before I got there and a maid found him but still…” Then she seemed to remember where she was. “You can ask for Lord Reyne’s son to be a squire for Laenor. Then you get to influence him, see him grow into a man with ideals of your choosing.”

Not a bad idea, actually. Still…

“I don’t care what contract is in place, if any boy betrothed to them does that, they can expect a meeting with Syrax to explain their behaviour,” I said, firmly and Joffrey covered up his chuckle with a cough.

“You are, of course, assuming they’d reach Syrax. Laenor is likely to take exception to that too,” he pointed out. “He certainly took exception to Laena’s ex-betrothed doing so.”

Laena nodded very seriously and then giggled. Still, the moment of levity did not last long.
“I know having them be alive and unhappy is better than dead but…” I sighed. “It still feels wrong.”

“You can be assured that should any young man or woman seeking to marry Lucerys, Jocelyn or Alyssa, or indeed any of our future children, not be suitable for them, they will not make it to the ceremony.” Joffrey’s tone was almost cold. I shouldn’t find that reassuring but I did.

‘Our’ children. Oh Joffrey, you do want one of your own, don’t you?

“I believe you,” I said. Then I took a deep breath once more. “Tell me, Joffrey, how old is Kermit Tully?”
Jocelyn was crying. Again. Not that Lyonel Strong seemed to care. Nor did his daughter. The Hand had still not recovered from the loss of one of his daughters, that was as plain as the day to see. There were dark circles under his eyes and where he’d always been clean-shaven and neat, he now boasted a ragged beard and his doublet showed at least one stain. He gazed down at the babes. I had little doubt that Sera had reported to him just how Alyssa would be referred to by everyone but Viserys.

I knew this because he looked to be on the verge of weeping. I’d never really gotten to know Lyonel all that well. He was my father’s Hand, promoted from Master of Laws after Otto’s none to gracious exit from King’s Landing. Even as Master of Laws he’d been the quiet type, the get-on-with-your-job-and-don’t-rock-the-boat type. I knew he’d grated at Daemon’s behaviour just like knew I he’d been all for executing him after his attack on me.

He was Viserys’ man. He’d sent his girls to me to tell me that. His friendship with Corlys came easily to him because he knew Corlys had a vested interest in following Viserys’ wishes.

“Your Grace has been very kind to my family,” he said and his voice was rough with emotion. Then he cleared his throat and met my eyes. Like his son, he was a handsome man, although his looks were eroding under the steady tides of age by this point. Although I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to be commenting on anyone’s looks given my current style was a nightgown and only getting out of bed to use the privy.

Healing from birth was a slow, painful and sometimes slightly humiliating process.

“Soon little Alys will be big enough to survive outside of the incubator,” enthused Sera from her seat next to me. At his daughter’s happiness, he smiled but it was quickly replaced with a look of pain. Sera would likely never bear children of her own. That she had insinuated herself as the babes chief protector should not come as a surprise to me yet it did. She was determined she would love them as she believed Alys would have done. As she would not be able to love her own children.

“The King can scarce contain himself,” he pointed out. “Although I suppose Harwin can not either. I thought Ser Laenor would have to restrain him from how insistent he was at getting in here.”

Okay… what’s Harwin up to now? He has to know there’s no chance of an illicit romance by now so what figures? I pushed the worry aside. There had been no note of accusation in Lyonel’s voice.

“I apologise, but the room is not so large as to hold Larys, Harwin, Sera and yourself all at once.” It very much was and I think Lyonel knew that. The truth was I couldn’t handle all four of the Strongs at once.

“I will send them up to you and then Sera can catch me up on how her day has been,” said the Hand. He cast one last look at the babes, bowed and left. Sera gave me a small grin as she followed her father out. He had barely interacted with the twins during their time as my ladies. Alys’ death had spurred him to be a much more involved father, it seemed. I was not allowed time to muse over the Hand however because moments later, Harwin and Larys let themselves in.

Harwin looked as well as his father did, handsome face ravaged by grief and loss. The twins and he had always been close, at least that is what I had gathered from Sera and Alys’ many stories. Larys looked as put together as ever, intelligent brown eyes taking in every detail of the room, myself...
and the incubator before coming once again to rest on me.

“Your Grace, Sera has told us of your intentions regarding young Alyssa,” he said when Harwin was silent for a beat too long. I fancied he looked a bit unsure by that, Harwin was usually the boastful, loud brother. It was unlike Larys to be allowed to take the lead in a conversation.

“It is one way of honouring her. It does not seem like enough but it is a start,” I said and Harwin nodded, face spasming into a grimace. “I hope that you will be able to see more of them both once she is out of the tank.”

“Oh yes, indeed. We can visit them often… if Your Grace wishes it,” Harwin piped up, something of his old charm and enthusiasm returning to his features. Then they darkened once more. “Alys would want us too.”

“I apologise, Your Grace, Harwin has not taken the death of our sister well,” said Larys and I watched as Harwin’s fists clench tight.

“And you seem to care not! Our sister died!” I flinched as his voice rose. “Our sister died because someone wanted to kill the Princess!”

“I care,” he said quietly. “I will find who killed her, Harwin.”

“Humph, never got why they were so fond of you. You know they filled my boots with horse dung when they learned I’d called you limpy in front of Her Grace,” muttered Harwin. Larys settled back into his chair looking as if someone had just physically punched him. “Yet you seem not to care when Alys dies!”

“I did not-” He started but Harwin had moved on.

“Your Grace!” He declaration had me turning to him in surprise. “I swear to you I’ll find who did this. She died for you, I’ll not waste that dedication. I’m your man from this day to the end of my days.”

“That is very sweet of you, Harwin,” I said. “But the prevailing theory is that it was Dornish poison that took Alys’ life.”

“The merchant that hired Otto’s killers was very clear he was the Dornish factor in the city,” said Larys, his voice hoarse. “I questioned him myself.”

“Maybe the Dornish did kill Otto but I don’t believe they tried to kill Her Grace,” he grumbled, prompting a raised eyebrow from myself and a strange look from Larys. Harwin was not given to his critical thinking skills. Had enough time in the City Watch finally taught him a few tricks? Or had someone fed him that information?

“I admit the merchant was not forthcoming when it came to the poison,” said Larys, dragging himself back into present. “But I hear an investigation is still under way?”

“A few servants have left the Keep’s service since the tourney and now. Joffrey is hard at work tracking them down,” I told him and Larys actually smiled even as Harwin snorted in derision.

“The lick-spittle that follows Ser Laenor everywhere?” asked Harwin and there was grudging respect in his voice when he mentioned Laenor. Evidently his duel had elevated him a little in Harwin’s eyes, gone were the days when he’d levy an insult at every opportunity.

“Ser Joffrey is Laena Velaryon’s husband. The Princesses goodbrother,” said Larys, icily. “He has
come far in the past year or so, has he not? From second son to the husband of a dragon rider, father of a dragon rider and in charge of much of our Princesses household.”

He sounded almost pro- Gods be good… surely not? His brown eyes met mine and for a moment I saw a spark of surprise.

“Oh! I’d forgotten about that,” mused Harwin, breaking up Larys’ and I’s staring contest. “Mushroom told some really funny jokes about the wedding after we got news.”

“This is the type of man my brother is, Your Grace, he gets his news from the court fool,” sneered Larys, prompting Harwin to stiffen and his eyes to flash dangerously. “Or used to.”

“Mushroom was prone to adding details no decent man would find funny into his jokes,” I said and Larys’ head whipped towards me. “I must admit I did not hear his jokes about my goodbrother. Perhaps you would care to enlighten me, Harwin?”

Harwin flushed in embarrassment and squirmed in his seat but it was Larys I was watching. He looked almost angry and I bet I was right as why. It would seem Laenor was right about the… courting, no doubt he would be thrilled to be vindicated.

“He implied that the rumours Daemon spread regarding you and Lady Laena were true.” Anger hit me like a punch to the gut. Nobody had believed them, even Alicent hadn’t bothered encouraging their spread to any real degree. I would warrant Mushroom pursued them because he was a nasty little shit too pleased by any kind of ‘deviancy’. “Ah, his story went on to imply Ser Velaryon an unknowing idiot, blind even to Ser Laenor’s alleged proclivities.”

“I can’t imagine my father put up with that,” I said, trying to stay calm. If Larys had killed Mushroom… well, I clearly owed him some flowers at the least.

“The Princess understands, like I do, that any right-thinking man would find Mushroom’s stories disgusting,” said Larys. “As it was, Mushroom was never eager to tell those particular jokes within the King’s presence.”

“It is ill-done to speak badly of the dead but I can not find it within me to think well of Mushroom,” I said. Harwin nodded thoughtfully.

“He was also telling everyone you slept with Ser Velaryon after your return to the Vale. He told everyone that Ser Laenor would not bed you because you would not give him up. Or maybe it was because you stole him…” said Harwin. Larys clenched his jaw and nodded. No doubt he’d been on Alicent’s orders when he’d come up with that particular comedy routine.

Gods damn Alicent Hightower’s imagination.

“He thinks… thought that any man not fully whole was an acceptable target of ridicule,” he said, making Harwin snort and my eyebrows shoot up.

Did you kill him because he insulted you, Larys, or was it because he insulted Joffrey? You’re Alicent’s man, I’m certain of it now. I have never seen even Laenor react that way at the mention of Joffrey’s name.

The question is have I let on I know?

“Forgive me, Larys, Harwin, but I tire. Birth has me fatigued more often than not. I thank you for your visit though, it is always pleasant to see friends.” The two were quick to nod and make their apologies, seeing the dismissal for what it was. Larys’ left with a thoughtful look on his face but I
could not tell, not truly, if he had made me or not. It was hard not to call for Joffrey straight away.

I should be feeling victorious, triumphant, yet all I felt was a bone deep worry. We’d often joked that Alicent’s factor was Joffrey’s ‘friend’ yet... yet Larys had not been able to stop his reaction. If I was right, he’d killed Mushroom not to make himself Alicent’s factor but because he’d insulted Joffrey one too many times. That spoke to obsession.

So I waited, feigning a nap until I was certain that good manners would dictate the Strongs had left and then I summoned Joffrey, Laena and Laenor. They were quick to attend on me, Laenor almost tripping over his own feet as he arrived.

“Are the babes well?” he asked, recovering from his near trip with a distinct lack of grace.

“They are well, there is another issue I wished to discuss.” He sighed in relief and dropped himself into a seat next to the bed. His sister and his lover arrived moments later, carrying a joyful Lucerys between them. The babe was placed into Joffrey’s lap and Laena perched herself on the bed.

“I know who your friend is.” That certainly got their attention. Especially Joffrey’s. He’d been going mad trying to discover just who Alicent was relying on, that I had discovered it quite by accident during a visit from ‘friends’ would drive him up the wall with frustration. “And it’s worse than we thought.”

“Who?” asked Laenor, hand resting on his hip where his blade should be. No swords in the birthing chamber was rule number two after wash your hands in the wash basin provided.

“Larys Strong.” Silence followed that and then Laenor gave a nervous giggle.

“That’s not funny, Rhaenyra,” he said when no one else said anything. Laena was watching me with a thoughtful gaze and Joffrey was staring at the back of Lucerys’ head. I could almost see the cogs of thought turning in his mind.

“It gets worse,” I said and Laenor groaned. “He’s got ideas of something more than friendship in mind. I’d say it’s verging on obsession.”

Laenor spluttered in outrage, shock and dismay. Joffrey’s eyes finally left his son’s head and met mine.

“You’re certain?” he asked. Laena dropped a hand to my leg and squeezed slightly, letting me know she was with me.

“He was very angry about the stories Mushroom told about you. Very angry when his brother implied you were forgettable. He was almost proud when his described your political rise...”

“So, one of my people must have ended up in his care. They speak about me and I attract his attention. He kills Mushroom to become my counterpart-” His lips twisted. “He killed Otto.”

“I wouldn’t go that far!” said Laena. “Alicent wouldn’t kill her own Father, surely?”

“They were struggling for power. Alicent was on the verge of losing everything... He killed Mushroom- oh fuck, he was the one that questioned Otto’s killers. He questioned the merchant.” My musing sent the Velaryon siblings pale with the implications.

Had Larys killed his own sister by accident?

“So, he ensured the war with Dorne,” said Joffrey. Then he smiled, making my eyebrows rise in
surprise. Evidently I wasn’t the only one because he blushed a moment later at the attention he’d
garnered from us. “I know who he is now. Now we have an even fight.”
In the other room, Jocelyn was wailing again, coaxing her little sister into joining her, and I debated just flinging myself out of the window and ending it all now. Even after moving from the birthing chamber to my own bed the need to keep the babes close meant their late night awakenings still woke me half the time but even if, by some miracle, I slept through them, the maid was quick to summon me. I wish Laena had explained you had to feed them at night too. I don’t know why I assumed you didn’t.

Sleep drifted ever further away and I groaned into my pillow. A rough hand ran over my back as Laenor imitated me, hauling himself upright to stare across the softly lit room at the door that led to the room our children were housed in. He’d sat with me as I’d read to them after their bed time feeding and had stuck around afterwards, banished from his usual sleeping arrangement by Laena pulling rank as Joffrey’s wife.

We both must have resembled zombies as we ambled into the room our children slept in. I fed Alyssa first, brain taking sometime to properly waken up. By the time she had been safely enclosed back into her tank, I was wide awake. Even more awake when an angry Jocelyn was presented to me.

“Shall we take her with us?” asked Laenor, still half asleep. “Alys might have some chance at sleep then.”

“Sure,” I managed to say through a yawn that ambushed me the moment I opened my mouth.

I took Jocelyn as he climbed back under covers, then positioned her between us. She did not quiet for some time. When she did, it was because she’d fallen back asleep.

“She’s beautiful,” he whispered. I couldn’t help but smile at the look on his face. “Do they cry like this every night?”

“Yes, they do. They’re babies. Mostly for food which is easily dealt with.” I really, really wish Laena had explained you needed to feed them at night. “Sometimes I’ll sit with them and tell them stories.”

“What do you after? I doubt I can sleep now she has woken me,” he asked, voice low.

“You get used to going back to sleep. Or falling asleep in the chair,” I told him, giving his hip a playful shove with my own. He shoved me back with a chuckle. In-between us, Jocelyn fussed momentarily, causing us both to freeze.

“I can take twin duty if you wish to spend time with Laena?” he said finally after we’d relaxed. “It is only fair since I have had a lot of time with Joff lately.”

He did not mention that a lot of their time together had been spent with Lucerys or running errands for Joffrey’s renewed determination to become omniscient or close to it. Knowing who his rival was had lit a fire under him as fierce as any dragon’s breath. He was determined he would not be played in the manner Larys Strong had played him ever again.

I cast those dark thoughts from my mind and burrowed myself into the pillow, trying to chase the sleep Jocelyn had awoken me from.

“I’m fine at the moment. I would be awoken anyway for their feedings.” He laughed at that.
“When will you resume your duties?” he asked after his chuckling had died away.

“When I have healed and dropped some of this weight. Alannys has said I should resume them one at a time and slowly,” I told him.

“I ask because… well, did you wish to join me for riding?”

“Syrax and Seasmoke? I suppose I could.” The prospect was pleasing at least. I was still healing but Alannys had opined that I could resume light exercises with her usual pointed tone. Riding Syrax once more, perhaps some brisk walks around the garden, along with cutting out the more unhealthy parts of my diet that being pregnant had allowed to make it’s way in. My first steps on the way back to fitness.

It was with a brief pang of sadness I resolved to return to my usual fare of chilled fruit in the mornings. No more bacon, sausage or eggs.

“And your marksmanship. Mother will be eager to start working on how it will translate to dragon back.”

“I am barely skilled with the damn thing on the ground. I do not know what she expects from me atop Syrax,” I complained and he shrugged.

“War with Dorne puts us all in danger,” he said quietly. “I did not see the reason for swords for a very long time. Now I am thankful I started working towards improving my skill long before now.”

“Swords and bows are all very good but how will you protect yourselves from the other dangers the Dornish represent,” I asked, waspishly but genuinely worried.

“Joffrey is vetting servants, food tasters and guards.” Was the quick reply and I smiled. I should have known Joffrey was taking it as hard as I was in his own way. “If any vipers or other desert wildlife tries to appear in my quarters you will find me and my men ready for them.”

At my unconvinced face, he chuckled once more.

“Have Gerardys prepare antidotes to everything he can,” I said. “And then have Joffrey teach your men how to use them.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” His mocking assent got him a raised eyebrow and a sour look. His amused look fell and became serious.

“Do not worry for us, Rhaenyr. We will be atop dragons. We will not die, not when we have been ordered to return whole and healthy by those we love,” he murmured. Not even his assurances would ease the fear in me though. “Now, let us try and sleep. Tomorrow we will ride.”

What had sounded like an excellent idea in the dark of night was less welcome at morn. I was tired and wished nothing more than to return to my bed. I had been roused once more in the night to feed the children and then once just after dawn. As such, I was less appreciative of Laenor’s relentless enthusiasm for our ride. He had even cancelled his training for it.

“It is showing all of King’s Landing that their Princess is hale and healthy after childbirth,” said Rhaenys, who had caught us preparing and invited herself along. My answer was a sour look as I swung myself into the saddle of the horse. It took a little adjusting in how I sat to be comfortable but it was nearly as bad as I feared with the padding Alannys had suggested.

Our early morning ride still attracted attention though. Evidently, I was still in the people of King’s
Landing’s good graces as more than a few stopped to cheer and wave as we made our way out the city to where Syrax, Seasmoke and Meleys lay on their stretch of claimed beach. From how the sand had been churned and the fact her gear was missing from the barn that had been raised especially for it’s storage, Laena had gone on a fact finding mission to Dragonstone.

Her request to spend the night with Joffrey had come out of the blue, so to speak. She and I had spent our nights curled up together, simply enjoying the others presence and warmth rather than anything sexual. I had asked if anything was wrong and she assured me there was not, that she simply wished for one of her talks with him. Given that she mainly enjoyed those because she could spill everything she was feeling and not feel judged, I was not assured.

Syrax taking to the air was enough to distract me from my worries at least and I let myself relish in it, pushing her to fly fast and high. We soared over the oceans, danced through the clouds and swooped low over the fields. I may have been laughing with delight for a good portion. I could already feel the burn in certain parts of my body that told me even my brief stay in bed had offended some of the muscles I was used to employing when riding.

It was a good burn though.

After I’d gotten that out of my system, we both took yet more delight in showing off our aerial manoeuvres to Rhaenys and Meleys, attempting to nip at the older dragons tail as a way of keeping score. Out of the many, many, many tries we both managed it once. I was quite proud of my Syrax as she bought us in for landing, her usual graceful glide managing to keep the spray of sand and dirt to a minimum. Not that Meleys or Seasmoke had gotten the message, their landings tore gouges across the earth and I mentally apologised to whoever actually owned the field we were partially camping on.

Continuing my mission of showing the world I was on my way to recovering from the birth of my children, we put in an appearance at the Red Keep. Not the Keep proper though, the training yards. Rhaenys had something to show us there and from her barely contained excitement I did have to wonder just what it was exactly. Something that got Rhaenys this giddy had to be good.

And I was not disappointed by her happiness because when we made our entrance, still garbed in our riding gear, there was my father. I wanted to laugh in delight at the sight of him, all dressed up in his padding and whacking away at Ser Marbrand with, what seemed to me, little grace or actual skill.

I had not seen him pick up a blade and actually train since before grandfather had died. Even then it had been reluctant, a forced march to the training grounds every morning and then escape at the earliest possible opportunity. I had heard Baelon go so far as to compare him to Vaegon in those days. After Baelon had died… well, mother had tried but he was not to be persuaded often and after Alicent had come on to the scene that was it for his waistline.

“This business with Dorne has one upside,” murmured Rhaenys, a kind of fierce pride in her voice. “It has awoken the dragon in him.”

“I have not seen him with a blade in his hand in a long time,” I told her. She smiled.

“After that attempt on the twins he carried Blackfyre around for days. Word is he was ready to execute Cole with it before the man took the Black.” Again with that fierce pride. “There is the rider of Balerion. Daemon always mocked him but I knew.”

That drew both our gazes from the King to her. She smiled at our interest.
“When he gets over that damnable softness he has, he is a true dragon. You have seen his rages? He mounted the Black Dread. I knew the moment he did Daemon was wrong about him,” she told us. Hadn’t she, not a few months ago, declared him not fit to be king? I was saved from the unwise notion to point this out by her sighing heavily.

“Do not worry, Rhaenyra. I will stay close to him when he marches. A dragon he may be but he is a wingless one. I’ll make sure no ill befalls him,” she promised. “Besides, it is high time he and I put an end to our differences.”

“You’re having differences?” said Laenor. I winced and Rhaenys raised a single eyebrow at my reaction.

“He likes to blame Corlys for all the ills in the world. Likes to blame you and Laena for all Rhaenyra’s ills. He sees our family as eager for power that is not rightly ours. Make no mistake, if those twins had not yet been conceived when Correy made his accusation, Viserys would have used it to remove you from Rhaenyra’s side. He sees you as an extension of your father.” I glanced around anxiously but no one was close, no one could hear her.

Laenor looked thoughtful, his eyes returning to the King as he practised.

“He believes Corlys still seeks the throne,” I admitted. “It was his initial thought to use Lucerys to keep the Velaryons as a whole in line.”

“Then he saw the little bugger and fell half in love with him. Typical Viserys,” chuckled Rhaenys. “Do not worry, son, I shall set him right. I was strong enough to master your father and Rhaenya is strong enough to master you. He will see that soon enough.”

“I fear it will not be so easy,” I murmured. “He’s had Otto filling his head with nonsense from the moment he was elected Heir.”

She set her jaw as if I had just levelled a challenge at her, her eyes flashing dangerously.

“And now he will have me setting things right.”

I gave in as he noticed us and called a halt to his practise before making his way over. I tried not to feel to guilty as his smile threatened to break his face. Still, better her haranguing him over something than me?

Sorry dad, I tried!
Recovering from birth had saved me from the need to openly ‘mourn’ Otto Hightower until long after his body had been sent home to be interred alongside the Hightowers of old. Yet from the moment I began my slow return to politics, I was forced to make a show of it. For all that his death was an inconvenience, I did not grieve for Otto’s death. I only wished that I had not been so foolish and summoned him to King’s Landing in the time frame I had.

His death had sealed the fate of Dorne but my foolishness had allowed him to set in motion the events that spelled it’s doom.

My return to politics coincided with the lords eager for war beginning their mass arrivals in the city and the first of the notable guests was Lord Borros Baratheon. Having finally proved myself fertile -ugh- he was eager to discuss putting the future betrothal between my firstborn son and his daughter. Although, he was happy to inform me, I could choose which daughter. A generous man to a fault that one.

I was not surprised Lady Elenda jabbed him in the ribs before asking after the children.

“Jocelyn,” he said and his voice was mild as if he were forcing what he truly felt from his tone.  
“Cousin Rhaenys must be thrilled.”

“Mother is in love with both her and Alys,” said Laenor cheerfully. I did not miss the slight tension in his body though as he picked up on what I had. Borros fixed a bland smile into place and quickly handed Jocelyn to his wife. Lady Elenda Baratheon nee Caron was a pretty enough with dark hair and eyes. She was also five years younger than her husband. She was my age and had already had three children. One of which had just turned six.

Ugh.

“Princess Alyssa is quite the beautiful child,” he said, with much more genuine warmth, as he moved to stand over her tank. “I pray she is as beautiful as her Mother one day. I have no doubt she will be the darling of the realm.”

His words were practised and stilted. When he delivered them anyway, Lady Elenda favoured him with an encouraging smile despite Jocelyn’s anger and volume.

“I can say with certainty that this one has far too much Baratheon in her,” she finally said, handing her back over. “Cassandra and her sisters were much the same.”

“She only quiets for her grandmother,” I replied and Borros snorted. Besides me, Laenor bristled slightly so I distracted him by handing him his daughter. She did not stop her crying but at the sight of her father she calmed a little.

“If they are anything like my daughters.” There was pride in his voice when he said that, that was surprising. “Then she will be trial until your dying day. Yet she will be worth every headache and argument.”

That’s… incredibly sweet of you Borros. I did not see that coming. Lady Elenda laid a hand on his
leg and smiled, earning herself a look of puppy love in return.

“Perhaps our daughters should be friends in the coming years,” I suggested. Borros turned to me and then his wife and then to me again.

“Friends are good, my girls will be fierce friends, but I would prefer your support for my Cassandra instead.” That made me blink in surprise. At my surprise, he flushed and turned to his wife again. She gave him an exasperated look and then sighed.

“I must lay the blame for this squarely on yourself, Your Grace.” For all that she was trying to make a joke of it, there was resentment in her tone. Oh hells, what had I done now? I do not recall making any inflammatory statements about the Stormlands or implying absolute primogeniture would be a thing.

“You have my sincerest apologies, Lady Elenda, but I confess myself unsure of my crime,” I said quickly. Elenda pursed her lips.

“I was three and ten when I gave birth to my Cassandra. I had difficulty conceiving until little Maris came along when I was seven and ten. As you know, I have had Ellyn most recently. I look forward to another. A son, I hope. Yet hearing of your midwives has convinced my great lummox of a husband that he has somehow hurt me! Damaged my ability to bear children!” I’d be willing to bet he had. You have one more daughter to go and then it’s going to be nothing until Olyvar, born seven days after Borros’ death.

“Giving birth so young can damage a woman, yes, and my midwives do not recommend it,” I said slowly. Borros looked downcast and Elenda’s face twisted in annoyance. “But surely your two daughters speak to that harm not being permanent in your case.”

“See! I told you I was fine,” hissed Elenda and Borros blushed before taking her hand. From next to me, Jocelyn’s sobbing quieted completely and I didn’t let out a sigh of relief but it was a near thing.

“I love my wife but it may be I only have daughters. Should that be the case, Cassandra is my right and lawful heir,” he said softly. “I would have you support her. There are numerous cousins to my line that would seek to seize it. There are still houses that quietly claim the Storm King’s blood.”

“I rode to my Cousin’s aid not because she was my cousin but because the law dictates she is the rightful head of House Arryn and her Father’s lawful heir. You need not ask for support that is already given, Lord Borros,” I assured him. He beamed at me and then turned that smile on his wife. Elenda sighed and gave her husband’s hand a squeeze.

“I will give my husband a son, Your Grace, but it does hearten me that should the worst happen, Cassandra would have your support.” You did not care much for your Four Storms in canon, Lady Elenda. In fact, I would warrant you were downright nasty in some cases. Mind you, you were playing damage control I suppose. Aegon III had ascended the throne and you had to ingratiate yourself. He would not have looked kindly on those that condemned his older brother to death.

“Perhaps…” Borros stopped as our eyes turned to him. Then he forged on. “Perhaps we might retain the services of one of these midwives.”

Elenda’s eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hairline and her lips pursed in disapproval. Borros ignored her in favour of directing pleading eyes at me.

“I have no issue with that. We seek to train more on Dragonstone soon enough.” And soon Alannys
would be leaving me to educate a further thirty women. Some to the Faith, some to houses already interested…

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he said and sat back, studiously ignoring his wife’s outraged look. Then he eyed Laenor, who had been silent throughout our little exchange, cradling the now sleeping Jocelyn. “Heard you’re putting together a strategy to Dornish.”

He spat the word Dornish as if it were some unforgivable curse. I expected Lady Elenda to shoot him that exasperated look once more at his demand but she looked cautiously interested too.

“Indeed. I would see them brought to heel. They have had their way too long.” He was lying, of course, but we had to be seen as in favour of the war now. Too many wanted it, fighting it would not be prudent. Borros nodded.

“Lord Hightower said you were not in favour of it,” he growled, as if it were an accusation of treachery. It probably was in his mind.

“I was not in favour of fighting a burned, half destroyed mess,” I interjected. “Laenor was of a different opinion. Then they made things personal and the argument became moot.”

“Dorne was at it’s weakest after they ran headfirst into the trap at Bloodstone,” said Laenor, a little lamely to my ear but at least he’d picked up on my plan. Borros was certainly examining him with a little more interest now. “I had an idea to break the Greenblood and split Dorne in two. I have been forced to tweak my plan a little in recent months.”

“Humph,” said Borros.

“Lord Otto was keen to hear our advice on how best to tackle the Dornish. He also had the idea to send a fleet to break the Greenblood,” said Elenda and I did not miss the ‘our’ she slipped in there. “My Lord Husband approved of his plan.”

“To send two armies into the Boneway and Prince’s Pass, right where they are strongest?” asked Laenor. “They would bleed us sorely. Luckily, we have something of a trump card up our sleeves.”

“Oh?” asked Elenda, completely forgetting her husband was supposed to be the one more eager for war with Dorne. Marchers, what could you do?

“The Falcons. The army raised and trained to deal with the Mountain Clansman of the Vale. Very good with mountainous terrain, shockingly,” Laenor boasted. “They could do well to disarm much of the traps the Dornish may lay for us. Not to mention using my Father’s fleet and the Redwyne fleet to ferry a third army into Dorne proper and the Lannister fleet to break the Greenblood.”

“Hah! Then their precious mountains are rendered useless and they’re stuck cowering in their deserts,” laughed Borros.

“As we march three armies into Dorne and take everything,” Laenor finished. I remained quiet. I was quite sure that for all Borros liked the plan, he’d like it less when we discussed which army was going where and how we wouldn’t be burning every bit of Dorne that was flammable. I would have to think on how to get him fully on board when the War Council began. He would be an important supporter to the plan that would see Dorne somewhat peaceful over the coming years and not a blood bath trapped in the endless cycle of vengeance.

Perhaps land could be taken from the Dornish. Wyl, perhaps? If anyone not named Wyl could even hold it. The castle itself would need to be raised, loyal Stormlanders shipped in… oh gods, I’m doing it again. Westeros keeps getting to me. I’m going to be a monster by the end of it.
“I confess,” Laenor was saying when I finally finished wrestling with my morals. “That the Falcons may need some outside help to secure the passes. Perhaps men who can buoy their numbers with familiarity to the terrain?”

“My goodfather can provide those,” Borros was quick to reply. “His men often help scour the mountains.”

“A directive of Lord Boremund,” said Lady Elenda. “He wished to deter raiders and another Vulture King.”


“Indeed,” said Borros, scowling again.

“Tell me, Lord Borros, how are the Dornish responding to our preparations for war?” I asked and his scowl deepened.

“Raids,” he growled. “They’ve raided near every land they could reach, drove refugees deeper into my lands and filched as much of the winter stores as they could manage.”

Well, shit. The Stormlanders were not likely to accept any plan that did not let them get revenge for that. Was this Aron Dayne’s doing? Or Lord Walter Wyl, eager to provoke war in which his chosen candidate may return?

“When I deployed men to hit them back they pulled into their passes and settled for slaughtering any scout patrols in the area,” he finished. “That’s what they’re like. They hit you at your weakest and then disappear like ghosts when you respond. They lure you into traps, poison your supplies or steal them outright, ambush you in the night. They’ll use every amount of low cunning to bleed you and when you are bled and exhausted, then they face you.”

We remained silent in the face of his hatred.

“Cowards,” growled Elenda. “All of them are cowards. Cravens! Bastards all!”

I caught Laenor’s eye. His face was grave. I had known the Dornish raided… to cause this much destruction and hatred? Borros would require bribery indeed to lend his support to a plan that would see his Marcher Lords excluded from the main fight.

“We shall teach them how true men fight, my Lord and Lady,” Laenor finally said. “By the end, they’ll know their folly.”
Viserys’ new exercise regime was already doing wonders for him, I had to admit, as our procession made it’s way towards the docks. His healthy diet, devised by my own Maester Gerardys, and his almost religious fervour when it came to relearning his old skill with the blade had seen him drop the pounds in a drastic way over the past few weeks. The fact that he now wore Blackfyre on his hip and his face bore a permanent almost scowl had him looking like an actual Targaryen King instead of some fat jolly fool.

I was being unfair to him, I mused, he was a competent king. Under his rule the prosperity that had come to Westeros under Jaehaerys had only grown. The smallfolk and the nobles alike were well fond of him and if it wasn’t for the ongoing tension between the Blacks and the Greens I’d say he was quite the successful king. Actually I was being unfair there as well, he’d taken action in this timeline. He’d opened his eyes and he’d taken action. He’d reeled Alicent in, given me the capital, more trust that original Rhaenyra had ever received and was actively stripping the Greens of their power.

He had my back in the way the original Viserys never had his daughter’s.

I wonder if he saw her as tainted by Daemon? Like he saw Alicent now? When she married him did he give up entirely, decide he’d ride out his last years in blissful ignorance and let his whole horrible family fight it out after he was gone? Did he assume he had more time? Did he seek to raise Jacaerys over Rhaenyra?

Bah, who knew what was going on it that man’s mind at times.

The Arryn ships were already in the bay by the time we had arrayed ourselves to greet the Lady of the Vale. I noted with amusement that Rhea and Torrhen Manderly had positioned themselves close to our party and the Lady of Runestone seemed to be almost giddy with excitement. The war for Dorne had put quite the dampener on her plans for a wedding at Runestone but Viserys had offered the Keep itself for a venue.

I wished Laenor was here though. Or Laena. My husband was supervising Laena’s armour fitting on Rhaenys’ orders. She’d wriggled out of it several times so far with excuses ranging from Lucerys’ teething to the boy having a slight fever she was worried about. So I was left alone to assess the damage I had done to my relationship with Jeyne while he ensured his idiot sister didn’t get herself killed in Dorne through sheer stubbornness.

At least Jeyne was the only person of any note arriving today.

I had been informed that even the elderly Rickon Stark would be putting in an appearance, alongside his his brother. They had not arrived yet but I was keen to meet them when I did. Rickon’s loyalty, and by extension Cregan’s, would be worth it’s weight in gold - or rather, worth it’s weight in the locally produced and very affordable glass I would ship into the North in return for their fealty.

Once we managed to get it to stop shattering if you looked at it wrong of course.

I dragged my mind back to the present as a screech echoed out over the assembled nobles and Morghul plunged us all into brief shadow as it circled above us. A smile grew over my face. Helaena’s dragon had indeed grown over the few months she’d spent in the Vale. Gods, it felt like an age since I’d last seen her and yet it had only been four months at the most. I could not wait to
show her the twins.

Jeyne was the first off of the ship, her head held high in the face of the assembled nobility that had come to greet her. Followed by the form of what could only be Lord Denys, Jessamyn Redfort and Helaena. My grin became wider as my sister hopped down from the gangplank and stopped to survey as all, looking suddenly nervous. Then her eyes met mine and she beamed.

The Arryn party reached us a moment later and all the proper obeisances were observed with Jeyne greeting Viserys as her King and Liege and presenting his daughter to him. She looked well, she truly did. A few months had seen her sprout up an inch or two - and she was seven now! How could I have forgotten? I must remember to ask her how she liked the book I sent her.

Jeyne was all smiles when she greeted me but I didn’t miss the slight wariness behind her eyes. It was if she expected me to spring an eligible bachelor on her the moment she let her guard down sufficiently. I felt guilty at that. I should have bothered to check with Rhea or someone first. I should have taken her outburst during that meeting oh so long ago as a hint there was still a sore topic there.

“Cousin,” I murmured as she kissed my cheeks in greeting. “I can only apologise once again.”

She paused and then gave me a rueful smile.

“So Lady Royce tells me,” she said finally and I tried not to flinch at the icy tone the word Royce was said in. “I have been informed you did not know of the events Aunt Aemma had to intervene in. She was quite clear about that.”

“I did not. I never would have broached the topic in that manner had I known.”

“But you would have broached it?” I opened my mouth to protest but Jeyne held a hand up. “Let us discuss this later, Cousin, in private. I do believe there is a certain sister of yours waiting to see you again.”

Helaena got halfway through her, by now, well-practised bow before I decided to hell with it and scooped her up into a hug. I didn’t miss Viserys’ broad grin at the sight of her delighted laugh as she buried her face in my collar and squeezed me tight.

“Can I see the babes?” she asked. “I’m their aunt right? I should be able to see them!”

“Of course! You can not hold Alys yet but there is Jocelyn.” She looked puzzled at the idea of not holding Alys but at the idea of seeing them her face cleared again and she beamed.

“We are also looking forward to seeing the babes, Cousin,” said Jeyne and it took me a brief second to realise she was referring to Jess in that we given Jess was currently standing at the back of the crowd looking green.

“You are welcome at the manse any time, Cousin,” I replied as Viserys evidently decided to involve himself in family time and came over to greet join his daughters.

“I see my own daughter does not wish to embrace her father!” He called with fake grief on his features. “Truly, what has this world come to?”

She wriggled from my grasp a moment later and ran at him, picking up quite a bit of speed. He caught her and hauled her into the air, prompting a scream of delight.

“I would speak with you tonight, Rhaenyra,” murmured Jeyne. “I have a tale to tell you.”
Well that was… reassuring. It played on my mind the entire day, lurking constantly in my thoughts as I settled the various Valemen into the Red Keep and took Helaena to see the babes. My sister was somewhat put out that holding Alys was not on the table yet but she had enjoyed chatting to both of them about her various adventures in the Vale and when she’d been on Dragonstone. Jocelyn even got through an hour of story-telling without loudly informing us all of her unhappiness when it came to… well, anything.

“They must be fond of you, little one, they did not cry at all during your visit” I told Helaena as we mounted horses to bear us back to the Keep under the watchful eye of Ser Willis Fell, Ser Steffon elsewhere today. She swelled with obvious pride at that and turned to her own sworn sword.

“Did you hear Byren? I’m going to be the best aunt they have!” she enthused. The Reachman smiled warmly at her, genuine fondness in his gaze.

“I have no doubt you will, Princess,” he said with a smile. Then he, shockingly, directed a smile my way. Huh, maybe the Vale changed him? Now that I think about it, I hadn’t detected a single sneer the entire time he had been in my presence.

“Ser Byren, I am glad to see you well,” I said as we set off. “Was there much trouble on your travels?”

“Not at all, Your Grace. Your Falcons have seen a drop in raids across the Vale, or so Lady Jeyne has informed me. Travel has become almost safe,” he said, then indicated the sword he wore with a smile. “I was rather looking forward to the practise, yet it seems my sword may become rusty yet.”

“I’m told the finest knights come from the Vale, Ser Byren, perhaps you could find one to spar with?” He took my jest in good humour which was a relief.

“I have a found a fair few willing to indulge me, Your Grace,” he admitted.

“Ser Byren is a really good swordsman,” said Helaena, who had been watching our exchange with interest. “He beats loads of people when he’s practising.”

“Of course he is, little one, he is your sworn sword. Do you think we’d give you a terrible one?” She giggled at that and Byren blushed. “Have you kept up with your archery?”

“Yes! Jeyne sent Ser Denys to help me when he was at the Gates of the Moon. Lots of the Falcons are very good archers as well,” she told me, then launched into detailed explanation about what seemed like every bit of practice she’d engaged in. I listened to her speech with a grin on my face that did not fade until Jeyne met us at the Keep and dispatched my talkative sister and her sword to prepare for tonight’s feast.

I, on the other hand, was invited on a walk around the gardens. Given that Jessamyn Redfort was hovering around in the background looking like she was ready to start a physical fight with me should I say the wrong thing, I was not thrilled with the development. Still the gardens were nice and I had promised myself I’d walk more in an effort to shift some of my baby weight…

“Do you wish for another apology?” I asked when I was certain only Jess could hear us. “Because I will give it freely. I was wrong to address the matter as brusquely as I did in a letter.”

“Yet you think you were right to address the matter at all?” she asked, voice sour.

“It is the succession of the Vale. Without an heir of your body, the moment you die, the Vale will go to war. Ser Arnold has children, there is Joffrey Arryn to consider and now the Gulltown Arryns
as well, ennobled once more.” At my reminder she scowled fiercely.

“Lady Royce said she enlightened you as to… the incident your Mother intervened in?” her voice shook and I felt guilty.

“I was given the bare bones of the matter,” I told her. That Willem had tried to force a marriage before any of the Vale lords could intervene and had arranged a secret marriage, all but bodily dragging a six year old to the Sept.

“Bare bones,” she muttered bitterly. “I am surprised she would have the gall…”

“And I am missing something once again,” I said aloud. Jeyne paused and tried to control her expression, closing her eyes and swallowing hard at some memory or reminder. When she opened them again, there were unshed tears there and I winced at the upset I had caused.

Yet no matter how much of an ongoing train wreck this was it was a train wreck I needed to push. Jeyne needed an heir no one could challenge. I could not afford to be drawn into enforcing her will. Not if I had Dorne to think about these days as well.

“She was there,” she hissed. “Lady Royce was there in the Sept. She held me still when the Septon refused to marry us!”

I stared at my cousin in shock and surprise. Jeyne took a deep breath and I was reminded she was not even nineteen yet. A young girl for all that she ruled a kingdom in all but name.

“I do not understand. Rhea co-operated with her father in his plot to have you married?” At my shock Jeyne laughed bitterly and Jessamyn placed a hand on her shoulder. “She hated her father, she certainly was not fond of her brother - why would she…”

“Leniency in her own marriage.” At my look of incomprehension she sniffed and then took a deep breath. “They wanted a babe from her. Daemon did not wish to give it without extracting a high price in turn. She never said what it was but is was something she did not wish to do. Willem said he would speak to their father and win her some time if she helped him marry me. So she did.”

Horror made bile rise to my throat. At my silence, Jeyne rubbed at her shoulders and forged on.

“I used to have nightmares about her hands on my shoulders,” she told me.

“Did she ever apologise?” I asked. Jeyne shook her head.

“We always avoided the topic. I just wanted you to understand… that letter from her it-”

“She means she’s been having nightmares since she got it and I’m bloody furious with you!” Jessamyn finally burst out. I stared in surprise at the girl who always seemed to melt into the background. She met my eyes with a glare, ready to leap to Jeyne’s defence. I opened my mouth but no sound came out.

“I have a man in mind, Rhaenyra,” said Jeyne, finally. “But I would extract a price from you first.”
I stared down at my babes. Jocelyn was awake and wriggling about, looking as if she were still deciding on whether she wished to throw a tantrum or not. Alys, on the other hand, was fast asleep. Completely unaware of how special today was. A smile forced it’s way onto my features as I gazed at them. They’d grown so much in the last month since their birth, taking on the look of actual babies.

Guilt rolled inside my guts then as I remembered Jeyne’s request. Jocelyn had been sold to the Reyne’s before her birth and now… now little Alys had her future planned for her as well. She would marry Jeyne’s firstborn son and secure the Vale for another generation. She would give the Arryns what they had been deprived of in Daella; royal blood.

And if Grover Tully wanted to get into a snit about the matter he could take a long walk off of a short pier. I had waited long enough for his reply to my enquiry about a betrothal. Laenor’s hand found the small of my back as Alannys came forward and lifted the lid from Alys’ tank.

“Which one are you taking?” he asked. I didn’t answer but bent over little Alys and scooped her into my arms. He laughed and retrieved Jocelyn. Happily, Jocelyn’s threatened tantrum was due to a lack of attention because the moment she was picked up and held, her tears melted away. In my arms, Alys shifted in her sleep before her eyes opened.

“Look!” said Laenor, breaking my moment of adoration. He moved closer. “She’s smiling at me! Is she smiling at me?”

Jocelyn had a beautiful smile. I dropped a kiss onto her forehead.

“Yes, Ser Laenor, she is,” said Alannys. She would be leaving us soon. Off to train the new midwives that were being taught on Dragonstone. My fledgling school needed the prestige of having a teacher who’d attended to royalty. I did not want her to go. “Something tells me she is fond of her Father already!”

“Do you think so?” he asked eagerly and Alannys smiled warmly.

“Oh yes. Look at her smile. She recognises you both now.” Alys made a few grunting sounds and I turned my attention back to her and away from Laenor trying not to weep at a smiling Jocelyn.

“Your father is a silly man, isn’t he? He is! He’s going to spoil you so much! You’ll be spoilt rotten!” Her unfocused eyes roamed about and I frowned despite myself.

“Is something wrong, Your Grace?” asked Alannys, having caught my worry.

“Perhaps I am worrying about nothing but it seems to me Jocelyn tries to make eye contact when she’s held. Alys… does not,” I told her. Alannys hummed thoughtfully.

“It’s possible she’s merely lagging behind her sister a little. She was confined to the incubator after all. I would not worry unless she fails to hit several milestones at the expected times,” she assured me after a while. I glanced up and caught Laenor’s look of concern, then he tried to smile but could quite mask his own worry.

“Now we have her out and about she will catch up to her sister in no time!” he assured me. Then was immediately distracted by a flailing Jocelyn.
“Something tells me they’ll have you wrapped around their fingers before they can walk,” I said dryly. In response, he wiggled his finger at her and she clutched at it. There was a knock at the door and Ser Steffon poked his head in, looking slightly worn out.

“Your Grace, your Father-”

“Is starting a riot with his impatience. I understand. Tell them we shall be down momentarily.” He nodded then paused before leaving entirely.

“It should be noted, Your grace, that Lady Rhaenys is ready to join him?” he told me and I let out a chuckle. Of course. No wonder Ser Steffon looked as if he had been on duty for the past three days with no rest or respite.

“Shall we go and rescue our loyal knight, husband?” I asked and Ser Steffon’s look become one of pleading.

“Oh, it’s the only honourable thing to do in this situation,” he replied and Ser Steffon looked relieved. We followed him out and down the hallways of the manse to the drawing room, packed full of family and friends all eager to see the babes free from their tanks at last.

“Might we present Princess Jocelyn and Princess Alyssa of House Targaryen!” said Laenor, pride evident in his voice. Rhaenys was first up to her son, lifting Jocelyn from his arms. I didn’t have time to analyse just how much she’d melted due to the proximity of a babe named after her mother because my father reached me a moment later, an expectant look on his face and I him take her.

He was gentle, oh so gentle, holding her as if he had spent his entire life holding babes. Then again with five children, he’d had plenty of practise when it came to their care.

“She’s beautiful,” he said as she fussied in his arms and I realised he was close to tears once again. “Little Alyssa. My mother would have been proud. Father would have been… he would have been proud too.”

Tears pricked at my eyes but I was saved from finding any kind of response to that statement by Rhea slamming to a halt beside me and peering intently at Alys’ face before smiling widely at me.

“They’re beautiful, niece.” Behind her, Torrhen Manderly hovered, looking distinctly out of place. Much like Jessamyn Redfort was currently doing from her place beside Jeyne. I caught my cousins eye and motioned her over. She tensed slightly, then forced a smile onto her face and managed to make her drift over look natural.

“We might introduce you to Alyssa?” I said when she was within speaking distance. Viserys half turned to her and very reluctantly offered the babe. Jeyne took her, accepting some of his pointers of how to hold her and support her head properly and such. She knew that this babe was promised to her as of yet unborn and un-conceived son. I could see her evaluating her, trying to figure out if risking my wrath were worth it.

We were saved from any awkwardness that bought by Helaena seeking us out, evidently not finding much luck when trying to get Jocelyn and loudly demanding to see the baby. I took Alys back and bent down, letting Helaena press forward for her first look at her niece not in her tank.

“She’s small,” she said, wonder filling her voice. Alyss fuzzed against me, little hands coming up to wave around, letting her displeasure be known. “Did I upset her?”

“Not at all! She is overwhelmed. This is her first time outside the tank and there are a lot of people,” I told her softly. “Do you wish to hold her?”
I regretted it the moment I said it of course but Helaena was ever so gentle when she took Alys from me, following all my instructions to the letter. I had feared that she would be jealous and that jealousy would drive her away from my children but judging from the smile on her face when she handed Alys back, I had been wrong to fear that. I rose from my crouch and handed Alys off to an impatient Rhea Royce, who was happy to coo over her to Torrhen.

Then she was retrieved by Rhaenys and swapped for Jocelyn. I managed to reclaim my firstborn eventually and I held her close, laughing quietly at her attempt to root through my clothing. Evidently someone was hungry. It had been a few hours since they had fed, I supposed. Unfortunately, when food was not forthcoming, Jocelyn decided to let us all know and raise quite the ruckus.

The fact that Alys chose to copy her was just icing on the cake and did rather put a dampener on our little gathering. Still, it had served its purpose. Alys was out of her tank and everyone who was anyone in our little family had been given the chance to meet them and hold them… and hear them scream for food. If everything went well then in five months time I would present them to the court officially.

I curled Jocelyn close to me at the thought as she wailed unhappily.

Well, we still had Rhea’s wedding to go (and boy did I have mixed feelings about my Aunt at the moment) but new life was new life. After the wedding, the war council would begin in truth. The greatest assembly of Lords since the Great Council all squarely focused on kicking Dorne into the dirt.

Laena helped me get into a position to feed the babes, smiling at my embarrassment as she did so.

“I do not understand why you are so flustered about it all. Did you forget I used to help you bathe?” she chuckled.

“Look, just accept it’s a complex, okay?” I protested.

That made her laugh even harder and then bring her hand to my cheek and her lips to mine.

“Okay,” she said, slowly, as I realised I’d let an anachronism sneak into my words again. “Yet I have still seen everything long before now. Come now, feed your babes before they rouse the whole of King’s Landing with their cries.”

She passed Jocelyn over and worked on calming Alys as her twin fed. Thankfully, she kept her eyes mostly averted until it came to swapping twins. I do not understand what embarrassed me so much about the process, it certainly did not embarrass anyone else around me.

“How will you handle feeding them when you become Regent?” she asked, carefully avoiding the topic that she would not be there to help.

“They will be past six months then. Old enough for feeding morning, noon and night with some mush to keep them going throughout the day,” I told her. It had been one of the first things I’d worked out after their birth. I had to balance being taken seriously as a ruler and making sure the kids were okay. Alys detached and gave a contented gurgle, curling her little hand into her swaddling clothes.

“Come, let me help you dress again. Mother and Laenor will be eager to present them with their gifts,” There was a smirk in place as she took the twins from me and handed them off to Laenor, who waited just outside. Then she helped me dress and I noted that she had improved greatly. A far
cry from the woman who once managed to literally tie her hand to my back. When I said as much she blushed such a vibrant red that it sent me into hysterics.

They were already in their cribs when we reached the room. Rhaenys stood by Jocelyn with her proffered egg in hand and I took the one I had selected for Alys from Syrax’s clutch. The one Rhaenys cradled was beautiful. A scarlet like Meleys with bronze patterns across it. My own was a pleasing inversion. Forest green with swirls of gold. Together, almost reverentially, we placed the eggs at the girls side.

Jocelyn was quick to focus intently on the new thing she had been presented with, hand wobbling out to touch at it. Rhaenys beamed with pride and pulled her son in for a hug that might have resulted in broken ribs if the air the whooshed from his body was any indication. She done something similar with Laena, I recalled. Here was a woman that was determined to be the world’s best Grandmother to these kids… not that she had any competition, mind you.

That brought another pang of sadness and I missed Aemma Arryn fiercely all over again.

Alys though… she barely seemed interested in her egg. Instead her head had flopped to the side to gaze at the window instead. I swallowed the worry that brought. Alannys had said she might be lagging, it was not a sign something was wrong with her. She was just small. She’d catch up eventually and then I’d likely regret wishing away the days when she was the calmer quieter one.

Laenor pushed my mother’s blanket into my arms and I let my head fall against his shoulder for moment.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, attracting everyone else’s attention to. I did not want to imply… If I was wrong… I gazed at Alys and her continued interest in the window.

“Did I do the right thing?” I asked, staring down at the falcon on the blanket. Whoever had restored it had done an excellent job. Laena placed a gentle hand on my arm.

“Remember, worse matches have been made for worse reasons,” she murmured. “They will understand in time.”

“Thank you,” I replied and placed the blanket in with Alys, arranging it by her feet. Laenor took his old wooden sword and propped it up against Jocelyn’s crib much to his mother’s amusement.

“That old thing!” she cackled, then gazed at the twins in their cribs. “They’re both fighters, Rhaenyra. Do not worry about them so much.”
I awoke that morning to Laena curled close around me, her soft snores causing my hair to twitch slightly. Honestly, if she was going to insist on sleeping by my side so often she was going to have to start keeping a chest of spare clothes in here. She could not keep sleeping in her dresses. As much as I wanted to let the moment drag on, stay in that warm embrace for as long as possible, duty called. At my first movement, her arms clenched slightly and I huffed with laughter before trying again. This time she let go and I was able to slip free. I got half way to the door before she sat up, looking puzzled at my absence.

“I have to feed the twins, Laena,” I reminded her. A part of me could not get over my children. Actual children! Twins! Two girls that were mine! I carried them and birthed them and fed them and they were mine. My babies! “Stay and sleep a little longer.”

She groaned and ignored me, swinging herself free over the bedding and padding after me, still looking half asleep.

“I need to attend to Lucerys as well,” she mumbled. Since Alys was finally free of her tank, they’d been put into the same nursery Lucerys had been the sole occupant of until recently. Oh, father had made his hints about how Daeron was oh-so-lonely at the Keep but I couldn’t trust it. I needed to know who had poisoned that bottle, who had killed Alys and killed Sera’s future children, before I could even think about moving something as precious as my babes into that place once more.

Plus this nursery came equipped with one guard dragon. Lucerys’ hatchling should probably be in its wicker cage yet when we entered we found it curled by his crib. Its’ red eyes rested on us for moment before it dismissed us and went back to sleep.

The room was silent as its three, and one dragon, occupants slumbered away and I paused as I reached my two, both half covered by the Arryn blanket, their eggs laid next to them and their hands entwined. In the soft light of the early morning, my heart wanted to break open at the sight of them.

“I told you the babes were worth it,” mumbled Laena, still unable to shake off the raspiness sleep bought to her voice. Her warm arms encircled my shoulders and she dropped a kiss to my cheek, resting her head on my shoulder. “They’re perfect.”

“Of course they are,” I replied and she chuckled fondly before parting from me and waking Lucerys. He didn’t cry, instead he smiled sleepily at his Mother and mumbled something that sounded vaguely like ‘ma-ma’. I wiped the last of the seep from my eyes and retrieved Alys, doing my best to calm her displeasure about being woken so abruptly. Admittedly, Alys wasn’t the one given to wailing at every little discomfort like Jocelyn was. She took her meal quietly enough, which was a relief.

“I wanted to discuss something with you,” said Laena, breaking the silence that had fallen between us. “I do not know if you will approve.”

“What could be so bad that you fret about my reaction?” I asked and she blushed. Worry eased in my gut at that, Laena had a good head for what would have me raging or upset. If the matter was embarrassing to her then it likely wasn’t a huge problem - just personal.

“I lied to you when I said I did not want another babe;” she admitted. I did not laugh in response but it was a close thing, instead I put Alys back in her crib and rocked her back and forth for a while,
encouraging the post meal sleepiness to take her back to the land of nod.

“I know that,” I told her when it seemed she actually wanted a reply. “But I figured you would talk to me in time, when you were ready.”

Jocelyn was even less happy at being awoken than Alys was and it took some persuasion to get her to settle down and actually feed. Laena took the time to marshal her thoughts and put Lucerys back down.

“I have spoken to Joffrey about it and he has agreed-” I froze and stared at her.

“You… what if… Will it be healthy for you to?” I asked finally. I saw the brief look of pain that spasmed over her features at that.

“If your only objection is my health I assure you, I intend to wait. Yet I wanted to let you know… I do want another babe. Joffrey has agreed to be the father.” And I note you neatly sidestepped the issue of if you are even able.

Evidently it was not something she wanted to think about at the moment.

“Laenor will explode at this news,” I told her dryly and she smiled.

“Telling Laenor is Joffrey’s job, not mine.”

“Is it not the wife’s job to help share her husbands burdens?” I teased and she flushed.

“He’s going to be as excitable as when the twins were born,” she said with a dramatic shudder. Then her fond smile became a smirk. “I’d much rather help my Princess with her preparations for today.”

Ah yes. Today.

The day my brothers arrived home.

Red and gold banners, a veritable army of Lannisters and a very excitable pale blue dragon announced the arrival of my baby brother to the capital. Gods, they made for an awe-inspiring sight. Even their guards were armed and armoured with eye-wateringly expensive equipment. Ostentatious did not even begin to describe it.

And they had not come alone.

Arriving with them in a significantly less impressive manner were the Tully’s, red and blue trout banners fluttering in the brisk winter wind alongside the more resplendent Lannisters. Next to me, Helaena was quivering with excitement, her eyes bright. She had missed her brothers, even the horrid Aemond and Daeron did not have the same appeal I had been informed.

I fought a smile as I was reminded of a different arrival - the royal visit the Dragonstone seemed an age ago now.

I still had Aegon’s picture. I’d ordered it placed in a glass frame to protect it and had it hung in the solar. Not that I got to see it often but it still served as an adequate reminder that Aegon, no matter what he became later, had been a scared child once. And that I had cared for that scared child despite the threat he represented to me.

“Do you think he’ll be happy to be home?” Helaena whispered as she watched the party wind it’s
way towards us. The Tully contingent was half the size of the Lannister one and I had to wonder if they hadn’t taken anyone with even a vague claim to the name and golden hair with them for the whole shock and awe process.

It might be worth chatting with Joffrey to see that no one is inexplicably left behind.

“Of course, he’ll be happy. He gets to see his favourite sister again,” I told her and her face lit up into a smile. “Oh, and you I suppose.”

That got her giggling and I distinctly heard Laenor snort in amusement from where he was trying to pretend he wasn’t eavesdropping. Viserys shot us a raised eyebrow and I controlled my mirth. No doubt he would be thrilled to have all of his children in one place once more. As much as he had been firm in sending my siblings away, it had pained him, no matter what accusations Alicent threw his way.

Although speaking of which, she had been conspicuous in her lateness to this little gathering and given the way she was looking slightly pale…

“Are you well, my Queen?” I asked in a low voice. She frowned, dark eyebrows forming an angry V over her eyes.

“Merely tired. My sleep has been uneasy of late. I thank you for your concern,” she said finally. Viserys caught my eye as if trying to judge if offence had been carried in my words.

“You have seen Mellos? Might I remind you there is still a poisoner on the loose? I would not wish to see you sick or worse.” And I do not want the blame if you drop dead in the middle of court and trust me, if you do I will get the blame.

“Rhaenyra, I am well enough, it is a mere reaction to the bad weather. Should these symptoms persist I will speak to Mellos if that would please you,” she snapped and this time Viserys laid a hand on both our shoulders.

“My daughter is merely concerned for you, my love.” She gave him a queasy smile but nodded and conceded the point. “But truly Rhaenyra, it is not appropriate to push such a thing in public.”

I wanted to protest that it had been genuine worry, if only for my own hide, than a need to show Alicent up but I was distracted by the parties final arrival and two excitable silver haired and violet eyed boys, each eager to greet their father.

And he was eager to greet them! He scooped them both up at once, laughing at their delight. When they’d left, he’d struggled to bend and pick one of them up, so great was his waistline. The fact he was ignoring one great lord and one heir probably did not even occur to him. Although Lord Jason Lannister and Elmo Tully did not seem to mind. Instead they focused preparing their children to meet the King.

“Your Grace,” Lord Jason said, when Viserys had finally dropped his two sons. “Might I introduce my daughters to you?”

Five blonde haired girls ranging from the oldest, Jocasta, at eleven to the youngest, Cerelle, who was only three and looking decidedly unsteady on her feet. Each gave a clearly practised bow and Viserys exclaimed compliments regarding their beauty and grace. Their mother, a Westerling by birth I believe, seemed thrilled at the attention they had garnered from him. No doubt they still sought that elusive royal marriage the Lannisters had been denied again and again. From the swell of Lady Johanna’s belly there would soon be another Lannister on their way.
I’m sure in canon that she doesn’t birth a son until later on but it seemed Jason Lannister had even less luck with producing a son than Borros did. The Lannisters gave their thanks once again for their invitation to the table, so to speak, concerning the war with Dorne. They assured my father their armies would be ready and at our backs. Then they thanked Viserys once again for the royal fostering and ceded the spotlight to the Tullys.

Elmo, the only son of the frequently ill Lord Grover Tully, was not what I expected when I thought of a Tully. His hair was a dark brown and his eyes were a similar shade, he wasn’t particularly tall or short… in fact if it weren’t for the fact he was in line to inherit the Riverlands he’d be completely unremarkable. Like Lord Jason, he’d brought his children with him. I’d wonder if he were seeking a royal match but my own letters had been completely ignored. The oldest, Kermit, was standing by his father, looking bored and disinterested. The other, Oscar, was safely in the grasp of a nearby maid.

Okay fine, you win. Every time I have to think about the Tullys I get the giggles!

As they greeted the king with yet more platitudes regarding Dorne and their princely fosterling, I decided to watch the reunion between brothers and sister. Aegon was quick to embrace Helaena, pulling her in for a hug. Like his sister, he’d sprouted a few inches. He’d turned nine a few weeks after Helaena had turned seven and I’d had a collection of figurines sent to him. Dragons, of course, they are all he would speak of in his letters.

I noted, as Aegon detached from Helaena and Aemond stepped forward to give his sister a fierce hug, that he wore the dagger I had gifted him so long ago. The one with the dragon hilt with emerald eyes. He caught my gaze and stepped closer. I was relieved to see less fear in his gait now, mostly he just seemed unsure, as if he expected rejection.

“Aegon! How has the West treated you?” I asked, managing an easy warmth in my voice. He smiled at that.

“Well, sister, the Rock is beautiful!” he said, relaxing a tad until Helaena escaped from Aemond long enough to hiss something into his ear. Aegon blinked and then blushed, stepping forward with his arms out. I swept him into a hug but he was still tense.

So his improvement only went so far. It was a start, something I could build on. All I had to do was maintain a friendly demeanour, play the patient big sister and wait for the ice between us to thaw further. It was somewhat gratifying that whatever Alicent had intended by his squiring in the Westerlands, she had at least paved the way for him to grow from the scared child he had been.

Although given the glare I’m getting from Aemond and the almost possessive way he’s clutching at Helaena, I’m going to say I’ve still got a long way to go with my second brother.
“Denys Corbray,” I said. From opposite me, Jeyne nodded stiffly. She was still nervous, I could
tell, and my attempts to distract her with gossip were not going well. “How is he related to
Gawen?”

“His third son,” she said. “But it is not for his links with his father I chose him.”

“Is it his dashing good looks?” I asked, teasing before I had properly thought the action through.
Thankfully she did not take offence, merely pulling a face.

“Whilst I am informed by those with an interest in such things he is quite handsome, I chose him
for his friendship with Jon Hardyng,” she said tartly. I scooped up my wine and took a sip as I
digested that statement. Jon Hardyng had been Laenor’s Vale fling. The two had exchanged letters
for a few months after the fact but even the friendship fizzled out after Joffrey’s return to Laenor’s
life.

“He knows about Jess?” I asked and she nodded.

“He does not mind my lady and I do not mind his knight. He has assured me he is capable of
producing heirs. I hope for a relationship similar to your own marriage,” Jeyne said. When I almost
choked on my wine her eyes widened. “I meant that we would be friends, I am not implying you to
be attracted to women.”

I’d never told her about my interest in Laena. Would she feel betrayed I had not shared it with her?
I took a deep breath and laid my glass down on the table opposite us.

“You would not be too far off though,” I told her, blood rushing to my cheeks and heart pounding
nervously. Her eyes widened and then she sat forward herself, her glass joining mine a moment
later. “For my lover is a woman.”

“Lov- A woman?” she breathed. “For how long? Is this new?”

“Relatively new. She is the only woman I have ever felt this way for.” Jeyne studied me for a
second then sat back.

“Well… I did not expect that,” she said finally. “Who?”

“Laena,” I replied.

“Laenor’s sister? That’s… convenient. Is she… does she like women or just you?” asked Jeyne. I
smiled, despite my flushed cheeks.

“She likes women,” I confirmed and Jeyne’s grin widened in response. “But she is taken, cousin.”

“By you!” Jeyne giggled. I struggled not to smile like an idiot as Jeyne collapsed into giggles.
Instead, I settled for sipping at my wine to hide my far too pleased expression. We fell into a
companionable silence after that, friends once again and rift between us closed. Even her demand
of a royal marriage in return for her own marriage no longer rankled. The Vale was a fine a place
as any and any son of Jeyne’s would at least be raised properly.

Had I married her to Kermit Tully, or his brother, I fancy Alys would have spent most of her time
preventing one disaster or another from setting her husband’s lands on fire.
“What is this?” said my aunt as she stepped into the room. Beside me, Jeyne choked on the sir in surprise. I could feel the sudden tension radiating off her as her breathing picked up slightly. That she had even gone to Runestone after the Siege of the Eyrie when I pushed her to was a miracle.

“A discussion,” I said politely and gestured for Rhea to take a seat on the opposite side of the table. I’d lured her to the manse on the pretext of babes. I had merely failed to mention I would have an accounting from her of the whole marriage business first.

“I see. I believe I know what about. Jeyne told you about the Sept.”

“Of course I did!” Jeyne burst out, fists clenched on the table. “Why did you not!?”

Rhea sighed and dropped into the chair opposite us, looking pale and tired suddenly. Jeyne’s anger seemed to stutter at the sight but it did not die. She clenched her jaw and squared her shoulders although I could see the start of tears forming in her eyes.

“You have to understand,” she said finally. “I… I had no other choice.”

“Then perhaps you could explain your position,” I said, reaching over and squeezing Jeyne’s hand. She spared me a small smile but it was brief and she still looked troubled after. Rhea massaged at her temples before taking a deep breath.

“It was not easy being married to Daemon Targaryen,” she said finally. “He was not a gentle man, or indeed, a kind man. I was not what he envisioned in a bride. He made it clear he’d wished for a Valyrian at the very least. He spoke of you being suitable even then, Rhaenyra. Indeed, he spoke of Laena being more suitable than I.”

That got my heart hammering.

“My Father granted me a small estate to start my family on. It was poisoned gift, it was understood Daemon would be the lord and master of it, not I. He controlled the purse strings, the servants… everything.” Including you, I did not say. “But soon even the petty victories he won over me entertained him no more. He was beginning to petition his Father to return to King’s Landing. Father was furious that there was no heir on the way - he blamed me, of course.”

Next to me Jeyne shifted uneasily, her hands tangled in her skirts as she pulled nervously at them.

“When Prince Baelon died, Daemon left anyway, no matter how much I bargained and… begged…” She continued after a moment of gathering herself. “Father wanted me to follow him, he demanded I accompany him to the Great Council.”

“But Daemon did not attend the Great Council,” I said, slowly. “He was confined to the capital and even then he managed to raise trouble.”

“Yes, it rather put Father on the back foot,” she chuckled but it was bitter and dark.

“What happened then?” asked Jeyne.

“Nothing changed for two years and then suddenly, Daemon was brother of the king and, at the time, believed to be his heir. Father was over the moon, of course. Queen Aemma had not had living child since Rhaenyra. He was so sure… that Daemon would be king one day that he began to get greedy.” Both Jeyne and I had scowls at that as she paused to swallow, as if the action were painful. “He began to get greedy. That’s when he began pushing the marriage with Willem.”

“He dismissed my ladies then. Except you,” said Jeyne in a small voice. “I remember that.”
“He should not have done. It tipped your Aunt to something in the works. She had already been pushing for you to be fostered with her. When Yorbert said no and dismissed every lady but me from your service, she wrote to the Faith with her husbands blessing. She gave strict orders that your marriage was to be approved by the crown. The High Septon commanded those in the Vale to refuse to marry you. According to the Septon, your Mother had gone as far as to add threats to her missive.”

I could not imagine my mother, quiet and gentle, angry enough to write threats. To the High Septon no less! Mother had been as devout as the Good Queen. The first thing she had ever read to me was the Seven-pointed Star. Beside me, Jeyne was scrubbing at her face, trying to control her tears.

“Father did not realise what she had done, of course, until that day in the Sept,” she told us. “Willem was so angry…”

“I don’t care about any of that! Why did you agree!?” demanded Jeyne, crying properly now. “You were my last Lady! You were supposed to be my friend!”

Rhea actually flinched before lowering her gaze.

“I was scared. Father was on the verge of having me banished from the Vale, cutting me off entirely from any protection my name gave but for what Daemon was willing to give me,” she said quietly. “Willem promised that would not happen.”

“Bullshit!” She was yelling now, on her feet. I wanted to reach out and calm her but it was not appropriate. “I heard you! You said something about a high price!”

“Daemon’s demands,” muttered Rhea. “He wanted me to… play host to a mistress. To treat her as SHE were my Lady. To play the servant in my own home! He knew not even father would countenance that.”

Jeyne dropped into the chair and glared at her, trembling slightly with the force of her rage.

“So you sacrificed me for your fucking pride,” said Jeyne, bitterly. “You could have borne the humiliation.”

“Could you? He hurt me! He would-” I wanted to vomit as the implications of her words sank in. “Had I bowed to that demand, I… he never would have stopped. It would have always been one thing more. Nothing more than seeing me utterly broken for daring to stand in his way would have satisfied him.”

“You didn’t have to sacrifice me though,” she sniffled. “You could have gone to my aunt. She would have protected us both. You could have taken us there.”

I very much doubt she could have. Yorbert would have raised the Vale for his meal ticket and Rhea… younger Rhea would have been as sheltered as any noble. Add in the Mountain Clans and it was like to be a disaster.

“You were not in danger, I swear. He would have done nothing,” pleaded Rhea. “Willem was not… he was brash, stupid and arrogant beyond measure but he was content with his whores.”

“I still would have been stuck with him!” she argued, voice raising in volume once again. “A man who I did not love, who did not love me… he would have ruled me!”

“The Queen would have stepped in! You would have had Rhaen-”
“And you are making excuses,” Jeyne screamed. Rhea’s teeth snapped shut so hard I heard them clack. “You sold me to him to protect yourself! He would have kept me as Daemon kept you!”

“In that you are wrong,” said Rhea. “He would have been infinitely kinder than Daemon.”

Then she caught my look and sighed, eyes closing once more.

“But you are right. I used the trust you had in me as your lady and led you into a trap you had little chance of escaping. I regretted it the moment I had done it. I told myself he would have done it anyway, that at least you would have me at your side. I told myself it was to save myself, that you would understand one day. I told myself many lies… but they were lies.” She paused for a moment. Jeyne was breathing heavy, tears still trickling down her face. “I was not much older than you and I was scared. I took the easy way out. I have well earned your hate. In truth, I was surprised we even reached the relationship we had before.”

Jeyne crossed her arms and glared out for the window for a while. I didn’t dare break the silence, Jeyne needed to come to her own decision in this. I had already interfered more than was strictly proper.

“It was for the Vale’s sake,” she said finally. “It was easier when you were not there.”

“You are a good woman, Jeyne. Better than I ever could be. I will always be your woman. Be it swords, an ear or advice, I shall give it freely,” she said. “I can only give that and hope that someday, it makes up for what I did.”

There was silence after that, broken only by Jeyne’s hiccuping sobs. Finally, though, she managed to bring herself back into the room.

“You will remain in King’s Landing,” she said quietly after a few shuddering breaths. “You will look after our interests here.”

Rhea winced and nodded.

“But… but I would like it much if we were to continue our correspondence.” That brought tears to Rhea’s eyes and she nodded furiously. My cousin turned to me and gave me a weak smile.

“I can not say I am glad for the mess you have stirred up but… perhaps you are right. Perhaps I needed to confront this.” She took another shuddering breath. “Mayhaps it will stop hurting so much. Mayhaps the nightmares will stop…”

“I am sorry,” whispered Rhea. Jeyne stared at her. “Did I ever say that? Words can not convey how sorry I am.”

Jeyne stood suddenly.

“I must go,” she choked out. “Thank you, Rhaenyra… call upon me tomorrow.”

And then she fled and my aunt and I were left alone. Rhea tapped along the armrest for a while and then sighed heavily.

“I gave an accounting,” she said.

“You did not tell me. You should have done,” I replied. I had no right to be bitter, Jeyne was the injured party here and yet… she hadn’t told me.
“I have become quite fond of you. I did not expect that,” she said after a pause. “I expected to find a spoilt princess as bad as the uncle she supposedly slept with. Yet you were just a child.”

I bristled at that and she waved a hand, preventing me from protesting.

“You are a woman grown with babes of her own but when you told me your tale in Runestone… you seemed so young. Then you actually came to look up to me. You wanted advice from me.” She grimaced as if in pain. “I wanted that just a little longer. It was selfish of me but I wanted you to hold me in high esteem a little longer.”

She looked miserable, half slumped over in her chair. My heart ached for all that I knew I should be angry. No, it was not my place to punish her or judge her. I do not know what I would have done in her place.

Jeyne is the one she owes the debt to and if I know Jeyne, she’ll extract a high price in recompense.

“Well, I know now,” I said finally. “Now I believe I promised you a visit with the babes?”

Her startled eyes flickered up to meet mine.

“Truly?” she asked.

“Yes, truly. Although I do hope your brought ear protection. Jocelyn is in fine form today.”
Rhea Royce’s wedding was possibly one of the most well-attended ceremonies in recent history, barring my own wedding over two years ago now. Nearly every Lord Paramount in the Seven Kingdoms and their principal bannermen were present. There were a few who did not show. Lord Willum Tyrell had always been prone to sickness and had, predictably, sent a raven to excuse himself from the upcoming War Council. It was muttered in some circles that he was less sickly and more a craven, not wanting to anger vassals far more powerful than himself.

Regardless of the reason, he would not be coming to the capital. Father would have to choose a representative for the Reach. I had no doubt it would be a Hightower of some description, the only question remained who.

The other notable exception was Lord Hagen Greyjoy. No reply had been forthcoming after the ravens were sent with their invitations despite Otto’s certainty they would be willing to use their fleet to raid the Dornish coast. I, myself, doubted he would the pass the opportunity up as well. It did not matter, I very much doubted Rhea wanted him present. I had never met him but I had been told he was unpleasant, even for an Ironborn.

True or not, Rhea was probably better off if he arrived after her marriage.

As to the ceremony itself, lavish was the key word. Viserys had offered to fund the feast and festivities, no doubt causing poor Lord Lyman to begin weeping given the man had been desperately trying to cut expenses to fund the war with Dorne. Father had been insistent though, in his view, Rhea had been given a grand ceremony once before, one I had apparently attended as a newborn babe even, but that had ended in tears and… well, a town on fire. I think this was father’s way of apologising to her. A way of saying that House Targaryen owed her a really, really fancy wedding at least.

“Stop fretting!” snapped one Rhea’s sisters as the Lady of Runestone twisted to look at herself in the mirror once more.

“I am not fretting, merely… checking,” she mumbled back, blushing halfway through as she realised she was indeed fretting. I covered my smile of amusement and made myself look busy by helping her youngest sister arrange the cloak she wore in her colours along her shoulders. I had to admit, her sisters did good work for all that I suspected at least one of their number did not wish this marriage to go ahead. That would be Ysilla, the mother of Rhea’s current Heir Apparent, Gunthor Royce and the future bearer of Lamentation, Willum Royce.

I had no clue who had Lamentation at the moment or even where it was. Although, if I knew my aunt, as like as not it was sealed in a vault in Runestone. Lamentation was a powerful symbol as to the rulership of Runestone, she would not allow anyone but herself to possess it.

Potential family issues aside, Rhea was resplendent. Her dark hair had been combed until it gleamed and plaited into an intricate style she wore as if it were some sort of crown, more regal than Father or Alicent or even both put together. The cloak that laid about her shoulders was no Maiden’s Cloak, for Rhea was not a maiden, but it was beautiful. The rich fabric a deep bronze and looking as if it were liquid metal about her shoulders. Underneath it, Rhea wore a sheer black dress, very much in the Vale style. She had edged it in bronze. These supported stems of yet more bronze, the ends of which had been beaten into the shape of the runes House Royce so prided itself on.
Armour, I realised, she is wearing her own version of the Royce’s famous bronze armour.

In all fairness, I reflected as we accompanied Rhea into the Sept, Torrhen Manderly was every inch the giddy husband-to-be. Right down to the ‘looking sick with nerves’ expression. He was also dressed to the nines in his own house colours, for all that he would soon be Lord Royce. I took my seat next to Laenor as Septon Eustace began his long, droning speech.

I let my attention wander from Eustace’s dry delivery of the traditional marriage ceremony and picked Jeyne out. She was sitting at the front, a man I did not recognise by her side. I suspected he was Denys Corbray solely due to a passing similarity to Ser Jaremy but I could not be sure. Jeyne’s face was a mask, inscrutable from where I was sitting, as she watched the couple recite their vows.

When Rhea and Torrhen finally sealed their union with a kiss, it was the Northern contingent that cheered the loudest, led by a man who could only be Ser Medrick, Torrhen’s older brother and heir to White Harbor. I did not miss the small smile that flickered across Jeyne’s features though. She was not a cruel woman, she could hold a grudge until it died of old age, but she was not a cruel woman.

And if the Gods were kind, Rhea and Jeyne could grow closer now on an even footing, without the spectre of the Sept hanging over both of them.

I joined in the cheering but studied the crowd, picking Gunthor out easily. He could not keep the scowl from his face or keep the resentment from his half-hearted clapping, I noted with some annoyance. He was Gunthor Coldwater in truth, his mother having married out of the family, yet he had styled himself as Gunthor Royce since he had reached his majority with no sign of an heir for Rhea. Rhea had let him because… well, who could have predicted Daemon’s idiocy.

I did not have much sympathy for his misfortune. He was not even a particularly clever man and, if the canon timeline could taken into account, he would have made a poor Lord of Runestone.

After all, it was sheer luck that Runestone had not been burned around his ears. I say sheer luck because relying on a daughter of Daemon Targaryen for restraint and tact in the face of the murder of the man she had, in all probability, loved was probably not the best strategy. I was not worried he would manage to somehow usurp Rhea by himself but he could be a potent force of disruption in the Vale if someone wished to weaken my allies.

Perhaps he could be offered a position to prove himself in Dorne, far away from my Aunt as she tried for her babe?

No… no, she’d realise what I was doing straight away. As much as it made my teeth itch, Gunthor was one problem I could not solve without making another one. Namely, Rhea going ballistic at me. I’d already pushed things by spying on Torrhen.

After the ceremony came the feast.

“You look grim, Rhaenyra,” said Laenor in a low voice as I scowled at the stuffed goose one too many times. “Is the food not to your liking?”

The food was fine. Exquisite even, although given the amount Laenor had stuffed his face with, he no doubt knew that.

“I am merely frustrated, husband,” I replied in an almost whisper after checking to see no one was too interested in the Realm’s Delight. The slight stress I put on the word ‘husband’ had him smiling even wider. The man knew well how to bait me, curse him. A toast from Ser Medrick’s
table distracted me from the impulse to kick him in the ankle in revenge.

“I wish to secure our support, to ensure our children do not see war. Yet all these oafs wish to speak of is Dorne,” I replied finally. His eyes softened and he laid his knife down to pat the back of my hand.

“We will get there. In a year we have all but annihilated the Greens and gained control of the court. When the war for Dorne is over, we can build upon that foundation,” he said gently.

He sighed when I said nothing, unable to give words to whirl of emotions and fears inside of me.

“We placated Borros, we have the Reynes and the Arryns on our side in no small part to the efforts you have put in recently,” he pointed out. “The Crownland lords are yours and Grover Tully is like to follow if he has any sense in his head.”

“Yet he ignores my overtures and plays host to one of my brothers,” I pointed out.

“It may be the Tullys are not the finest ally anyway. They likely ignored us because they know getting involved will see their lands burn. Either between our army from the Vale or her army from the Westerlands. Yet if we ensure the North is Black, the Riverlands will likely fall in line too,” he began. “The North we can win with our glass and the Westerlands we can hamstring with the Reynes and likely, the Marbrands. It would be every kingdom against, at most, the Reach and Dorne.”

I sighed.

“It seems to good to be true. We only have the Vale and the Reynes for certain. If I never birth a boy or if Alicent plays the marriage game astutely, we could lose our advantage very easily,” I mumbled finally.

“We will deal with challenges as they come,” he said. “Together. All four of us.”

“You are trying to placate me,” I realised and he blushed a little. “And Joffrey put you up to it.”

“Laena, actually,” he replied glibly and received an elbow to the side. “But you are sulking for nothing. Merely speaking to them all will leave an impression of you in their minds. Since Aegon is too young to do the same and Alicent too… guarded, you shouldn’t need to do much.”

“Just mingle, chat them up a bit and make it personal? Could it truly be that simple?” I wondered, spearing a bit of goose and liberally scooping up sauce.

“Mingle,” said Laenor slowly as I chewed.

“Mix with people,” I said once I’d swallowed. He shook his head, bemused.

“I shall never tire of the things you say sometimes, Rhaenyra,” he said finally, fond smile in place. Then he stopped as if remembering something and leaned in, conspiratorially.

“Did Laena speak to you of her plan?” he asked. “With Joffrey?”

I sighed. He’d managed to go a surprisingly long time without harassing me about it.

“I think it’s delightful,” I said. “A sibling for Lucerys in a year or so. Another potential dragon rider to strengthen House Velaryon.”

Laenor tapped his knife against he face thoughtfully and smeared sauce across his cheek causing
me to choke on my wine in amusement.

“A baby Joffrey?” he said finally. “Do you think one of our children might be engaged to his one
day?”

I froze half way through putting my wine back down. That had not even crossed my mind. My eyes
sought out the back of Laena’s head. She was turned away from me, sitting next to Joffrey, and
absorbed in conversation with Lady Elenda. The Lady of the Stormlands was frowning slightly and
Joffrey had his arm securely about her waist. The Gods only know what they were discussing.

No, no, a marriage between our children would be too weird.

Besides, as much as Laenor wanted to downplay marriage alliances, they were the best way too
make sure you damn well had an alliance. My next son would be Borros’ and my next daughter?
Well, it might be worth playing for the North or the Riverlands again at some point.

“We can not afford it,” I mumbled. He pursed his lips and then shrugged.

“Joffrey said something similar.” His tone was slightly sheepish and I smiled despite myself.

“How does Joffrey feel about having another babe with Laena?” He blinked and then caught on a
second later.

“He is cautiously excited. He did not expect to love Lucerys with the intensity he does. Did you
know Lucerys is saying ‘da-da’ now? He is. Joffrey is over the thrilled. He dragged me into the
nursery the other day to show me but…” he hesitated, then took a deep breath and forged on.
“There is always the potential that Laena is barren. He does not wish to invest himself in a child
that may never come.”

Ah yes. Yet one more reason for Joffrey to keep investigating. I thoroughly intend to make our
mystery poisoner drink his own medicine one of these days.
After Laenor’s little pep-talk I made my towards the Northern contingent, eager to hint at my future glass production only to find myself utterly waylaid by one Lord Roland Reyne.

“Your Grace,” he said. He was a handsome man with the famous red hair of the Reynes. He had been married by the time my hand was ‘available’ so to speak so I had never had the pleasure of much of his attention before. Now this man’s son would be married to Jocelyn. He would be one of my principal allies in the days to come, I needed to know him. I needed to know which way he would jump or how he would react in certain situations.

But not right now. Right now I wanted to continue my push for more allies with Lord Rickon.

Lord Reyne was not a complete unknown to me, I reflected when he refused to take the hint. His son was called Rolph. The boy had just passed his first name day and had been left in the arms of his mother, a Marbrand by birth, as his father travelled to the capital to join his Liege lord in discussion for the war and to, secretly, sign the betrothal that would see his house secure a royal marriage. Providing something disastrous did not happen Jocelyn’s betrothal would be announced alongside Alys’ on her tenth nameday.

When Rolph was old enough he would squire under Laenor and Lord Roland would pay through his nose for the prestige both that and the marriage would bring his family in turn, if I had anything to do with it. I could not rely on only Velaryon gold to fund my efforts in the Dance should Tyland Lannister make off with the entire treasury again. That had already been proved to me with the burning of Spicetown. Indeed, it was partially rebuilt and Corlys was still having to cut corners and take out loans.

“Lord Roland, how are you finding the feast?” I asked, focusing on him. He gave me a wide smile.

“Well enough, I’ve found myself quite looking forward to weddings recently,” he chuckled and I tried not to twitch at the insinuation. “Joyous occasions. I wish Lady Royce every happiness she can find!”

“I’m sure she appreciates that, my Lord,” I replied, unsure of why he’d actually waylaid me. Gauging my reaction perhaps? Checking to see if the betrothal was still set to be agreed?

“Mind you, Lord Jason’s been enthusiastic about marriage recently as well,” his voice was nearly a growl at that, his cheer false and barely able to mask it. I paused, examining that phrase.

“You believe he expects one in the future?” I asked and the red-headed Lord shrugged.

“You know as little as I do then?” he asked and realisation smacked me in the face.

“Indeed. I would look to the Vale for future weddings. I’m told Lady Jeyne may finally announce she’s picked a suitor she likes the look of,” I told him and he did not manage to mask his look of surprise.

“And here I thought she was bedding every man in the Vale first?” he sneered and my smile became slightly fixed.

“I assure you my cousin is innocent of such accusations. She merely has particular tastes, namely men who will not try and rule her.” Roland scowled.
“No man ought to let a woman rule him.” Then his eyes widened as I frowned. “In marriage, Your Grace. A woman with a title is the ruler of her lands, of course.”

“Indeed,” my tone was chilly and he suddenly looked very on edge. If this was a view he passed onto his son, Laenor would be set to showing him differently from the moment he set foot on Dragonstone. “Have I mentioned that my girls have been presented with dragon eggs? Jocelyn’s is a gift from Lady Rhaenys.”

“Truly, Your Grace? Dragons are a different matter entirely. Dragons rule men.” His excuse did not hide the fact that he looked as if he wanted to dive out of the window over his misstep and my threat. “Ah! I do believe Ser Alastor is attempting to gain my attention.”

I watched as he retreated into a nearby crowd, unsure of who Ser Alastor was or if he were even in the room. Eyes would have to be kept on Roland and his son. I would not marry Jocelyn to a man who thought her beneath him like Lord Roland evidently viewed women. Then I made my way over to the Northern contingent in time to see Bennard and Borros start up an arm wrestling match. Curious, last I had checked Borros was in a fine temper about the ‘Northern cowards’ refusing to send any real force south, citing issues at the Wall and logistical problems bought about by winter.

“Lord Rickon, it is a pleasure to see you here.” The elderly Lord of Winterfell dragged his eyes from his much younger brother’s display and looked up at me, before giving me a barely respectful bow. I ignored the disrespect and seated myself next to him. Lord Rickon was not a big man in the way his brother was. He was slim and age had only eaten away at his build. He boasted a thick, wiry grey beard and longer hair tied back in a tail of a similar shade. Even his eyes seemed tired as he examined me in the same way I was doing to him.

“Your Grace,” he grunted by way of greeting when he realised I was not going away. “How may I serve you?”

“Perhaps a conversation. I do believe we have never spoken in much depth?”

“Humph, you don’t want to speak with me, you want to gauge how loyal I am to you,” he said. I had expected blunt from this man. He was famous for eschewing Southern politics even in the face of his own brother’s insistence that he should get involved and let the murder of Walton Stark go. There had been five different lords since then and all of them had been angry about the mutineers.

“Then I shall dispense with politeness also. I want your allegiance should anyone threaten my crown and I can provide boons in turn that will aid the North,” I replied, surprised that I was so close to losing my temper with this impolite curmudgeon.

“What boons could a Southern Princess possibly provide? Will you magic away the Winter? Promise to return what is rightfully ours? Or will you use the North as your dumping ground for the unwanted again. Send your criminals and traitors to the North and forget about them as they damage us in turn,” he sneered. “Or will you offer me the hand of one of your daughters for my son? So that you can throw Northern lives onto the blades of those that rise up against you.”

There was a small bubble of silence spreading from us now, even Bennard and Borros had ceased their shenanigans to stare at the elderly Lord of the North and his heated words.

“I am willing to offer more than vague promises,” I said. “I am willing to give glass for glass houses to the North, I am willing to give Northern Lords political appointments and I am willing to support the Wall with food and gold.”
“Hah! Glass houses? You would saddle every house in the North with enough debt to sink them and we do not require your political appointments. Leave, Princess. If you and your brother wish to fight like children over a Throne, the North will not involve itself.”

Angry and embarrassed I left, feeling like a child that had just been given a public dressing down in front of all their peers. I did not need to Northerners anyway. Perhaps I might have better luck with the Greyjoys, who had arrived recently and refused point blank to engage in any politics. Their entire contingent had taken up residence in one of Joffrey’s brothels and refused to leave. I was assured they were making quite the nuisance of themselves there. I got halfway back to the High table when someone caught my arm and pulled me back. Angry, I turned to let them have it only to find myself face to face with Bennard Stark.

“I apologise for my brother, Your Grace. I insist you not come away with the impression that all Starks and Northerners are so impolite,” he said. “Just my brother, I’m afraid. I assure you I am not the old grump he is.”

My eyebrows rose at that and I had to wonder what could create two completely different people. He led me to the dancers, caught me about the waist and managed to lead me through a dance without stepping on my toes, admittedly he lacked the grace Laenor did. As we danced, none paid attention to us. Each were more caught up in their own conversations or partners but he still lowered his voice all the same.

“I am also not as ignorant as he is when it comes to the goings on of Southern politics and families. I have heard rumours that soon the Myrish may not be the only ones producing glass of a sufficient enough quality to be used in the construction of a glass house?” He framed it as a question but I could tell it was more of a statement. “And now that House Manderly has links with you through Lady Rhea Royce, a certain family may be willing to cut the price of such glass for your most loyal subjects.”

“Generous discounts and, perhaps, rich gifts,” I replied and his eyes almost sparkled with delight. “I try to be a very good friend to those loyal, after all.”

“We northerners are fiercely loyal creatures, Your Grace. Fiercely,” he said with a rakish grin and I stiffened as I realised he was flirting with me. The idea of it brought heat to my cheeks. It was pleasing after spending so long feeling like a useless lump, even if Laena was always quick to demonstrate her attraction when I grumbled about it. “But perhaps I can demonstrate our fierceness in solving this issue we have with Dorne?”

“I have no objections to northern allies in the upcoming war but I was under the impression Lord Rickon was struggling to bring his troops south?” At the seemingly innocent question I did not miss his eyebrows draw together in anger.

“Not as much trouble as he makes out. I offered to take a few thousand men, men who wish to go to relieve the burden on their families this winter and my brother denied me the use of his ships, his gold and his guard.” I tried not to look surprised he was even admitting this. That came dangerously close to treason, after all. “Lord Borros has offered to equip us should we join him but I still need gold and ships.”

I let my eyes flicker to the High table where Laenor was sipping at his wine and watching us both, eyes wary. I gave him a smile then tilted my head to the main doors. He caught my message and rose, disappearing from the hall a moment later.

“Ships I can probably manage. Gold is a dicier prospect. Come, let us speak with my husband.”
He was waiting for us in a small alcove, evening light casting him in gold. As we reached him, he caught me by the waist and dropped a kiss to my lips. I did not miss Bennard’s chuckle at the sight. I also did not miss the firm look he directed at the northern lord afterwards.

“Bennard wishes to bring some northern troops south but his brother, awfully rude to me by the way, is denying him access to ships and funding.”

“Indeed, Ser Laenor, your wife hinted you may be able to help with transport?” Bennard said.

“We still have a few cogs we designed to ferry troops back and forth. In truth, our shipyards have been focusing on rebuilding the galleys we lost,” he explained. “Father is eager to have our naval dominance of the Narrow Sea back.”

“If I can get the gold, will you allow us use of the ships?” he asked. Laenor studied him for a moment and then nodded.

“You will not be able to bring a huge amount of troops. A few thousand at most,” he warned him.

“I have about two and half thousand men that will follow me to Dorne. Do not worry, Your Grace, what we lack in numbers we make up for in skill and ferocity.” There was no more flirting in his tone now that Laenor had so obviously marked his territory.

“I have long held Northerners in high esteem, Bennard. I have no doubt you can impress even Lord Borros with your skill.”

“If you can obtain the gold,” Laenor reminded him, hand possessively winding around my waist.

“I’ll work on it, do not worry. With ships and equipment lined up I can get some of my brothers lords well interested,” he told us. Then he smiled widely. “Now, I believe I have to test that Stormlander bastards arm once more! Good day, Your Grace, Ser Laenor.”
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Laenor insisted on dancing with me for the rest of the feast, something which quite honestly surprised me. He’d never shown a trace of jealousy over me before, not when the River lords had competed for my hand or when Harwin Strong had all but slobbered over me in the same room as him. Yet for some reason Bennard Stark had him all but peeing on me to mark his territory. I knew it was Bennard specifically because every now and again, he would direct a glare over to the Northern contingent.

He knew where my heart lay, so why had this got him up in arms? When I asked him as such he looked extremely disgruntled.

“You were blushing,” he finally muttered when I pushed. “You only blush with Laena and I.”

“So you had to beat you chest like a monkey from Sothorys to warn him off?” I asked, more amused than offended. He flushed at the implication but I felt his hands tighten on my waist. “As I recall this time a year and a half ago you were all for me making new friends.”

“You found a ‘friend’ in Laena,” he whispered directly into my ear causing gooseflesh to rise across my arms. “And you are the mother of my children. A year and a half ago, I did not think that possible.”

“And now you are ready to leap to defend my honour,” I teased. “Be still my beating heart. You realise, of course, he was only doing it in the hopes I’d ply him with ships and gold.”

“He shouldn’t do it at all,” Laenor grumbled but let the matter lie for the rest of the night. Verbally, at least, but he left no man in the hall unaware that any rumours of my availability to other men were just that, rumours. As it turned out, he was not the only Velaryon sibling that had taken notice of Bennard Stark’s flirting.

“Lord Stark’s brother seemed quite taken with you,” Laena observed after the feast. I paused in my attempts to clean myself, dropping the cloth into the basin.

“He was quite the charmer.” Behind me, through the mirror, I saw her frown. “But you may be assured Laenor was quick to warn him off.”

“You were blushing and giggling.” My smile became a smirk as she met my eyes through the mirror.

“Many things make me blush, Laena. Frequently it is you. Are you worried, my love?” At the implication she blushed but her frown did not leave her face. That was not a good sign.

“Worried? Not at all.” Ah, said too firmly and too quickly. I rose and turned to face her. She watched me with wide violet eyes, tracking me as I sat down next to her and brought her fingers to my mouth, laying a kiss over the back of her fingers.

“You know I only have eyes for you. I love you. If you would prefer me not to flirt than I shall cease my flirting,” I told. She looked at her knees and bit her lip. “What is it?”

“Nothing! Well… no, it’s nothing.” When I merely raised an eyebrow, she sighed. “You aren’t… you aren’t doing it to make me jealous, are you?”

What does this girl think of me?
“Of course not. I assure you that whilst I do find your jealousy somewhat pleasing, I would never do it on purpose. I am not given to mind games,” I told her, giving her hand a squeeze. She sighed.

“I did not mean it as an insult-”

“I did not take it as one,” I said far too quickly. She gave me a grimace and I gave in. “Very well. I did but I shall not hold it against you.”

“Please understand, I thought Daemon the dashing prince. I knew he could be thoughtless and, at times, vicious,” she said and I tried my best to hide my surprise. Even with the appalling job I did, she did not notice. She was staring at the wall, a distant look in her eyes. “But he could be spontaneous and romantic. He would quote poetry or tell funny stories. For all you warned me of what he was, I did not see it.”

“He could charm the small clothes from a Septa,” I said and she smiled but there was no joy in it.

“I know you must not believe it but I do know what people are like. I know when people lie. When they are discomforted or afraid-”

“I am aware that you are incredibly observant when you wish to be,” I interrupted, feeling like I needed to point out I did pay attention to her. That I did not believe her to be entirely brainless.

“But I did not see it in him! I did not see his true nature. Had you asked me then if I believed he could burn Spicetown I would have laughed you from the room!” she protested. “I did not see it and I let him…”

She paused then, her violet eyes finding anything in the room but me.

“After Spicetown, after everything he said and everything I was told, I had reason to think over our romance.” I remained silent. I did not think she wanted to hear my opinion on Daemon once more. “You knew him from when he was Commander of the City Watch? From before the Queen’s death?”

“I did,” I said slowly and she nodded.

“You spoke of Mysaria like you knew her?” That took me by surprise but I couldn’t parse the look on her face and she would not face me.

“I knew of her. Mostly from Alicent.” She grimaced at that.

“He truly… forgive me, I know you said he bedded her but… did he truly?” she asked.

“She was taken with him the moment she saw him. Just as he was with her for a while. Yet he bored of her eventually. Just like he bored of many things back then. By the time he became Commander their relationship was almost burnt out,” I told her.

“That was when he met Mysaria,” she said and it was statement more than a question.

“I believe so. They called him Lord Fleabottom back then. Prince of the City if you were being polite. There was not one brothel or seedy tavern that did not know him.” She had to know this already. She was revisiting old stories and rumours because she was putting something off. But what? “I admit Father was keen I not hear too much of his exploits. Yet I heard enough from Alicent, Otto and Mother to put two and two together.”

“Did you ever meet Mysaria? Could you recognise her if she were described to you?” Laena asked.
Now that did surprise me. She caught my look as well because she turned towards me as I struggled to parse her meaning.

“I never met her. I heard her described as the Pale Wyrm but... well, that she is pale and of descent from Lys is the best description I have,” I said when she merely continued staring at me, waiting for an answer. “Laena, what is this about?”

“I think I met her.”

“Mysaria?” In what setting would Laena and Mysaria ever meet unless- “Did you go to some sort of brothel?”

From the colour she turned, my guess was dead on the mark. She caught my hands and pulled me closer.

“I did not mean to! He invited me to see Bloodstone’s sights. He was- we went for a walk on the beach. He said we could get a drink nearby- I did not know!” At her panic, I pulled her close. We stayed like that for a while until I felt some tension leave her body. Then I pulled back.


“I went to Bloodstone. You know that. I was eager. I would see battle, it was new and exciting. I remembered your warnings though. And Laenor’s. Even Mother’s. I was determined I would not be Father’s weapon against you. That I would not become Daemon’s tool,” she started. “But he was kind. Funny. Charming. He helped me adjust to Bloodstone, he took me flying, pointed out the nicer delicacies. He made it clear he was interested in me. I was interested by that interest, by his intensity.”

“Because he was the first man you’d ever looked at and seen yourself with?” I asked, trying to understand. She shrugged.

“I do not know. I know he is the only man I’ve ever... liked,” she admitted. “But I was still determined! I was still determined I would not. I swore an oath to you and I told myself I would keep it, even if I could not see the monster you portrayed him as.”

“That had to have changed somehow,” I stated, trying to keep my voice level at the reminder of that broken oath. Gods, she was clearly trying to tell me something incredibly personal and here I was on the verge of raging again.

“We went to a tavern. It was not a tavern. Or maybe it was-” She shook her head. “There was a woman dancing there. Daemon was... openly appreciative of her. She was... pale and Lysene.”

“You think that could have been Mysaria? I was given the believe she stopped dancing the day Daemon took her as a mistress,” I mused. Mysaria was clever, dangerous and ambitious. She did not dance a day longer than she’d needed too. Instead she’d ingratiated herself at Daemon’s side. Rumour had it his men even took orders from her on occasion.

In retrospect, that was probably how Otto’s men died. If they had believed Daemon’s men to be on their side the resulting fight would have ended badly for them. Like a certain future Northern Lord.

“But the description? Pale, Lysene... it could be her,” she insisted.

“I will admit the point. It could be,” I said, giving in. Laena nodded.
“We drank together, Daemon and I. We talked of dragons and flying. Of travel… myths and legends. He…” she paused and took a deep breath. “He bought me dance from her. I think I was drunk enough… I must have been looking too intently. He said it was a jape.”

Anger stole my breath away and judging by the frightened look I got Laena had completely misinterpreted it. She forged onward as if she feared I were moments away from ejecting her from my room.

“He knew. He knew from the moment she approached. Rhaenyra, I think he knew from… from before we left on that walk.” The way she spoke was almost as if she were begging me for something although for what I did not know.

“Of course he knew,” I said, fighting for volume control. “He knew. He played you. That bastard. If I ever see him again I will geld him and make him eat it.”

She hung her head and stared into her lap.

“We argued once. A terrible argument. He was… I drew back. I told him we should not be…” She was on the verge of breakdown again, stopping to gather herself when her voice failed her. “The next day he had her play maid to me. In front of my father!”

“He threatened you?” How could she not have seen everything he was? Then again, was it not like a frog being put to boil? You put a frog in hot water and it will jump out but put a frog in cool water and slowly turn up the heat…

“He acted like I was over reacting… that it was not a threat. That it was not even he that assigned her to me that day… I fell for it. I thought I knew people. I thought I knew him. I was so, so sure I did.” Her voice was barely a whisper but what she actually wanted to say came across clear as day.

“You think you know me?” She flinched. No rage came to me. That surprised me. The implication I could be half as callous and cruel as him would have sent me spiralling into anger in any normal situation. “Oh Laena…”

She pushed her face into my neck as I pulled her close and gradually, slowly, relaxed as I rubbed comforting circles over her back.

“I do not want to hurt you. Please tell me if I do,” I whispered. “And I will do the same for you. If what we are is to survive, we need to be honest with one another.”

“Honesty,” she whispered to her self.

She was honest about many things that night. By the end of it, I was ready to invent a whole new realm of torture solely to put my Uncle through.
As she sat alone in her husband’s quarters, she allowed herself time to reflect. Her mistakes and triumphs, she could see everything that had led her to this moment. It was not often she reflected. To look back was to become lost in old fears and losses.

To remember her Father as he was brought grief and relief in equal measure. She hated it. He would have made her a puppet, used her children to further himself… She had not always felt this way about him. Once she had loved him as fiercely as any daughter should love her Father.

That had changed when he had brought her to the capital with him all those years ago. The Old King, wise even at his advanced age, had feared the influence of Corlys Velaryon. That grasping snake had gotten so close to the Throne - seducing a woman young enough to be his granddaughter in the process…

Jaehaerys was more cunning by half though. His chosen heir was not the woman Corlys had despoiled but Viserys, son of Baelon, and to make sure that point was hammered home to the Sea Snake he’d invited Father to ensure Viserys would have support beyond the Vale lords.

Even with three dragons to Viserys’ one, Corlys would not be able to seize the Throne with the might of the High Tower at Viserys’ back.

Her Father had bade her to get close to the King; to care for him in his dotage. She had and in turn, Jaehaerys had cared for her. He’d asked how she was, asked after her hobbies and interests and as he’d grown more addled by his illness, even mistaken her for his own daughter.

That was how a father was supposed to be, she had realised then, they were supposed to see you as something more than a mere plaything. More than a tool to advance themselves.

Closeness to the King had bought her into the Targaryen family itself. Hindsight told her that this was what her father had wanted above all. Her Father had been so proud when she had gotten closer still, securing a new place after Jaehaerys had died by the Princess’s side as one of her ladies.

Rhaenyra had been so small then. So eager to give love and desperate to be loved in return. She had been Aemma’s only child in a decade of marriage, and Father had wanted her close enough to snare Viserys in the event of Aemma’s death even then.

She unclenched her hands as her nails caused pain to bloom across her palms.

How much would have changed if she had just done as Father had asked? If she had not caught the eye of Daemon Targaryen? If she had not fallen under his sway? He had been like a dream then. A dashing prince interested in her. They had ridden together, hunted together and hawked together. He had flattered her, read her poetry and told her the funniest tales.

He had told her she looked almost Valyrian. That he was attracted to her because of that. He flattered her, told her she could almost be Rhaenys’ mother in truth with how similar they looked at times. He’d told her she could be Jaehaerys’ daughter in truth when she had confessed her deepest desire to him.

She had begged her Father to pursue an annulment for him, begged to be married to him. Her Father had been furious at Daemon’s interference, doing all he could to see Daemon humbled.
She had gotten angry with him. She had not understood then, not truly, what the prince was. She had been in love and she had wanted to force the matter. She had given herself to him. He had taken her maidenhead. Her most happiest moment. Her life a downward spiral since. She’d peaked at five and ten. The rest seemed like some sort of nightmare. Some sort of punishment.

Experience told her he’d only wanted her for the potential annulment and when that was not forthcoming, he’d become restless. His eye had wandered from her and found a Lysene whore. She, a daughter of the High Tower, usurped by a mere whore!

After he’d killed the men she’d sent to remove the problem, he’d killed her childhood for good measure. He’d revealed it was all lies. He’d called her the plainest of Andals. He’d dismissed her as some empty headed chit. He’d boasted about what he’d done to her Father.

Her Father’s fury could have put Viserys to shame. He’d been on the verge of sending her home when Queen Aemma had died.

Then her shame did not matter because Daemon was gone and she could be made Queen. All she had to do was make Viserys love her. Daemon had given her the tools to do so. She had taken every lesson he’d taught her and brought it to bear on his brother. It was to be her revenge. Daemon would hear of the marriage and know. It had been enough to calm her Father’s fury but not enough regain his trust or earn his pride once again.

He’d told her to stay on her back and produce heirs. Nothing more. Nothing less.

How angry he’d been when she had done all he asked, made herself the puppet he wanted, and Viserys had claimed Rhaenyra as his heir first and foremost despite the son she’d given him. Not as angry as she had been though. She had put aside everything she was, played the good and doting wife, and her son was still being denied his birthright! He would not have set aside a son that the Velaryon bitch had given him. That another Valyrian, another dragon, had given him.

Her son, who should be king, was being set aside for his sister! As if she were a lesser wife than Aemma Arryn. Aemma Arryn who had looked as Andal as she had. As if her son was lesser than Rhaenyra! Hateful, arrogant Rhaenyra!

Rhaenyra who would rather the girl barely three years her senior play at being her mother than the woman who had half raised her! Arrogant, ungrateful…

She took a deep breath.

Rhaenyra was all too happy to be placed before her sons. Oh, Viserys liked to protest she had pushed for Aegon to be made heir and Rhaenyra loved to play the proud older sister but she knew better. Rhaenyra wanted the Throne. She would sooner die than give it up to its rightful occupant.

She was a Usurper in all but name and not even the Seven seemed to want to punish her! Everything seemed to favour her! Viserys was seemingly blind to the Velaryon whore and her bastard spawn. Rhaenyra had somehow persuaded her sword-swallow husband to get her with trueborn children! Somehow getting him to give her twins! It was all so unfair!

Unfair and wrong!

And Viserys acted as if she were in the wrong!? As if, by trying to protect her son’s birthright, she was the villain? He’d locked her up! Like she was some kind of criminal…

Guilt slithered through her veins at that and she fought to control herself once more.
It had been Larys that had saved everything. He had saved her life, her father’s life, her brother’s life and likely her children’s too. The Tears of Lys had been an expensive poison. Completely traceless. It would have been simple to ensure it ended up in Rhaenyra’s juice, no one else drank it when wine was available, and Mellos did not know enough to spot it. No one would have ever known. Just another girl dead in childbirth.

She had forgotten about Rhaenyra’s Maester. Larys had not.

So he’d poured a king’s ransom in gold down a drain and told her not to be so foolish. Rhaenyra’s death would mean nothing if her own came on its heels. She knew he was right. Viserys would see Rhaenys and her children take the throne before Aegon should she be implicated in Rhaenyra’s murder.

He had been right.

She did not know who had killed Alys Strong but when she found them, she would kill them slowly. Was it luck that saw the girl dead on the night she had picked for Rhaenyra to die or had the assassin been seeking to mask one murder with another? Who could have known her intentions beyond her own loyal Greens?

It did not matter. She would have the truth eventually. Larys was a clever man. He would deliver the culprit to her. He said, and she agreed, that her father had been killed by the same conspirator. One eager for war and unwilling to go along with his plans. In the meantime, the rest of the court could wail about the Dornish. She alone would avenge her father.

The slam of a door had her looking up. Her husband stood before her, smiling widely. She returned it with practised ease.

“My Queen,” he said by way of greeting. His happiness lit his entire face up. It was easier to play the loving wife now that he no longer resembled some fat fool in a mock crown. A shame that he insisted he would not grow a beard.

Another testament to a dead woman she would always come second to. Queen Aemma had been well fond of that ridiculous moustache.

“Alicent, are you well?” he asked, concern radiating from him when she did not answer straight away, tongue held still by memories of the past. She blinked the tears from her eyes.

Her father was dead. The child she had so loved had become a hate-filled woman. Her children were all she had left. She would deliver them what was theirs by right.

“I am fine, my love. Merely overwhelmed.” She would honour her Father’s last advice to her. His sacrifice had given her the keys to save herself. She would stay by her husband’s side. She would play the tamed and meek good Queen. She would play nicely with Rhaenyra.

And in the darkness, Larys and her would rebuild the Greens. They would destroy the Blacks.

Time was on her side. Her Father’s final gift. Her second chance. She would not waste it.

“I quite understand!” her husband told her, smiling as he took her hand. “But another child? Truly we could not be more blessed!”
A babe.

Good gods, she was pregnant again. I should have known making it through an entire meal without her usual sniping was an indication she had something up her sleeve. This was her plan then, the plan the would ensure she would stay by my Father’s side. He would not send her away if she was once again expecting his child. A more selfish part of me was keen to point out that in the future the babe will be one more marriage to secure an alliance for the Greens.

Father beamed at us all and it seemed my siblings were each digesting that news in their own way. Aegon looked cautiously excited, Helaena was frowning as if something had worried her and Aemond was, in typical Aemond fashion, glaring at his shoes.

That was interesting and worrying in equal measure.

Jeyne’s letters had mentioned Helaena’s nightmares a few times during her stay in the Vale of Arryn. Much less than the amount she received after first coming into my care but still undeniably present. Had she seen this babe? Was that why she was worried? As for Aemond, I knew he was not fond of Daeron. Did he perceive this new babe in the same way?

And what did I feel for this babe? Independent of his or her role in Alicent’s scheming? Another sibling, younger than the twins… would he try and insist they get along like he had done Jacaerys and Daeron in the original timeline? I put aside the worry in my gut and smiled with joy I did not truly feel.

“A new babe, Father! You both have my congratulations!” I gave Alicent a polite hug and then turned to Viserys and promptly nearly had my ribs broken as he pulled me close.

“I’m glad you’re excited for him,” he muttered into my ear. “You make so proud with your love for your siblings.”

“Him, Father? The babe has not even quickened. It could yet be a girl?” I said, pulling away and trying to hide how good it felt to have his pride. He was so much like the man I remembered from my childhood now. Physically fit and not… wasting away like he had been since his marriage to Alicent and Aegon’s birth.

“A girl or a boy! I care not,” he laughed.

“I confess that I wish for a girl this time,” said Alicent, smiling fondly at Helaena, who beamed back. Perhaps absence does make the heart grow fonder because I distinctly remember many arguments about archery and me before she left for the Vale.

“You must look after them all in the coming months. They will need their big sister,” Viserys said, catching my arms in his hands. Judging by the dark look that flickered over Alicent’s face briefly, she was not of the same opinion.

“It goes without saying,” I told him, trying to hide my amusement at Helaena’s preening under her mother’s gaze.

“Thank you, Rhaenyra,” Alicent said as Aegon decided he’d had enough of letting me steal his thunder and pressed closer to his mother, looking curious. She let him place a hand on her stomach. Aemond was quick to copy him, looking unconvinced. We watched as Aegon bent low and
whispered something only Aemond could hear. Given that whatever it was had Aemond change from unconvinced at the prospect of a new sibling was a good one to determined. It was somewhat adorable to see his little face scrunch up as he nodded.

“Perhaps you can even get her one of those midwives!” Viserys chuckled and Alicent actually twitched. Honestly, I didn’t think people did that. “Maybe the girl that delivered your twins? She knew her stuff.”

“Alannys has returned to Dragonstone, Father,” I told him. I had been sad to see her go but if my newest midwives could boast they had been trained by the woman who delivered Luke and the twins they’d be in a lot higher demand. “We are opening up a small school.”

“Truly?” said Alicent, sneer in place. “I wonder how many would truly want a midwife. We have Maesters for a reason.”

I did not take the bait. Father would likely start sulking if we started bickering at the dinner to announce Alicent’s pregnancy, even if we had gotten through the actual meal without it devolving. Instead, I smiled at her as if she had merely asked the weather or the time.

“A fair few already,” I told her, before turning to my siblings. “And what do you feel about having a new brother or sister?”

“Excited!” said Aegon, pulling away from his mother’s stomach. “I hope he’s a brother. Then I can teach him and Daeron how to fight.”

“You can teach me how to fight,” sulked Aemond, prompting his brother to thump him in the arm. He raised those sulky eyes to mine. “Will he cry a lot like Daeron?”

“Possibly. Hopefully not as much as Jocelyn.” He tilted his head at that. Aegon and Aemond had yet to meet the twins after all. The prospect should not make me nervous yet it did. They were children, they would not harm them…

“Jocelyn cries all the time,” Helaena informed her brothers. “Except when I’m holding her. She doesn’t even stop crying for Lady Laena!”

I tried my hardest to suppress the chuckle that prompted. Helaena had not realised she was not the twins only Aunt until recently. Since that realisation she was determined to be recognised as the better of the two. She turned those wide violet eyes to me and I rewarded her with a smile of pride. She grinned in response. Hmmm, she was missing a tooth. When had she lost that?

“But I want a sister. Then I can be like Rhaenyra to her!” Awwww, that was genuinely touching in a way. I scooped her close and she giggled as I rearranged her on my knee.

“Will he have to go away like us?” asked Aemond plaintively and Alicent and I both froze at that. “Or will he stay and Daeron get sent away?”

“We did not send you away, Aemond,” said Viserys gently. “It is a fostering. It is too help you learn and grow up.”

“Do you not like Riverrun? I like Casterly Rock. Helaena likes the Gates of the Moon.” It seemed Aegon was becoming something of a peacekeeper. Although I really did not miss the nervous looks Alicent kept shooting Viserys’ way. My bet was on Aemond’s bad behaviour being the result of Alicent winding him up.

Still with everything that had happened since, I truly couldn’t see him blowing up at that if it did
come out.

“There aren’t any dragons at Riverrun.” Of course that’s his reason. Then he turned that sulking face to me. “You said I could not have a dragon when I was five. I am six now. Helaena was six when she got Morghul.”

“I said your mother said you could not have a dragon,” I replied, grateful I’d reserved myself a get out all those months ago. A spasm of amusement crossed my father’s face but he hid it with a cough. Alicent did not bother to hide her look of annoyance.

“Can I have a dragon now?” Aemond asked her. She looked to both of us for help and found none before she slumped in defeat and sighed.

“If you father or sister is willing to take you to the drag-”

“I want a a big one,” he demanded, interrupting her.

“No,” Alicent’s reply was fast and final. Unfortunately, Aemond had not got that message.

“Why!? I want a big one like Vhagar! I don’t want a small one like Frost!” He complained, actually stamping his foot.

“A big dragon would require you going to Dragonstone. It is incredibly dangerous. If you want a dragon, you will have settle for going to the pit and claiming one there,” I told him, backing Alicent up. She shot me a grateful, if puzzled, look.

She should honestly not be that puzzled. The biggest dragon on Dragonstone was Vermithor. I am not letting Aemond Targaryen, potential future war crime extraordinaire, get his hands on the Bronze Fury.

“But I am six,” he argued as if it were the most flawless argument in the world. Alicent raised her eyes to the ceiling and Viserys remembered he was the boys father and that if he did not want a flambéed son, he’d better get involved.

“Your sister and mother are right, Aemond,” he said gently. “If you want a dragon now, you must have one from the pit.”

“And if I want a big dragon?” he asked, frown on his face.

“You must be six and ten.”

“That’s not fair!” shouted Aemond, glaring at his father.

Honestly, it was stroke of genius. There was no way he’d wait that long. He might say he would but give him enough time to see his siblings all mounting their own dragons and him stuck on the ground, I’ll bet he’ll change his tune.

“There is always Dreamfyre, my love,” said Alicent gently.

“No!” cried Helaena and we all turned to look at her. Her eyes flickered to me for a second and I frowned. “Dreamfyre is small!”

That did it, Aemond screwed his face up. Meanwhile, my mind churned. That had to be dream-related right? She’d also looked at me. Was that because she knew I’d know it was dream-related or because the dream had something to do with me?
Or did she just think the damn dragon was bad luck?

“Then I don’t want Dreamfyre,” he decided. “I’ll wait until I’m six and ten and then you have to let me have a big one.”

Alicent shot a smile at her husband for his genius idea. He beamed back and then nodded solemnly at his second son.

“Of course, son. If you wait until you are six and ten, I shall give you everything you need to traverse the Dragonmont,” he said warmly and Aemond nodded.

“Don’t worry Aemond, if you need to fly I’ll take you,” said Aegon. Generous for a nine year old whose dragon was yet to be able to fly.

“Maybe Rhaenyra can fly us about on Syrax?” suggested Helaena and hopeful stares turned towards me.

“Your sister will be far too busy in the coming weeks,” warned Viserys. “She will be taking the reigns of the capital from me as the war council gets underway.”

Honestly, he makes it sound like he works his arse off every day just to keep the city running. He doesn’t, I should point out. I know he doesn’t because I followed him around for four years. I know how much work he does and I’m willing to bet he’s offloaded even more of it in recent years directly onto poor Lyonel’s back. Still, it was a boon to my cause. Even if I was still refusing point blank to move back to the Keep until I knew who had killed Alys Strong and tried to kill my twins.

“Oh, will you make people complain with forms?” asked Aegon and the question threw me for a loop. It made Viserys roar with laughter though, startling us all.

“She already does! I got her working on that before she had the twins!” he laughed. Even Alicent smiled at that. Her hold on the administration had vanished with Joffrey’s hard work but she was still nominally in charge of it and it did make her life easier on more occasions than not. Having decided that talking about bureaucracy was not for him, Aegon moved back to his Mother and laid a hand on her belly once more.

“Another little sibling for you,” she said gently. “You will look after them, won’t you?”

Aegon nodded solemnly and she smiled at him, pulling him close to her.

“I will mother. Just like I’ll look after my sisters and Aemond and Daeron! And the twins!” he promised, then turned to me and asked. “When can I see the twins? Helaena has seen them.”

“I did not think it prudent to fling them at you before you had settled back in,” I replied before Viserys could. “But you are welcome to visit them anytime you wish.”

Please do not visit them anytime you wish.

“Can we?” he asked his mother, who managed her usual look.

“Of course! I’m sure the twins will be very glad to see you,” she said warmly. She’s getting good at this faking business.

“You’ll have to spend a lot of time with them anyway when the banners are called,” said Father, smiling at the picture of familial bliss we were managing to form.
Wait, what? When he saw our confused faces, he elaborated.

“I’m not bloody well taking my sons into a war zone and neither are the Lannisters or Tullys. They shall stay here with you, Rhaenyra!” he grumbled. “Well minus Helaena of course but I believe Lady Jeyne is staying here for some time anyway.”

They shot excited looks at each other at that and were soon huddled together in the corner, likely gleefully planning to make my life a misery once I was in charge of two of them.

“With Rhaenyra?” asked Alicent, smile sharp and voice pitched low so the children did not hear it. “And where shall I be, husband?”

Heedless of the obvious danger, Viserys smiled at her.

“You shall be getting ready for birth, my love.” She started to relax at that. Unwisely, as it turns out because Viserys had one more clarification to make. “On Dragonstone.”

I decided the kids looked tired and herded them out a few seconds later, keen to avoid whatever argument that would provoke.
It was with some amount of relief I finally let myself into the manse. A maid was quick to attend to me, looking harried. I made sure to thank her for her help and slipped her a silver moon for her troubles. A moon was more than any servant had any right to expect, a copper star was more in line for a tip, but I wanted to be seen as generous and very un-betrayable.

Although, I reflected as she led me through the manse, it does beg the question as to why she is so on edge? I could not recall ever seeing any of the staff here so stressed. She showed me to the drawing room and I got my answer. Laena’s armour had evidently arrived and she was making her unhappiness with the fact very clear to anyone within earshot.

“I feel like I can’t move in it!” she complained as her mother fuss ed over her.

“You can move just fine!” her mother snapped back, fussing over straps and adjusting where the plate sat. “Move your arm up a little!”

Laena caught my eye as she did as she was told, giving me a long suffering look and rolling her eyes as Rhaenys finally noticed my presence.

“Stubborn as a mule!” she said, stepping back from her daughter, who gratefully lowered her arm. “What do you think?”

I bit my lip without meaning to.

Her armour was similar to Laenor’s, inspired by the Valyrian style and embossed with the seahorse of House Velaryon. That combined with her height… Laena was tall for a woman in Westeros. The effect was striking.


I think I have a problem when it comes to pretty Velaryons in armour. Gods, she was magnificent.

“She looks better than fine,” he mother said, completely ignoring the look of utter betrayal Laena shot me. “She wears it better than half your Father’s so called knights.”

“All that’s missing is the sword,” I murmured and Laena finally got why I was so intent on her if the blush was anything to go by.

“I think I am a little too old to start learning to use a blade, Rhaenyra,” she stammered, flustered and desperately trying to hide it from her mother.

“Hmmmm, there are many swordsmen that do not start until they are older. I confess your two and twenty would be unusually old but with a good enough tutor you certainly wouldn’t be appalling,” Rhaenys mused.

“I don’t even think it’s necessary. I’m hardly going to be fighting alongside the men,” she insisted.

“But the Dornish do not always fight fair, daughter. What have I always said a dragon’s greatest weakness is?” asked Rhaenys.

“It’s rider,” we both dutifully chorused and she nodded.

“Still, you are right. You need only defend yourself,” she said, smiling broadly at us. “Do you still
have the knife I gave you?”

I sensed Laena did not roll her eyes through sheer force of habit but I didn’t miss the corners of her mouth twitching.

“Yes, mother,” she mock sighed, fighting a smile. “Surprisingly enough, I still know how to use it as well.”

“I shall be the judge of that.” Laena’s amused expression became one of worry at her mother’s declaration.

“Alas, a mother’s duty calls. Have fun Laena!” I laughed, not bothering to hide my own amusement with her predicament. If I stuck around for much longer, I’d probably get roped into those sessions too. I did not want to be awoken before dawn anymore than I already was.

Jocelyn was awake when I stepped into the nursery, babbling away to herself. When she saw me loom over her, she stopped in favour of giving me a broad smile instead. I ran my hands through her black hair and coaxed her into taking her meal after she’d decided she’d much rather attack my braid.

After, I sat with her for a while in my arms, staring down at her face. She, for her part, seemed quite content to stare up at me, her hand stuffed into her mouth. Then her fist was removed and she smiled up at me, swiping at my face. That caused a smile so broad it hurt my face in response and I caught her small fist in my hand. Predictably, she tried to drag my hand back to her mouth so she could chew on it.

“I love you so much,” I told her. She didn’t understand but I had to say it or else it would swell up inside of me and burn it’s way out eventually. Reluctantly, I placed her back inside the crib and scooped up Alys. She did not smile although she did let out a murmur of protest at being awoken. It did not surprise me she was asleep and I stamped down on the usual worry.

She reacted well enough when I read to them both in the evening. She was just tired right now.

“Hello!” I said to her brightly. “I’m sorry I woke you up. I know, it’s terrible! You need to eat though. You do!”

I kept up the almost nonsensical babble as she fed and kept her for a little while longer as I had done Jocelyn. Like I had spotted the day she came out of her tank, the maids also reported her being slow to… well, do the normal baby things. Slow to support her own head, slow to develop any upper body strength… the missed and delayed milestones stretched on and on. Laenor was as worried as I was.

What would I do if… if she hit a point where she no longer improved? No, I know what I would do. I would love her and care for her no matter what. What would Westeros do? I would sooner kill Alicent than see her use my own babe against me. I would feed any that mocked her to Syrax.

“My beautiful Alys! My perfect Alys!” I sang as she fussed in my arms. Eventually sleep took her again. They always slept for a while after their feedings. In fact, they were close to making it through the night now. I certainly slept better in any circumstance.

It was sometime later that I left them dozing in the nursery and made my way back down to where the Velaryons had gathered. All wearing armour in some form or another. I actually had to stop and do a double take. Corlys was lightest armoured out of all of them. His usual almost flamboyant sailors garb replaced with mail and a gambeson in his house colours. I might have stared a beat to
long... gods, it was easy to see what Rhaenys saw in the man.

Rhaenys herself was every inch the Targaryen Princess in black enamelled armour embossed with the three headed dragon of our House. That did catch me by surprise. The last time I’d seen her resort to Targaryen colours her son had just told her he was gay, her daughter had revealed she was carrying a bastard and I had told her all about those lovely boys Corlys had been keeping in Hull.

I... I should probably check in on Addam, Alyn and their mother at some point. I have no clue what they’re doing...

“Well,” I said as they turned in varying degrees of surprise. “I feel under dressed.”

That turned surprise into annoyance from Laena, amusement from Corlys and Rhaenys and exasperation from Laenor. He was as handsome as ever in his armour... okay, I really do have a problem.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have you some made up at some point,” Rhaenys promised as I dropped down next to Laena. My lover was doing a remarkable job of appearing very uncomfortable and almost robot-like in her movements. A wicked kind of glee went through me and I decided to have some fun.

“You know, aren’t these things made for comfort and manoeuvrability?” I asked and was rewarded with her jaw clenching in annoyance.

“Valyrian style is,” said Rhaenys, catching on to my game. Probably because of the smirk I was directing at Laena, who was steadfastly refusing to meet my gaze or acknowledge my presence.

“Laenor can do laps around the garden in it,” I said, to no one in particular. My husband rolled his eyes and shot his sister a sympathetic look. I could just see a frown forming on her face at the angle I was at.

“Hah! When I was your age I could do acrobatics in it!” boasted Rhaenys.

“It’s awkward,” Laena finally said, taking the bait. “You’ll see soon enough!”

“I’m sure I will! Why are you all in armour anyway?” I asked as Laena went back to looking vaguely disgruntled with the world.

“Laena here has never worn it in her life and needs to get used to it. My boy is putting his on in solidarity!” Rhaenys told me.

“And I’ve been told in under no circumstances is my usual fare acceptable to take to war,” grunted Corlys, fond smile on his face as he gazed at the back of his wife’s head.

“And yourself, Rhaenys?” I asked. She brought a hand up to the breastplate and tapped the dragon.

“New armour,” she said cheerfully. “I’m going to make sure the Dornish know a woman called Rhaenys Targaryen is responsible for their defeat.”

“Mother has been giving her opinion on the strategy I have come up with,” said Laenor as Rhaenys nodded. “It’s been quite helpful in regards to the dragons.”

“I still say we should show them the same treatment the conqueror gave them,” she grumbled. Then she caught my look and smiled. “But I understand your concerns well enough.”
“It’s still a work in progress but we have a rough outline of the strategy we will present to the King. Three armies for three dragon riders. Mother will be staying with your Father in the main army,” he said. “I’ll be with the force that will push through the Boneway until the main force makes for Sunspear then Laena will take my place after her forces push through Prince’s Pass.”

I understood precisely zero of that but Corlys and Rhaenys were beaming with pride so I smiled and nodded along. I think he picked up on my confusion though because he brought his hand over his mouth the fight his amusement.

“See? You need not chase us down on Syrax and smear mercenaries all over the roads,” teased Laena. No nausea troubled me at the memory of those men I’d killed and I felt guilty that I didn’t feel guilty anymore. I had been shocked and horrified when I’d first done it and now… now, all I could see was how necessary the action was.

“Or playing courier and catching a fever,” said Laenor dryly and he realised his mistake a moment later, his eyes going wide.

“A fever? You caught a fever in the Vale?” said Rhaenys, disbelieving. I shot Laenor a glare but he was too busy focusing intently on one of the wall-hangings. “You never told us of this? Was there a plague after all?”

“It was a trifling thing. I was fine afterwards,” I protested only for Rhaenys to rise from her seat and seize my shoulder.

“If we get fevers it’s because they’re dangerous. Or they were caused deliberately. Which one was it?” she asked, not letting me evade eye contact. From just over her shoulder, Laena looked similarly intent.

“The Maester says it was one of the worst he’d ever seen,” I mumbled in defeat and Rhaenys let go of my shoulder to stalk about the room in some sort of rage. Not that I understood why. She had not been my biggest fan at that point in my life, even Viserys trying to strangle me had not provoked this reaction.

“And you have had no repeat since?” she asked finally.

“None!” I told her. “I have been perfectly healthy except for the birthing sickness.”

“And no one else got ill?” she asked. I frowned at her method of questioning before I realised she was likely trying to convince me I had been poisoned.

“No one else was ill,” I confirmed then cut her off before she could continue. “But Lady Rhea questioned every member of her staff. There was no poisoning attempt.”

“And how do you explain a fever able to take a Targaryen and only a Targaryen!” she shouted and I recoiled back into my seat. She took a deep breath, heedless of her son and husband watching her with wide eyes and continued at a lower volume. “That doesn’t happen, Rhaenyra. Not naturally. How are you so certain?”

Because it was me touching things I should not have been touching was the answer but… well, maybe I could tell her that. Magic was hardly the unknown it was in the canon timeline. After all, everyone but Corlys in this room rode massive fire-breathing dragons. Why should they be surprised at a castle that had ignored erosion for centuries due to runes set into the foundations?

“I… can be relatively certain,” I said slowly and Laenor dropped his head into his hands and groaned in despair.
“I know that tone,” he said when we turned to him in askance. “That’s the tone she uses when she did something she isn’t proud of. When she knows no one will approve.”

“Rhaenyra?” said Laena, turning back to me. “What did you do?”

“I ferried Lady Rhea to Runestone. Gunthor had fouled something up - a property dispute I think - but the point was I had nothing to do for the day so I decided to solve a little mystery,” I explained. “Runestone completely ignores the erosion of the cliffs. If you must know, I did try the less dangerous way to investigate first!”

Laenor gave a disbelieving snort.

“I asked around and I raided the Maester’s library and I discovered a legend that Brandon the Builder had built Runestone,” I started but, surprisingly, it was Laena that interrupted me with excitement in her tone.

“And he weaved spells into the foundations of Winterfell! You saw the same in Runestone?” Our noses were practically touching as she leaned forward, eyes bright.

Uh… yes, actually,” I replied, trying not to blush in front of Rhaenys. She fell back with a smile.

“Anyway, I ended up touching them and it was like… I was suddenly cold. Oh so cold. Then Syrax dived me into the water and that’s when I got the fever.”

My explanation was finished somewhat lamely as Rhaenys’ eyebrows climbed higher on her face, Corlys looked unconvinced, Laenor looked puzzled and Laena looked excited.

“Runes and magic,” said Rhaenys finally. “Seven help me.”

That was the last she said on the matter bar the occasional suspicious look. We discussed Laenor’s plans some more and Laena manged to gradually relax in her armour even if she did still look miserable as she trailed me back to my room afterwards.

“Still uncomfortable?” I asked with sympathy as she halted in the middle of the room looking like a cat that had been forced to wear socks.

“I can’t imagine ever being comfortable in this,” she whined. “Mother is going to make me wear it until I can walk on my hands in it. I feel ridiculous.”

I hid my amusement at that image behind my hand but she did not notice as she forged onward.

“And she says I must braid my hair! ‘There will be no time to style ringlets in Dorne’” she complained, imitating her mother’s voice. “I do not look good with braided hair, Rhaenyra!”

Then she noticed my evident amusement and sighed, her eyes flickering closed. I took pity on her and raised my hands to her face, drawing her in for a kiss.

“You could look good in rags,” I told her. “The armour and the braid has no complaints from me.”

She leaned against me for a moment and I moved to rest my head in the crook of her neck. Finally she opened her eyes and her face took on a chagrined look.

“I noticed your lack of complaints about the armour,” she said dryly. “In front of mother!”

I snickered in response to her grumbling.

“How about I get you out of that armour?” I murmured, putting as much suggestion as possible into
the question. She definitely got the message as she went bright red again.

“You’re teasing me,” she groused after a moment.

“Not so! The offer in entirely genuine.” For all that I kept my tone light, my heart was trying to beat it’s way out of my chest. It would be another step in our relationship. A big step. She bit her lip in response, blush fading into a pink dusting across high cheekbones.

“Well,” she finally said. “I could do with some help.”
I awoke early the next morning before dawn, pleasantly sore and happy beyond measure. I lay there for a moment, bathing in the warmth of Laena’s arms around me. Then the knock that had awoken me sounded again and I was forced to pull myself free. The pre-dawn chill saw me throwing on my precious, looted robe in Velaryon colours. Laena did not stir as I moved about and I did not bother to hide my smile as I arranged the sheets over her.

The maid outside let me know that the babes required feeding and not even that could dull the satisfaction I felt. Feeding them was easy enough and peaceful enough. Jocelyn seemed as sleepy as I was and Alys was her usual quiet self. Afterwards, I sat with them in the darkness until both had surrendered to sleep and then returned to my own rooms.

Laena awoke as I climbed back into bed.

“Just feeding the twins,” I assured her but I doubt she heard what I said because a moment later she’d pulled me close again and was back in the land of sleep. I took me longer to drift off once more and I could not wait for the day, or night rather, they could sleep right through without needing to be fed. I missed unbroken periods of sleep.

I was still somewhat tired when we finally rode into the Red Keep together. It was unusual for all of us to be in one place since our return to King’s Landing. Corlys and Rhaenys often left to deal with problems arising from the rebuilding of Spicetown but even if construction was running smoothly Rhaenys had lived at High Tide before the birth and Corlys spent most of his time in the Keep or the Docks fulfilling his role as Master of Ships. Joffrey, Laenor, Laena and I had our own business to attend to more often than not with Joffrey’s growing power in King’s Landing, Laenor’s training and studies, Laena’s trips to Dragonstone and my own slow return to politics in the Red Keep proper.

We garnered a lot of attention as we cut through the crowds. I think it was Ser Steffon that was the most eye-catching as he strode ahead of us, shoving aside any minor lord or knight that failed to get out of our way fast enough but I knew that I had earned my fair share of startled second glances. My new style was still in service despite dropping a decent amount of the pregnancy weight in the past few months. Yet it wasn’t my figure that was causing the surprise, it was the colour of the clothing I had made especially for today. After all, I had not worn green since long before I was fourteen.

The lords not used to the fast changing allegiances of King’s Landing were no doubt feeling out of their depth. So many had poured into the capital over the last few months, so many drawn by the chance of glory in war or simply still feeling the outrage that Otto had carefully cultivated until it spread through the Seven Kingdoms like an uncontrollable wildfire.

Nobody wanted to risk missing the opening of the spectacle that would be the War Council. This part would be public at least. Father would rant and rail against the Dornish, lay out the reasons they needed to be brought to heel and officially invite those who would be his advisers in the coming months to join him privately. That’s when the fun would really start.

I should not be shocked or surprised that my father, King of parties, feast and tourneys, had managed to create such a spectacle out of a War Council.

As the King’s oldest child and his Heir Apparent, I was given pride of place amongst the Lords Paramount that had arrived. Jeyne sat next to me with Laenor and the Velaryons taking the seats to
my other side. I ignored Borros’ somewhat sour looks as he took his place and especially ignored Rickon Stark’s outright hostility. Lord Jason gave me a polite enough smile as did Elmo Tully. None gave any such comforts to the last of the Lords Paramount to join us. As the Tyrells had declared themselves unable to attend due to their lords sickness, the honour of last to arrive went to Hagen Greyjoy. He was an old man but unlike Rickon Stark, age had not sapped at his physical form. He was tall, broad and looked as capable in a fight as the day he’d first lifted his axe.

I had to admit, he had not been on my radar for allies. The Ironborn were a law unto themselves, fickle allies that would turn on you the moment you wavered and their practice of thralldom was slavery by any other name. Truly, they disgusted me on so many levels.

Hagen took in our studied indifference to his arrival and smiled, his lips peeling back to reveal black and rotting teeth. I had to force myself not to shudder as he made eye contact with me before he moved away and took his seat with a dark little chuckle. Laenor’s fingers curled into mine and I could see the distaste in his features for all that he fought to disguise it. Corlys and his son saw the Greyjoys as little better than pirates and neither were fond of pirates.

Others began to file in behind us, creating enough noise that I felt brave enough to risk leaning across to whisper in his ear.

“Let’s not court the Greyjoys.” His mouth twitched into a smile and he made a show of leaning into me to reply.

“If I thought you’d go for it, I’d take Seasmoke and burn their islands the moment you were crowned,” he whispered.

That is very tempting… Oh gods, I am a bad person.

“Let’s not start my reign off with the destruction of an entire culture,” I told him. “It might send a bad message to the rest of my future subjects.”

“You spoil all of my fun,” he sighed and I really, really hoped he was just teasing.

We settled back into our seats as the last of the lords piled in. It was amusing to note the standing room only at the back. Only the truly important lords had been given seats. The rest had been forced to elbow, cajole and bribe their way to the front spots where they could get a good look at the proceedings. Ah, Westeros, I hope I can do something to change you…

The hissing and muttering fell silent as Alicent stepped out and almost seemed to glide to her smaller throne. She’d gone all out, I noted. Her black dress seemed to drink in the light of the throne room and only made the gems she wore, enough to buy a small city, seem all the more magnificent. The dress implied mourning to those not in the know but to those who were… well, it was symbol that we were aligned in this at least. Her lords would note it and my path would become just a little easier. On the flip-side, my dress was a signal to my lords that even if I resented the war with Dorne, they weren’t to make targets of themselves by railing against it.

She took her seat and smiled a practised and very fake smile at those assembled. Yet Alicent, for all she’d decked herself out, was not the main event. The main event was my father.

He strode out, accompanied by Ser Arryk and Ser Erryk Cargyll. I had to hand it to whoever had dressed him because he was resplendent. Gone were the rich fabrics and plush outfits that he went to his parties in. Now he wore full plate, darkened as Rhaenys’ had been and inlaid with rubies that formed the three-headed dragon of our house. His crown, the crown of Jaehaerys I, was in place. It
glinted in the light, the different coloured jewels gleaming atop his silver hair. The contrast was pleasing to say the least. As a final touch, Blackfyre was strapped to his side and somehow even his moustache looked less silly as he stood before the Throne and looked over his subjects with a grim face.

“My Lords!” he started and every eye in the room must have been riveted on him. “My Lords, I have called you here today for war!”

Angry muttering broke out at that. Everyone ‘knew’ how the Dornish had slain Alys Strong in a failed poisoning and Otto Hightower in a craven ambush in order to send Westeros to war and save themselves. I had no doubt Otto’s recent rabble rousing had left the events of the Dornish Conquests well in mind for most of those present. I caught plenty of mutterings of the words ‘Wyl’ and ‘Uller’ and even ‘Martell’. ‘Poison’ was another favourite as well.

“We did not choose this war!” he shouted and the room fell silent once more. “We did not! We chose peace. We chose diplomacy. We chose forgiveness. Yet the Dornish threw our magnanimity back at us! Like all their gifts, their offers of friendship were poisoned! They sought to slay my granddaughters in the womb! They slew the daughter of our Lord Hand! They slew my goodfather as he walked peacefully in the gardens!”

That got boos and hisses aplenty as the lords fell under his sway. I had to admit I had only ever seen one other person with the kind of showmanship and gift for speaking and that was Patrek.

“Enough, I say! It is time Dorne was brought to heel!” Cheers of agreement rang out. “It is time they were humbled. Will you be the ones to do it, my Lords? Will you ride with me into the deserts of Dorne and finish what the Conqueror started?”

The answering roar of ascent caused a smile to twitch over his face but he quickly hid it.

“My Lords, I have called and you have answered. How could I fail with the might of you all at my back?” he said, bringing the cheering to an end. “I would ask for my Lords Paramount, my goodbrother Gwayne Hightower, my Small Council and finally, my dragon riders to join me. Everyone else, please enjoy the hospitality of the Red Keep and King’s Landing.”

I really want to know how to make these kinds of speeches and still retain my ability to speak clearly by the end. And he clearly still could speak. He welcomed us all to the Small Council chamber where the usual table had been switched out for one much larger. Once we were all sat and served wine, he began.

“I want plans. No politics. No Blacks vs Greens. I want Dorne delivered to me,” he said, voice stern. “To do this, we need to know everything about the current situation. I know you have already begun making your plans but you will all benefit from the most current information we have. Ser Jaremy, please begin.”

The Vale knight half bowed in his seat, shot a worried glance at Joffrey and the forged onward with his usual slightly off impression of the man that fed him all his information.

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“Dorne is currently the weakest it has been since Morion Martell’s disastrous invasion of Westeros,” he began. “Despite Prince Garin’s exile with his supporters there are many houses that still support him quietly. Prince Garin wanted revenge against… uh, well… us for the actions of… Daemon Targaryen. He promised the Lords of Dorne that they would share in that revenge. His main supporter still in Dorne is Lord Walter Wyl but reports state much of the Stony Dornish would rally to him should he make his return.”
He paused to examine how his report was being received. Then focused on his papers again, tips of his ears turning red as we scrutinised him.

“That is to say, his main supporters are Houses; Manwoody, Dayne of High Hermitage, Fowler, Blackmont and Yronwood. I believe he has cousins and supporters in Houses Dalt, Uller and Toland but not the support of those Houses,” he continued. “It would have been better for us had Lord Dayne been unable to gather his support so adeptly.”

“There was silence as we processed that particular metaphor. Then Father seemed to shake himself out of it and indicated for Jaremy to continue.

“Yes… um. The Princess Aliandra is the only child of Prince Qoren. The Prince was very popular in Dorne as he invested heavily in repairing the damage that King Aegon did after Queen Rhaenys was murdered at the Hellholt. Both Qoren and his brother, Maron, as you know, died in the assault on Bloodstone along with about a thousand men sworn to House Martell.” He turned over a few sheets. “Aliandra enjoys the support of Houses; Dayne of Starfall, Wells, Vaith, Gargarlen, Dalt, Santagar, Toland and Allyrion. The remaining houses have sworn their oaths freely but are cooler in their support. These are Houses; Ladybright, Jordayne, Uller, Drinkwater and Qorgyle.”

“The political machinations of such treacherous and dishonourable people are fascinating, Ser Corbray but what I want to know is what are we facing? How many men do they have?” Lord Jason asked, tenting his fingers. His question seemed to have Borros’ approval as well although not my Father’s judging by his brief look of annoyance, yet Viserys did not interfere.

Jaremy flicked through his reports and I took the time to steal a covert look at the rest of the Lords Paramount. They would be the deciding votes on which plan we would use in the Conquest. Elmo was nodding along, he was no expert in Dorne and he knew it for the Riverlanders had little reason to ever meet them in battle. Rickon was scowling at us all, I’d warrant he intended to stay silent the entire time and sulk like a child. Jeyne was imitating a statue, alert and barely moving with her face an unreadable mask. Hagen was slumped in his seat, examining us all as if he were a petulant child choosing who to argue with.

“Normally the Dornish can call upon anything from ten thousand to fifteen thousand spears but…” Jaremy hesitated for a moment, turning over yet another page of his report. Then he forged onward. “But it seems there is some sort of ancient treaty signed in Nymeria’s time. They agree to unite in totality in the face of a foreign invader, no matter the current internal politics. Subject to the treaty, I would estimate… perhaps thirty thousand soldiers of any skill.”

I tried not to be surprised at that. It seemed Daeron had not overstated Dornish power in his book. He’d just been fighting everyone in Dorne that could pick up a spear and charge him.

“A quarter of those will come at you like men. The rest will strike and vanish or act like camp followers then poison you,” grumbled Borros before downing his wine with a gulp. He would be the man to convince. He had liked Laenor’s plan well enough but would he still be in favour when it was revealed his men would be in the secondary force? I doubted it. I knew Wyl was the key to persuading him to go for it but it needed the proper leverage…

“Let ‘em come! We’ll burn their coasts to the bedrock,” boasted Hagen and next to me Jeyne snorted in derision, barely audible over the clamour Hagen’s comment caused.

“We do not need Ironborn to burn them to the bedrock,” said Corlys dryly, earning himself a glare.
Nobody missed him taking his wife’s hand then and the implication of his statement. Nor did anyone miss the nasty look on Rhaenys’ face as she studied Lord Greyjoy. It was somewhat reminiscent of a cat observing a particularly stupid mouse. Rhaenys disliked the Ironborn with an intensity that outstripped even her husband and son. Pirates were a sore point for her.

“It works especially well for fleets… as Morion Martell found out,” she said sweetly. Hagen said nothing in response to that but his mouth stretched into a leer he directed straight at the woman who had just threatened to burn his fleet as if that were the sweetest pickup line in existence. Next to me, Laenor shuddered and I noted Laena had done similarly.

It was also enough for Father to finally step in. His hand slammed into the wood, sending most of us into shock.

“Enough!” he growled. “Ser Jaremy, continue. The next man to interrupt will lose his command position.” And that was that.

The meeting seemed to continue on for hours as Jaremy informed brought us all up to speed on Dorne and what allies it could call on. I was amused to note that the only ally they had claim to of any note were the Triarchy and they weren’t likely to try to interfere, all three cities having descended into the kind of bickering that starts with people being knifed in alleyways and ends with the fielding mercenaries.

Laenor took notes throughout. I’m not sure why, this was all Joffrey’s information after all, he could have gotten access to it at any other point. Worryingly, the only other person who seemed to be taking his own notes was Gwayne Hightower. Would he propose his Father’s old plan? Or did he intend to create his own?

By the time the meeting broke, my skull felt as if it might break open with the force of the headache I’d developed. In truth, I’m glad Laenor had taken the time to brush up on strategy and campaign because too much of that meeting went over my head. All I could do was watch the participants, gauge their motives and make sure they voted for his plan when the time came.

I would not be useless… I would not send those I love into danger they did not need to face because some complete arse with the last name Hightower wanted glory that wasn’t their due.
Lucerys’ hatchling whined mournfully from his wicker cage. Although I was honestly surprised anyone had heard him with Jocelyn wailing as she was. I hovered behind the maids anxiously, watching them dress her and Alys in their outfits for today’s meeting with Lord Reyne.

“Oh shut up, you silly thing. We’ll let you out to play later!” Laena told her son’s hatchling and the wicker basket rocked alarmingly at her voice and then settled somewhat. She smiled and patted it. “Good boy!”

Then she noted me watching her and smirked.

“Still fretting?” she asked.

“I don’t even know about what…” I replied, flushing as she came to stand close. The smell of dragon and the sea made my belly turn with nerves of a different kind. She caught my hand gently and held it between us.

“Lord Reyne will love Jocelyn or I will feed him to Vhagar,” she said simply. “And he will agree to your demands or he shall not have his betrothal.”

“You sound like your mother,” I said and she pulled face. Rhaenys had been true to her word and had taken to drilling her daughter with the knife she now carried on her waist.

“That’s just insulting,” she whined. “Take that back or I’ll start waking you up before dawn every morn to put armour on.”

“If you also put it on, I will not complain.” She went red and spluttered at that. “You know, there are worse fates than ending up like your mother. She is, after all, the only one who can get Jocelyn to quiet down reliably.”

As if to prove my point, Jocelyn’s wailing increased in volume and Laena winced.

“Point,” she admitted. Then her face softened. “You jinxed yourself when you joked about having a loud child.”

“Probably,” I replied mournfully.

“Come! The maids can handle Jocelyn and Alys for a while. Let’s go take Lucerys out to play with Red here.” I bit my lip. The offer was tempting… Then I gave in when she caught me gently by the arm and pulled.

We found Lucerys in the arms of his Uncle. Arms being a… relative term as my husband was tossing him repeatedly into the air much to Lucerys evident delight if the little baby giggles were anything to go by. When he saw us, his face went carefully blank as if he were weighing how fast Seasmoke could go if pursued by Vhagar.

“Ma-ma!” cried Lucerys happily and Laena’s stony expression gave way to affection as she handed me the wicker cage containing the hatchling and recovered her son from Laenor’s arms. I caught his eye and smirked, enjoying the blush that caused.

“Joffrey said to entertain him,” he complained when Laena swept past him with a final disapproving look. I adjusted my hold on the cage and gestured for him to follow me as I hurried to
catch up with her. He did as told, taking the cage from me in the process. “I was also asked to discover what you ordered from Myr and whether Joffrey needs to hide the expense.”

“Why would he need to hide it? Anyway, you may inform him it is a gift for his nameday and he is not to go intercepting it,” I ordered and Laenor chuckled. From over Laena’s shoulder, Lucerys waved at us and we dutifully waved back.

“A gift from the Glassworks in Myr, what could it be?” he wondered. “A far-eye?”

“Close but no,” I replied.

“Also I might point out his nameday has been and gone. We bought him the new walking stick, remember?” he said as the hatchling scented fresh air and began scrabbling around in it’s cage in excitement.

“I want to give one of my friends a gift! Must there be an excuse?” He snorted at that but let it lie as we reached Laena arranging her son on the bench. She took the cage from her brother and quickly had the hatchling out. Lucerys watched, enraptured, as his dragon launched itself from the top of the cage and did a few circuits of the garden.

“It won’t be long before we can not keep him here,” said Laena sadly. We had nearly another month of safety where he absolutely would not start breathing fire but as we reached the sixth month of his life… well, we needed him gone before he set the manse on fire. The beach where the Black dragons found their rest would be as fine a place as any to put him.

The presence of the bigger dragons would drive away anything foolish enough to try and predate on him. Not that there were many creatures that could mess with even a baby dragon once it was capable of breathing fire. Most of said creatures were unlikely to be found in the Crownlands as well but you never knew. Dragons did not naturally group together in the wild. They set up their hunting ranges, mated during the summer years, raised their children until they were capable of breathing fire and then went back to their solitary lives.

How we Valyrians had changed them, even the dragon pit dragons yet to be claimed were more likely to group together. Another thing for Laena to research, I think.

“You will have to name him before he goes,” said Laenor and Laena grimaced.

“I know, but mother is being troublesome about what precisely we should name him,” she groused. “She wants to do as many have and name him for a Valyrian deity. She has her heart set on Urrax.”

“The Valyrian God of Destruction,” I murmured. Truly not the greatest name for a dragon. Especially since there was a historical Urrax that was famous for being slain.

“Quite. You can see why I’m not convinced,” she sighed. “What do you think?”

I mulled it over as Lucerys clapped happily from his bench. So happily, in fact, that he nearly toppled himself from it after losing his balance. Laenor was quick to catch him though, no doubt trying convince his sister he was responsible enough to catch his nephew reliably.

“Come on, Luke, it wasn’t that scary,” chuckled Laenor as his face crumpled unhappily at the shock. The hatchling fluttered down the bench and perched on it, examining the human it had hatched for with a critical eye. The red hatchling.

I couldn’t help it, I started laughing.
“And what is so funny?” asked Laena, sounding a tad offended when I bent double at the waist, overcome with giggles. Oh, it was not funny but how had I missed it? A Luke with an awkward evil father reveal in his future? One that rode a red dragon?

“Nothing. I just remembered a tale and how the hero is so similar to Luke,” I giggled once I’d recovered enough to speak. Laena frowned at me and the pouted, her gaze finding her son again as Laenor lifted him up for a closer look at his dragon.

“Is it at least a good tale?” she asked.

“I certainly enjoyed it. The parallels are striking though. Luke Skywalker and your Luke, both with father issues and both associated with red mounts,” I told her. I had only ever told Helaena the Star Wars story. She had loved it, if I recalled. Attempts to get her hair styled like Princess Leia had been a bust from the start though.

Laena shifted uncomfortably at the word ‘father’ but otherwise didn’t answer me, looking thoughtful.

“Skywalker,” she said finally. “It’s a good name.”

“Certainly an evocative one,” I murmured as the hatchling began flapping around the garden once more, making Lucerys screech loudly in response. I winced at the noise. Next to me, Laena followed the hatchling’s movements before smiling to herself.

“Skywalker. A better name than Urrax, don’t you think?” It was with sinking dread in my stomach that I turned to her. Oh, I know that look. That is the look of Laena deciding on something. I should have kept my big mouth shut.

- 

“Your Grace, might I say once again how honoured I am to be invited to visit the children before their debut.” It seemed Lord Roland was back in fine form and eager to ignore his little slip up he’d made at Rhea’s wedding feast.

“It is I who is honoured to receive a visit from such a prestigious lord as yourself,” I lied. He smiled and accepted some wine from one of the servants. His smile was nervous though, I could tell. The Velaryon family had mustered in force for this meeting. Rhaenys was cradling Jocelyn, Corlys was holding her twin and both had managed smiles that promised pain should any harm come to their granddaughters.

Laenor was tapping out a discordant beat on the hilt of his blade and Joffrey was matching him on the silver head of his walking stick. Laena for her part was sat in between her husband and brother, making eye contact and smiling benignly. No doubt Lord Roland had not forgotten the fact she had the biggest dragon in existence.

“Your daughters are very beautiful, Your Grace,” he said warmly and I think he was being genuine. His acting wasn’t nearly as good as the usual inhabitants of the court.

“Thank you, Lord Reyne. Shall we get down to business?” The lord nodded quickly and Joffrey moved his hand, indicating for his scribe to begin taking notes.

“I’ll be quite clear with you, Lord Roland. Lord Jason Lannister has allied himself with Queen Alicent in her attempts to usurp my rightful place as my Father’s Heir,” I started.
“The Lannisters are ever eager for more power. They do not understand there are things money can not buy,” he told me, nodding sagely. “But I suspected something of the sort when young Prince Aegon fostered with him.”

“Prince Aegon was sent from the court after his mother had him half-frightened of his own shadow,” growled Corlys. “The fostering was to buy off a rich family that had been snubbed for marriage again.”

“And the marriage they’re getting in turn?” asked Lord Roland triumphantly.

“I knew it! I knew she’d marry Aegon to them,” said Rhaenys, disturbing Jocelyn’s sleep and making her grumble with unhappiness. “Who is it? The Jocasta girl?”

Roland shook his head.

“My friend in the Rock says it is not. He also says it isn’t Aegon, for all that Lady Jocasta and he are friends.” I caught Joffrey’s eye and noted the almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulder in response. Evidently his work in Lannisport was limited to only Lannisport so far. Casterly Rock was likely a tough place to get spies into.

“Aemond?” I asked.

“No. There are rumours about that boy. No, it’s Daeron they seek to marry to Jason’s get. Prince Daeron to little Cerelle,” he explained. Rhaenys snorted and went about calming the fussing Jocelyn.

“Concerning but not too unexpected,” I said finally, after some thought. “I require a check on their power, however. A way to remind them where their loyalties lie.”

“And you turn to Lann’s bastard line,” said Roland with a smile.

“Your family have often been in opposition with the Lannisters. You are the second most powerful family in the Westerlands. Have I looked to the wrong people?” His answering smile was fierce.

“Not at all. If Lord Jason can not remember his oaths then we Reyne’s shall prove ourselves his betters,” he boasted. “What do you require?”

“We require a pledge of your support to begin with. A guarantee it will me you support should Alicent attempt her usurpation.” Lord Roland nodded along. I gathered myself for the next bit. It left a terrible taste in my mouth but it had to be done. “And, once I take the throne either in peace or war, I would require a loan of sorts. I have many projects planned and all will require gold.”

The Reynes were not nearly as rich as Casterly Rock. Whilst the mines that had propelled them to the Lannisters strongest bannermen had long since dried up there were a dozen more minor mines, mostly of silver, to be found on their lands and nearly all lords of Castamere had the financial acumen to turn that silver into gold. Wealthy enough to give me the money I needed but not so wealthy that they could afford to write that debt off.

If the Dance kicked off, they’d have to throw themselves behind me or ruin their house immeasurably. He knew it as well. I could see him thinking it over, wondering suddenly if all this were worth it. Then he smiled.

“I would be happy to provide a loan to House Targaryen upon your ascension to the throne. With reasonable interest, of course, and a set repayment plan!” Next to me, Laenor smiled. Sorting the amount, repayment and interest would be his wheelhouse.
“I understand that such a request is daunting,” I said. “So I would offer your son a position of squire with my husband when he is of age. It would be nice if Jocelyn and Rolph could get to know each other as they grow up.”

Roland’s eyes gleamed. A royal betrothal and a place as a squire for the future most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms was no small prize. Yet the money… the money would be the sticking point.

“Perhaps I could be as bold as to request another boon from Your Grace,” he finally said. “A place on the Small Council, perhaps?”

That could be done. Lord Reyne was good with money, if no other position was available he could be made Master of Coin. Should a financial genius come along, he could be given the title of adviser. I would have to make a show of actually listening to his opinions but I could do that.

“That would be agree-”

“And such a guarantee for my son when he becomes Lord of Castamere, as well?” Less agreeable but I needed that money. Behind me I heard Rhaenys snort but she did not interrupt. No doubt she disapproved. Then again, she had wanted Jocelyn for my eventual son and Alys for Lucerys.

And that was not happening. No way. Not in a million years.

“Of course! He would be my goodson, I would greatly value any advice he could give!” Laenor’s fingers wrapped around mine and gave a reassuring squeeze.

“Then let us speak more of this loan, Your Grace!”
“I am told Your Grace was a fierce supporter of my rights.” The statement out of nowhere had me turning in surprise to find myself face to face with a woman I had never seen before. She was not pretty and the Riverlander style she wore was ill-fitting and spoke of strained finances. “I can not thank you enough.”

“You are quite welcome,” I said, searching my memory for the identity of the woman before me. It took the man who joined her to be wearing Blackwood colours for it to click in my mind. “I trust the matters regarding your Father’s estate have been resolved now?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I’m told the King made a definitive ruling after I was able to present some letters my father had written to a friend,” she explained. “I am now Lady Harlsbury of Harlsbury Hall.”

“And your cousin?” I asked. She smiled and it was not a nice smile.

“I’m told he has been ordered to leave Stone Hedge and return to his goodfather’s lands. Even House Bracken acknowledge I am my father’s rightful heir now.” The wicked smile on her face told me she did not intend to let the matter rest when it came to her cousin. Ah well, Lady Harlsbury could go back to being a Tully problem and they could deal with whatever shit she starts.

“Justice has been done then, my Lady,” I said and her nasty smile only widened.

“Indeed. Justice has been done, Your Grace.” Her husband’s smile came to match hers as he wound his arms about her shoulders. “But I fear I sought you out with an ulterior motive.”

“Oh? Do tell!” She turned to her husband.

“My cousin, Samwell, asks to see you… if Your Grace would honour him with a visit,” her husband interjected. Samwell was sweet but entirely too hot-headed. He’d gotten into his canon duel with Amos Bracken over the prospect of my hand but honestly, I had not encouraged either of them. More Bracken vs Blackwood bullshit. Bullshit that would end with Stone Hedge being sacked in the Dance.

Poor Amos. He was as sweet as Samwell but both had been indoctrinated early to their families ongoing generations long feud and not even the encouragement of a Princess would change their minds. The sad thing is they’d probably be friends if it weren’t for their unfortunate last names. I sense the only way to stop the Blackwood and Bracken fighting is removing one family from the Riverlands entirely.

Regardless of the dicey politics associating with either side comes with, the Blackwoods and the Brackens are some of Lord Grover Tully’s most powerful bannermen and securing their good will could be the final piece in lighting a fire beneath his behind when it comes to getting him off that damnable fence. Honestly, I was not unsympathetic to his plight. His lands were likely to be burned in whatever war was to come so he had to think long and carefully on who he would burn for and who was more likely to help him rebuild in the aftermath.

Did he honestly think for a second Alicent would reward him with gold and men to fix his broken
lands if she won?

“I would honoured to invite him to see my newborn girls,” I said with a warmth I actually felt. “He has a new sister himself, does he not? Alysanne, named for my own great grandmother.”

Nameless Blackwood Cousin nodded, a smile breaking out over his face.

“Near four years now, Your Grace, and as bright as the sun,” he boasted.

“Perhaps one day young Alysanne may join my daughters as friends,” I suggested and the look in his eye suggested that the offer would be relayed to Lord Robert, Samwell’s father, with as much haste as seemly.

“Perhaps, Your Grace,” Lady Harlsbury said. “But I must unfortunately steal my husband away from you now. We have a prior appointment. Please accept my thanks once again.”

“It is no problem, my Lady. Enjoy your day.” I watched as the disappeared into the crowd and kept a frown from my face. If young Alysanne was to be accepted into the twins’ household when she was older I would need a Bracken to balance it all out. My girls would be princesses and the inevitable squabbling would teach them skills they would need later in life.

I spent an hour or so more at court but all I found were questions about Dorne, subtle offers of betrothals, less subtle offers of betrothals and the usual peacocks that wished to catch the eye of their betters. I made my way back to the manse, Ser Steffon behind me as always. My faithful shadow.

Laena was there and, much to my delight, so were my ladies, minus Sera Strong.

“Your Grace,” greeted Falena as I lowered myself into the seat beside her. “We were discussing our new schedule. Sera thinks we should be on hand for the children as well.”

They had people for that but I could understand the sentiment. My ladies had loved Lucerys and they would no doubt love Jocelyn and Alys even more fiercely, even if it was because one of their own had been taken in an attempt on their lives. Although…

“Where is Sera now?” I asked as Laena poured me a glass of wine and passed it over.

“Sitting with the babes,” said Maris. “Ser Harwin has informed me she has not been sleeping well recently. Laena suggested she might like to have some peace and quiet with them.”

“With Jocelyn?” I asked, sending Marya and Laena into giggles. Maris merely smiled and shrugged. Perhaps I overstated Jocelyn’s loudness, she had certainly cut back on the screaming lately. It did not mean the Nursery was any less peaceful. Lucerys had started crawling and the little bugger could certainly pick up speed. Revenge, no doubt, for the initial grief after we had removed Skywalker from the house.

Yes, I still hate myself for opening my mouth about Star Wars.

“I admit that might not have been the best part of her plan,” said Maris.

“She needed it though,” said Falena quietly. “She looks… she is not taking Alys’ death as well as she pretends.”

We all became somewhat solemn at that. Sera liked to put forward a strong front but I knew she could not be doing as well as she pretended. This was merely confirmation.
“I do not know what I can do,” I replied. “Ordering her from my service will do more harm than good, I fear.”

“All we can do is be there for her,” said Laena and Marya nodded.

“And be there for you, Rhaenyra,” added Marya. I smiled at her.

“I thank you all. You have been very good to me, all of you.” We ended up toasting to my ladies a few times after that as we unwound. Maris was quick to retrieve one of the many decks of cards she must keep on her person at all times.

She had amassed quite the empire in recent months. Gambling dens, Joffrey’s brothels and normal taverns. She was chief information gatherer now. All of that was passed on to Joffrey who sorted through it and prepared a report. Everything she gathered just hammered home one depressing point. I had erred when I allowed Otto free reign in the capital. He had outplayed me so successfully I could scarcely believe he had managed it.

He had arrived, scared up outrage at Dorne, started planning for a war, pulled in the Marcher Lords as support and set a fire that still burned even after his death. Larys’ likely assassination of him was just hastening what was already set in stone. In doing so, in ensuring a war, the world would have his oyster.

Assassinate loyal Black lords, Dornish. Any of the current dragon riders fall in battle or to ambush, Dornish. Rebels keep the courts attention focused on them, that’s the Dornish for you.

And all the while my support would bleed, his own support would be reinforced and by the end of a long and bloody war, he would have reset the board with him as the chess master and leader of the Greens.

Gods, I had been a fucking fool to assume I could beat Otto Fucking Hightower at his own game.

I do wonder if Larys killed him on Alicent’s orders or his own initiative. I had wondered if he had poisoned my wine on Otto’s orders but Larys killing Otto nixed that idea. Alicent had clearly not done it but would he truly be so calm and composed had he been responsible for accidentally killing his own sister? No. I could not believe that. For all that he was shifty and devious, he was not a monster.

“You are brooding again,” said Laena, her cheeks aglow with wine. It set the rest of my ladies giggling.

“When does she not?” asked Falena. “I swear she broods more than Maris cheats at cards.”

“Then she does not brood at all!” Maris laughed and earned a chuckle from me.

“One day, Maris, one day I shall learn how you do it!” vowed Laena which set her laughing even harder.

“You should tell me how,” came Sera’s voice from the doorway. She did not look well, that was my first thought. Pale with sunken eyes but she was trying for a smile so I made room next to me and handed her my glass of wine.

“I do not cheat!” Maris protested, handing out cards once more. “You are merely bad at cards.”

“Am I bad at cards, Maris?” I asked. “Remember, I am your Princess.”
She pursed her lips and made a show at thinking before smirking slightly. “You are the worst of the lot, Princess, because you never play.” True. I hate losing. I refuse to play until I know how she cheats.

“Do not worry, Rhaenyra, I will tell you when I have discovered her secrets,” said Laena and for a moment, I could almost believe she had said those exact words to Alys once. I could see she had the same thought because she paused, wine halfway to her lips, and blinked furiously. Maris watched us as we fell silent, missing Alys dearly, and nodded to herself.

“Alright, it’ll come out eventually so I’ll ask you now,” she said, causing Sera’s head to whip round and a smile to grow on her face. “I have a suitor.”

“Oh?” I asked as my ladies leaned forward, eyes gleaming. Maris flushed.

“Tell us everything, Maris,” said Falena dryly then she cast a small look at Laena, whose ears went red. “You know we dislike it when one of our number holds back on the details.”

They were never going to forgive her for not revealing her non-existent love affair with Joffrey before they were both ‘caught’.

“Well, important things first,” she said. “It’s all very proper. My suitor has asked me to marry him.”

My ladies gasped in delighted shock and Maris blushed under their attention.

“It is… should my Princess give her assent… I would become Lady Strong.” Of course. Oh Harwin, you soppy old fool. No doubt he cares not if her name and family is in disgrace, if there is no dowry to be paid or if she is barren. I can just see him now, declaring his love for her and vowing to fight everyone if it means marrying her.

My ladies exploded into questions for her as I made my decision. I would speak with Jeyne, to see if we couldn’t come up with a tempting dowry between us and should the worst come to pass… well, I would be Queen some day. I could legitimise any of his bastards with Maris’ permission.

“We have known each other through the twins for some time,” Maris explained. “After Alys died, Harwin and I began speaking regularly… and well, he began bringing me flowers and asking after me-”

“That’s when I realised. He wouldn’t shut up about her!” Sera interjected, sending Maris even redder, were that possible. “He kept asking me about what she liked and whether she ever mentioned him-”

A gentle shove ended her teasing but Maris had a broad, pleased smile in place. I tried to wrap my head around such a pairing. Maris may be acidic and rude at times but she was smart and cunning, how could she put up with Harwin? Harwin who seemed content to prattle on about whatever he was thinking about in the moment?

“His proposal is very recent, I might add, but should you give your assent-”

“Of course I will!” I said, a tad too fast. “If you wish to marry him, marry him. My only demand is that you invite me!”

I was startled to see a tear leak from her eye at that. Around me, my ladies were chattering excitedly amongst themselves, even Laena was caught up in the excitement of it all. A surprise, not
too long ago she had disliked the woman intensely.

“That goes without saying, Rhaenyra. I can only hope Jeyne will accept my invitation as well,” Maris said, aiming for her usual dry and mocking tone, and failing to hide the emotion in her voice.

“I could not imagine her missing it. She considers you her greatest champion,” I told her and Maris chuckled. “Risking the Moon Door to call Yorbert Royce names I will not repeat in polite company to his face buys you a lot of leeway.”

Maris snorted at that but she knew I was right.

“Have you set a date?” asked Falena, eagerly leaning forward in her chair. “Do you require any help planning the ceremony?”

“Alys would have loved it, that’s for certain,” said Sera with a small, pained smile. “You need not worry, as your future goodsister you shall have the grandest wedding I can muster.”

“And you will have my help, naturally,” I said. Dragonstone’s treasury could stretch a little further. Perhaps even Father might lend us some… no, Lyman would probably cry if he took more money from his war budget.

“To Maris and Harwin!” called Falena and we all followed suit, toasting the blushing would be bride.

Chapter End Notes

So, as I have mentioned in the comments, the next Interlude will kick of a timeskip. I'll be covering the events of the timeskip in 'in-universe' books. Since I've finally finalised the titles for them, I figured I'd give you all a look at them.

Unbent, Unbowed, Unbroken; Bastard Born; The Seven Ladies of Rhaenyra Targaryen; Dark Sister; The Black Queen; Vulture Kings; The Three Journeys; The Silver Falcon; An Age of Science; The Green Death and A History of the Schism.

Thank you again for reading, commenting and leaving Kudos! I really appreciate all the feedback you've given me.
“So you would let them go unpunished!” bellowed Borros, rising to his feet. Laenor followed him up, facing his mother’s cousin with a face flush with anger.

“I would see Dorne brought into this realm!” he shot back. “Not burned to the bedrock!”

“Ser Laenor is correct,” said Jeyne tartly. “Dorne is no good if we beggar ourselves taking it.”

Borros whirled to face her but she remained defiant in the face of his glare.

“You are a woman,” he sneered, finally. “What would you know of war!? Of Dorne?”

“Well noticed, Lord Borros! I would not have thought you observant enough to determine my sex.” At the provocation Borros turned a funny shade of purple.

“Enough!” roared my Father, making us all jump. Laenor and Borros lowered themselves back into their chairs. Opposite Jeyne, Elmo Tully seemed to be trying to merge with his whereas Lord Jason merely gave a small, sardonic bow in Jeyne’s direction, seemingly unbothered by the screaming. I, myself, had a headache. We had run into the second hour of discussion and already I wanted to end it all.

Two plans had emerged as I had predicted. One put forth by Gwayne Hightower, ripped entirely from his Father’s original plan. It called for two armies split between the Boneway and the Prince’s Pass. These two armies would then fight their way into Dorne whilst the fleets broke Plankeytown. Dorne would then be razed, each castle being utterly destroyed by the dragons as the army moved on.

The other one Laenor had created. This one involved three armies. The two traditional ones at the land entrance to Dorne and third one that would ferried into Dorne via the Velaryon and Redwyne fleets to take Yronwood. The idea being that this would trap whatever forces were in the Boneway between two armies and force the army in the Pass to leave and try and rescue their trapped forces. Once that was over, the Lannister fleet would take Plankeytown and the Greenblood and the main force would begin taking castles. Most importantly, the plan had been developed to leave as much intact as possible.

Whilst Laenor’s had the support of the more moderate factions, and thankfully my Father’s and Lyonel’s, Gwayne had the vengeful idiots refusing to follow any but his. Case in point…

“Lord Borros is right,” said Jasper Wylde. “The Dornish need punishment. Offering any terms of surrender, even ones much less generous than this is… folly!”

“I don’t give a shit about either of you!” interrupted Hagen, apparently unable to contain himself any longer. Both plans gave the Ironborn a respectable role in the fighting but neither called for allowing them to raid the coasts to their hearts content. Lord Greyjoy was making his displeasure known. When he wasn’t making faces at Rhaenys, anyhow. “We were promised the chance to raid Dorne!”

“You most certainly were not!” barked Gwayne and Hagen snarled. Rickon snorted.

“What do you expect from a pirate?” It was the first words the Lord of the North had said all day and it set the Lord of the Iron Islands surging to his feet, only to be shoved back down by Erryk Cargyll at a nod from Viserys.
“I have said, that is quite enough,” said Viserys again and the table lapsed into silence.

“I admit I favour Ser Laenor’s plan,” said Lord Jason after the room fell silent. “I have been discussing the matter with Lord Lyman and Ser Jaremy and both have assured me that if we burn the damnable place down it’ll drain our treasury for generations to come.”

From a few seats down, Lord Lyman nodded so hard I feared he might strain something. Next to him, the Master of Whispers was also nodding but he seemed less sure about the matter. The members of the Small Council were taking a backseat in the shout- sorry, discussions. They were also one person short. Lorent Marbrand had not been invited to give his opinion here and according to Corlys, had yet to be invited to any Small Council meeting.

“That is what I have been saying, Lord Jason,” said Jeyne. “We should focus on conquering them and doing as little damage as possible.”

“By offering them the chance to keep the title of Prince of Dorne? To control their own taxes? Mint their own coins!?” grumbled Borros.

“I believe, and pardon me if I am wrong in this, that Ser Laenor does not expect them to accept the first offer of surrender. It is merely a ploy to make the Lords of Dorne wonder how necessary the war is,” came Elmo’s nervous contribution. Laenor nodded encouragingly at him. Borros merely snorted.

“Stinks too much of playing the Dornish at their own game,” he said finally. “And they have more practice than we do.”

“Which is why we position our forces even before we receive a reply,” said Laenor.

“Listen, I may be ‘just a woman’,” said Rhaenys, directing a glare at her cousin. Borros flushed and stared at the table. “But I damn well know how the world works. Take Gwayne’s plan and we’ll be chasing the bloody Dornish about their deserts and bleeding men.”

“Yet you can not deny, Princess Rhaenys, that the Dornish do require some punishment for their past actions,” Mellos piped up and then immediately quailed as Rhaenys glared at him. I wasn’t sympathetic. Rhaenys had not gone by the title Princess in a long time and the stress he’d put on the word implied mockery.

“That can be addressed after we have conquered Dorne,” said Corlys after a beat had passed. “Right now we need to figure out the fastest way to conquer it and Gwayne’s plan is not that way.”

“And if we follow your son’s plan we’ll be reconquering it every fifty years or so!” said Borros, unable to contain himself anymore. I grimaced as the table exploded into arguments again, as they retrod the same path they had done for the last two hours. Borros, Gwayne, Jasper and Mellos wanted harsher sanctions and punishments. Jeyne, Corlys, Lyman, myself and the Velaryons wanted a plan that left Dorne intact and ready to not drain our resources.

As for the rest, well, they had their own agendas. Elmo was cautiously on our side but was visibly unsure of his place at the table. Rickon was still sulking and refusing to give his opinion on anything as some form of protest. Hagen seemed to delight in demanding to raid and baiting every other man at the table and Lord Jason was not much better, acting the cultured Devil’s advocate and switching sides as each started to gain traction.

I let my head fall forward and massaged at my temples for a bit, yet it did little to calm the frustration bubbling under my skin. I wanted to explode, to scream at them all until they shut up
and listened. Yet, I could not. The most powerful people in the land were assembled here and I needed them to think well of me. When I looked up, Viserys caught my eye.

“Enough!” he bellowed again and silence quickly fell. “Let us take a small break to set our thoughts in order.”

There was more than just my grateful sigh as chairs scraped and we all stood. Laena gave me a look that said she’d much prefer to be anywhere else but here. The most she’d done was make noises of agreement when her mother had spoken and nodded when her brother laid out his points. I understood her need to leave, I really did, but the support of the rider of Vhagar was not so easily dismissed.

Since I could not comfort her, I waited until most of our opposition had drifted away before catching Laenor in a hug. He was tense and he growled angrily into my hair before he relaxed slightly, bringing his arms around me.

“You are doing well,” I told him, aware of my Father’s eyes on me from across the room.

“It does not feel like it,” he sighed back and then raised one arm to rub at his face. I released him.

“This has been on your mind for a while, hasn’t it?” I asked, noting that he hadn’t shaved in a few days and had the beginnings of a beard forming. I ran my hand across the bristles and grimaced, much to his amusement.

“Yes. Not burning Dorne is a big thing-” He was cut off by my Father, who had finally moved in close.

“I must admit, Ser Laenor, your plan intrigues me,” he said as I quickly lowered my hand.

“Thank you, Your Grace, it has been quite the undertaking to put together.” Viserys responded with a tight smile and I saw my moment to escape the awkwardness. I meandered about a bit, giving a small reassuring speech to Elmo and asking after Jess when I caught Jeyne. It was nice and relaxing until both Rhaenys and Borros exploded at each other across the room.

“You great lummox! Say that again! You shall meet Meleys’ flames!” Rhaenys bellowed as Borros dodged backwards from the slap she had aimed at him. Corlys caught her about the waist and nearly lost hold of her until the Cargyll twins rushed to help. She was hauled from the room, still yelling profanities. Borros looked almost shell shocked as she disappeared and I made my way over, wondering what could have prompted such a reaction.

“What a woman!” marvelled Hagen as I passed, directing his speech mostly at Laena. “She would make a worthy Rock Wife even!”

Gross.

“-do not understand women,” Borros was snarling as I reached him. Next to him, Lord Jason merely looked amused. “Elenda is much better at-”

He paused when he realised I was there and I paused when an idea hit me full in the face. Laenor’s plan called for Wyl to play the sacrificial lamb but hadn’t stated to whom. I had cautiously suggested Borros but Lady Elenda was a Caron by birth, perhaps if the forces of Nightsong were to occupy Wyl…?

“What on earth did you say to her, Lord Borros?” I asked, mimicking Jason’s amusement. Borros blushed and directed his gaze anywhere but at me. Lord Jason decided to answer my question.
“I believe Lord Borros brought up the rumours surrounding your husband, Your Grace.” I strangled the annoyance that brought and laughed, obviously fake to anyone that knew me.

“I’m surprised anyone still spreads them. Laenor proved himself innocent of such accusations when he slew Qarl Correy and put twins in my belly,” I snorted. Sensing a lifeline and proving he wasn’t as stupid as he sometimes acted, Borros nodded.

“I was trying to say that!” he said eagerly.

“I shall ensure Rhaenys is told so.” He nodded happily and seemed to relax slightly.

“Father always said to look after cousin Rhaenys,” he said finally, odd tone to his voice. “But I have the Stormlands to think of.”

“Indeed you do. Three girls and a wife, too,” I agreed, taking advantage of the conversation to slip in my offer. “Your wife is a Caron by birth?”

He nodded, puzzled at my asking what I already knew.

“She must be eager to see the Dornish cast down,” I said and he definitely looked puzzled now.

“What kind of gift? The Stormlands are not rich,” he said, frowning.

“She means Wyl,” said Jason dryly. “She’s asking you to support Laenor in return for making your good-family and wife very, very happy with a gift of Wyl.”

He blinked at that for a moment as Lord Jason turned to me.

“I assume it’s Wyl. Blackmont, Kingsgrave and Skyreach will be the Reacher’s responsibility and Yronwood the main force. That leaves Wyl, the family that have earned their reputation a thousand times over.”

“So you’d let Nightsong’s men take Wyl for their own? If I support your plan,” Borros clarified.

“And any Wyl you find there,” I said, feeling nauseous. There were innocent people in that family and I was selling them to a man who would not be kind. Gods, I hope they ran. Borros looked thoughtful at that.

“Elenda would like that,” he said.

“And after the conquest perhaps my Father may be persuaded to take Wyl and give it to the Stormlands.” He definitely liked that idea. Lord Jason gave me a small bow as a grin grew across Borros’ face.

“Deftly done, Your Grace,” he murmured and made his way over to Gwayne. I watched as he reached him and muttered something into his ear. Gwayne frowned and then sighed in defeat, nodding once. I turned back to Borros.

“Fine. If you get me Wyl, I’ll support your plan,” he said. I didn’t bother correcting him as to who came up with the plan. It didn’t truly matter, it would always be seen as my plan.

“You might wish to apologise to Rhaenys,” I advised as she was shown back in, Corlys’ arm around her waist. More for the protection of others, I think. She had once broken Malentine’s leg in an attempt to attack Daemon. He was saved from having to do so that moment by Viserys breaking
off from his conversation and calling for the break to be over. We all took our seats once more.

By the time he took a final vote, Laenor’s plan passed with ease with thirteen votes to two. It could have been more but both Hagen Greyjoy and Rickon Stark refused to vote. Still, it was one weight off of my mind. At least I would not be condemning all of Dorne to a fiery end.

Just House Wyl.
The next week or so proved blessedly free of headaches and surprises, allowing me to focus on Dorne. It was all very well and good that we should have a plan to take it but holding it was a different story entirely. An entirely more tricky one, in fact. I quickly sketched out my main worries: Insurgency by disloyal lords and the smallfolk, the economic mess that even Qoren hadn’t been able to fix and the sheer difference in culture our two lands had.

Insurgency amongst the nobility was most likely to come from those more obviously disloyal to Aliandra now. Wyl was the name that jumped to mind. He had been so upfront about it that Aron Dayne had been willing to risk outright civil war to rid Dorne of him. If he were left alone and unwatched, he would be trouble and he would inspire others to follow him. Perhaps, then, I had not erred when I promised Wyl’s fate to Borros Baratheon.

I swallowed as I picked up the quill again. The Wyls were a dangerous family. A symbol of more desperate times when Dorne had prevailed against all odds. The Carons would not be gentle but then Wyl of Wyl had not been gentle with his captives. Walter Wyl, the current lord, was not reputed to be a gentle man either.

No, I was already in too deep now.

As for preventing the smallfolk from rebelling, that was an all together trickier question. I had no clue why they had rebelled against Daeron, only suspicions that they had been pushed to it by vengeful Marchers eager to get even after centuries of bad blood. Preventing the smallfolk from rebelling then would be a simple matter of leaving them alone with little oversight. It would set the Lords of Westeros screaming… perhaps a Governor then. Appointed by the Iron Throne to oversee our interests. He would need his own guard, his own servants - probably his own manse too if he were to survive. Perhaps the occasional visit by a dragon to give his words weight.

He could not be Dornish and he would need to be someone that was respected… I jotted down a list of Black Lords and trusted allies that could fill the spot nicely. Whoever it was would likely end up working alongside Aliandra’s regent until she attained her majority.

Aliandra would not be in Dorne if I could help it. I wanted the girl as my ward. For both selfish and selfless reasons. Aliandra as my ward would mean she was raised alongside my children. If the gods were kind, they would befriend each other. If I were extra lucky, she would come to see me as a mother figure. Having her loyalty would go far in ensuring Dorne did not continuously rebel.

As well… I could scarce imagine how terrifying it would be for a young girl to be raised in King’s Landing, mayhaps if I had her she would know she had someone in her corner.

As for other measures: hostages and marriages.

The marriages would have to start in the Riverlands, the Vale or the Westerlands. The North, the Reach and the Stormlands were not an appropriate place to send a Dornish man or woman and the Crownlands to close to the Throne. It would also help to send men and women to Dorne to marry as well but that would require brave souls unafraid of vipers and attacks in the dark.

Hostages from every major family were a given. The young men and women would provide Aliandra with a link to her homeland as well. She may need that link and those friendships should Garin come calling one day.
Now, onto making Dorne profitable… actually, I’d settle for not a drain on our resources. Once we took Dorne, it’s people would look to us for food and protection instead of the Martells. Given that Dorne was still recovering from Aegon’s rampage, this would require a lot of money. Fix the export infrastructure and use the subsequent income to try and boost food growth.

I had no idea what it took to grow things in the desert although I knew irrigation was involved somehow. Something to -ugh- consult the Citadel on. They would have records of any civilisation that had flourished in arid climates. If we could get more of Dorne growing food instead of being desert it would go a long way to fixing the problems that came with the acquisition.

My quill scratched over the parchment as I turned my scattered and almost illegible notes into something vaguely resembling a plan for Post-war Dorne. I wrote for quite a while, until my wrist was cramping and my handwriting starting to slide into illegible again. I was stopped not by those things but by a maid telling me my Father had sent word that he wished to see me in the Keep.

I searched my memory as I packed my things away. I had not done anything to anger him recently, of that I was quite sure. Why then did he wish to see me? The last time this had happened, I had been accused of murder and gone into labour soon after. I doubted it was anything so serious this time, there were a distinct lack of guards for it to be another accusation.

When I arrived in the Small Council chamber, it had been transformed once more. Lyonel, Lyman and my Father sat on one side of a large oaken table. When he saw me, Viserys smiled widely and gestured to an empty seat next to him. Somewhat relieved I wasn’t to be sat in one the seats opposite, I took it gratefully, dropping a kiss to his temple as I did so.

“How has your morning been, daughter?” asked Viserys softly.

“Well enough. Jocelyn has been screaming the house down once more,” I told him and he chuckled.

“And Alyssa?” I tried not to wince at that, keeping my now somewhat strained smile in place.

“Quiet to Jocelyn’s loud. She enjoys her naps although she has finally noticed her egg.” He beamed at that news. “Might I ask what the occasion is?”

“We are to be speaking with representatives of the Iron Bank,” piped up Lyman’s reedy voice before Viserys could answer. “To discuss the prospect of a loan in regards to Dorne.”

Oh boy, this is going to be fun.

“I wish that you had told me, I would have prepared something,” I said, trying to disguise my surprise. Lyonel passed me a stack of papers that Lyman had held out and I took them, eyes skimming over them. I had discovered early into my education as Father’s heir that I had little head for figures even though Lyman had been a patient and competent teacher. I could see his hand all over the more understandable parts.

“By the Seven…” I breathed before I could help it.

“Indeed, Your Grace,” said Lyonel. “You see the need for a loan now.”

“How much of this can we cover with our current finances?” I asked, glancing up at Lyman. “Do we not have a surplus?”

The old man paused for a moment, as if trying to figure out how to explain it.
“We do indeed make a surplus at the moment, Your Grace, and going into winter we continue to do so,” he started. “Yet in winter, that surplus is eaten into by low taxes, winter storms making trading more difficult and more and more people dying off the longer winter goes on.”

That made sense. Less people to pay taxes, less trade to gather taxes from and less food to go about as people hoarded all they had saved in case the winter proved long and hard. When he saw I’d understood, he forged on.

“As well as that drop in money, expenses also rise. We must provide a bonus to the men we keep, we require more money to keep roads in good repair and... as I’m sure you understand, everything costs more in winter,” he said. “In Summer, we would be able to afford the war. I would not advise it as any disaster could see our finances spin out of control but it would be possible.”

Barely, I noted, noticing Lyman’s own summation.

“Do our finances truly drop so much?” I asked. That winter would see a drop of a hundred thousand god dragons in revenue and an increase in spending of nearly that again seemed absurd yet the explanation made sense.

Gods, I needed my own financial wizard.

“Indeed they do, Your Grace,” he said, grimly.

“Which is why we need to negotiate with the Iron Bank,” said Viserys firmly. Nobody pointed out that a loan from the Lannister’s or the Hightowers was likely to be a lot more gentle interest wise and easier to obtain. That would give them power over the court, over the conquest and over my Father. I should be thankful he wasn’t giving them new ways to push their way in once more.

“It should be noted, Your Grace, that it is customary for the details to be negotiated after the meeting between men of the treasury and their clerks,” Lyman said.

“Forgive me, for I have never sat in such a meeting before, but what are we to do in the meeting itself?” I asked and Lyonel and Viserys chuckled in response whilst Lyman directed me a look a fond indulgence I knew so well from the days of his tutorship.

“Politics,” answered Lyonel finally and with a rueful smile in place. “They want to make sure their investment isn’t going to upset the balance if things. Unstable times make bankers very nervous, Princess, they much prefer peace, where the profits are steady.”

“I see. They shy away from the high-risk, high-reward model?” Lyonel blinked at that and Lyman butted in.

“A peculiar way to put it, Your Grace, but you have the general idea. The Iron Bank does not like gambling. They wish to know that what we owe will be paid back in full and on time,” he said.

“And of course,” said my Father quietly as the doors to the room were opened. “They like to humble us by forcing us to play to their game. A reminder, they think, that for all we have dragons, they have power still.”

I was saved from thinking on that sudden turn to hostility by the representatives themselves arriving. Three of them, each dressed in the customary dark and somber colours that indicated men of high rank in Braavos. The first was a large built man, dressed in the deep purple that was almost unique to the Braavosi yet apart from his considerable girth, there was little more memorable about him. An average face with dull, brown eyes and dark hair that showed no signs of grey. He was the one in charge, I would bet on it. The way he moved, how he remained a little ahead of the others
were all clues to this fact.

Which is not to say the other two were unimportant. One I immediately nicknamed weasel, for if there was ever a face fitting that description, this man surely had it. Thin and narrow features with a truly unfortunate nose. His hair was a dirty blond and his eyes a dull grey. Like his somber companions, he wore a deep blue. Just looking at him put me on edge for he put me in mind of how Larys looked at people, just a little too intently.

And given what I now knew about Larys…

I studied the final representative. He was the opposite of weasel in every way, dressed in a deep grey. Like the fat one, he had dark hair and eyes in an average face yet it was his expression that gave him some character. His small, polite smile and the way his eyes seemed to shine as he took in the luxurious surroundings. He was also, I noted, taller than the rest yet seemed to be trying to hide the fact by bending in on himself almost.

All three were eventually seated, shuffling their chairs about and all but weasel declined the offer of wine.

“Your Grace, I can not tell you how honoured we are to have been invited here,” began Fat. “I am Laraz Irrolis ad these are my associates, Jaerys Sorrelion and Maranos Hartios.”

Oh, how interesting. The youngest man, the polite one, was a relative of dear unwanted Tycheo. I certainly did not miss Maranos’ awkward shifting as I studied him, looking for any resemblance to the rogue that had been promised to Laena.

“I am delighted to welcome you, Master Laraz,” Viserys began with a smile I was rapidly beginning to recognise as fake. “Might I introduce my daughter, Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen, the Hand of the King, Lord Lyonel Strong and my Master of Coin, Lord Lyman Beesbury.”

Laraz smiled warmly and I had no doubt that it was as fake as Viserys sudden good humour.

“It is truly an honour to make your acquaintance,” he assured us. I gave him a gracious smile as his eyes lingered on me for a second. Yet even as Laraz moved on to Lyonel and Lyman, Jaerys’ dirty grey eyes remained on me for all he was trying to pretend he was examining a stack of papers that he had placed in front of himself. When I made it clear I had noticed his observation, he smiled thinly and looked away, making a note.

Curious.

“So, shall we get down to business!” suggested Laraz. You could almost see Viserys’ teeth in his smile as he gave his assent. “You wish to borrow a sum of money from the Iron Bank of Braavos to fund a war of conquest in Dorne.”

“That is correct. I had hoped for peace-”

“Yet Otto Hightower’s death left you little choice, I quite understand. I do,” said Laraz and Viserys lips pursed in annoyance. No Westerosi lord would dream of interrupting the King. “And the attempted poisoning of your own daughter did not help matters.”

I did not miss Lyonel’s sudden tenseness and neither did Laraz, if the way he moved on from the topic was any indication.

“We understand your position, Your Grace. There have been many discussions amongst the Keyholders regarding the Dornish matter for quite some time. The late Prince Qoren borrowed
“You may be assured that, under my rule, Dorne will pay what it owes. In full and on time,” Viserys replied firmly, sounding sincere. There was a threat in his voice but Laraz merely smiled. The threat was not for him anyway but I did not miss Maranos’ little shudder, or the look Jaerys shot him in response.

“Of course, Your Grace. You are known to Braavos as an honourable man, invested in the rule of law like Jaehaerys before you.” It was blatant flattery and I was happy to note Father did not rise to the bait and start preening like a lesser man might have done at being compared to ‘the Wise’. “Would I be right to assume you would be willing to agree to take Dorne’s debts should they fail to pay?”

I forced myself to stay still. The Iron Bank would have it’s due, indeed. Be it from Dorne or ourselves. Yet there was no way he could say no and still expect to get our own loan from the Bank. Gods, I would need someone dedicated to dealing with these bankers when I ascended the Throne. I did not want to be reduced to selling the mess of half-melted swords off to pay a debt because I did not read the fine print.

Lyman coughed politely and our gazes swung to him. You could have heard a pin drop as the elderly Lord leaned over and whispered something into Viserys’ ear. The King frowned and nodded.

“We would be willing to agree to that on the understanding that it would only be Dorne’s loans we become responsible for.” I frowned at his words even as Lyman smiled and I fancied a brief chagrined look crossed Laraz’ face. “We will not become responsible for every loan any in Westeros take with you.”

Oh, by the Seven, I would have missed that. Of course it set a precedent in which they could argue us responsible for any idiots loans after making us pay Dorne’s.

“Oh, by the Seven, I would have missed that. Of course it set a precedent in which they could argue us responsible for any idiots loans after making us pay Dorne’s.

“Of course, my most sincere apologies if I worded it in such a manner!” said Laraz, any trace of chagrin gone from his features.

“Then we are agreed? The Iron Bank will extend to Iron Throne a line of credit should we enforce Dorne’s repayments?” asked Viserys. Laraz glanced at his companions. Jaerys nodded, barely visibly. Maranos’ was more obvious and Laraz beamed.

“That is agreeable to us, Your Grace. I’ll send young Maranos here to discuss the matter with Lord Lyman at his earliest convenience.”

Well, that went... well.
“And why did you spend fifty five gold dragons on such a curious device?” asked Joffrey, as I presented him with the magnifying glass. I watched as he turned it over in his hands, looking mystified as my smile grew. Oh, it was overly fancy for what it would hopefully be used for. The Myrish lenses were set in a gold frame and the handle was carved from Ebony.

“It’s all in the name of intelligence gathering,” I told him.

“Then perhaps I can start now,” he said and placed it carefully down on his desk. “What is it for?”

I produced the pot of fine powder, made from what I do not know, and dropped it to the desk before stealing a pot of ink and some paper to round it all off. Joffrey watched me as if I had gone mad. I suppose, in his defence, there was no particular rhyme or reason to my actions.

“Now, here is a fun fact,” I said once I had all my bits and pieces arranged. “No two fingerprints are the same.”

He blinked and then folded his hands under his chin.

“Go on.” I tried to smile as all his attention came to focus on me. He was my primary contact with Wisdom Jerrett for a reason. The new technologies fascinated him on a personal level and were an important tool for keeping an edge in his service to my cause. Under his gaze I polished the glass with a clean handkerchief until it shone and then pressed my thumb into it, leaving a mark we could both see.

Then I uncapped the ink and poured a small amount into the lid, dipping the handkerchief in and painting my thumb a deep black. Then, I pressed it to his paper several times before handing him the ink and cloth. He did the same with a bemused smile.

“Fingerprints get left on everything we touch without gloves,” I told him as I tilted the glass and unscrewed the powder Jerrett had sent me, ostensibly so I could discover if the maids were cleaning my quarters properly. “So if you can find someway to highlight them, make them visible even to the human eye, then you can compare them. Since no two are the same, it’s easy to prove who last held an object.”

He did not answer as the powder spilt over the glass. I blew gently and the excess powder disappeared from the surface and spread itself across Joffrey’s desk, leaving a semi-visible thumb print behind. It was not perfect, nowhere near the level of ‘modern’ fingerprint dusts but it was enough. Joffrey caught the idea soon enough and retrieved the magnifying glass and examined the print on the glass and the sample prints.

“Hmmm,” he said finally. Underwhelming much.

“Hmmm?” I asked. He placed the magnifying glass down once more and gave me a look with a half apologetic look on his face. “This will revolutionise crime detection.”

“I am well aware of that,” he said, now more amused than not. “But I do not see it’s worth to… well, my line of work.”

“The poisoning,” I said. “Imagine if you could have taken prints from the bottle.”

In truth I had been angry at myself that I had not thought of it sooner. The bottle had long since
been destroyed but with so many suspects even ruling a few out would be useful beyond measure. Joffrey tapped out a rhythm on his desk and glanced at the glass again.

“We would only have the print on our end though,” he pointed out.

“But we could use it to identify whether a suspect did or did not do it once we have one,” I argued. “Imagine a fingerprint in blood on a doorway. We know it is not the victims because her hands are too small. Ergo, it must be the killers. When we have a suspect-”

“We test it.” He had his hands under his chin again, eyebrows drawn into a V over his eyes as he thought. “Very well, I admit it has it’s uses.”

I must have pouted because his amused look came back even as he struggled to look stern.

“I will work on it,” he promised. I was about to press the issue further when somewhere above us, a door slammed and the distance sounds of Laena yelling filled the manse. Joffrey was in the dark as I was if the confused looks we shot at each other was any indication.

“-ave a right to see it!” she was bellowing as Joffrey and I got closer.

“No, you most certainly do not!” barked Corlys, prompting a scream of frustration.

“Why are you being stubborn!? It’s just some books and art!” she was retorting as I pushed open the door to the room to Corlys and Rhaenys’ living space. Instead of answering, Corlys directed a glare at us and Laena whirled around. “Rhaenyra! Joff!”

“I will not change my mind, Laena,” her Father warned. Puzzled, I glanced between the two, noting the flush on both of their cheeks that indicated they had each been arguing for some time. A sigh came from somewhere over my shoulder.

“Do not get involved, Rhaenyra,” sighed Joffrey, sounding tired. “They will yell at each other until the end of days and neither will bend for the other no matter what you say.”

“He will bend for Rhaenyra! For his future Queen!” Laena protested but the effect was ruined by Corlys throwing up his hands and shaking his head in denial.

“Future!” he replied, crossing his arms. “Not yet my Queen.”

“Perhaps you could explain what the argument is about?” I said and Joffrey sighed again before moving forward to stand by my side.

“It is quite simple,” said Corlys. “Laena wants something from my private collection and I have said no. This tantrum wil-”

“It’s not that simple!” she interrupted, turning those pleading eyes on me.

“What has she asked to see?” I asked, trying to ignore the heart wrenching effect of that expression.

“A few books… a reed tapestry or two… all are unimaginably old. And rare. And are in storage for their own protection.” He could not have looked more shifty if he’d actively tried. Even Joffrey was frowning at the display.

“Surely a simple viewing-”

“No.” I blinked at the cold shut down and the glare I was getting. “They stay in the vault.”
“Lord Corlys?” The man’s glare turned to his goodson. “Laena? What exactly are these artifacts?”

Both father and daughter glanced at each other, before Corlys snorted.

“Well, I suppose there is no hiding it. They relate to magic,” he said and I saw Laena wince.

“Magic,” I repeated, not taking my eyes off of her. “You have an interest in magic now?”

“No exactly.” Her response was more shifty than Corlys behaviour and at my narrowed eyes she blushed red. “Fine! Yes! The whole concept of the dragons are deeply routed in magic. One can not understand dragons without magic!”

I stared at her, her face flushed with righteous anger. Next to me, I sensed Joffrey doing much the same.

“You have to understand,” she said into the silence. “They are creatures of magic. Those books, that art… I need it! Jerrett’s books can only convey so much!”

“Jerrett,” said Joffrey, raising a hand to his forehead and groaning. “Of course that mad man is involved.”

“He gave me a few lessons in the basics,” Laena retorted “And pointed me towards more reading materials.”

My brain finally rebooted and I shook myself from my shock, almost physically.

“I don’t understand.” She grimaced at my statement. “You wish to learn magic to understand the dragons?”

“You know why it’s important, Rhaenyra,” she insisted, stepping forward and taking my hand. Her eyes sought mine as she gripped my fingers tight. When she spoke next, her voice was a whisper. “Our future, our children’s future… rebellion… the Long Night.”

“And how does learning magic help?” I hissed. “Apart from painting a target on your back that every slightly devout lord will use for practise.”

She let go of my hand and stepped back.

“It’s more than just the dragons,” she said finally after taking a deep breath. “It’s Westeros as a whole.”

“Explain,” her Father said. She took another deep breath.

“It is hard to,” she said finally. “It’s routed in concepts I do not fully understand. Concepts I know are explored in those books!”


“Did Jerrett ever mention a tablet to you?” she asked. “It’s from the Great Empire of the Dawn-”

“The Tablet of Stars,” I said and she nodded.

“Just seeing it is considered the pinnacle of Alchemy, Jerrett says. It supposedly describes the first Long Night and how it came about. After… after I learnt of certain facts, I asked Jerrett and he told me about the tablet.” So she’d gone investigating after learning of my tale. Of canon. “And
remembered I’d seen some of the symbols he showed me. In Father’s collection!”

“You believe it’s important to understanding what the Long Night is?” I asked. We were a long way off the second Long Night. It was, quite literally, not a priority.

“Not just the Long Night but… magic! The Great Empire of the Dawn outstripped even the Valyrian Freehold! They had magic we could only dream of, that Valyrian sorcerers could only dream of!” She was cut off by Corlys surging forwards and seizing her arms.

“Listen to yourself, girl! You sound like a madwoman!” he bellowed and even Joffrey flinched at the sudden volume. “Better men than you have wasted their lives seeking these secrets! It drives them mad! Then it kills them!”

She tried to pull free but he held her still. I could only stare as her violet eyes widened and Corlys’ face hovered ever closer to her own. In fairness, even Joffrey seemed routed to the floor in shock.

“You speak of some ancient disaster as if it’s relevant! You speak of violating the tenets of the Faith as if it’s nothing! Might I remind you of Gogossos? That dead city riddled with sorceries and plagues? Of the twisted monsters that it birthed as the Valyrians practised their magics?” Finally he let her go and stood back, his next words were hoarse with emotion. “Cease this search, daughter. Stick with your dragons. Pursue the matter of the artifacts again while I live and I will have you stripped of your name.”

We were left gaping as he stormed out. I turned my head back to Laena, who had the beginnings of tears in her eyes and stretched out my hand to place it on her shoulder. She flinched when I did but caught my wrist as I drew back.

“I need those books,” she said, voice bitter and tears flowing down her face. “It’s more than just… Rhaenyra, please. Runestone, Winterfell, the Wall, I know if you let me continue, I can find the answers to those mysteries.”

I said nothing and Joffrey copied me. She tried to pull me close then stopped when I proved resistant.

“Burn powder,” she said. “Jerrett told me. This could be the reason it requires blo-”

“Enough,” I said, finally, making up my mind. “Laena we are constantly observed, constantly attacked and our enemies will use any perceived weakness. We can not afford to get involved in magic of all things.”

“You tasked me to learn the truth about dragons!” That made me pause. “We need them if we are to survive and yet if I am to know their secrets, then I must delve deeper.”

“You put us all in a difficult position,” said Joffrey, his stick tapping as he moved closer. “We can not afford rumours of magic.”

“Yet all will be lost if we lose our dragons.” She abandoned me and appealed to her husband. “You and I are good enough to hide it.”

There were dark rumours about Targaryens that had gotten to involved in magic and it’s practitioners; Maegor, Aemon, Shiera, Bloodraven… probably Stannis too, in his future. Yet if Laena was right… Daenerys had hatched her eggs, a miracle if George were to be believed, whilst echoing the words of a witch. Oh gods, whichever way I jumped I was at a disadvantage.

“Fine,” I said and Laena whirled around to stare at me. Joffrey too. “It is kept secret. Nobody
learns of it. You consult me regularly and no, and I mean this Laena, no killings, no blood magic - theory only.”

“Nothing like that!” she assured me, leaning into Joffrey, looking relieved. “I only need the theory to expand upon Barth’s work.”

I was about to chide her further on the matter when I was interrupted by yet another Velaryon yelling. This time it was Laenor and he was yelling for me. I was out of the room in a flash and heading towards the nursery as fast as my legs could realistically go.

My husband was half leaning out of the door when I reached him, my breath coming in short pants. Whether it was due to fear or exertion I could not tell. He seized my wrist and dragged me forward into the nursery itself, babbling incoherently. I tried to get him to stop, to calm down and tell me what was wrong before I exploded yet when he dragged me before the twins, both seemed fine.

“What?” I finally managed to gasp out. Laenor finally stopped and looked at me, face morphing from a confusing mix of emotions to slightly guilty.

“Nothing is wrong! I’m sorry but-”

“Da-da.”

I peered at Jocelyn as she descended into happy babbling, small arms waving in the air.

“Did she-” I was cut off by Laenor’s nodding, silver hair a mess about his face and his eyes threatening tears. I turned back to my daughter, who seemed intent on trying to catch her own foot now that it seemed play was not forthcoming. “Oh.”

I only realised I was weeping tears of joy when Laenor’s threatened tears broke and he threw his arms around me. I couldn’t help but laugh as he lifted me into the air and twirled me around.

“She said da-da! She knows who I am!” he crowed joyfully. I was still weeping slightly when he put my down, a grin so wide I feared he may strain something.

“Yes!” I said back, gripping his arms and overwhelmed. “But if Alys’ first word is not ma-ma, we’re having words.”

The threat had no bite to it. I was too happy and so was he.
Okay. I've finally decided on what the timeskip will look like. After Viserys' Interlude has been posted I'm going to take a weeks break from posting. Then I'll post fourteen timeskip chapters that will cover a decade of time and then I shall take another weeks break. I know that means a month before regular posting starts again but I'll need to rebuild my buffer and I have three assignments that need completing.

Corlys was still on edge the next day when I finally managed to arrange some sort of meeting between us all. The frown on Laenor’s face as he examined Laena told me Joffrey had filled him in on what his sister intended to do. Although if Rhaenys knew what Laena and Corlys’ disagreement had been about she certainly didn’t show it. Instead she greeted us all with a smile and a quick update on the rebuilding of Spicetown. The good news was that they had managed to pull ahead of schedule, which pleased Laenor. The news of them being over budget was a little more concerning. Still, it was Velaryon gold - not technically mine and I was not allowed to sulk when they spent it.

Besides, the work on Spicetown would benefit me in the long run.

As they all settled into seats and murmured their greetings, I shuffled the papers I’d had one of Joffrey’s scribes copy out. Each copy listed my ideas, thoughts and wants all drawn up into a solid plan for reforming Westeros’ laws and hopefully heading off the disasters of the future Targaryen Kings. They’d find new ones, I was quite sure, but I could not prepare for every eventuality and so I had not tried to.

I began sliding each copy out. Not one of them seemed put off by the thickness of it I was glad to see.

“This is just a first impressions discussion,” I said. “We can refine and work on it through further meetings.”

“The Basic Law of the Seven Kingdoms,” said Rhaenys, her tone doubtful. I did not wince but it was a close run thing. That tone already did not bode well and this was just the first, and least objectionable, of the changes I planned to make.

“Indeed,” I replied, keeping my voice even. “A foundation our descendants can use to build a better future for themselves.”

Her face did not change from it’s doubtful frown as her eyes scanned through it. Laena merely looked puzzled, Joffrey and Corlys thoughtful whereas Laenor… damn it, also a doubtful frown. I remembered his staunch opposition to change long ago and took a deep breath. If I was lucky I would win over Joffrey and Corlys and they would help convince their significant others.

“The first five decrees are already law,” she said finally but I sensed her disgruntlement was due to the last two decrees.

“They are common laws or customs. They are done because they have always been done that way. People can not imagine it not being done. I am merely putting ink on the paper and formalising the
matter,” I explained. Besides, this was to be a set of laws that not even a King could break. Especially decree one, with any luck adhering to that would prevent any regrettable incidents like murdering a Lord Paramount and his Heir.

The other formalised the ban of slavery, guaranteed the right to petition the crown, guaranteed the right for a trial and guaranteed the right to take the Black if you have been convicted of a capital crime. Basic stuff. Nothing revolutionary.

“What do you think of the last two?” I asked my assembled ‘small council’. Those referred to the formalisation of a Great Council in the case of a disputed succession and the idea that not even a king could break the above laws without permission of more than half his Lords. Those ideas were… radically new to Westeros. Especially the last one. The idea that the King’s word was not law? That his power was not absolute?

The look on their faces told me everything as they struggled to find someway to let me know I was making a massive mistake with decree seven without hurting my feelings. I levelled them all with my best stare. I would be Queen, I could take criticism. Surprisingly, it was Joffrey who spoke up first.

“Do you not disinherit yourself with this decree?” he asked, tapping decree six on his copy. “If a Great Council were called, how many would support your brother because they do not believe a female ruler is capable? You risk destabilising your own rule from the start.”

“Too many would support Aegon, you have the right of that,” I admitted. “And his descendants may call a Great Council upon my death but they will already consider themselves the true heirs and is this way not better than burning tens of thousands whenever dispute does arise? Besides, I have prepared something to remedy such a situation.”

He could not argue that but it seemed Rhaenys had finally found a point to debate me on.

“You are giving to much power to the Lords,” growled Rhaenys. “A Great Council every time succession is disputed? They would seek to call every succession into dispute. They would seek to make every monarch a beggar that must come to them on bended knee.”

“Then it is a simple matter of defining what the dispute is?” I answered back. Her eyebrows came to together in a dangerous V and her mouth opened to respond but oddly enough, it seemed I had won over Corlys at least.

“Rhaenyra is right, my love, what is the Kingdom worth if it is set aflame every generation or so?” he said gently.

“It would not be set aflame if people would follow the word of the King,” protested Laenor.

“Which King would that be? Rhaenyra may protest the Great Council was about the right of a King to pick his heir but we all know that’s not what Jaehaerys had in mind. Should we follow his word of no woman sitting the Iron Throne?” For a moment I thought Rhaenys might slap Corlys and then, miraculously, she relaxed. Her face did not change from thunderous disapproval though. Laenor had nothing to say to that but he was still frowning when he dropped his eyes back to his copy.

“Am I correct in assuming this ‘House of Lords’ you have described would form the Great Council?” asked Joffrey having read ahead. I glanced at Laena, confirming that she had nothing to say on the ‘Basic Law’ before moving to answer Joffrey’s query.
“It would,” I confirmed. Like many things, George’s nobility were analogous to Medieval nobility just blown up on a massive scale. The Dukes were what I had come to privately refer to as the Lords Paramount; Stark, Arryn, Tully, Greyjoy… those that ruled over Kingdoms in all but name and in some cases had ruled Kingdoms in the past.

Lords were the ones sworn directly to a Lord Paramount and had vassals sworn to them in turn, in my classification of rank. Westeros was vast, yet there were only about five hundred Lords that met this criteria. The rest were what I would think of as barons, landed knights and wealthy land owners. Any below the rank of Lord would be excluded from this House of Lords if only because I doubted there was a place in Westeros that could hold all of them.

I had my heart set on Harrenhal, I would admit. The Strongs could be bought with a less cursed castle and I could knock down that twisted, half burned mess and turn it into something useful. I’m getting ahead of myself. If I can’t even push this idea past my own supporters, I will never get Westeros as a whole to accept it.

“It is to give the Lords an illusion of power in truth,” I said, feeling the need to explain further. “They have power, yes, but the framework puts that power entirely at the discretion of the Monarch.”

“So I see,” said Rhaenys, sourly. “I mislike it. The King’s word is law. They should not need to ask the Lords for their opinions.”

“Come now, Rhaenys, she makes it clear in her writings she would not be asking. It’s a stamp of approval, a way to gauge how well the law would be recieved. A Monarch might ignore the decision should they wish,” said Corlys. Rhaenys pursed her lips. She was struggling with the idea that anyone who rode a dragon or had claim to our blood should ask for the opinions of those ‘below’ them yet she was clever enough that she knew having some sort of way of gauging the opinion of the assembled nobles was a good one.

Pride warred with pragmatism.

“It only takes one weak king,” she said finally. “One weak king and the nobles will run amok with this power you wish to give them.”

“A weak king would allow them to run amok anyway,” I replied and none of us mentioned the name Viserys. He had not covered himself in glory in his early reign, even if he was making up for it now. It was clear from her pained expression she still could not quite let go of a dragon’s pride. “At least with the House, Lords can air their grievances instead of letting it boil to rebellion.”

I saw the moment the spark of understanding went off behind those who knew about Aerys the Mad and finally Laenor nodded. Presumably because he saw the point of not letting things get that bad and couldn’t come up with a better way to prevent it himself.

“It can not be allowed to propose its own laws,” said Laenor finally. “Or block them if it is the Monarch’s will. That is much too far but I see no problem in allowing them at least some say.”

Her son giving in was enough for Rhaenys to sigh in defeat and nod her assent. Again, Laena had little to say on the matter. She was chewing her lip and looking a bit baffled as she flicked ahead through my proposed changes.

“This Succession Act will cause problems,” said Laenor as they all read through the next proposed change. “I understand your need to legitimise your claim through the title of Princess of Dragonstone but… all children of the first wife before the children of the second? Do you truly
need to legitimise yourself twice?”

“I consider it prudent,” I said.

“It will cause problems,” said Rhaenys.

“Succession always has problems. At least with a Great Council we can prevent those problems from becoming violent,” I replied and she snorted.

“You still have not defined a ‘dispute’. In your Act, it says that Succession will be published by the Small Council to the sixth degree,” Joffrey cut in. I paused at that. Damn him, he did have a point.

“It would have to be based in law,” I decided. “Not just anytime someone wants to fight for it. Suspected bastardy for example?”

“And other examples would be?” he asked. I ignored the intense focus I was getting from the others.

“If someone in the line committed a criminal act.” Damn him, he’d seen my hesitation.

“Like kidnapping?” asked Laena, coming to my rescue. “Would that disinherit his children as well or just him?”

“Just him,” I answered as Rhaenys frowned.

“That sounds very specific,” she said. Laena flushed in response.

“We were debating made-up scenarios for laws,” she muttered. Corlys raised an eyebrow. “In this one, the Crown Prince kidnaps the daughter of Lord Stark and the heir of Lord Stark threatens the Prince’s life. We were debating the outcome for that.”

“An interesting scenario,” Corlys said, amusement playing about his lips. “Were there others?”

“A King legitimising all his bastards on his death bed, the Queen passing of bastards as trueborn… uh… the North succeeding?” she replied, which sent her Mother into a fit of laughter.

“I see a lot of laws that make sense with that context,” said Corlys, smiling at his wife’s amusement. Then his expression darkened. “Including this matter about Courts.”

“Yes,” I said. “It lets the Crown claw some power from the nobles in exchange for the House of Lords business.”

“So it does,” said Laenor. “But I agree with Father. It will not be well-received.”

They were not wrong. The Lords had been the enforcers of the law on their lands for time immemorial. My proposals would see three courts set up and my Lords would only have control of one; Magistrates, Crown Courts and High Courts.

The Lords would be their own Magistrates, or they could appoint someone in their name, but like in that half forgotten land my mind had originated from the Magistrates would only try summary offences. Summary offences were things like theft, assault, drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace and other such crimes. For anything bigger, or indictable, it must go to the proposed Crown Court.

These Courts would be overseen by Justices of the Peace, men appointed by the Crown. That would be the sticking point of course. Lords would not wish to lose their ability to try such cases as
murder, rape, treason and banditry. They would be very, very opposed, violently in some cases, but this was the height of Targaryen power and if we did go on to lose our dragons later we would need institutions to cement our rule.

The Three Courts would be one of them.

The Third Court would be the High Court. My attempt at removing the sting of losing the Crown Courts. Only the nobility would be tried here and only they would have the right of trial by their peers. I had no doubt many would still prefer trial by combat but I had no chance in all Seven Hells of removing that particular right. The least I could do was add in a provision to prevent those on trial pulling a Tyrion and declaring trial by combat after another such trial is underway.

None of it was perfect, it would definitely need the decade and a half I hoped I had before Father’s death to refine but it was a start. A better one than I had hoped given that Laenor and Rhaenys still looked unconvinced. Still, I had not expected for them to agree with everything and I had no doubt I would be receiving their corrections and suggestions.

“It will not,” I finally replied after Laenor raised an eyebrow at my brooding. “But we need a better handle on the nobility.”

“I will not deny that,” said Rhaenys with a sigh. I had no doubt as to what she was thinking. Had this clarification existed when her Father had been alive, she would be Queen now. There is some part of her that will never let that go, I think. “Still, I will... work with these suggestions for now.”

From the set of her mouth, she had already thought up a lot of ‘suggestions’. Judging by Corlys and Laenor nodding along and Joffrey already making his notes, I suspected it would be more work than I had hoped.

“I have an issue with these proposed changes to City Charters,” began Corlys and I resisted the urge to close my eyes and sigh.

The rest of this meeting would no doubt prove to be a long one.
Perhaps I had blown this whole thing out of proportion.

That was all I could think as I surveyed my ladies. They were dressed in crimson edged in black, a pleasing inversion of my own dress although mine was far more ostentatious where they wore a somewhat simpler style. The Seven know Marya and Falena had cursed me for choosing it as they’d fastened and strapped me into the damnable thing this morning. It had layers, it had dragons and it had metal trimmings. Impressive to look at and a bitch to get into and out of. The colour, the shock and awe - all to hammer home my children were dragons, Targaryens, and not Velaryons as many in court might mutter.

By the Seven, I was fretting again.

I turned my back on them and made my way over to the heavy velvet curtain, pulling back the corner so I could peer out over the assembled crowd. It was the somebodies of Westeros, yet again, that had gained access to the Sept. There would be many more later, when our little party made its way to the Throne room but even looking out over the crowd now had my heart pounding.

“Rhaenyra,” Laena said gently from behind me. “Come away from the curtain. You will just work yourself up further.”

I stepped back and let the velvet fall back into place, taking a deep breath before forcing a smile on my face and turning to her. She raised an elegant silver eyebrow at how fake the grin must look. Or how manic I must look. It was hard to tell.

“Deep breaths,” she said. I followed her advice as the world tilted around me a little. “I have not known you to be so worked up about a public appearance ever before.”

I pulled a face at the teasing smile on her face but it only made her chuckle.

“It is not just my appearance now,” I told her and if on cue, one of the stars of the show gave a wail. Laena’s amusement only increased as we both turned in time to see Laenor lift Jocelyn from Marya’s hands and cradle her to himself. He’d bowed to me on his dress today. He’d taken one look at my expression and timidly agreed to wear whatever I had the maids lay out for him.

I’d had to wrestle with the temptation to drape him in my own colours for a little too long to be healthy. Still he wore a beautiful doublet, stitched with silver seahorses and waves. A matching cloak was thrown over his shoulders and his now shoulder length hair was pulled back into a tail. He wore a blade at his waist, the only thing he’d truly insisted on against my wishes. He wanted to appear the handsome warrior prince.

“I have her in hand,” he said, noticing my look. It was true. She had been completely distracted by the silver seahorse clasp of his cloak and was pawing at it with a smile stretching her face. I gave him a strained grin and turned back to an even more amused Laena.

“I have her in hand,” he said, noticing my look. It was true. She had been completely distracted by the silver seahorse clasp of his cloak and was pawing at it with a smile stretching her face. I gave him a strained grin and turned back to an even more amused Laena.

“I am allowed to fret,” I told her sternly and she snickered into the back of her hand.

“Perhaps you could see how Sera is doing with Alys instead of working yourself up further,” she suggested once she’d calmed a little. I followed her pointed look to the Strong girl. Sera was singing softly, that much I could tell, and Alys was gazing up at her in adoration. It made my heart ache with happiness to see that unwavering violet stare. When I reached them, Sera paused and Alys tore her eyes from her and onto me.
My heart nearly burst in my chest when she smiled happily at me. She may have been slow to do so but now that she could my Alys had smiles for everyone. Sera passed her over. It all seemed to be moving so fast, I reflected as I rocked her back and forth in my arms. It seemed like only yesterday that I had birthed them and now they were to be presented to the Court. Soon they would be teething, hopefully anyway, and beyond that crawling. Walking. Jocelyn was already babbling and finding her voice. Alys had yet to say any discernible words but she would not be far behind her sister, I knew. It was enough to make me want to shout ‘Stop! Slow down! Let me get my thoughts in order!’

“You should not frown so close to your appearance, you’ll worry Alys,” chided Sera and I forced said expression from my face.

“I said it to Laena and I’ll say it to you,” I said passing Alys back. “I am allowed to fret. It’s their big day.”

“That it is,” replied Sera. She still was not sleeping well, I could tell. Dark circles not quite masked by powder. I was at a loss for what to do. Nothing could heal the loss of a twin. My eyes found my daughter’s and from Sera’s arms she smiled at me again. Alys was helping matters, I think. I no longer needed to worry about not having a guard dragon in the Nursery, I had a guard Sera.

It was more often than not that I found her dozing in there in the early morning.

“It’s time!” called Laenor, handing Jocelyn back to Marya and beckoning me over. I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm. Laenor’s arm looping through mine helped. Behind us, Sera and Marya cradled the twins and behind them were Maris, Falena and Laena. Feeling as if I were actually floating, we made our way down the long hallway and down the stairs.

The doors of the Sept were opened before us and the excited buzz from within fell silent as our procession began. This had mostly been my father’s idea and it showed. The spectacle was all him. Dread mounted in my heart as Jocelyn began her angry grunting, the usual prelude to her screams that could wake even the deepest sleeper, yet I dared not look back.

I would have to trust Marya to calm her.

By the time we reached my Father, she was still grunting angrily but had not devolved into a tantrum. I thanked six of the Seven for their mercy and focused on getting through their first public appearance without somehow passing out.

Father was beaming as we all took our assembled places. His smile even wider than Laenor’s whenever he stopped to reflect on his children but then that was Father. In the past six months, I had come to the conclusion that Father loved children. I was startled to find tears in his eyes though, as he gazed at me. At least until Eustace ruined the moment.

The Septon stepped forward and cleared his throat before launching into a speech or sermon. It was clear from the beginning that he would not be able to keep the attention of the crowd. All of them, even those I would not have been expected to be interested like Hagen Greyjoy and Rickon Stark, were peering intently at my girls. Everyone wanted to see their new Princesses.

And, muttered my more cynical side, see how they measure up against that desired son. I refused to frown at the thought though, keeping my polite smile plastered across my face. It became harder and harder to keep as Eustace droned on. Occasionally he actually mentioned the twins, the whole point of this ceremony and the reason we were all here, but mostly he focused on his usual sanctimonious blathering.
By the end of it, even my Father’s smile looked strained.

Once Eustace had wrapped up, Viserys stepped forward. I tried not to make the tension that drained from my body obvious. Eustace could make even the most pious and devout men look desperately for the doors with his sermons but Father, he could rouse the dead to fight for him. The change in atmosphere was not just limited to me. The bored, dull acceptance became charged with excitement.

“My Lords and Ladies!” he called, hands sweeping about. “I thank you all for coming today!”

He would be better off apologising for making them all sit through that horrendous show Eustace had put on and then grovelling at my party’s feet for making us stand through it.

“We are here today to celebrate the future!” he called. “And the future can be found in my grandchildren! My first grandchildren! The first of many, I hope!”

The crowd chuckled and I tuned out, letting my eyes wander over the crowd. Jeyne was front and centre, smiling broadly at me with Denys Corbray by her side. Elmo was seated just behind her, enraptured in Viserys’ speech and did not even seem to notice my attention. Gwayne Hightower almost certainly noticed though, his eyes flickering from Viserys to mine and then back.

Lord Jason had arranged his face into a polite smile as he listened. His twin, Tyland, was sat next to him. Both had once competed for my hand as newly made knights. Jason with quick wit and poetry; Tyland with a show of arms every morn in the training yard. Both were handsome, blond and so far up themselves that being married to either of them was my idea of one of the Seven Hells.

As I could have probably guessed, Hagen and Rickon were the only ones not showing approval. My eyes met Rickon’s grey ones and I didn’t miss the anger and fury in them. It would seem someone had found out about Bennard’s Desert Wolves plan. Well, it was as much Borros’ fault as it was mine. The Stormlord was enraptured in Viserys’ speech as Elmo Tully was but his wife gave me an almost imperceptible nod when she noted my attention had fallen on her. Elenda was sharp. Somebody to watch but not a problem yet.

No, my problem was a different region entirely. The North. Soon Rickon would be dead. Not even half a decade actually. In canon he leaves the regency in the hands of his much younger and very ambitious brother, Bennard. A man more charming than I would have given anyone named Stark credit for yet I was not discounting his overtures as support for a coup in the North.

For it was a coup he was probably pursuing.

The boy Bennard would serve as Regent for was Cregan Stark, a man I had a lot of mixed feelings about. During the Dance, the vast majority of Cregan’s men had hung back, although he had sent men South. Those men had been placed under the command of Roderick ‘the Ruin’ Dustin. They’d been damn effective, punching well above their weight when it came to offing important Greens, but they’d only numbered in the low thousands.

Cregan had only moved North after canon!Rhaenyra’s death. He’d met up with what was left of Rhaenyra’s loyalists and somewhat hijacked the cause. By the time he had reached the city, the Aegon of that time had been dead and Cregan had been the architect of the Hour of the Wolf.

Would he be a just man? One willing to punish all murderers and traitors even if their actions had benefited him? Or was he ruthless, saving his strength until he could dictate terms with the strongest army even if his chosen candidate died in the process?
Cregan or Bennard was the question I had to ask myself. Would Bennard even be made regent now he had gone so openly against his brother? There was a good question.

Cheers filled the Sept as my father came to the end of his grand speech and I forced myself back into the presence, politely clapping as he stood with arms spread wide, drinking in the adoration of the crowd.

We were escorted by the six knights of the Kingsguard the empty Throne room. Two cradles had been set up. I imagined Sera and Marya were quite happy to drop their heavy bundles into them.

It wasn’t long before Alicent slipped in, my siblings trailing after her like little ducklings. I greeted each of them with a hug and a kiss to the cheek. It was probably a testament to Eustace’s powers of boredom that even Aemond accepted it without complaint or squirming.

“How did you find the ceremony?” asked my Father. His younger children all glanced at one another before Helaena spoke up.

“It was boring.” I had to slap my hand over my mouth to keep from bursting out with laughter even as Father frowned at the statement. Next to him, Alicent’s eyebrows came together to demonstrate her annoyance.


“You should get a better Septon,” said Aegon, coming to back her up. “Septon Eustace is boring. Septon Will is much more exciting!”

“So is Septon Tommen,” said Aemond quietly. Daeron merely clutched Aegon’s sleeve tightly, violet eyes watching us all. Father sighed heavily.

“Boring they say,” he said then turned to me. “Ah well. It is your day, daughter. How have you found it?”

The temptation to say boring was almost overwhelming but I controlled myself.

“Well enough. Now! Should we not prepare for the crowd that will be in here soon enough?” At my words, he nodded, clapped and sent everyone scurrying to their places.

Show time!
“Beautiful girls,” mumbled one of the faceless Lords of Westeros that had been traipsing by the cribs for the past half an hour or so. Not that the girls noticed, they were fast asleep. Jocelyn had taken the initial crowd badly and it had taken both Laenor and myself to be constantly within view for her to calm. Alys had been better but her smiles had died completely as face after face had passed by. Now she was snoring away, her pudgy hand resting on her egg.

That had not been my idea but Laena’s.

“Let them see the eggs,” she said as Rhaenys had delivered them into the crib. “Let them know your children are dragons.”

Rhaenys had been all but preening as she listened to her daughter’s words. I was sure now that Corlys had not told her about Laena’s interest in magic and how she had fought for access to his more esoteric treasures. That gleam in her eye as she had imagined the glory days of Valyria, long since passed… I fought the sudden chill that went down my spine. Joffrey would keep her from doing something we’d all regret. He would not let Laena become Visenya reborn… or worse, my own twisted version of Tyanna.

“Thank you for your kind words,” said Laenor, smile wide. I forced my own smile to broaden a bit and thanked the lord myself. He ambled off happily. After, Laenor made a show of bending down to tickle Jocelyn’s belly and took the chance to murmur to me. “Your thoughts keep running away with you.”

“I’m exhausted. How much longer do we have to go?” I asked. He sighed and tilted his head up to look at me.

“An hour or so,” he said finally. They would need to be fed in an hour as well, I remembered, gazing down at their peaceful faces. “Do you want an excuse to rest?”

“No,” I said after a moment’s thought. My feet and legs ached fiercely at the denial but I could not afford to look weak, not in front of all the Lords of Westeros assembled before me. “No, I can do this.”

And then the next Lord was upon us. Perhaps my inability to stay standing for as long as I remembered I could was a testament to my current fitness. I had lost baby weight, that much I could definitely say, but I was not at all close to the level of fitness I had achieved before the babes were born.

Perhaps I should take up jogging. A quick run in the morning to wake me up before my ride with Laenor and then my archery practice.

Somehow I made it through, half of my mind occupied with day dreaming of the future and half of it dedicated to not making a fool of myself in front of the many, many lords that had come. Thankfully Jocelyn and Alys remained fast asleep until Marya and Sera were able to whisk them away to a side room.

“That was exhausting,” I groaned as Alys took her feeding. I was too tired to even feel much embarrassment at feeding them in front of six women although they had long since caught on and tried to give me what privacy they could. I could not wait until I could start them on more solid foods. It would not be long now but Alannys had recommended waiting for as long as possible.
before starting them on the fruit mash Lucerys was already happy to fling at his mother whenever he was given it.

Gods, his first nameday would be next month. How had time passed so soon?

“You looked a thousand leagues away,” chuckled Sera and I blushed.

“By the Seven, tell me I was not that obvious?” I groaned. It set my ladies tittering with amusement.

“Not that obvious to any but those who know you well,” Maris assured me as the others exchanged amused looks. My ladies knew me well by now. They’d seen the worst I could be, my blackest rages and my periods of self-loathing. Somehow I had not scared them off.

“Well, no doubt I shall be in for a lecture if Father noticed,” I sighed, trading Jocelyn for Alys. My firstborn daughter was unhappy in my arms, small chubby hands waving about as she let me know she had not appreciated today’s festivities. Well, she would be back in the manse soon enough and I would be stuck here still, shaking hands and making good impressions so that she would hopefully have a peaceful life.

She took her meal eventually though, wild flailing becoming more and more subdued. By the end of her meal she was fighting to keep her eyes open as I handed her to Laena. My lover took her niece with a smile and began helping her make that final jump into sleep by rocking her back and forth gently as Marya fastened me back into my dress. A feat a lot more impressive than it sounded, trust me on this.

It was a heavy Velaryon guard led by Ser Steffon that eventually accompanied the girls back to the manse. I wanted to go with them to see them safe but I could not. I was sentenced to mingle with the Lords and Ladies of the Realm until my Father said otherwise. He’d been very clear on that regard. Experience with him told me it was because he had something planned but as to what it could be, I had no clue… Joffrey on the other hand.

Joffrey had been of the opinion that one of the knights here might be due an offer of service.

I returned to the hall and set myself to mingling. My usual routine of reassuring what men still called themselves Blacks proudly and seeking to entice more back into Alicent and I’s game rather than the war with Dorne. As usual, it proved virtually fruitless.

“Oh, there you are!” I turned to find myself face to face with Bennard Stark and Medrick Manderly.

“I have not been hiding!” I told them, my smile a little more genuine at finding friendly faces.

“Indeed you have not, Your Grace,” said Ser Medrick with a bow. Rumour put him as well-spoken and charming as his brother yet a fierce knight and fighter. “Might I once again congratulate you on such beautiful babes!”

Had he been part of the viewing? I could not remember.

“I am a mother, Ser Medrick, I never tire of hearing praise for my children.” That set him tittering in amusement and to his credit, he hid that it was false quite well. Bennard was not hiding his impatience to be on to another topic though.

“I have spoken with Lord Desmond regarding your glass,” he whispered. “He is eager to discuss terms.”
Medrick’s smile became slightly strained and I sensed my own had as well. By the Seven, I tired of the North and the endless problems they presented. Perhaps there was a reason Laenor had been so dismissive about bringing them on side early? Perhaps book bias once again pushed me on?

“It is best to discuss the matter with my husband, Ser Medrick. He is the expert at such matters,” I tried to inject some sorrow into my voice at that. Medrick merely shrugged in response and made a show of seeking him out. After receiving directions from myself he departed with one more bow, Bennard on his heels. A problem indeed. Just as well Laenor had been well warned about our Northern suitor. Two seconds later, Laena looped her arm through mine with a small smile on her face.

“If you’re here to tell me it was cruel to set Bennard on Laenor’s tail, I shall not hear it,” I told and she giggled.

“I’m here to ask you to introduce me to someone, actually,” she informed me tartly after she’d recovered herself.

“And who is so high and mighty that Laena Velaryon, rider of the dragon Vhagar, can not simply introduce herself?” I asked.

“The Lady of the Vale?” There was a hesitance to her voice as I suspected she might be fighting the need to blush.

“Ah,” I said, knowingly. At that she did blush, pulling away to hide her face slightly which sent me into giggles in turn. “Come, let’s find cousin Jeyne and see what trouble we can get into.”

Jeyne had clearly had the best idea of all of us, pulling her loyal lords in as defences whilst she, Jess and Ser Denys took refuge behind the small break in the crowd they provided. They parted easily for Princess Rhaenyra and her goodsister though. Not that Jeyne seemed to mind if her easy smile and the two kisses she dropped onto my cheeks in greeting were anything to go by.

“Jeyne, might I introduce Laena Velaryon? Laena, this is cousin Jeyne!” Laena got half way through a stilted and awkward greeting when Jeyne decided to hells with it and gave her a hug. It was somewhat amusing to see. Jeyne was only just taller than me and where Laena had become used to adjusting to my height she had no clue what to do with someone who was a complete unknown.

Serves her right for inheriting her mother’s height.

“Lady Laena! I have heard so much about you from Rhaenyra!” Laena blushed again and shot me an appraising look.

“Don’t be so shy, Laena,” I said with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “She already knows what a dear companion you are to me.”

“Does she?” she asked, rallying herself from the tides of embarrassment.

“Oh yes!” said Jeyne, interrupting my reply. “She bet you could beat Jess in a fist fight, you see. We spent an hour debating who would win.”

That startled a laugh from her and she relaxed slightly. I still wanted to take her hand and reassure her it was all okay though.

“I do believe I am not much good in a fight with my hands. I rely on Vhagar too much, I fear,” Laena chuckled, earning a quick smile from Jeyne.
“That was the conclusion we came to as well,” said Jeyne solemnly and I made a show of nodding along. “Although Rhaenyra did not wish to be disloyal to you. Now! Come and meet Jess and Denys.”

It was a command and we obeyed, not that Jeyne was keen on giving us much choice. She took Laena’s hand and half pulled her over to where Jess and Denys were pretending to chat and hide the fact they were eavesdropping on our conversation.

“Might I introduce you to Ser Denys Corbray, my betrothed and Lady Jessamyn Redfort, my own dear companion.” Thank you, Jeyne.

“You look much like your brother, my Lady,” said Denys Corbray. “We met briefly when he came to the Vale and we have a mutual acquaintance.”

It was a shame we could not speak openly here, that it must all be done in double speak and innuendo. Laena would do well to simply be able to speak with her… and I am an idiot.

“We were wondering if you might visit before Laena has to fly off to war,” I asked my cousin. “I’m sure we can find Helaena something gainful to do in the meantime.”


“Perhaps I could invite Jon. I admit I am eager to meet Ser Laenor in the flesh once again. Jon shared many tales regarding him.” I fought to hide my smile at that and agreed readily.

“It will be fun!” said Jess, nudging Jeyne excitedly. I might have planned it out a little better with them both but my father parking himself on the raised dais that had been occupied by the twins until recently caught my attention. Indeed, it caught everyone’s attention as the vast hall slowly fell silent. I was put in mind of a school assembly with all the shushing going on.

“My Lords and Ladies, as much as I wish it were, this day is not solely about my grandchildren.” A chuckle from the crowd. “For it strikes me that my loyal knights of the Kingsguard are short one member!”

Behind him, the men sworn to him were assembled. The Lord Commander, Lorent Marbrand, and his five subordinates; Erryk Cargyll, Arryk Cargyll, Rickard Thorne, Steffon Darklyn and Willis Fell. Who would join their number? It had the crowd murmuring amongst themselves, theories and speculation briefly running wild until Viserys raised his hands once more.

“So it falls to me to name a new brother of the Kingsguard. One who will be loyal! One who will uphold his oaths!” Oh I wish I had eyes on Alicent right now. She has to be so angry he’s indirectly calling her out again. “Ser Garibald of House Grey, please step forward.”

Huh… that has to be some form of irony, right?
Ser Garibald would serve him well and, if the Gods were kind, he would serve his daughter well in time. He’d already extracted oaths to that effect from the man. He’d made it clear he would not suffer another Criston Cole. The Kingsguard oath he spoke now was a formality, Ser Garibald had already pledged his life to him. As the knight rose a sworn brother of the Kingsguard and Ser Lorent presented him with his white cloak the Throne room burst into applause.

His daughter seemed puzzled but pleased, he found when his eyes had picked her from the crowd. Mother’s mercy, he thought that his heart might burst open at the sight of her. None could deny she was a Queen in truth. She was made of stern stuff, his Rhaenyra. The Seven knew she had to be. She would be strong enough to lead Westeros, he knew, just as he knew she was strong enough to triumph over those that would deny her the Throne.

He didn’t look at his wife, the smile would waver from his face and he could not afford that. The people must see a composed and calm King, not one that fretted over what part of his family would murder the other. He loved Alicent, he loved her so much it hurt, but he couldn’t trust her anymore. She would sooner kill Rhaenyra than see her crowned. Aegon… no, his son was better than that. That much was obvious now the boy had some space between him and his mother.

Seven save him, why couldn’t he just send her away?

“Your Grace,” murmured Lyonel, into his ear. “We await your signal.”

The crowd were tense again. He’d put about that something else was happening today but had left the rumours deliberately vague. Then he’d tracked down Ser Joffrey and told the man point blank what he intended and demanded he not reveal the matter to Rhaenyra. The man disgusted him, made his skin crawl, but he could see why Rhaenyra kept him around despite his part in the insult that was her marriage. The man was efficient and talented.

He knew he was taking a risk by trusting the man. Rhaenyra did not, as a general rule, like surprises. It may be Joffrey Velaryon would tell her anyway but he hoped not. He thought this might be one surprise she enjoyed.

“Good work Lyonel,” he whispered back. “I shall begin soon.”

The man strode off, courtiers parting before him. The Seven bless Lyonel. He did not know where he would be without him. Still Otto Hightower’s puppet King no doubt. It was Lyonel’s capability that had made it safe to banish the man after he’d been caught haranguing his daughter. Another thing to feel guilty over, he reflected as his eyes found her again.

She had taken up conversation with her kinswoman, Jeyne Arryn. The past seemed intent on taunting him today. He should have put his foot down… he should have brought the girl to King’s Landing when Aemma had requested it. Otto had convinced him not to, that he would be making trouble with a loyal vassal unnecessarily. He’d agreed at the time, too frightened his cousin would come and take what was hers to realise how badly he was being manipulated.

Well, Rhaenys would have what she wanted now. Her blood on the Throne. Her son and his daughter. The whole matter left a bitter taste in his mouth. Had he known then what he knew now
he would have told Rhaenys to go hang! Instead he had to watch that poor sodding excuse for a man mock his daughter with his every bre-

No. He could not get angry now. The courtiers were like sharks. They would sense his anger like blood in the water.

Laenor Velaryon dishonoured his daughter with his… perversions. He could no longer save her from that. She had made it clear in that tent nearly a year ago now. To strike at the Velaryons was to strike at her.

Oh how he wished it was not so. Not even Rhaenys in all her fury would stop him from stripping the bastard from her side. She had not known, she had assured him of that and he believed her. Yet he knew, deep within his gut, that even had she known she would not have told him, would not have acted to spare his daughter from the insult.

A Velaryon in all but birth, the thought was bitter in its clarity. He wished he could have the cousin of his youth back, the wild girl that would sneak into the training yard and play at being a knight, not what she had become under Corlys’ watchful eye.

“My lords and ladies, if I might have your attention once more!” At his call, the Throne room was silent once more, all focused on him. His smile was genuine then. “I have yet another appointment to make!”

That had them whispering in surprise. He felt his smile widen a little bit as he found his daughter in the crowd again. She was looking apprehensive. He hated that. He hated the feeling of knowing she did not trust him.

And why should she? He had drowned himself in wine, food and women. He had ignored his duty to marry Alicent, he had put her in the thick of a political mess with no thought for her safety or well-being. He had ignored her pleas to spare her the grief when Aegon had been born… he had… he had raised his hands to her…

He should have married Laena Velaryon. He had realised that when Rhaenyra was four and ten and begging to be allowed to visit Driftmark. So many problems could have been averted had he just married Rhaenys’ girl. Rhaenyra could have married as she pleased, as opposed to a husband that would never please her.

Oh, he had heard her protestations otherwise. He had never been so proud of her before that duel, her face set in defiance. He hadn’t even been able to detect the usual signs of her lies or acting. She knew what would come from not binding the Velaryons to them in marriage and she was willing to make the sacrifice for him and for their house.

Yes, he should have married Lady Laena. Rhaenyra would have loved having her as a mother, the Seven knew they were close enough friends now. She would not need to go to war every time she came to eat a meal at least.

He should have been the one to sacrifice himself on the altar of Velaryon ambition. He should have put up with whatever whispers Lady Laena wished to fill his ears with. He had thought Alicent to be different yet he wondered now… who was it better to climb into bed with? Otto or Corlys?

Otto had seemed his saviour in those days after the Great Council, ever helpful and ever sure that he could prevent Rhaenys from rising up. Yet Otto had set out to rule him all the same.

Corlys was arrogant, ever grasping for what was not his and as fickle as the seas he so loved. He’d
sought to seduce Rhaenys for her claim and when had that not worked he had worked to destabilise Baelon’s rule. That had seen him married to Aemma and Daemon promised to Rhea Royce, a desperate move from his Grandfather to prevent such a plot from succeeding.

He’d married Alicent and gotten Otto as a goodfather, how much worse could marrying Lady Laena be?

Daemon would never have even dared to lay a finger on the girl if she had been his wife. The fact that she had been offered once was probably what had drawn him to her in the first place. His brother was never content to let him have things. He always had to take them, twist them and poison them. It was it’s was his fault she’d fallen into Daemon’s line of sight.

Mother’s Mercy, he owed the girl something at least. He owed his nephew something he could call his own. He’d been a piss poor brother but he could be a better uncle. He’d play the old man doting upon the next generation, he’d make sure his brother's son was raised to be a better man...

“There will be need for strong guidance in the months to come! Strong guidance I can not provide from the deserts of Dorne!” It was best not to get too lost in thought. Especially not about his traitorous brother. In the corner of his eye, he saw the servants moving into position under the watchful eye of his Hand. “So I must appoint one worthy to lead the Seven Kingdoms whilst I bring Fire and Blood to the Martells!”

That got a cheer. War with the Dornish always would. Curse Otto. He had been so sure the man grieved for his son, that he had come because Gwayne needed his Father. Curse that cold-blooded man to the depths of the Seven Hells.

“Who is worthy of leading the Seven Kingdoms though!?!” The brighter ones already knew and eyes were shifting from him to her. He watched her shift uneasily under the scrutiny. It was a slight thing but he saw it. She liked to pretend nothing touched her but he was her Father, he knew her tells. Indeed, when the eyes of the throne room turned to her at his expansive gesture, nothing showed on her face but a knowing smile. “Who better to lead it now than your future Queen!?”

She stepped forward and the crowd parted around her, cheering her name. Almost all with no visible discomfort. Ser Jaremy had been instructed to observe who was less pleased with this turn of events. Yet even hints of the factions still could not prevent him from beaming in pride once more. He wanted to weep when she met his eyes with a pleased but confused smile that was as genuine as his pride.

At least he could still win those from her. He had not driven her too far away, despite his many mistakes. He would have to keep trying to make amends, to keep winning those smiles from her.

“Father?” she murmured as she reached him. Lyonel’s men were moving speedily now and he saw her eyes widen as she laid eyes on what they bore. He felt the tension in the room soar as everyone came to the same realisation she had a moment later.

And he felt his wife’s eyes on the Crown.

His daughter had once confided to him that she had wanted to find Silverwing that day she had escaped to Dragonstone. Well, he could not give her the Good Queen’s mount but he could give her his Grandmother’s Crown.

He took it gently from the cushion and maravelled at it for a moment. It was much like his, although the band was thinner and the gems less ostentatious. It was no less beautiful though. He cradled it between his fingers, turned back and had to stop himself from laughing at her expression. It was
rare he saw her dumbstruck and yet... Oh Rhaenyra...

“Rhaenyra Targaryen!” She almost jumped at his booming voice and he hated that as well. She always flinched when men yelled. When he yelled. His brother would pay for that one day. She had never been so jumpy before that night. “Kneel.”

She did so, one smooth motion that demonstrated her grace.

“I name you my voice so that all shall obey you as they would me!” he called. This time he did meet his wife’s eyes. She would be on Dragonstone and he doubted even she could cause trouble there but he wanted her to understand; child or not, this was her last chance. He held those green eyes as he lowered the crown onto his daughter’s head and he did not break that gaze until Rhaenyra rose.

The Throne Room erupted into applause and shouts of his daughter’s name.

“Thank you,” she said, small smile playing about her lips. “I shall try my best not to burn the city down in your absence, Father.”

“See that you don’t,” he told her, his voice stern. Then he gave her a warm smile. One she returned with ease. “Although if you do, be sure to get Fleabottom. If we are to rebuild the whole blasted city, we should at least try to make it smell better.”

The laugh was genuine as she turned to face the hall, linking her arm through his.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be taking a break from posting for a week from this point onward and then we'll have the timeskip chapters.
An excerpt from the text *Unbent, Unbowed, Unbroken* written by Maester Alek, 209AC

“... as expected by all architects of the Conquest of Dorne, Lord Aron Dayne was quick to reject the initial terms offered by the Iron Throne. Although the offer was beyond generous, there was a great desire for war amongst the people of Dorne. Nearly all believed that winter and the political situation within the Seven Kingdoms would destroy the invaders long before Sunspear was forced to yield.

Indeed, for a while it seemed that the Dornish may have been correct in their assessment of their foes. Over three hundred Lords of Westeros answered the calls to war and it took months for all to be in position in spite of the warning all had received. Yet the bad luck afflicting the armies of King Viserys was not to stop there. It had been the hope of the King to launch his invasion the moment the Dornish rejected his terms yet winter storms prevented the launch of the fleet for a full five months. It was well into the year of 117AC that King Viserys came to besiege Yronwood.

Events were not proceeding any smoother for the armies gathered under the command of Prince Laenor either. No sooner were the terms rejected that both assembled armies found themselves under assault by Dornish raiding parties under the command of Lord Walter Wyl. Prince Laenor proved his worth as a warrior during this time and gained the respect of many Lords in his defence of Nightsong.

Yet Prince Laenor’s forces at Nightsong were not the worst hit by Dornish raiding. The events of history tell us that Lord Walter Wyl was a cunning man with a grasp of strategy and politics rarely seen. Whilst his raids at Night song were numerous, the true force of his raiders was brought to bear against the armies assembled at Horn Hill. The forces there were already in disarray with Green and Black loyalists being forced into close quarters exacerbated by the fact that Lady Laena Velaryon, the last rider of the dragon Vhagar, had no direct control over the forces. That honour had been granted to Ormund Hightower, a knight of some renown and the heir to Lord Garmon Hightower.

From the moment of the first raids, the forces at Horn Hill fractured and Ser Ormund did not prove up to the task of bringing them into line. As such the defence was limited and with each successful raid, pressure on Ser Ormund mounted. During this period, Ser Ormund’s forces would lose a full fifth of their number and Lady Laena Velaryon would take a wound that would trouble her for years to come.

However, the luck the Dornish had experienced so far was to run out during the second moon of 117AC when King Viserys’ forces finally crossed the Sea of Dorne. Lord Qyle Yronwood was quick to contest the landing but his raids did little to prevent King Viserys from landing his full force and marching on Yronwood proper. Unwilling to face the Red Queen and her rider, Rhaenys Targaryen, Lord Qyle abandoned his seat and joined forces with Walter Wyl, intent on using the Boneway as a protection from the Targaryen Dragons.

It was at this point the trap that Prince Laenor had laid for the Dornish became apparent as both his forces and the forces of King Viserys moved into the Boneway to crush the Dornish opposition. The trap was so complete that when Lord Qyle and Lord Walter attempted to dissolve their troops and take refuge in the Red Mountains as they had done countless times before they found themselves quite unable to do so. The Falcons, under the command of Lord Denys Waynwood, and the Desert Wolves, under the command of Bennard Stark, served to pick off any fleeing or deserting soldiers.
With the trap sprung, the forces of the Iron Throne looked set to have earned an unprecedented victory over the Dornish on their own soil. Lord Walter Wyl was to prove once again, however, that his black reputation was well given. On the morn that the Dornish and the invaders looked set to clash, Lord Walter Wyl betrayed Lord Qyle Yronwood and used his destruction to cover his and his loyalist’s escape into the Red Mountains.

Despite that setback, Wyl and Yronwood were taken and the road to Dorne had been opened.”

An excerpt from the text *Bastard Born* written by Rue, 155AC

“Addam and Alyn of Hull were first found and brought to the attention of the court by Queen Alicent Hightower. She was on the island to prepare for birth and recover from it. She’d brought many ladies with her and she was soon a familiar sight about the island as she rode with them even as heavily pregnant as she was.

After Princess Viserra, the one people would call the Princess of Peace, was born Queen Alicent found the two boys and their mother accidentally when her spies found the boys were tutored by a man hired by Ser Joffrey Velaryon, a highly placed supporter of Princess Rhaenyra.

Curious about why the boys were so interesting, Queen Alicent paid a visit to the boys mother, Marilda of Hull, and demanded she name the father of the two bastard boys. When Marilda refused and was moved away afterwards, Queen Alicent sent her many spies to find out why.

Her spies questioned those who had known them on Hull and found that until Princess Rhaenyra had taken custody of the two boys they had been cared for by Lord Corlys Velaryon. When rumours spread of that, Princess Rhaenyra claimed that they were the bastards of her goodfather. Lord Corlys backed her up and formally claimed the two as his own making them Addam and Alyn Waters.

Queen Alicent was not happy with the idea and wrote Rhaenys Targaryen about the boys. When she read the letter, she is said to have laughed it off and said “I married that old bastard knowing what he was like” to her cousin, King Viserys.

In the third moon of 117AC, a new rumour was widely believed to be the truth about the boys. They were not, as Princess Rhaenyra claimed, the children of Lord Corlys Velaryon but were instead the bastards of his son, Ser Laenor. As the boys got older, their looks only increased this belief as it’s said they looked greatly alike to Ser Laenor.

Princess Rhaenyra was furious about the rumour and publicly referred to Queen Alicent as an ‘interfering bitch’ many times afterwards. Anyone who mentioned the rumour to her fell quickly into disfavour which was taken as further proof that Ser Laenor had fathered the boys.”

It should be noted that ‘Hard as Oak’, despite being considered as colorful and unreliable as ‘Bastard-Born’ by the Citadel, and ‘The Dragonknight’, which is considered to be reliable and factual by the Citadel, support the official claim that Lord Corlys fathered both Addam and Alyn of Hull.
"With Lord Qyle Yronwood's capture and defeat in the Boneway, the forces of the Iron Throne now held both Wyl and Yronwood. Yet they were not uncontested in their control. Skyreach, Kingsgrave and Blackmont had yet to fall. This would not be the responsibility of Prince Laenor or King Viserys, however, for within a sennight of taking Yronwood and capturing its lord, King Viserys' army began its advance into Dorne proper.

Its first target was to be the lands under the dominion of House Wells, the first of Princess Aliandra's loyalists to come under attack by the invading force. In contrast to Lord Walter Wyl's aggressive strategy, the forces of Lord Gerris Wells fell back and yielded their lands with only minor raiding. King Viserys' armies were not to occupy the castle however. After a few days had been spent ensuring the army was resupplied courtesy of Lord Corlys Velaryon's fleet, Princess Rhaenys Targaryen destroyed the outer walls, leaving little to no fortification behind for Lord Wells to reclaim.

In the fourth moon of 117AC, as King Viserys moved further into Dorne towards his next target of Drinkwater, the forces at Horn Hill marched into Prince's Pass. Fearing a similar trap that had brought Lord Walter and Lord Qyle low, the forces of Lord Manfrey Fowler split into three separate armies. When Ser Ormund attempted a similar strategy to Prince Laenor and employed irregulars formed from men knowledgeable about the Pass to prevent them from splitting entirely, his forces were routed and Lord Tarly was slain.

It was only the intervention of Lady Laena Velaryon that saw Lord Tarly's body and his Valyrian steel blade Heartsbane recovered from the field, and a third of his irregulars escaping the Dornish ambush they had unwittingly sprung. Lord Manfrey Fowler and the vast majority of his men were nevertheless able to escape Ser Ormund's forces. Having secured the Pass, however disastrously, Ser Ormund marched on to seize Blackmont.

It was here that the cracks in the facade of united leadership were to once again appear. After sacking the castle, Ser Ormund ordered Lady Laena to destroy it in its entirety. Unhappy with such orders, Lady Laena refused and was backed by several Black Lords. Mutterings of a plot by Ser Ormund to weaken those with Black leanings first arose during this tense stand-off with many pointing to Lord Tarly's death as proof of this.

The stalemate was only broken by the arrival of Prince Laenor himself with grim news. As King Viserys' forces had prepared to take Drinkwater, their mother had been attacked and was badly wounded. Although details must have been scarce about the event at the time, surviving records written in King Viserys' hand tell us that Lady Rhaenys was ambushed by a man convincingly disguised as a soldier in Wendwater livery. Although she is said to have killed the man with nothing more than a dagger, she suffered several wounds in fighting off her attacker.

With Princess Rhaenys unable to fly Meleys in battle, King Viserys, taking the advice of Prince Laenor, was forced to alter his battle plan. The Prince would join King Viserys' forces and support the main army as it carried on its march to threaten Sunspear itself. Lady Laena Velaryon would be based at Yronwood as her brother had been with a full third of the forces there moving under Ser Ormund's command so that he could continue his subjugation of the Stony Dornish.

It is rumoured that during this meeting, Prince Laenor and Ser Ormund nearly came to blows and that such a fight was only averted by a surprise attack on the outer defences of the camp. After the
attack was repelled, Prince Laenor refused to speak with Ser Ormund once more and instead relayed his orders through the newly made Lord Alan Tarly.

By the end of the Seventh Moon of 117AC, the reshuffle of the invading forces was done and the stage for the Massacre at Ghost Hill was set.”

And excerpt from the text *The Seven Ladies of Rhaenyra Targaryen*, by Meredyth Stokeworth , 190 AC

“The seventh and last of Princess Rhaenyra’s Ladies is considered one of the oddest appointments that Princess Rhaenyra would ever make! When one takes into account those she raised later, this is quite the feat. If my great aunt’s letters are to be believed the event that saw her forge her friendship with the Princess was quite unique indeed. Below is an excerpt of her letter concerning the matter!

‘To my most noble Father

I am praying most every day for your safety as you fight alongside our King. Lady Falena and I have prevailed upon Septon Patrek to lead daily prayer groups beseeching the Seven that the matter with Dorne be resolved quickly.

No doubt you have already heard the rumours surrounding the attack on Princess Rhaenyra. It was cowardly and ill-done. All in King’s Landing are in uproar. I can only dread to imagine what would have happened should the villains have succeeded. In truth, it came perilously close to being so. Had it not been for Lady Frey I fear our Princess may have been struck down!

Princess Rhaenyra has named her a lady-in-waiting to join us whilst her husband is with you on campaign. Father, I fear it is uncharitable of me to dislike such an appointment after she so bravely saved our Princess’s life but I can not help but mislike my new compatriot. Sabitha is rude and unladylike in the extreme. Just yesterday she attended on the Princess in mail! Mail!’

The rest of the letter goes into more personal details surrounding my great Aunt’s courtship with her future husband Ser Byren Hastwyck and the ongoing troubles that Lady Maris Grafton was having in regards to her marriage to Ser Harwin Strong. In a most concerning turn of events, it ends with a mention of the villain Larys Strong being willing to help them marry despite Lord Lyonel’s refusal to bless the union.

Regardless, it can be understood that even from the beginning that the appointment of Sabitha Frey was as divisive as it was bizarre.”
An excerpt from the text *Unbent, Unbowed, Unbroken* written by Maester Alek, 209AC

“… thus the forces of King Viserys and Prince Laenor were able to secure Godsgrace with little opposition. As before, they were swift to dismantle the castle’s defences and prepare to move on to threaten Sunspear proper, in a move that would hopefully see the war ended.

Yet as the King and Prince prepared to bring the Conquest of Dorne to a decisive close, a most terrible act had been set in motion. Many historians have argued over the causes of the Massacre at Ghost Hill. Some more popular theories lean on the black reputation Lady Laena Velaryon garnered later on in her life, others point towards vengeful lords unwilling to follow the word of a ‘mere’ woman. Regardless of its reported cause, all agree that the senseless slaughter of House Toland was a dark day in the history of Westeros.

What we do know is that the confusion caused by Prince Laenor’s reshuffling of the forces to account for his mother’s absence in the war effort meant that somehow several Lords who would name themselves proud Greens ended up in the army supported by Lady Laena Velaryon. When Prince Laenor and King Viserys began their march along the Scourge towards Godsgrace, that force left Yronwood and headed for their targets of Ladybright Castle and Ghost Hill, achieving excellent time by using the fleet’s support to bypass the already taken castles of Wells, Drinkwater and The Tor.

As House Wells, Drinkwater and Jordayne before them had, the denizens of Ladybright Castle had also fallen back to Sunspear. The occupation there was concluded quickly and the army began its fateful march onto Ghost Hill. House Toland had not fled in the face of the oncoming army. Survivors have stated that Lord Allard Toland had heard of the King Viserys’ offer of surrender and Lord Aron Dayne’s planned response in turn, resolving to emulate Princess Aliandra’s Regent and surrender Ghost Hill to the invaders.

When Vhagar plunged the castle into shadow, Lord Allard threw open his gates and prepared to negotiate his terms. Multiple accounts have risen as to what, precisely, began the slaughter. Some claim that Vhagar was the first to attack, letting loose a great belch of flame and igniting a tower. Others claim that a Dornish archer, panicked by Vhagar’s presence, shot at one of the approaching lords. Most official reports blame Ser Dickon Bulwer for the initial fighting, however.

It is said that no sooner had Lord Allard come into view that Ser Dickon ordered his archers to loose and slay the unarmed Lord. What occurred afterwards well earned its moniker. By the time the sun set, only two members of House Toland were left alive along with fifteen men-at-arms and seven servants who had managed to barricade themselves in a wine cellar.

The party would only emerge on the assurances from Lady Laena herself that they would not be harmed. Her protection of the survivors was met with much consternation by those who had joyfully taken part in the massacre.

Once the killing was done, the forces sent to secure Ghost Hill split into two factions. The so-called ‘Green Men’ led by Ser Dickon Bulwer and the ‘Queen’s Men’ led by Lord Alan Tarly. Fearing the army would turn on itself, Lady Laena Velaryon is said to have sent word to her brother to bring the dissidents back into line and reappoint a clear commander of the men. Yet despite seeking her brother’s aid to peacefully resolve the conflict, by sunrise the next morning most of the so-called ‘Green Men’ were dead by her order.
The version of events depicted in Lord Alan Tarly’s memoirs are widely accepted to be true accounts of what happened next. He claims that the letter Lady Laena sent to her brother was sent in good faith. Yet as the army settled in for the long wait for a reply, one of the two surviving children of House Toland were slain. There were no witnesses to the murder. Upon discovering the body, Lord Tarly writes that Lady Laena flew into a towering rage and ordered for Ser Dickon’s ‘Green Men’ to be seized.

Lord Tarly goes on to write, quite proudly, that it was he who led the attack on the ‘Green Men’ and that it was he who personally brought Ser Dickon to face Lady Laena. He does not write, however, of what came next. Only that by morn, Lady Laena had ordered that most of the ‘Green Men’ be given to Vhagar’s flames…”

An excerpt from the text Dark Sister: A Dark Tale of a Dark Blade written by Maester Gilbert, 313AC

“…with the defeat of Daemon Targaryen and the disaster at Bloodstone, Dark Sister was thought lost to House Targaryen.

It was luck, and perhaps the blessing of the Seven, that saw it return to its rightful owners once more during the Conquest of Dorne. As Prince Laenor Velaryon, husband of the future Queen Rhaenyra, laid siege to The Tor with his goodfather, he led a counter-raid against Dornish forces. During this minor skirmish, he slew several men in single combat. Afterwards, to the surprise of all his men, he recovered that lost blade from the corpse of one of his opponents.

When the Prince sought to return it to King Viserys, his goodfather announced he could think of no one more worthy to wield the blade and cleanse the stain of dishonour its previous owner had brought upon it. Thus Dark Sister passed to its next bearer.

Prince Laenor would go on to wield the blade for a decade and a half in the service of his wife. Over this time, many would complain that the Prince was not worthy of such a sword. History tells us that Prince Laenor was only of middling skill with a sword and certainly possessed none of the great talent that Prince Aemond and Prince Aegon would go on to develop.

It is oft rumoured that after the knighting of Prince Aegon in 122AC, Queen Alicent pressed his claim to the sword to her husband, only to be rebuffed quite harshly. Others argue that this event is misattributed to Prince Aegon and that it was Prince Aemond, knighted in 124AC, that the Queen attempted to acquire the blade for. Whatever the truth of that matter is, the blade would not pass out of Prince Laenor’s hands until 131AC, when he granted it to his eldest trueborn child, Princess Jocelyn.”
“...Lord Aron Dayne officially surrendered to King Viserys Targaryen during the Second Moon of 118AC as the King’s armies moved into position to threaten Sunspear itself.

There were many at the time, mostly Westerosi Lords, that sneered at the decision, yet history has shown us that Lord Dayne was every inch the equal of Lord Walter Wyl in the field of political manoeuvriring. Lord Dayne ended the war believing that the loyalists of Princess Aliandra had not taken a single loss and that Prince Garin’s supporters had been utterly decimated. Word of the Massacre at Ghost Hill was yet to reach Dornish ears and news of the disaster nearly derailed the negotiation of terms between the King and Lord Dayne, who was said to have called a halt to talks for three whole days after he was informed.

Nevertheless, even with that dark news hanging over them, peace was declared between the Seven Kingdoms and Dorne with only the terms of Dorne joining the Realm remaining to be laid out. Lord Aron Dayne was not to receive the generous terms that he had been offered at the start of the war, however, despite his optimism that he could yet receive them if he did not personally take the field. Not even Dornish anger at the events at Ghost Hill would see King Viserys bend in his demands. Peace talks would stretch on for months as Lord Dayne and King Viserys each brought forth their proposals and counter-proposals.

The ‘Treaty of the Shadow City’ was the subject of much debate and scandal amongst the lords of both sides of the conflict at that time, and even as the treaty was signed, the war between the Princess and the Queen was beginning once again. Many ‘Greens’ claimed the terms were much too lenient. They pointed to the centuries of raiding endured by the Stormlands and the Reach and called for punishment. The fact that Princess Rhaenyra’s Black Lords supported the treaty as fair and just seemed to only worsen matters.

Yet the Black Lords were not to entirely have their way. The first of the terms presented to the Dornish called for a temporary governor, with the matter to be revisited when Princess Aliandra reached her majority, to be appointed by the Crown to ensure the Dornish were not rearming for rebellion. It was stated that Princess Rhaenyra and Queen Alicent both petitioned King Viserys to appoint their chosen candidate, but it was Queen Alicent that would emerge victorious when Ser Gwayne Hightower was installed in the position.

The rest of the terms forced on the defeated Dornish were equally as harsh. The lands historically referred to as Wyl were seized from Dornish control and granted to Lord Borros Baratheon. Hostages were taken from every major Dornish family, including the last surviving scion of House Toland, with Ghost Hill itself falling under the control of Myles Sand, the late Lord Allard’s bastard son. Perhaps the most painful term of all was the fostering of young Princess Aliandra with Princess Rhaenyra. Princess Aliandra was Lord Aron Dayne’s niece and only the reassurance that she would keep her title as Princess of Dorne would persuade him to agree to the fostering.

Yet the Dornish were not entirely humiliated in the negotiations. As mentioned above, they were able to keep their title of Prince of Dorne. They also won financial aid from the Crown to rebuild their shattered economy, and King Viserys agreed to officially take responsibility for the debt they had incurred with the Iron Bank. Yet these concessions would not raise nearly as much clamour from the Lords of Westeros as the final one.
King Viserys had decided on a suitable candidate for the hand of Princess Aliandra. Lucerys Velaryon.”

An excerpt from *The Black Queen: A True Tale of Rhaenyra the Reformer* by Prince Gaemon Targaryen written, 230AC

“The reunion of Prince Laenor and Princess Rhaenyra was so fraught with emotion that it moved many observers to tears. Despite what certain scurrilous rumours might have you believe, dear reader, Prince Laenor was in love with Princess Rhaenyra and had been since they had met as children. The moment the war with Dorne was over he mounted the dragon Seasmoke and flew to be in her arms once more. Laena Velaryon, another victim of later politics and dramatisation, was similarly keen to reunite with her own husband, Joffrey Velaryon. Their reunion was more private but no less touching.

The two dragon riders brought with them Princess Aliandra, who was to be raised alongside the Princess’s own children. A wise decision that was later revealed to have been suggested by my illustrious ancestor, Queen Rhaenyra herself. Although in her own memoirs, that only those of the Royal Family are privy to, she explains that the Princess of Dorne did not settle well into her household at first, frequently throwing tantrums and demanding to be taken back to her mother and uncle.

This can easily be forgiven, however, as children of three are hardly able to recognise the honour that comes with a royal fostering. It should be noted as well that Princess Aliandra would later become a great friend of Princess Alyssa Targaryen, showing that she did come to realise what an opportunity she had been granted.

Yet this book is not about Princess Aliandra, dear reader, it is about the first Queen of Westeros! A remarkable woman much maligned by the rumours of cruelty and tyranny brought against her after the ‘Dance of Dragons’, the contents of falsified letters created solely to besmirch the good name of her true love, Prince Laenor, and the almost criminal character assassination of her most loyal friends Joffrey and Laena Velaryon!

We must let the actions of both Princess Rhaenyra and Prince Laenor during their reunion speak for themselves. I say, dear reader, that they shout the truth, for nine months after Princess Rhaenyra greeted her husband at the Dragonpit on his return from Dorne, Prince Aemon Targaryen was born.”
An excerpt from the text *The Vulture Kings* by Mara Ladybright written, 245AC

“The Third Vulture King is the subject of quite some debate with current affairs as they are. Whereas modern scholars agree that the first two men who bore that name were dedicated to Dorne and her people, the third Vulture King is shrouded in scandal. The first of these great scandals being that after taking the identity of the legendary outlaw, he did not cast aside his name. Whilst even Dornish records struggle to reveal the true names of the first and second Vulture Kings, the name of the third is known to all. Lord Walter Wyl.

After the Conquest of Dorne, House Wyl was attainted in a declaration signed by King Viserys and Lord Aron Dayne both. The former Lord Walter himself was declared an outlaw for his desertion in the Battle of the Boneway and Lord Qyle Yronwood was said to have promised his treasury and the hand of his daughter to any man that brought him his former ally’s head.

Many people argue that his taking of the mantle of Vulture King was an act of political genius. That he declared himself, like all others who had taken the mantle, loyal to Dorne and Dorne alone. I would posit that this explanation fails to truly explain his motivations.

Walter Wyl had broken Nymeria’s treaty and left an ally to his destruction in order to save himself. His act of ‘crowning’ himself as Vulture King was one of desperation. A way to not only justify the raiding and foraging he needed to perpetrate to feed his army but to give himself a way to strike back at those he thought had wronged him by failing to rise up in response to Lord Aron Dayne’s surrender to King Viserys.

It should be quite telling that his first and the subsequent majority of his raids were carried out on Dornish targets. During the year of 118AC, he struck twice at Yronwood lands, once at the lands of the Manwoodys and no less than three times in the lands ruled by the Fowlers of Skyreach. Contrast this to the mere two raids he carried out in his own former lands, now governed by Bennard Stark and what remained of his Desert Wolves. In fact, he would go on to nearly decimate the lands of Yronwood and Skyreach over the next six years. These are the actions of a man that blamed Lord Fowler and Lord Yronwood for their losses and capitulation, not those of a cool political actor.

Indeed, if even more proof is required, he never struck into the Stormlands proper until he declared his allegiance to Prince Garin in 124AC. For six years, Walter Wyl played the vengeful Bandit King, but only then did he decide to retroactively justify and legitimise the crimes he committed against Dorne and her people with the formidable political mind he had demonstrated during the Conquest.

Walter Wyl is not, as some modern demagogues like to claim, a symbol of a better Dorne. He is a symbol of our worst natures, a symbol of anger and spite and hatred. He is a symbol of our divisions…”

An excerpt from the text *The Three Journeys* by Lyra Cargyll written, 175AC

“In contrast to her later journeys, Laena Velaryon’s first journey is exceedingly well documented. Modern scholars even have an idea of why she began her journey when she did. In the, admittedly oft-contested, letters between Prince Lœnor Velaryon and Ser Joffrey Velaryon we know that Ser Joffrey and Lady Laena began trying to conceive a new babe after her return from the Conquest of Dorne.
Unlike Princess Rhaenyra and Prince Laenor, however, they were not successful and fears began to be raised that the difficulty they were having stemmed from the well known effects of Hag’s Grasp. They ceased their attempts after six months, as Princess Rhaenyra grew great with child once more. In Ser Joffrey’s letters, he writes that Lady Laena found it hard to see her closest friend begrudgingly accepting what she desired most but, as mentioned before, the letters are often contested in their validity.

To summarise that first journey, during the eighth moon of 118AC, Laena Velaryon flew from King’s Landing to Runestone with full permission to investigate the runes etched into its foundations from Lady Rhea Royce. Lady Laena stayed there for just over a moon’s turn and produced one of the most accurate recordings of the runes to date. Records from this period in Runestone also tell us she borrowed numerous tomes from the library, some of which were never returned. She did not depart the Vale after concluding her business at Runestone, instead flying Vhagar across the Mountains of the Moon, seemingly at random. Many speculate she sought the hidden valleys of the Mountain clans. Indeed, the later discovery of pre-Andal settlements in those valleys seems to confirm this, and claims have been made of recent human and draconic presence in those settlements.

From the Vale, Lady Laena flew North. She did not receive a warm welcome at Winterfell, if Ser Joffrey’s letters on the matter are to be believed, despite the rich gifts she offered for a chance to examine the castle proper. She stayed less than a week at the capital of the North before flying to the Wall. Here, her gifts were gratefully accepted and she stayed for quite some time, often questioning the stewards and builders. We do not know if Lady Velaryon attempted to take her mount beyond the Wall, although later claims from Criston Cole, who would go on to become First Ranger, says that she did not, having been warned that to attempt to do so was to invite disaster. He did not say who had warned her or what form this disaster may take.

Her next flight took her to the Iron Islands where she stayed for a week as a guest of Hagen Greyjoy. We can only speculate what she wished to examine there but her haste in departing the Islands requires none. Hagen Greyjoy was in declining health but he was no less the lecherous man he was reputed to be. Continuing her odd pilgrimage about the legends of Westeros, Lady Velaryon is rumoured to have visited the God’s Eye and Harrenhal. Records from the great castle have never confirmed it, so the matter remains shrouded in mystery.

We do know that, whether she visited the God’s Eye or not, her next point was the Hightower. An odd choice of destination given that she and Ser Ormund Hightower were reputed to hate one another. Yet Lady Laena won a month in the High Tower from Lord Garmon. Ser Ormund wrote to his cousin, Queen Alicent, with a detailed report on the matter. He claims that she examined the Tower from top to bottom but seemed most interested in the black stone that forms the base of the ancient structure. Ser Ormund goes on to complain that Lady Velaryon refused the services of maids and stewards and was secretive, almost verging on paranoia, during her stay. When her month was up, Lady Laena is said to have left without any complaint.

Her final stop on her journey was with her kinsman, Lord Borros Baratheon at Storm’s End. Like Lady Rhea Royce had, he reportedly gave her full access to the fortress and she was keen to take him up on his offer only returning to Princess Rhaenyra’s side after three months spent studying Storm’s End…”
An excerpt from the text *The Silver Falcon* by Maester Godric written, 219AC

“… Lady Jeyne Arryn would stay in King’s Landing for some time after the Conquest of Dorne was brought to a close, staying with her cousin Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen until she was great with child once more. It is thought she intended to witness the birth of Prince Aemon, wanting to support her beloved kinswoman, before returning to the Vale for her own wedding.

Yet as winter wore on, Lady Arryn would be forced to return alongside her Falcons as the Mountain Clans, much reduced by a bitter winter with no end in sight, began desperately raiding any target they could reach. Even ancient fortifications that had stood against the onslaught for thousands of years were feeling the strain of the Mountain Clans’ death throes, and sacked farmsteads, burned villages and looted convoys became common sights within the Vale. Matters only seemed to escalate; Redfort was nearly burned in early 118AC, Wickenden barely fought off a raid a month later, and Lord Gawen Corbray was attacked, and his guard slain, within sight of the walls at Strongson. Even the Bloody Gate suffered a raid, so bold were the Mountain Clans in that period.

Yet before the Vale could raise its banners in earnest, politics dictated that there was a more important matter to attend to. The marriage of Ser Denys Corbray and Lady Jeyne Arryn. It was said to be a lavish affair, attended by no less than five Princesses and, one might argue as Princess Rhaenyra was heavily pregnant, one Prince. Even Lady Rhea Royce was recalled from King’s Landing to witness the affair, bringing along her firstborn son, Yohn.

The grand tourney held afterwards was no less lavish than the ceremony and feast that preceded it. Yet where many may have grumbled at the cost in the face of renewed raiding and the sheer toll of winter, Lady Arryn was quick to reassure them and lay the foundations for the claiming of her title of ‘The Silver Falcon’. Using surveys taken in ancient times, Lady Jeyne had negotiated a significant loan with which to found silver mines in the Mountain of the Moon after the winter’s end.

It did not escape the notice of many that a significant portion of the mountains said to contain the rich deposits of minerals were placed in areas claimed by Arryn Kings long dead with ancient decrees. Ancient decrees that Lady Arryn made clear still applied. Despite that brief political upset, it was clear that in a few short years Lady Arryn had gone from barely maintaining control of the Vale in the face of those that would support her kinsman to undeniably ruling it in truth…”

An excerpt from the text *An Age of Science* by Wisdom Harlan written, 299AC

“… there is evidence that ‘Ether’ was used in minor surgeries performed by Maester Gerardys on Dragonstone as he was developing the techniques of administering it. Yet it faced its first true test on the twelfth day of the fifth moon in the year 119AC. Keen scholars of medicine will note that this date is not long after the discovery of the properties of Iodine or, to give it its common name, Dragon Salt. This is the most likely theory as to why Maester Gerardys was not present in King’s Landing and why events were allowed to develop as they did.

Regardless, records kept by Grand Maester Mellos show that Princess Rhaenyra visited him no less than three times in the preceding month complaining of pain in her fingers, broken by her Uncle in a fit of rage years ago and ill-healed in the aftermath by Grand Maester Runciter. The Grand Maester, in his own notes, dismisses the pain as a product of the Princess’s broken fingers reacting badly to the ongoing winter, which grew more bitter as spring failed to arrive.
As time went on, the Princess fell ill with ever worrying symptoms. She contracted a fever, sweated excessively and was said to have barely been able to eat due to nausea. She had to be sedated with Milk of the Poppy as the pain returned to her fingers in unimaginable levels and the hand itself swelled to twice its size. After her symptoms failed to improve despite the Grand Maester’s complete attention, King Viserys became desperate.

By Royal Decree, Maester Gerardys returned to King’s Landing and was quick to identify an infection in the badly healed bones in her smallest finger. Fearing that the infection may spread and cause further complications with the Princess’s health, Maester Gerardys opted to amputate the problematic finger. To this end, he used the untested ‘Ether’ to ensure the Princess would not awaken during surgery.

Whilst this surgery was a resounding success, many Maesters objected to the use of ‘Ether’ quite vocally. It was this outcry, and a formal complaint from the Grand Maester, that allowed the Citadel to act as it did.

As 119AC came to a close, Maester Gerardys was formally summoned to the Citadel to answer to an official investigation into accusations made against him. The Citadel alleged that he had passed on forbidden knowledge and secrets to the Alchemists, engaged in witchcraft and foul magic, withheld knowledge from the Citadel, committed vulgar acts and, most seriously, that he had broken his oath to be loyal to Dragonstone by using an untested substance on the Princess.

The Inquest continued well into the new year as Maesters and Arch-Maesters alike quizzed Gerardys on Dragonstone, the Alchemist’s Guild and who had invented the wondrous things that its campus produced. Gerardys remained loyal to Dragonstone, however, and soon after the Inquest came to a close, he was formally stripped of his chain and denounced as a Maester.

If The Citadel expected Gerardys to be humbled by stripping him of his chain, they were sorely mistaken. No sooner had Princess Rhaenysa received the news than she invited the man back into her household and refused to take the replacement The Citadel offered.

In defiance of convention, Gerardys would go on to officially open a school of healing on Dragonstone, training many of the wisemen and Septons that would go on to serve the people of King’s Landing and the Narrow Sea…”
An excerpt from the text *The Three Journeys* by Lyra Cargyll written, 175AC

“The second journey of Laena Velaryon is harder to summarise and relies much on the assumptions of her contemporaries and folktales. What can be said for certain is that two months after her daughter was born prematurely in 119AC, Laena Velaryon mounted Vhagar and flew to Braavos with not even a year passing since her last journey. She did so without the permission of Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen, who still counted her as one of her ladies-in-waiting and a close friend. Upon hearing the news of her lady’s unauthorised departure, Princess Rhaenyra is said to have flown into a great rage.

Contested letters between Joffrey Velaryon and his lover and goodbrother, Laenor Velaryon, claim that Princess Aemma Targaryen was conceived shortly after Lady Velaryon’s departure as Ser Laenor sought to comfort his wife at the loss of such a good friend. One of the greatest proofs that can be offered is that Princess Aemma was born almost nine months to the day after Lady Velaryon left.

Records from the Sealord of Braavos at that time tell us that Lady Laena did not tarry long in Braavos. Dark rumours swirled about her stay there and it was a contemporary theory that she sought to gain access to the House of Black and White, the house of assassins so shrouded in mystery even now. It seems unlikely she was granted an audience, however, as she soon left Braavos for Lys.

She is known to have tarried in the Perfumed Sister for near two months, a guest of Magister Lotho Dagareon, who was oft seen taking her on tours about the city and accompanying her to the many parties the Lyseni are known for holding. Yet Lady Laena’s tours of the oldest parts of Lys, its temples and its libraries are not the only thing of note to happen during her stay there.

From records recovered from Magister Dagareon’s cache, kept safe through the Rogue Prince’s Rebellion that took place not even a decade later, we know that towards the end of her stay, Lady Laena Velaryon received a letter from a most unlikely source, Princess Helaena Targaryen. Westerosi scholars argue the accuracy of such records. Princess Helaena would have been approaching her eleventh nameday and was fostered with Lady Jeyne Arryn at the time. What cause would a daughter of Queen Alicent, no matter how beloved they both were by Princess Rhaenyra, have to send a letter to the rider of Vhagar and a staunch Black?

Magister Dagareon never writes what the letter contained, or if he did the contents were destroyed in the rebellion, but he does write that after reading the letter, Lady Laena became distressed and began making plans to depart Lys immediately for the next stretch of her journey. Where she had been happy to accept Magister Dagareon’s aid in planning her adventure she now tore up those plans and refused to let him see the replacement itinerary.

Within a week she had departed Lys, refusing all entreaties to stay further in the city.

We know that from Lys, she went east to Volantis. Where she had been free and sociable before, she was now secretive and paranoid. She attended no social gatherings, instead spending her time exploring Volantis and the surrounding Valyrian towns along the River Rhoyne, even daring to venture as far as The Sorrows. Records of her exact movements have never been released to Westerosi scholars by the Volantenes however, despite many requests they do so by the Royal Family.
From there on, we only have Magister Dagareon’s writings as to what she intended to visit before she changed her plans; the ruins of Essaria known as Vaes Khadokh, the Demon Road with its cities of Mantarys, Bhorash, Tolos and Elyria, the Isle of Cedars and its cities of Velos and Ghozai and the ill-reputed Isle of Tears and the ruins of Gogossos. Nobody can say for certain which of these she truly visited but if Magister Dargareon writes truly, it seemed Lady Velaryon wished to tour the crumbling glory of her ancient ancestors - the Dragon Lords of Valyria…”

An excerpt from the text *The Silver Falcon* by Maester Godric written, 219AC

“...Lady Arryn’s power in the Vale was to only go from strength to strength after spring was officially announced in 120AC. The winter had been long and hard, the Vale was still reeling from the Mountain Clans desperate rebellion, food was running short after five years of weather that had only grown worse as the years went on, and the start of 120AC saw Princess Helaena Targaryen, her ward, fall deathly ill.

Yet as the weather slowly began to warm, the people of the Vale, both Lords and common folk, were given even more reason for celebration than the changing of the seasons.

Attended by one of Princess Rhaenyra’s midwives and her dear companion, Jessamyn Redfort, Lady Arryn gave birth to her firstborn child. A healthy, lusty son she named Osgood Arryn, for the King of Mountain and Vale that had passed the decree she relied on to lawfully seize the mountains in which her future silver mines would be founded. Even better for Lady Jeyne, a month after her son’s birth, Princess Helaena finally awoke from her almost comatose state.

Yet not all in the Vale were pleased with the political situation. Gunthor Royce, for he was officially a Royce despite his later actions, grew ever further from the Lordship of Runestone. Lady Rhea Royce, his Aunt, now had two healthy sons; Yohn, born in 118AC, and Yorwyck, born in 119AC. Once the roads were safe for travel in 120AC, Gunthor Royce made a progression to the Gate of the Moon to petition Lady Arryn to restore him his rights as Heir of Runestone.

He argued that Lady Royce’s first husband yet lived and that the annulment granted to Lady Royce that allowed her to marry Lord Torrhen Royce was obtained via bribery and deceit. He argued his cousins, born of that union, were therefore bastards. Lady Arryn was not of the same view. In a blistering letter sent to Lady Rhea Royce, who resided in King’s Landing, Lady Jeyne denounced Gunthor Royce and had him imprisoned in his quarters.

Lady Rhea was inclined to be merciful to her nephew, however, and although she banished him to stay with his kin at Coldwater Burn she did reaffirm that he was a Royce in name as well as blood…”
An excerpt from the text *The Green Death* by Maester Oswell written, 288AC

“The Green Death is a fascinating nickname when taken in context of the time period, who originally coined it and just who earned such a name.

On the surface of it, a child of Queen Alicent Hightower being named ‘the Green Death’ implies some sort of political motivation. Looking at the moniker one is forced to wonder just how it could have come to be? Is its bearer a staunch Green and fearsome fighter that brings destruction to the Blacks? Is the bearer a traitor that ensured the Greens failed in their plot to crown Prince Aegon with their actions?

The answer is none of these. The nickname was not even coined by those who knew about the Black and Green factions. After all, what would the Mountain Clans of the Vale know about the Princess and the Queen? For it was these long destroyed barbarians, these old terrors of the Vale, that first called Princess Helaena by the sobriquet ‘the Green Death’.

It was only a few months after she had recovered from her mysterious illness that the Mountain Clans finally united under a new Griffin King. The Clans were not given to written records and much of their culture was destroyed after the Battle of the Bloody Gate but survivors claimed that the Clans threw their support behind the Griffin King because he promised to take back a full third of their lost territory by beating the armies of the Vale in pitched battle.

Today, this sounds laughable. The Vale could call upon armoured knights, veteran men-at-arms and double that number in levies that had a score to settle with the Clans. In addition, they had the Falcons, a force designed to neutralise the advantage that the terrain granted their opponents. Yet the Falcons had taken losses during the Conquest of Dorne and the forces of the Vale chose their battle site poorly, against the advice of Lord Denys Waynwood, leader of the Falcons.

When the battle began in earnest, the Vale looked set to take large losses whilst the forces of the Griffin King were set to withdraw having barely taken any. No doubt they hoped that the force would pursue them even deeper into the Mountains of the Moon where they could wear down their foe’s numbers to an even greater degree. They were not to be given the chance. Despite the young dragon Morghul being barely the size of a horse, Princess Helaena mounted her and flew to aid the Vale army.

Having never faced a dragon in the field, The Mountain Clans threw down their weapons and fled in the face of the sudden onslaught of fire. The Vale army was quick to rally and pursue, following Princess Helaena’s mount as she harried the fleeing tribesman.

As for the nickname? Well, Morghul was green and she rained fire and death from above.”

An excerpt from the text *Bastard Born* by Rue, 155AC

“After Queen Alicent found the two bastard boys, Addam and Alyn, during her stay on Dragonstone to birth Princess Viserra, they were moved away from the prying eyes of the Court and its gossips. This only further fed the rumours that Ser Laenor had fathered them. Rumours that made King Viserys angry enough to unsuccessfully try and visit the boys in 119AC.

They returned to their home in the castle town on Dragonstone in early 121AC after four years in the small and nameless farming village that Princess Rhaenyra’s alchemist’s perfected their
agricultural techniques in. Nobody knows what made Princess Rhaenyra order them to be moved back as interest in the boys, now six and seven, was always there as the Blacks and the Greens played their games. They lived there for three moons before their Mother caught Princess Rhaenyra’s eye.

In order to make the glass they were producing on Driftmark, the Glassworks needed a lot of seaweed. As the first work at the site got underway in 120AC, the seaweed farms that had been invented by the Wisdoms were making plenty of it to feed the Glassworks. When Westeros realised the potential in cheap and local glass everyone wanted to buy some. Soon the farms were not making nearly enough.

Princess Rhaenyra flew back to Dragonstone to find out what was causing issues at the farms. She also met with Addam, Alyn and Marilda of Hull. Marilda had been the daughter of a shipwright and had been involved in trade since she could walk. We don’t know why Princess Rhaenyra visited the mother of her husband’s bastards but the next day, the Princess took Marilda on a tour of the farms.

Even though Marilda was only a year older than the Princess, she bowed to the woman on certain matters and suggestions Marilda made. Many people tried to talk the Princess out of putting Marilda in charge of improving the farms but the Princess would not be told. She appointed her ‘Interim Director’ and Marilda was so successful in providing enough seaweed for the Glassworks that six moons later, Princess Rhaenyra put her in charge permanently.

After this happened, Addam and Alyn moved to live with their Mother in the castle of Dragonstone proper as Marilda was now a highly placed member of Princess Rhaenyra’s administration on the island and reported to the Castellan himself and no one else. Marilda and her family were also said to have been given a generous cut of the seaweed farm’s profits.

Despite an allowance from Princess Rhaenyra, these profits and her pay as ‘Director’, Marilda did not rest on her laurels. She invested her money in many trading ventures. Most people agree that she was advised by Lord Corlys on whom to give her money to. Soon she had enough money to buy her own ship. Even though she still worked on the seaweed farms her ships multiplied and by the time her first son was made a squire she had seven ships…"
An excerpt from the text *A History of the Schism* by Septon Andar written, 314AC

“Many have argued about how involved the then Princess Rhaenyra was in the early stages of the Great Schism given that the vast majority of it happened long after her death. Many, particularly those that subscribe to the teachings of the Starry Septon, are quick to accuse her of using the Faith to her own ends. That she could not truly believe in the tenets of the Shepherd’s teachings and that even her many charities were more the work of her underlings than genuine piety.

It is the opinion of this humble Septon, a follower of the Shepherd’s teachings, that the Schism was made possible, and began, with her actions. I will not argue this way and try to prove that the Princess was a true believer, for that is between her and the Seven. Yet it can not be denied that by sheltering the Septon then called Patrek, by protecting him with her own men, by providing him with money, food and her inventions, she laid the foundations for his rise to power.

It was with her blessing that Septon Patrek and his believers stormed what was then called the Great Sept on Visenya’s Hill in 122AC, it was her influence with her father that prevented Septon Eustace from gaining the King’s aid in taking back the Sept, and it was her supplies to it’s ‘food bank’ that kept the crowds of King’s Landing flocking to it despite the moratorium the High Septon had placed upon doing so.

Later, she spent thousands of gold dragons on printing copies of the Seven-Pointed Star. Those same copies she ‘donated’ to Septon Patrek. Did she also suggest his later actions? Some say she was behind his church school, in both funding and conception. Whether she was or not, she certainly encouraged the education of the commons. She had many learning healing and other arts at the feet of the disgraced Maester, Gerardys, on Dragonstone through a ‘scholarship’ given to the brightest and best among them…”

An excerpt from *The Black Queen: A True Tale of Rhaenyra the Reformer* by Prince Gaemon Targaryen written, 230AC

“… that was not the only stroke of genius my ancestor had in regards to the raising of her children!

In 122AC, she summoned Lady Jeyne Bracken, then aged ten, and Alysanne Blackwood, then aged nine, to attend upon her twin daughters Princesses Jocelyn and Alyssa, who had just seen their sixth nameday. I can hear your thoughts, dear readers! Why summon two ladies of the most quarrelsome houses in all of Westeros? The answer lies in the memoirs she left her descendants, written in her own hand! Her reasons were threefold! The two ladies would provide the twin princesses with strong-minded individuals so that they should grow up humbled on occasion and not be given to arrogance, to give them practice in solving disputes between two overly argumentative sides and, simply, to give them friends so that their position did not render them lonely.

Her plan went into effect almost immediately! She refused to allow the two ladies two separate sets of servants and retinues and wrote to their Lord Fathers to rectify the situation. Not wishing to lose their daughters' places, especially if the other should keep it, they agreed readily and Princess Rhaenyra merged their households with brutal efficiency. Her memoirs state this was not received well by the girls and that they had to be separated to prevent physical violence on multiple occasions!
Yet, my ancestor writes, both adored the twins and made an effort to ensure their rivalry did not trouble the younger girls even if they did argue about every topic from religion to architecture when the Princesses were not present…”

An excerpt from the text *Bastard Born* by Rue, 155AC

“Marilda of Hull being moved to the castle for her work on the seaweed farms meant that Addam and Alyn were often seen playing in the halls of Dragonstone and getting underfoot like their mother once did when she lived on Driftmark with her father. It also meant that Addam and Alyn could be tutored by the many wise men that Princess Rhaenyra had gathered on Dragonstone.

They got their lessons from men like Gerardys, Wisdom Jerrett and Lady Alannys, who wasn’t a lady then. Also lots of other wisoms helped out and they were often taken to see lectures and other stuff at the campus. Most surprising to everyone that heard of it was that Princess Rhaenyra gave orders that both boys should be allowed to train in martial pursuits with the Master-at-Arms, Ser Rogar Langward.

Even King Viserys told Princess Rhaenyra to not allow it as he feared that the boys might become too skilled and threaten the Princess’s trueborn children. Princess Rhaenyra refused advice once again as she swore that her husband’s children would be good boys who were loyal and would not hurt their own kin even to enrich themselves. None of the Princes or Princesses ever wrote down what they thought about this at this time even though they would go on to become great friends with their bastard brothers later on in their lives.

So the boys started learning martial pursuits under the Master-at-Arms. Right from the start, people noticed that Alyn had no real talent for it and only attended the lessons because of his brother. Addam was a natural talent with the sword and received a lot of praise for his progress and skill. When word got back to King Viserys he begged the Princess again to ban the boys from learning such things.

Instead, Princess Rhaenyra travelled to Dragonstone for another meeting with Marilda of Hull and Ser Rogar Langward. Ser Rogar was very impressed with Addam and offered to take him as a squire as long as he had permission to do so from the Princess. Princess Rhaenyra was happy for Addam to squire under Ser Rogar and even gave the knight an allowance to properly care for Addam. As for Alyn, Princess Rhaenyra agreed to pay for him to apprentice at Hull to learn the shipbuilding trade…”
“Before the rule of Lady Jeyne Arryn, the old and proud families of the Vale often struggled for coin. Whilst the land of the Vale itself was, even then, rich and fertile, they had been fighting a war against both man and seasons for time immemorial. What the vicious winter winds did not snatch away, the Mountains Clans were happy to take. Noble Houses were forced to spend the vast majority of their incomes on soldiers and fortifications to keep their lands safe and therefore struggled to invest in the necessary infrastructure to improve their lands.

Their pride should also not be underestimated as a cause for their poverty in comparison to even some Northern Houses. There was an element of ‘keeping up appearances’ and a steadfast refusal by most to involve themselves in trade and ‘coin-counting’. When Lady Jeyne Arryn raised her kinsmen to Lords of Gulltown, many of the Vale Lords scorned them, despite their noble ancestry. The Arryns of Gulltown, to many, were ‘up-jumped merchants’ who had risen above their station despite their obvious wealth in comparison to others.

Even Lady Arryn herself was not as rich as other Great Lords and Ladies, with her incomes being a paltry amount compared to all but the rulers of The North, the Starks. Even the barbarous Ironborn could boast more gold and richer lifestyle, even if it was mostly stolen from hard-working and honest folk in Essos and, as the rumours went, Westeros too.

Yet this was to change forever in 121AC. The Mountain Clans had broken under the onslaught of her armies and her ward and the Falcons pursued them to their last holdfasts and hideaways. Time had run out for the Mountain Clans of the Vale and Lady Arryn was ready to begin her surveys of the Mountains of the Moon, having negotiated a loan with the Iron Bank to fund her work. Aided by Lord Reyne, who was happy to send expert miners and surveyors to her, Lady Jeyne Arryn undertook the daunting task of discovering what lay in the Mountains and how truthful her ancestors had been in their ancient documents.

What she found there was beyond her, and indeed her ancestor’s, wildest dreams. Small deposits of gold, silver in vast amounts, iron to rival the Iron Islands themselves, copper, tin, antimony and galena. The news was well received by all who had a stake in the matter and Lady Jeyne soon accepted further investment from her cousin Princess Rhaenyra, House Velaryon and House Reyne. She also, surprisingly, allowed the Belmores of Strongsong to extend their existing iron mines in return for a generous part of the profits they would make. Lady Rhea Royce received a similar grant to extend her copper and tin mines.

Although the Arryn mines would not begin producing anything of note until 132AC, the decade after the discovery saw an economic boom in the Vale…”
funding. The move was not well received by all, as many believed that the College would become another Citadel in time and would crush the spirit of scientific enquiry that the College had been founded on. Regardless of arguments, the changes went ahead and were finalised soon after.

To fund its many studies, the College was granted part of the profits from the many inventions they had created there; Dragon Salt, the Midwifery School, the Printing Press and, perhaps most importantly at that time, the Glassworks on Driftmark. The Glassworks had begun reaching full production in mid-122AC and Westeros’ demand for its service was great indeed.

This left Wisdom Jerrett, who still claimed overall leadership of the College as its Master, in an interesting position. The new College would be a state of the art facility, boasting many features that even the Alchemists Guild of King’s Landing did not. He had access to a steady and large revenue flow to fund his new College and its studies and he had prestige and a great following with the Guild itself.

It was he that had persuaded Princess Rhaenyra to share ‘The Book’ with him, it was he that had founded the campus on Dragonstone, and would now rule its successor, and it was he that had turned those fanciful technologies into real world inventions. He had even presided over discoveries not in The Book’s pages in the form of Iodine. Compared to the current Grand Master, a man more obsessed with turning lead into gold, Wisdom Jerrett looked to be a very good prospect for leadership.

Yet Grand Master Jowen was a hale and healthy man, unlikely to die any time soon and very much opposed to surrendering his title to, in his own words, ‘an upstart that had discarded the Alchemist’s chief tenets for prestige and gold from a pretty girl’. Many of the King’s Landing Alchemists were quick to point out that the Guild had been founded to study magic in the scientific manner. Under Wisdom Jerrett very little magic was being studied.

The political disruption caused by the old and new clashing would go on for many moons until late 123AC when a solution was reached. Wisdom Jerrett would become High Wisdom Jerrett, the College would be separated entirely from the Guild with the Guild ‘renting’ rooms within it and the study of magic would take place in the old campus that the Alchemist’s Guild would retain control of... ”
An excerpt from the text The Silver Falcon by Maester Godric written, 219AC

“… the words of Princess Helaena who often wrote to her brother, Prince Aegon, that Lady Jeyne Arryn and Princess Rhaenyra were very alike in personality and bearing. It is not odd that the cousins should be alike both physically and mentally. They shared a grandfather in Rodrick Arryn, both Princess Rhaenyra and Lady Jeyne inherited his lack of height with Princess Rhaenyra being the shortest of King Viserys’ children despite being the eldest.

Their situations in life were also comparable. Lady Jeyne had ascended to her position as a child after her father and brother were killed during an attack by the Mountain Clans that Lady Jeyne would go on to destroy. A young girl in charge of so much was a scandal during that time period, especially when she had male relatives who were older and believed to be more capable by many. Princess Rhaenyra was raised to the position of heir at age seven after the death of two of her brothers. Like her kinswoman, this caused great scandal. A scandal that only grew when her brother, Prince Aegon, was born and King Viserys refused to rescind his decree that she was his heir.

Both were repeatedly challenged by vassals who preferred their male relatives to their rule and both destroyed houses and ways of life in their quests to assert themselves in their positions as rulers. This is not the only similarity that has been noted between the two, though. As mentioned in previous chapters, many historians posit that Lady Jeyne Arryn preferred her own sex, pointing to the relationship she held with her lady-in-waiting and childhood friend Jessamyn Redfort. A woman who, rumours say, so often played the bed companion that Lady Arryn slept more by her side than she slept by her husband’s. Contrast to Princess Rhaenyra, whom a minority of scholars argue held a similar relationship with her own lady-in-waiting and childhood friend, Laena Velaryon.

Indeed, when Lady Velaryon left on her second Great Journey with little notice and no leave granted, Princess Rhaenyra was said to be so upset by the matter she turned to her husband to comfort her, resulting in Princess Aemma being born nine months after Lady Velaryon’s departure.

A similar turn of events occurred when Lady Jessamyn Redfort was married to Ser Donnel Templeton in 122AC. Lady Jeyne was said to have been heartbroken by her marriage, enough that Lord Gerold Redfort fell out of her favour after enjoying it since he had marched on the Gate of the Moon to confront Ser Arnold in 114AC. Nine months after the now Lady Jessamyn Templeton’s departure from the Eyrie, Aemma Arryn was born as healthy as her brother was.

Even if one ignores the rumours and tales of just who shared the Princess and the Lady’s bed, the events still remain similar. Both had a childhood friend and lady-in-waiting depart their service unexpectedly and both, nine months later, birthed girls that they named Aemma.

Perhaps we can understand much more about the type of person Lady Arryn was by looking at the actions of Princess Rhaenyra…”

An excerpt from the text The Green Death by Maester Oswell written, 288AC

“… in fact, Princess Helaena would not end her fostering with Lady Jeyne Arryn until late 124AC. This makes her the last of Queen Alicent’s children to return home as her brother, Aemond Targaryen, had been knighted not four moons before.
The first of her brothers to return to King’s Landing was Prince Aegon in 122AC, although such an early arrival was somewhat unplanned. It had been agreed between King Viserys and Lord Jason that Prince Aegon would not be knighted before he was six and ten yet Prince Aegon was not content to wait. He won his spurs by entering the melee of Lord Jason’s nameday tournament disguised as a mystery knight, bringing low many older and more experienced men. Lord Jason was said to have offered the mystery knight any boon that was in his power to grant him. At which point, the tales say, that Prince Aegon revealed himself to the delight of the Lords and commons alike and asked to be knighted. Unable to refuse, Lord Jason acceded to the request with amusement.

Even before this, Prince Aegon was thought well of across the Westerlands and had forged a great many friendships with the young scions of many noble families as well as having many a maiden blushing. Handsome, even at five and ten, he had grown tall and fair of face during his fostering. When Lord Jason wrote to King Viserys to explain why he had broken their agreement, he described Aegon as ‘second to none in the Westerlands, perhaps even Westeros, with a blade’. He returned to King’s Landing to great acclaim with a small army of knights and lordlings at his back.

Queen Alicent was perhaps, according to letters between Princess Helaena and Prince Aegon, a little too overly happy that her eldest son had returned, haloed by a growing legend with a reputation as an honourable and peerless knight. Regardless of her children’s feelings, she moved to have them formally betrothed as quickly as possible, with the official announcement sent out before Princess Helaena had even been told. Contemporary rumours were of the opinion that this had been done so that Lady Arryn could not reveal the betrothal to her kinswoman, Princess Rhaenyra, whom Queen Alicent believed would attempt to interfere with the matter as the traditional brother-sister marriage of the Targaryens being granted to her rival for the Throne would only be a boon to Prince Aegon’s cause.

No record of either of her children’s reactions exist although some more doubtful sources allege that both were displeased but resigned to what they saw as an indignity. What is known is that Princess Helaena refuses to leave the Eyrie to attend the feast thrown to celebrate her betrothal and that Prince Aegon spent most of that feast sat next to his older sister, Princess Rhaenyra, and her husband, deep in conversation...”
An excerpt from the text The Vulture Kings by Mara Ladybright written, 245AC

“124AC was a turning point for Walter Wyl and his band of traitors and ne’er-do-wells. He had finally annoyed the Regency in Sunspear enough that something was resolved to be done about him. Until that point he had faced fractured resistance in the form of former allies whose strategies and plans he could predict with little effort. Perhaps he felt that he could weather any general in Dorne that Lord Aron Dayne could call upon to face him, and perhaps that was even true.

Yet Lord Aron Dayne did not call upon a Dornish general to solve his problem with the so-called ‘Third Vulture King’. No, in a move that only demonstrates how much stronger we are, how much stronger Dorne is, when we are part of a greater whole, Lord Aron Dayne formally asked Borros Baratheon and Bennard Stark to crush Walter Wyl and his men as they cowered in the Red Mountains.

The Lord of the Stormlands and the Lord of Red Wolf’s hold were quick to gather their men to them. The Desert Wolves were once again called into service, their numbers swelled by both Dornish and Stormlander volunteers, as they began the Second Vulture Hunt. Within a few moons, Walter Wyl went from the uncontested master of the Red Mountains to losing half his men and fleeing what had grown into a veritable army as more and more of his victims joined their power to the Lord of the Stormlands to ensure justice was carried out and that Walter Wyl was dragged to Sunspear in chains.

Yet, as much as I put forth that his genius is overstated in historical texts, it can not be denied that Walter Wyl possessed cunning and a political mind rivalled by few of his era. He contacted the exiled Prince Garin, whom many of the Stony Dornish still quietly supported, and declared himself to be his man, willing to strike at Princess Aliandra’s supporters relentlessly to make up for his raiding over the past six years. Prince Garin was no doubt eager to accept, knowing what we know now about his activities in the Disputed Lands.

I would imagine it came as a great surprise to Lords Yronwood, Fowler and Manwoody when their chosen Prince ordered them to drop their pursuit of the man that had slaughtered thousands across their territories combined. They did so, however, quietly selling out their former allies. From that moment on Second Vulture Hunt floundered, beset by problem after problem. Patrols going missing, weapons shipments diverted, pay convoys robbed, water poisoned and equipment damaged - despite a strong start, by 125AC, the Second Vulture Hunt was over.

As for Walter Wyl, he kept his oath to his Prince. From that moment on he struck at Princess Aliandra’s supporters and the Stormlands alone, going so far as to cross Dorne’s deserts to reach his targets. Nightsong, Ladybright Castle, Hellholt... any who even wavered on supporting the Prince would soon receive raids from Walter Wyl’s men.

Not all had given up on bringing him to justice though. Bennard Stark had set his sights on claiming the bounty on his head and, quite sensationally, changed his family’s heraldry to reflect this, much to the anger of his late brother’s son, Lord Cregan Stark. The Lord of Red Wolf’s hold banners now bore a red wolf holding a dead, black snake within its maw...”

An excerpt from The Black Queen: A True Tale of Rhaenyra the Reformer by Prince Gaemon Targaryen written, 230AC

“Dear readers! Despite the almost peaceful and idyllic the year 124AC was for my glorious
forebear, villains beset her at every turn. Despite the vilification of her noble friend, Joffrey Velaryon, during both of their lifetimes and after, he was a clever and true man. He sought to protect the Queen he had sworn his heart to from every danger. None, dear readers, was more villainous or dangerous than Larys Strong!

He had found his match in Ser Joffrey though, and the two engaged in a secret shadow war in the city. Yet, whilst the villain was happy to play by the rules when he was winning, he was equally happy to drop the guise of the gentleman when Ser Joffrey began to turn the tide against him. Whereas before they had avoided involving innocents and unfortunates, Larys Strong began using them as his shields and patsys as Ser Joffrey’s net grew ever tighter around him.

Yet Larys Strong had one last scheme to play. One last gasp to save himself from the ignoble end that would no doubt befall him should his villainy come to light, and it would all play out at the nameday celebrations of my ancestor, King Viserys I. It was well known to all that the Master of Whisperers, Ser Jaremy Corbray, often took part in the jousts and had found much success there for many years. Princess Rhaenyra writes that she was surprised to find him quite the skillful knight despite his less than stellar abilities in his role on the Small Council.

Yet, it was this honourable knight of the Vale that became the victim of Larys Strong’s desperate attempt to survive. Perhaps only Larys Strong knows how he persuaded, or more likely tricked, Ser Jaremy to enter the melee that day when he had never done so before but enter the melee he did. When Ser Jaremy was one of five competitors left, the brute Ser Emmon Leygood struck him in the head with a vicious blow.

Ser Jaremy lingered for nine days before dying, never again to rise from his bed. Afterwards it was Lord Lyonel Strong that became the unwitting pawn of his son when he suggested him as a replacement. You and I know, dear reader, that he was fiend but a talented one. When Princess Rhaenyra attempted to speak against him, King Viserys would not hear it! He claimed that a son of Lord Lyonel would be loyal, that he would ensure that her ascension to Queen would run smoothly. He was unmoved when Princess Rhaenyra revealed to him her suspicions about his allegiances, accusing his daughter of seeing enemies where there were none!

Afterwards, my ancestor writes, she did not speak with him for weeks and Larys Strong became Master of Whisperers…’
An excerpt from the text *The Green Death* by Maester Oswell written, 288AC

“Princess Helaena could not avoid her Mother’s plans for her indefinitely, however, and as 124AC closed and 125AC began, she was summoned by Royal Decree to begin her journey home. Accompanying her was the woman who had fostered her, Lady Jeyne Arryn, along with Ser Denys Corbray, Osgood Arryn, Aemma Arryn and Lady Jeyne’s new sworn sword, Ser Jon Hardyng. They made excellent time from Gulltown to King’s Landing where they were received joyfully by the entirety of House Targaryen.

“All finally united and together as it should be” Princess Rhaenyra would toast at the feast held in Helaena’s honour. A toast that Prince Aegon and Princess Helaena were happy to drink to.

The reason for their coming together was soon upon them though. More dubious sources from this period claim that Princess Helaena and Prince Aegon twice sought their elder sister’s intervention to prevent their marriage. Yet Princess Rhaenyra was unable to help, for the same policy that gave her freedom in her children’s betrothals also prevented her from interfering in Queen Alicent’s plans for her children.

Thus Prince Aegon and Princess Helaena were married. It was a lavish ceremony, even for a Royal Wedding. It was said to have cost twice the amount of Princess Rhaenyra’s wedding that had taken place in 114AC and the spectacle it was could surely attest to that. There was entertainment from all over Westeros and Essos including Braavosi mummers, musicians from Lys, fire-eaters from Volantis and even, it was rumoured, a witch who could tell the future from far-flung Asshai. The entire city was halted as seven days of holidays were announced and anyone with any claim to nobility or knighthood flocked to the Keep to try their hand at the jousts, the melees or the archery competitions.

The Red Keep itself had been transformed with banners, bunting, and tapestries. Daily feasts were held in the run-up to the ceremony itself and Prince Aegon and Princess Helaena were always the guests of honour, whether they wished to be or not. When they were not feasting, Queen Alicent had them amongst the lords and ladies, shaking hands and making conversation.

The Ceremony itself was performed by the High Septon and the feast afterwards was said to have served seventy-seven courses, each dish more expensive than the last. The power of House Hightower was on full display for all that it was two scions of House Targaryen marrying…”

An excerpt from the text *The Silver Falcon* by Maester Godric written, 219AC

“… as Lady Arryn set sail to attend the wedding of her Ward, Princess Helaena, she left the Vale to Lord Denys Waynwood.

This was all the weakness that the rebellion that had been growing in the shadows of the Vale needed. From Coldwater Burn, Gunthor Royce declared himself the true Lord of Runestone. He was aided by Ser Edric Arryn, the young son of Ser Arnold Arryn. Both, like Ser Arnold before them, rode at the head of mercenaries. They were joined by knights from across the Vale and men from Hunter, Corbray, Templeton, Coldwater and Royce lands.

When Lady Arryn received notice of the traitors, she flew into a rage to rival any of the legendary Dragon Rages of her cousin. Furious, she refused aid from her dragon-riding allies and insisted on leaving the festivities early to attend to Ser Edric and Gunthor Royce herself, although she allowed
her husband and her children to stay and enjoy the wedding. She was, however, accompanied by Lady Rhea Royce and Ser Jon Hardyng.

It speaks to the character and skill of the rebels that she needn’t have left King’s Landing. By the time her ship docked in Gulltown, the rebellion was over. Ser Edric and Gunthor had failed to take a single town or defeat any foe. They had allowed themselves to be manoeuvred into a disadvantageous position by the much more skilled Lord Denys and were utterly routed from the field in their first clash with Arryn forces.

Ser Edric was captured fleeing the battle and Gunthor Royce made it to Runestone in time to encounter his Aunt, who promptly seized him in the name of her liege lady and turned him over to her custody. The whole matter was considered somewhat embarrassing by all involved and both Ser Edric and Gunthor Royce were dispatched the Wall as quickly as Lady Jeyne could bring them to trial.

The true mystery of the matter arose after, however, when it emerged that the two had a secret backer who had been operating in the Vale for quite some time. Who had supplied the two conspirators with enough coin to raise the mercenaries they did? Who had masterminded the political pressure that had severed Lady Jeyne from her Redfort allies? Ser Edric and Gunthor Royce had refused to say, even when offered clemency for a name…”

An excerpt from The Black Queen: A True Tale of Rhaenyra the Reformer by Prince Gaemon Targaryen written, 230AC

“Perhaps, dear readers, it is in poor taste to celebrate death. Yet Princess Rhaenyra could only have let out a sigh of relief when Grand Maester Mellos passed away in his sleep during the seventh moon of 125AC. In truth, no one could argue her not completely justified in doing so! He had been a poor Grand Maester from the beginning, possessing great skill in law, mathematics, history and administration and barely any skill in other areas.

Truly, it is a miracle he managed to deliver the sons and daughter of Queen Alicent without inadvertently killing her in the process. Not only that, but Mellos had made it clear from the beginning that he did not support King Viserys’ choice of heir and often played stooge to Queen Alicent and Jasper Wylde during Small Council meetings. To say nothing of his utter failure in regards to protecting her health that saw her lose a finger due to his inaction. How did he reward the man who actually saved her life? By formally accusing him of a list of fabricated crimes!

It is a testament, dear reader, to King Viserys’ mercy that his head was not struck off at that moment. As it was, King Viserys sidelined the old man after the incident and was extremely supportive of Gerardys’ efforts on Dragonstone. Yet that is an aside! Grand Maester Mellos passed peacefully in his sleep and by the end of 125AC, the Red Keep would be assigned a new Grand Maester.

This one would be much more troubling to Princess Rhaenyra, although she had no way of knowing it at the time. Grand Maester Edmund seemed a kind and compassionate man, eager to make up for the mistakes his predecessors had made…”
An excerpt from the text _The Three Journeys_ by Lyra Cargyll written, 175AC

“Lady Laena Velaryon’s return to Westeros was less a glorious and warm welcome and more a dejected and almost unnoticed slink into Dragonstone in 121AC where she would stay for over a year before Princess Rhaenyra would visit the island. Even then, it was not even to meet with her friend and rumoured lover, but to meet with Marilda of Hull regarding the treatment of her bastard boys. It must have stung being relegated in priority by Princess Rhaenyra to behind her husband’s bastard sons and the woman who bore them.

Yet they must have eventually met, because Lady Laena travelled back with her to King’s Landing after Princess Rhaenyra’s visit and took up the mantle of lady-in-waiting once more. According to Ser Joffrey’s letters, she also took up the mantle of mother and reconciled with both her children and him, as their father. According to gossip, her relationships with her fellow ladies-in-waiting even improved as their children thawed matters.

Lady Maris Strong had three boys; Joffrey, Osmund and Jon, whereas Lady Marya Hastwyck had one son; Edmund, and Lady Sabitha Frey had two sons; Manfryd and Olyvar. Perhaps this lack of children is why her friendship with Lady Falena Waynwood, unmarried and devoted to the cause of Septon Patrek, never quite mended itself. Although many argue this can not be true as Lady Sera Strong welcomed Lady Laena back with great joy, it’s reported.

Perhaps, in Lady Falena’s case, it was the rumours Lady Laena’s journeys had provoked. It had been noticed by the Court, and Queen Alicent especially, that what places she had visited had ties with dark rumours or magic. A somewhat warped view on the matter as all her destinations also held significant historical importance too, but the once rumour has started, it is hard to stop.

Not even court hostility could move her, though, and she would spend the next three and a half years by Princess Rhaenyra’s side, once again her favourite in all things. Yet if there is one thing that we know about her character from all sources, it’s that Lady Laena was a wanderer at heart. In late 125AC, she flew from King’s Landing for the final part of her famous journeys. Ser Joffrey says in his many letters that this was a trip begrudgingly approved by Princess Rhaenyra, who was always loathe to let her friend leave her side. He goes on to explain that even the Princess was aware that her disapproval would not hold Lady Laena in Westeros for long, and that the granting of permission would at least ensure she would not disappear into the night.

This time, no one could track where she had gone. To any looking for her, it seemed she had disappeared completely. There was no rumour of Vhagar to be found across Westeros or Essos. No tracks that they could follow. Some rumours said that she had gone west, across the Sunset Sea, as Elissa Farman had once done. Others had said that she planned to go to Asshai-by-the-Shadow and learn dark magics there.

We know now that she only trusted her closest friends with her destination. Once again, it is Ser Joffrey’s letters we look to. It is one single line said in jest, in a single letter, sent whilst he was visiting his business in Lannisport but it truly is telling. “Has Laena returned from Valyria yet? Or has the Doom swallowed her whole?” This one jape lays out the destination she had in mind when she mounted Vhagar to leave on her final journey.
"Who can truly say why Princess Helaena often travelled back to Vale once she was free to do so. Prince Aegon wrote to his mother, upon being asked, that she had grown to like it there. It is no surprise then that her moniker of ‘the Green Death’ was first used by the Lords and Ladies of the Vale. The more her mother begged her to return home and bear a babe, the more time the Princess spent in the Eyrie alongside the friends she had made there.

It was the nameday of Prince Aemond that finally drew her back for any length of time. Prince Aemond had been knighted in 124AC, returning home with a fair few young men from the Riverlands nobility to boost Prince Aegon’s growing crowd. He was even better than his older brother with the blade, boasting that he would be able to defeat his Uncle, Prince Daemon, with ease should he ever return to threaten Westeros.

Skill with the blade, however, would not see him rival his Uncle in truth. Prince Aemond needed a dragon and at six and ten, he had yet to claim one. It was not for lack of choice; many times had he been offered first pick of any unclaimed dragon currently in the Dragonpit but he had demurred. Princess Helaena was of the opinion he hoped that some unfortunate accident would befall Lady Laena Velaryon, rider of Vhagar, yet she immediately clarified this as unfair and pointed towards an agreement with their Father, King Viserys. The King, fearing for his second son’s life should he try at such a young age, forbade Prince Aemond from attempting to tame a dragon from the Dragonmount until he had reached his majority. Most, like Princess Helaena, assumed he would claim one far before then due to impatience, but the Prince held true to his word.

But before he could finally travel to Dragonstone to make his attempt in 126AC, King Viserys had one more Decree. The entirety of House Targaryen would travel with him as a celebration of their family and heritage. It was a sign of his good mood that he extended this definition of family to include Lady Rhaenys, Lord Corlys, Ser Joffrey Velaryon and his son and daughter…"
The *Princess Rhaenyra* was a beautiful ship, no one could deny that. A truly impressive construction of ash and pine, she was what my husband fondly called a hybrid galley. Which was, as far as I could tell, the resulting baby of a galley and a swan ship getting to know one another rather well. If he had his way she’d be the future of ship construction, a fact which no doubt had the shipwrights at Hull weeping. His new baby had required an expansion of the yards, necessitated taking on dozens more apprentices and had taken years to complete. Not to mention the amount of upset when I remembered a vague and half-formed memory of placing copper sheets on the hull and Laenor called a halt to the whole project for nearly a year while he figured out how to reproduce the effect.

I had to admit the ship was impressive, and I mustn’t call her a boat especially in front of Laenor; I’d only needed to weather his reaction to that once to know not to do it again. Still, ship or boat, she was a monstrous hundred and twenty feet in length and, given the next largest galley was a mere eighty feet in comparison, she easily dwarfed every other ship in the small fleet that was currently descending on Dragonstone as if to invade my poor island.

A poor choice of words perhaps but an accurate one. I had been so sure Aemond would give in and take a dragon before he turned sixteen and yet, time had conspired to spite me because he’d just passed his nameday and my dear Father had decided to make his trek up the Dragonmont into a family spectacle. Which meant the entirety of my extended family had piled onto boats because of course we weren’t using the dragons, the massive creatures that were the whole reason we were even royal in the first place!

I sighed, feeling far too frazzled for this to be the start of the trip. The view from the deck was not as pleasant as I would have liked given that it was composed primarily of Blackwater Bay, stinking and polluted with the refuse of the city. That and the dragons flitting about, free of their riders for this journey. Certainly no distraction from the inescapable family gathering we were sailing towards. And speaking of family…

“Jocelyn!” I barked as my firstborn daughter charged past me, shrieking with laughter. She braked hard and I let go of the taffrail to fix her with a stern look. “Why are you not in your cabin?”

She stared at me, mouth set into a unhappy grimace and I raised my eyebrow. Then she sighed and stared at her feet.

“A bit harsh?” asked Laenor, nearly giving me a heart attack as he stepped out of a small crowd of men.

“I must be harsh. You know she is behind in her lessons.” He grimaced and nodded, forcing me once again to reflect on the changes a decade of parenthood had wrought on us. We were older now, he was thirty one and I was twenty nine, although I liked to think neither of us looked our age. I had long given up trying to maintain a slim figure and had instead arrived at somewhere close to curvy although my looks remained unchanged by it, something I was exceedingly thankful
for. I still wore my braids, time could not change that.

Although it had seen fit to steal a finger. I had been horrified to awaken one digit short all those years ago but I was used to it now. Joffrey could always be relied on to put things in perspective. I may be short a finger but he’d lost everything to a badly healed leg. It was hard to sulk with that knowledge, but that didn’t mean I was about to forget what Mellos and Runciter and their whole rotten Citadel had cost me.

As for Laenor, he was still built like a dancer, slim but strong. He’d also, much to Joffrey and I’s delight, grown a beard. Nothing as messy as some of the abominations that graced the Court but a neatly-trimmed one that put certain other people’s facial hair to shame. His hair was much shorter now, cut back to his ears, although everyone from Joffrey to Lady Rhaenys had tried to convince him not to do it.

There could be no doubt, though, that we were older. Considerably more stressed, too, thanks to our children.

“I know, but you know she struggles,” said Laenor, joining me in watching King’s Landing disappear over the horizon. “She hates feeling like she’s missing things as well.”

“Not enough to stay in her lessons,” I pointed out dryly and Laenor smiled. Our daughter was an adventurous one. There was nothing she hated more than to be cooped up in a room and forced to take notes or read books.

I was being too harsh. I know I’m being too harsh. It twisted my insides to know she likely had some form of dyslexia or some other learning difficulty. Even when she wanted to focus on her lessons she was doomed to fail and my memory would give me nothing on how to help her. I sympathised, I made allowances yet she didn’t even seem to want to try and work with me, content to learn the way her twin learnt things and scream at me when it inevitably didn’t work out.

I sighed in frustration and Laenor rubbed a soothing circle in the small of my back.

“She’ll get there. She just needs time.” I gave him a look and he raised his eyebrow in response. Then added in a stern tone, “And her mother.”

“I am there for her!” I protested and he laughed, actually laughed, at that. I was about to draw myself up to defend myself when he raised his hands in mock surrender.

“I know that! I saw what you did to the idiot that dared to suggest her simple!” he chuckled and I flushed. I had done everything short of threatening to feed him to Syrax. The fact that I had done it all with Rhaenys looming over my shoulder had likely just made it worse. “But she doesn’t see that. She sees your disappointment with her whether she’s in her lessons or escaping them. If she’ll earn your ire either way, why earn it in a stuffy room being lectured?”

“I’m not disappointed,” I replied. “Surely she knows that?”

He didn’t have an answer to that, instead clapping me on the back in commiseration and moving away to bark orders at his crew. I leaned against the taffrail for awhile and watched. These were his men, not Corlys’. He’d picked them himself, trained them himself and sailed with them himself. I was pretty sure half of them would die for him and the other half would kill for him given they were likely the sort that Joffrey employed these days.

I sighed as his words drilled into my head and pushed back from the rail, pausing to examine the small crowd of children playing catch and no doubt infuriating the crew. I could see Aemon, my
solemn little boy, Lucerys, Jeyne, Rhaena and Aemma. I frowned as I realised I was missing three… Ah, almost hidden from view. Aliandra, Alys and Alyssanne - they’d be terrors if they were ever motivated to do anything other than gossip. Alyssanne directed a lazy wave at me and I smiled before returning it. She already had the sharp eyes of the famous archer she would become.

I left them to it, trusting Laenor’s men to make sure none of them did anything ridiculous, and made my way to the cabin Jocelyn shared with her sisters. I was willing to bet she hadn’t touched the books she was supposed to study on the journey to Dragonstone but I knocked on the door and called her name to at least give her time to make it look like she had. The slight delay in admitting me into the room spoke volumes.

“Come here,” I said, perching on the cot and holding my arms out. She threw herself into the hug and sniffl ed even more into my shoulder. “You promised me you would at least try to do some reading.”

At the gentle reminder, she pulled her arms even tighter around me and nodded into the crook of my neck.

“I did. I’m sorry I went to play first,” she mumbled and I sighed before gently prying her free of my shoulder so that I could look into her eyes. They were the Valyrian violet for all that her hair was coal black. Corlys was always happy to point out that she looked more and more like Rhaenys everyday and I was inclined to agree. “Mama-”

“Go and play, little one,” I said cutting her off and giving in. It was hard to be the stern parent when confronted by a sobbing ten year old. “But tomorrow you will follow me about for your lessons all day.”

“All day!” she cried and I nodded. I watched as her eyes travelled over to the books sat on her desk, one thrown open to a random page. She bit her lip and I struggled to hold my amusement in. “What would we do?”

“Well first we will speak with Ser Vaemond about the general state of Dragonstone, then we shall visit Marilda-”

“Will I get to see Addam and Alyn!?” she burst out, features brightening into a smile. I couldn’t help myself, I laughed.

“Addam will be with Ser Rogar, whom we will see, and Alyn has gone to Driftmark already, little one.” She sighed in dismay. It was funny to me now, although it had not been so at the time. Everyone had been so convinced that Addam and Alyn were Laenor’s that even Corlys claiming them had done little to combat the rumour. The problem was that my children and Addam and Alyn themselves also believed the rumour, for all that they promised to parrot that the boys were Corlys’. “After we have seen Marilda we will speak with Ser Rogar and then we shall go to my offices and I will test you on what you have learnt.”

“Alright,” she said, nodding to herself. “I will follow you tomorrow.”

I held my hand out and she took it solemnly, shaking it as if she were concluding the gravest business, before breaking out into giggles and throwing her arms around me again, nearly knocking me backwards.

“Thanks, Mama! You’re the best!” And then she was gone, racing out of the door to join her friends on the deck and no doubt get herself into every bit of trouble she could possibly manage on a ship. I waited until her footsteps had died away before standing up and leaving myself, ensuring
the door was shut tight behind me.

The deck was no less busy when I returned to it but I could hear Jocelyn’s voice from clear across the deck as the sedate game of catch morphed into a more lively game of tag! that even had Alysanne joining in, much to Aliandra and Alys’ teasing. I didn’t bother fighting the smile their laughter brought to my face as Alysanne tackled Jocelyn into a pile of rope, both of them becoming a pile of flailing limbs.

I turned back to the view and sighed. I would have to think of some way I could convey the skills Jocelyn was lacking to her tomorrow. Maybe even convince her to have a reader. Learning difficulty or not, she was clever when she wasn’t forced to read from a book, she truly was. The issue was all three of her siblings were the classic book smart types and she was constantly comparing herself to them.

How did that saying go? Judge a fish on its ability to climb trees and it’ll spend the rest of its life thinking it’s an idiot? How curious that I could remember that and not something that would help my daughter overcome her difficulties. Perhaps a visit to the College might be warranted? Gerardys’ students would be on placement so he shouldn’t be too busy… I tapped out an annoyed beat on the rail, the prosthetic I had under my glove causing it to clang discordantly. I knew the answers were some-

A scream split the air and I spun on my heel, heart feeling like it would pound right through my chest and my hand falling to the knives I still wore beneath my dress.

Jocelyn tumbled through the air and hit the deck with a thump I would hear in my nightmares for years to come. I stood there, frozen in horror, as she lay motionless on the deck.

Then Alys screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Having some trouble creating and uploading the family trees so bear with me.
It was barely a conscious thought to sprint across the deck. All I could focus on was her unmoving body, her arm bent at an unnatural angle and the blood I could see dripping from a gash above her eye. Laenor reached her first, dropping to his knees and placing two shaking fingers on her neck. I almost threw myself down next to him, wanting to reach and grab at her but knowing I could not. I was aware, vaguely, of Laenor’s men herding the children away, hopefully to their cabins.

“Your Graces.” I glanced up and found a familiar face looming over us both, clutching his bag to his chest as if he feared he may need it to defend himself. “If you could… um… I need to get closer.”

It took Laenor pulling on my shoulders slightly to get me to rise. I leaned against him as the ship’s medic, a man I knew had trained under Gerardys, knelt down next to her and began his work. I held my breath, both of us silent and tense. It was the worst kind of wait.

Eventually, Jocelyn stirred and whimpered. I was at her side, holding her hand, before even the medic could react.

“Mama, it hurts,” she sobbed. The medic frowned and gestured over one of the waiting crew members. I didn’t catch their quick exchange but the man took off quickly enough. “Mama! Please! It hurts!”

My heart twisted and ached as I clutched her non-injured hand.

“It’ll be okay, little one. You be brave.” Her little face screwed up as she fought tears and I choked a little on tears of my own.

“You be brave for Papa and Mama,” said Laenor, kneeling down next to me, face solemn. “And I will take you on a tour of the shipyards at Hull when you are better.”

“I’m supposed to go with Mama tomorrow,” she whined, tears running down her face. I smiled, despite my own.

“I think we can delay that for a few days,” I told her and she smiled. It was a small smile though, I could not imagine the pain she must be in. She was far braver than I, I would have been screaming by this point if her arm and how pale her face were any indication. The man the medic had sent returned with wine. It took me longer than it should have done to realise it was likely laced with some kind of sedative.

“Drink this,” I told her, before the medic could ask her to. “Drink this, I promise it will help with the pain.”

She scrunched her face up at the first sip. I did not let them have wine as a rule but the ship hardly stocked their usual drinks.

“A little bit more, my Princess,” urged the medic. I nodded along encouragingly, aware of Laenor doing the same behind me. She gave in and drank deeply. It wasn’t long before it took effect and her eyelids began dropping closed. Once she had finally gone under, two men moved in, laying out a canvas stretcher and preparing to move her on to it. The medic stood up and turned to us.

“She’ll need the arm re-set and stitches on that gash but I’m hopeful she’ll be fine beyond that. When we get to Dragonstone, I’ll have her transferred to Dean Gerardys as a priority.” I sighed in
relief at that.

“Thank you, Sanderson. There will be something extra for you in your pay,” Laenor said, faint with relief as well. Sanderson blushed and half bowed.

“Thank you, Your Graces, thank you, but I was just doing my job,” he insisted.

“And you’ve done it well. You have my personal thanks,” I said and he went even pinker before bowing again and bustling off after my now sedated daughter. I wanted to follow but I knew I’d only get in the way. “Laenor? Get us to Dragonstone as soon as possible.”

“As long as you take the blame from your Father,” he replied but I could tell it wasn’t a serious objection. I didn’t answer as he strode away, shouting instructions to his men. The Princess Rhaenyra was a fast ship, as well as a big one. Father had made us promise that nothing short of an emergency would see us demonstrate that speed and leave them all behind. He had his heart set on us all arriving together.

I only realised I had been kneeling where our daughter had fallen when one of the crew made his way over with a bucket, mop and a meaningful look. I stood, cursing the pain in my knees, and got out of his way. It took me a while to realise we were already leaving the fleet behind and that Laenor had ordered the signal flag for medical assistance to be put up. I hoped Father would be told and wouldn’t be overly angry about it. No. He would not be angry about it because if he was, he would be having words with me. His need for spectacle did not trump my daughter’s need to see a doctor.

“Rhaenyra?” I whirled on my heel and sighed. Aliandra. She was dressed in her usual fare of Dornish fashion, picked out and bought over by her mother on the latest of her many visits. I could not begrudge her them though, her daughter had been taken from her at three and given over as a hostage to be raised by a stranger. It was a miracle she ever left when her visits came to an end.

“Aliandra, what’s wrong?” I asked, placing a friendly hand on her shoulder. She reached up and clutched at it, squeezing my fingers tight briefly before letting go.

“The others… we wanted to know how Jocelyn was?” There was a slight anxiety in her voice and I sighed, pulling her close into a half hug she accepted with rolled eyes.

“A broken arm and stitches but the medic believes she will be fine,” I told her and she sighed in relief. “What happened, Ali? Why was she climbing the rigging of all things?”

My ward frowned at the question before her mouth twisted in unhappiness.

“I didn’t really see,” she lied. I counted to ten and reminded myself that she was thirteen for all she liked to pretend to be a mature and sophisticated young woman. When she caught my stern look she sighed and ran an agitated hand through her hair. “I didn’t do anything!”

“I’m not saying you did, Ali, I just want to know why she was climbing the rigging,” I insisted gently. I was always careful to avoid the motherly tone I often took with even Jeyne and Aly. I was not her mother. An aunt at best and a jailer at worse. For all that she had received an upbringing worthy of a Princess of Dorne or even a Princess of the Seven Kingdoms, she was a hostage to her countrymen’s good behaviour. Although, if Dorne rebels, I’m not about to hurt her. I wasn’t Ned Stark. I had raised the girl for all that she was technically my hostage. I wasn’t sure if Aliandra knew that though, her Mother certainly didn’t if the ideas she put in her head were any indication. I pushed aside my worry for Jocelyn with a deep breath and focused on Aliandra in truth.
Waves and the shouts of the crew were all I could hear as Aliandra thought that statement over, before sighing and looking aggrieved, her hand coming up to twist her long, dark hair about her finger. Something she only did when she was upset.

“Alyssa dared her to climb it.” I wanted to groan at the admission. Alys had been spoken to repeatedly about dares, especially those directed at her twin and Lucerys. “Jocelyn was boasting that she could climb all the trees in the Godswood at the Red Keep. So Alyssa dared her to prove it.”

“You won’t punish me, will you?” The question took me by surprise and she blushed. “I should have known better. I should have stopped Alyssa from daring her or at least stopped Jocelyn from doing it.”

“You aren’t at fault.” She was one of the oldest there. Jeyne being her age and Aly being only a year younger. Yet they were all still children.

“You won’t tell my mother then?” she asked, sounding anxious. “I don’t want to be punished when she arrives. You know what she’s like.”

“I won’t tell her,” I confirmed. “She’s not due to visit for a few months anyway.”

“She wants me to visit Dorne.” The statement was delivered as if it were no great matter, as if it were just a passing fancy of her mother, but I had raised Aliandra. I knew better. She wanted to visit Dorne more than anything else.

“I will speak to the King on the matter. Hopefully, we can arrange a visit for you before you reach your majority.” She nodded, pulling on the curl of hair she had wrapped around her finger, brown eyes staring into the distance as she momentarily lost herself to her thoughts. She was worried Dorne would not accept her. In truth, so was I. She knew Dorne’s history, she lived its culture and fashion and I had even arranged for someone to tutor her in the spear but was it enough?

Would she return and take up the reins of Dorne with little problem? Or would more flock to her Uncle’s banner like the Vulture King had?

She certainly would know how to deal with snobby courtiers at any rate. King’s Landing had not been kind to its Dornish contingent. Whispers, rumours and even attacks in some rare cases. It had gotten better as time went on but I feared the poor initial showing had done much to sour our guests’ opinion of us. They seemed friendly with Aliandra though, maybe that was a sign of hope?

“Do not worry so much, Ali. You are the Princess of Dorne,” I told her and she tugged on her hair again.

“My Uncle says I am more Targaryen than Martell now,” she whispered. I wanted to pull her into an embrace but I knew that would be a mistake. This was the first time she’d ever spoken such fears aloud. Jocelyn’s accident must have rattled her more than I thought if she were willing to share this with me.

“Your Uncle has been grasping at any reason for why he is more fit to rule Dorne than you since your Father died. It was why Lord Dayne ensured he got on a ship and did not come back,” I pointed out. “Your people did not support him then and they will not support him now.”

“But what if-” I caught her about the shoulders and looked into her dark brown eyes.

“You are the Princess of Dorne. You are Aliandra Martell. You have already won the hearts of your court here. You have the full support of your Uncle and his family. You still have your
loyalists. You are a Martell to your core, willing to put your own life in danger for the survival of your people.” She said nothing. I changed tact. “You can out-shoot nine out of ten of my men with a bow and out-fight almost half of them with your spear.”

That earned me a small smile. She was good with spear and bow but not as great as I was making out. She would be better when she had grown up a little more, I think, but it had been enough for Lord Aron to proclaim her Nymeria come again a few times. I’d had her learn a little of strategy and tactics from Laenor as well, just to sell the idea a little more.

“I am the Princess of Dorne,” she said. She smiled widely at me and I returned it gladly, then it faded and she bit her lip. “Are you angry at Alyssa?”

“We shall be having words, Ali, you may tell her that. I do not like being disobeyed.” Aliandra nodded, face serious. “But that will wait until we reach Dragonstone and I know how badly Jocelyn is actually injured. Until then, she can think about what she’s done.”
“I feared the worst when your ship left us behind.” It seemed I had badly misjudged my father’s reaction to our sudden departure. He’d barely disembarked before he’d set upon me in a panic. I’d explained the matter and he’d demanded to see Jocelyn. Not that there was currently much to see. Gerardys had tended to her arm and stitched the gash on her head shut before giving her something for the pain. Whatever he had given her was strong because she was snoring within minutes of taking it.

“I apologise for doing so,” I told him as we made our way back towards the hall. Ser Steffon lurked behind me, having only exchanged a nod with his Lord Commander. “But I fear we had no other choice.”

“Accidents happen, Rhaenyra, do not castigate yourself over it,” he replied, his smile wide. I paused and examined him. He was nearly fifty years old now and jogging towards fat once more, although he was nowhere close to the girth he had achieved before. He still had his moustache, I doubted even the Stranger could wrest it from him by this point, although it was grey now rather than Valyrian silver-gold. It made me happy to look at him. In canon he was nothing more than a blob at this point and suffering for it too. Dorne had given him what he needed to drag himself from his pit of despair and change himself for the better.

Peace on the other hand… Peace was luring him into that mindset he’d had all those years ago. No, that was harsh, he was not nearly as bad as he had been. It was thinking he’d won that was causing the issue at the moment.

He saw defeated foes, I saw old enemies preparing to strike once more. He saw clear signs of his, and my, victory and all I could see were my advantages slipping away. Even when I revealed what I knew about Larys, he had refused to believe it. Lyonel did not believe his son could be so devious, and my Father had given me an ultimatum: accuse him in open Court or drop the matter. Damn him, he knew I had no proof. When I had protested once more, Father had merely told me I had grown so used to fighting that I could not enjoy peace, that I saw enemies where there were none.

“Thank you, Father, for being so understanding,” I said, hiding my frustration. Larys Strong’s manipulations were not important at the minute. He had been left behind in King’s Landing with Maris to watch him, he was not likely to manage much under her supervision. Besides, he was Joffrey’s to deal with, I had promised my spymaster that much.

“My daughter, you need not thank me,” he said, resting a hand on my cheek with a smile. Then his smile fell, his eyes finding something over my shoulder. I blinked and turned to find Joffrey waiting patiently for me, his eyes solemn. At least I could take solace in the fact that little about Joffrey ever changed. His hair was longer, reaching his shoulders now, and his eyes bore signs of laughter once more, but he was much the same at thirty one as he had been at twenty one.

“You Grace, there are some matters that require your attention,” he said politely, bowing low. I’d sent him ahead of our little fleet to ensure the castle was up to snuff. I had not been in residence in some time and the last thing I needed was for standards to have lapsed and for Alicent to notice.

“My apologies, Father, my work never ends it seems.” Viserys managed to drag his eyes from Joffrey back to me as I turned to face him once more. Then he forced a smile, evidently no longer feeling his earlier good cheer.
“I shall leave you to your duties then,” he said, as if relenting after a moment of silence stretched on just a beat too long. I caught his arms and stood on my tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek and he drew me close for a hug before striding off, Ser Lorent falling in behind him. After he was gone, I made my way towards my offices. Joffrey fell in behind me, as silent as I was, with Ser Steffon making up the last of our group.

Joffrey must have predicted it would be my first stop because there was wine waiting for us on the table.

“Where is she?” I asked, pouring myself a goblet before passing the pitcher over. I did not mind saying such things in front of Steffon these days. He was loyal to me, even over my Father. A decade of service would do that.

“I do not know,” Joffrey replied. “None of my agents have reported seeing her and she has not made any of her check-ins for nearly two months.”

“Damn her, she was supposed to be back two months ago. No doubt that’s why she hasn’t bothered with the check-ins,” I hissed. Joffrey gave me a shrug before sipping at his wine. He had his own problems with his wife these days beyond the problems I had with her. I took a deep breath. At least this time I could be reasonably assured she wasn’t in a Lyseni pleasure house. “What of our guests?”

“Settling in well enough, although I do question why we needed them all here-”

“You should know my father by now, Joffrey,” I told him dryly, sipping at my wine. A dry white wine from the Riverlands that was a far cry from Arbor Gold but it would do in a pinch. “What are my siblings up to?”

“Aegon and Helaena are unpacking and discussing things of little note, Aemond is studying dragon lore and as for the other two…” he trailed off and I got the message loud and clear.

“With their mother.” He nodded in confirmation. If Aegon and Helaena had turned out better than their canon counterparts and the jury was still out on Aemond, then Daeron was unquestionably worse. A simpering mother’s boy that was more invested in Aegon being King than my oldest brother seemingly was. Worse still, when challenged on his attitude he would pretend he had done nothing wrong and cry into his mother’s skirts about it the first chance he got.

Viserra was nine. She was still learning who she was. Although at the moment what she was was the darling of the Court, much to Alicent’s glee. Jocelyn was too rough to be their perfect Princess which left Alys as Viserra’s only competition. Yet Alys was still sickly, and compared to polite, precocious Viserra? Yes, Alicent was very pleased indeed.

“And my ladies?” I asked.

“They arrived well enough. They’re both in your rooms, awaiting you.” I smiled at that. Maris, Falena and Marya had been left behind in King’s Landing but Sab, that is Lady Sabitha Frey, and Sera had followed me here. With any hope my sixth Lady might grace us with her presence. I finished my wine and sighed, leaning back in my chair.

“Do you predict any problems for tomorrow?” I asked after a moment’s silence. He shook his head.

“The biggest threat is The Cannibal but he is on the far side of the Dragonmont currently. He took down a nearly grown dragon not three days ago, he’ll be resting now, the watchers report he was wounded in the struggle.” Something had to be done about that creature eventually. He had no
defined range, instead attacking lairs and dragons all over the Dragonmont without rhyme or reason.

“And the others?” I asked.

“In their usual ranges. He will almost certainly go for Vermithor, you know?” I did know. Aemond wanted a big dragon and since Laena had failed to die and release Vhagar, he would only be pleased by the second biggest. The Bronze Fury.

“I know,” I said, debating pouring myself more wine. No, better not. I had one more issue to attend to today before I could truly relax. “My apologies Joffrey, I must leave you. I have a daughter to discipline.”

“Ah,” said Joffrey, pouring himself more wine. “Good luck with that task.”

I did not like the tone of his voice but it was an old argument. One not worth bringing up now. I rose from my seat and Ser Steffon fell in behind me as I left the office, heading for my daughter’s room. The castle was alive around me. Everyone knew what they were doing, no one was milling about without purpose. I could take pride in that at least, even the King’s Landing administration had its problems but Dragonstone ran like clockwork.

“Are you sure it’s wise to allow your brother a chance at the Bronze Fury?” asked Ser Steffon the moment the corridors we walked were empty.

“Beyond finding someone to tame him before tomorrow, I’m not sure I have a choice,” I replied.

“You mentioned the possibility of using dragonseeds?” he said. Ser Steffon did not know the truth but he was privy to many secrets only my inner circle knew.

“I wouldn’t trust them to be loyal. We have no assurances the person we chose would not simply flee or defect,” I told him, thinking of dragonseeds in another time. Addam had been loyal, Nettles was, at a stretch… Ulf and Hugh however…

No. No dragonseeds. I did not need them yet. Hopefully I never would, they were a last resort kind of plan. One that promised to cause more trouble than it solved.

“Understood, Your Grace.”

We reached Alys’ room a moment later. It was silent but then, I hadn’t expected it to be anything else. I knocked on the door and a few moments later, Alys opened it, peering at me with wide eyes.

“Mama!” she said, throwing her arms about my neck as I staggered through the doorway. I laughed into her silver-gold hair. She wore it in ringlets, like Laena once had. Ironic, considering her relationship with her aunt was chilly at best. Not that it was her fault, that lay on Laena’s shoulders and Laena’s shoulders alone. “Mama, did we have to cancel the arrival celebration? I wanted to show everyone my new dress!”

I picked her up and cuddled her close. She was light, far too light for a girl her age. Small too, I sensed that she wouldn’t be that much taller than me when she was fully grown. Then again, she had always been small, even compared to children younger than her. At least she was not affected mentally by the circumstances of her birth. She was clever, learning quickly from both lectures and books.

“But you know Jocelyn was hurt.” She drew back and frowned, her small face scrunching up and her violet eyes shining in frustration.
“Jocelyn climbed the rigging. Why should we be punished because Jocelyn did something stupid!?” I raised an eyebrow and she crossed her arms, angrily.

“And was climbing the rigging her own idea?” I asked. Alys’ face morphed into triumph.

“Yes! She came up with the idea all by herself!” she told me proudly. “She was boasting about climbing trees and then she said she could easily climb the rigging.”

“So you dared her to prove it?” Alys froze, her eyes going wide. Then they narrowed.

“Aliandra told you,” she pouted. “I might have said that.”

“Might have?” I asked, eyebrow crawling further up my forehead. “Do you not remember?”

Alys stared at me for a moment and then looked at her feet. She stayed like that in silence for a while before a hand came up and rubbed at her eyes. When she looked at me again, tears were flowing down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry Mama! I am sorry! Please don’t punish me! Please! It was an accident.” I sighed and pulled her in close. She pushed her wet cheek into the crook of my neck and shivered in my arms. I frowned, pulling back.

“Are you cold?” I asked. Her room was relatively warm, she should not be shivering so.

“A bit. Mostly I have a headache and my tummy hurts a little,” she said, voice soft. I pulled her close again, burying my face in the hair on top of her head.

“Go rest, Alys. I shall send Gerardys to you as soon as he is free.”

“Thank you Mama. I will wait for Gerardys here.” I pulled back and dropped a kiss onto her forehead.

“Good girl. I’ll send him along the moment I am able.”
Night saw me lying awake in bed, gazing at the canopy of my bed as sleep refused to come easily. Next to me, Laenor snored away. Sometimes I envied his ability to fall asleep almost anywhere, and other days I skipped straight to just wanting to slap him for it. I wasn’t sure what point I was at at the moment. Perhaps that was a sign I had not been sleeping enough. There was too much to worry about, too much to plan, to fall asleep easily these days. After a few more minutes of listening to him snore, I gave up and slipped out of bed.

How I wished it were Laena by my side and not Laenor… but Laena was gods’ know where and Laenor could not be with Joffrey because of how many eyes were on us at the moment. I wrapped my robe around me, black silk with red trimmings, a present from Laenor a few years ago so that I would return his. When I left the room, Ser Erryk stood, jerking out of the daze he had been in. I smiled at him in the silvery moonlight and made my way through the castle.

It seemed wholly different at night, the moon’s glow lit it in a way the sun never could. Ten years under my rule had seen more love and attention poured into its structure than it had seen since the Doom and Aenar’s reign. And if I had taken great care to ensure the dragon imagery was brought down to acceptable levels then that was no one’s business but my own.

I wasn’t sure of my destination when I left my rooms but my feet seemed to have ideas of their own and it wasn’t long before I recognised that I was walking down one of the corridors that would lead me to what had been the Maester’s tower but now served as Gerardys’ home away from the office. There weren’t even ravens kept there anymore, Gerardys’ had been seized by the Citadel and since I had refused his replacement, none had been bought in to replace them.

It wasn’t too great an issue. If anything required my attention before my next visit, it was a simple matter to send a boat to King’s Landing crewed by oarsmen that were on retainer for such a situation. Laenor’s men, of course, you could tell because they waited until evening set in to start their drinking. One of my knights was on duty when I entered the ‘ward’ and he straightened before bowing.

Ser Alfred Broome.

He had already betrayed me. When my old Castellan had passed away I’d selected Ser Vaemond Velaryon for the role. I imagine that with canon Rhaenyra in residence she had not needed to pick a replacement until the Dance had broken out and then she had picked Ser Robert Quince. I could not speak to Ser Robert’s abilities but Vaemond was good with numbers, ships and familiar with Driftmark. Also, without the obvious bastards of canon and Laenor’s ongoing survival, he had no claim to Driftmark and no ambition to fabricate one. In short, he had the skills I needed to link Driftmark and Dragonstone together as partners in trade and little downsides.

Ser Alfred had begun looking for a way to jump ship to Alicent’s side the day after it had been announced. Fortunately for me, he’d already been on Joffrey’s watch list, especially in this precise situation, and nothing had yet to reach Alicent that I didn’t want to. Of course, that was now, when misinforming Alicent was useful. If she insists on making the Dance happen, I have men on the island instructed to deal with a few problem members of my staff.

“Guard the door with Ser Alfred,” I told Erryk and the knight nodded, making sure Alfred left before him.

I dropped into the chair next to Jocelyn’s sleeping form and smiled down at her as she snored. She
had awoken for supper and eaten quite a bit, although Gerardys said that was quite normal and to be expected, before falling back into a slumber when he gave her another dose of medicine for the pain.

I wasn’t sure how long I sat there. I must have dozed off at some point because it was the doors to the ward opening that caused me to jerk back into the present. I readjusted myself in the chair, wincing at the various aches and complaints my body had from the angle I’d fallen asleep at. It wasn’t hard to deduce who had entered the ward. There were only three people Ser Erryk would let in without warning me; Laenor, Laena and Joffrey. No tapping meant it wasn’t Joffrey and Laenor would not awaken by himself until someone woke him.

“Laena,” I said, rubbing at a particularly achy spot on my side. “How nice of you to finally make an appearance.”

She didn’t answer straight away, instead grabbing a chair from somewhere behind me and placing it down oh so gently. She didn’t even make a noise when she dropped into it, even though she wore chainmail under her jerkin.

“I was looking into something,” she said finally, swinging her legs up and easing her boots off with a grimace. “For Joffrey.”

“He did not mention sending you on such a fact-finding mission,” I said, well aware my frustration with her was leaking into my voice. She paused, one boot off, and then sighed in defeat.

“That is because he did not know,” she whispered, turning towards me. “I am sorry. It was a risky undertaking but it paid off more than I could have imagined.”

I looked at her as she turned to me and wanted to wince. She was tired, her eyes sunken and dark, but more than that… the road had not been kind to her. She was thin, thinner than she should be because her cheeks were gaunt and her cheekbones too pronounced. Her skin, normally tanned by the sun during her travels, was pale enough to match Lady Misery…

I said nothing to that. I had nothing to say to that. Whether we spent another year not speaking was entirely down to how useful her information was. I was being overly harsh again yet I had begged her to keep checking in, to keep me in the loop. To not simply run away again, to shut me out for over a year. She huffed at my silence before she pulled her other leg up. I watched as she seemed to struggle with the action… then she grimaced in pain, hand going to her side briefly before she pulled it away, as if I might not notice the action if she could do it quickly enough.

“You are hurt.” Unfortunately, I was not as unobservant as she hoped. “How?”

“I’m not hurt, just stiff. Sleeping on rocks is a little more taxing on the body than sleeping on a feather mattress, Princess,” she hissed.

“Get up,” I said, making up my mind. Anger helped. “Get up and stand in the next bay.”

She glared at me, some of her hair had escaped her braid and fallen across her face, ruining the effect somewhat. I met her eyes with a level stare of my own.

“I mean it. I am, as you so deftly reminded me, your Princess. Get up and stand in the next bay.” She stood and trudged over, reminding me of Jocelyn in full tantrum mode. The thought made me smile a little. Jocelyn was fond of Laena, she loved hearing her tales of adventure. I followed her over. It seemed she’d guessed my intention because she started struggling with her jerkin a moment
before I reached her. I had to help her with most of her clothing, a testament to how ‘stiff’ her muscles were.

The lighting was not great but it was enough to see the damage wrought on her body. I circled her, heart hurting at the injuries both old and new - the old scar across her back from a Dornish spear, the arrow wound inflicted by a lucky clansman, three jagged wounds from some creature that had attacked her in the New Gift across her arm, one long and thin scar along her forearm from a hired assassin in Volantis and the one bisecting her lip, the one she had earned in a bar fight in a Lyseni brothel of all places.

The Doom had given her two more for me to count, it would seem. I reached out and gently touched my fingertips to the mess of bruises across her torso, the centre of which was a nasty looking, half-healed puncture. Too wide to be a blade. I could see her ribs through her skin, I noted idly, as she hissed in pain. There was some kind of bite on her calf, angry and red. I’m surprised it had not forced her to limp. Gerardys would need to see to it whether she wanted to or not. It looked infected and I would not lose her to an infection. The skin on her knees was raw and when I caught her hands and brought them up, I could see they were littered with small cuts of their own.

“Slept funny,” I finally said. She gave me a weak smile, not quite meeting my eyes.

“I didn’t want you to worry,” she replied, tangling our fingers together. “You fret too much.”

I dropped a kiss to her lips. It was risky… Jocelyn could wake up, Ser Erryk or Ser Alfred could open the door but I didn’t care at that moment. I loved my stupid, battered idiot of a girlfriend. She wound her arms around me and laid her cheek on the top of my head.

“If you must come home battered like this, then you will have to deal with me fretting,” I mumbled into her shoulder and she chuckled, before letting me go and catching my hand, bringing it up to the light. I shuddered as her finger probed where my littlest one should be.

“You know I dislike that,” I told her, resisting the urge to snatch my hand back. She smiled sadly and let my hand drop.

“If Mellos and Runciter were still alive, I’d give them to Vhagar’s flames. I should have done when Mellos’ pride cost you that finger.” I couldn’t hold that intense gaze for long. “Could you fetch me my pack?”

I did so and then helped her dress in a clean shirt and breeches. We retook our seats next to Jocelyn, who had not stirred at all during my examination of Laena. Thankfully. Would I one day explain to them what Laena was to me? What Joffrey was to Laenor? I had not decided yet. Mayhaps it was best to let the matter lie, to never tell them, to leave them the comfort of knowing their parents loved one another passionately.

“What happened?” asked Laena, staring at her sleeping niece. I frowned, sensing the storm clouds of an argument on the horizon.

“She climbed the rigging and fell,” I replied, resolving not to mention Alys. Laena was quiet for a while and then she sighed, pushing her hair back from her face.

“I’m sure that was her own idea,” she said dryly. I scowled before I realised that I’d as good as confirmed her theory. “Of cou-”

“Enough,” I hissed. “I have heard this a thousand times. Enough.”

We sat in silence for quite a while.
“You need to open your eyes with that girl,” she said finally. “She’s a terror and you spoil her too much.”

I clenched my jaw and said nothing. If you believed Laena, Alyssa was responsible for every terrible event since the Doom and I’m sure my lover was busy working on pinning that on her as well. Just what kind of daughter does she think I would raise?

She ignored Alys’ kindness, her studiousness, her determination - would a child as evil as Laena claimed be polite to servants? To animals? To any beneath her? Even when she had never been told to? And I knew my staff would tell me if they thought otherwise. She was no Joffrey come again, just a ten year old too fond of the word ‘dare’.

“Rhaenyra, I’m serious.” I shot her a look and she met it with her own level stare. “Did you at least punish her?”

“She was ill. It would not have been appropriate,” I replied and she sighed again, running an aggravated hand through her hair and pulling more of the braid free.

“What was it? A tummy ache? Headache? I’m betting she’ll be perfectly fine today,” hissed Laena, eyes bright with anger and half out of her chair to tower over me.

“Enough!” My yell echoed about the ward for a moment and she raised an eyebrow. Pain made me look down and I realised my hands were clenched tight.


Shit.
“The servants say Lady Laena is back,” said Sab, leaning against the great oaken wardrobe and examining her nails. The way she said it implied it was a mere curiosity, a bit of gossip, but I knew Sab better than almost anyone else. Nearly a decade of service had seen to that and I could tell she had more interest than she liked to pretend. Sera finished fastening the shoulder cloak and dodged around me.

“Is it true? Is she? Oh, it has been too long! Little Luke and Rhaena have missed her fiercely.” I smiled at her enthusiasm. Sab did too, although I detected a bit of sadness there. I had long suspected my ‘sworn sword’ held a bit of a torch for Sera Strong.

“She got back last night,” I told them, to Sera’s delighted cheer. I hid my smile and turned to examine myself in the mirror, at least until a knock on the door disturbed me. Sab was the one to open it, moving aside to admit Joffrey.

“Good morning,” he said, dropping a handful of letters onto my table before stealing an apple from the fruit arrayed for my breakfast.

“Have you seen Laena yet?” asked Sera. He took a bite from his stolen prize and shook his head.

“I have been informed of her arrival but she has not yet visited me.” He went back to munching his apple as Sera frowned. I took pity.

“She is with Jocelyn, keeping her company and having herself seen to by Gerardys if she has any sense,” I told them and received three indulgent smiles in turn. After Jocelyn had awoken and realised she wasn’t dreaming her favourite aunt had returned she’d begged for stories until Laena had given in with a laugh. I had ordered iced milk with honey for Jocelyn and beef stew for Laena and left them to it after making Jocelyn promise that she would tell me if Laena did not eat everything she had been presented with. Now that she was home, she would be eating proper meals whether she wanted to or not.

“Tell me, were there any problems this morning?” I asked, adjusting part of my dress slightly.

“Alyssa is sick,” said Joffrey. I caught his eyes through the mirror and hated the look I saw in them. “The maids report that she was up several times during the night, although she did not vomit.”

‘Did not vomit’ was Joffrey’s way of telling me he thought she was faking the illness. Unlike Laena, he was never so bold as to say it to my face directly. Or Laenor’s for that matter. At least Joffrey was willing to acknowledge she her good behaviour and less likely to blow her bad behaviour out of proportion as his wife was wont to do. I held out my hand and Sera handed me the leather and silver prosthetic.

“You know what I meant,” I said, untangling the straps. “What of Aemond?”

“The guards saw your brother off and the watchers report no incidents as of yet,” reported Joffrey, eyebrow raised. He did not question me on why Laena would need to be treated by Gerardys, he had seen the scars just as I had. “He asked about Vermithor before he left.”

Sab scoffed and even Sera looked discomfited. I just sighed, pulling the leather straps of my prosthetic into place before pulling my gloves on.
“It was a predictable move on his part. What of my other siblings?” I asked.

“Aegon rose early and headed to the training yard. Laenor promised to watch him—” I cut him off, frowning.

“Without Helaena? She always goes with him to shoot?” I asked. Joffrey shrugged.

“Their maid says she slept in this morning,” he told me.

“Have a separate maid drop by mid-morning to see if she is well,” I ordered and he bowed in response. The mocking gesture did not rankle although I admit to amusement when Sab used it as an excuse to lean over and ruffle his hair. “What of Father and Alicent?”

Daeron and Viserra would not be up yet, both enjoyed their long mornings in bed and frequently broke their fasts in their quarters before beginning their lessons in the mid-afternoon. With Grand Maester Edmund, of course, a competent replacement for the poor, deceased Mellos yet an unwelcome one. For me, at least. Alicent had been quite pleased by him.

“They are breaking their fast together in the hall,” Joffrey told me. “Along with Aemon and Aemma.”

“Then I think I shall join them,” I said cheerfully. “Sera, Sab, could you go on ahead? I have something to discuss with Joffrey.”

“Of course!” said Sera, cheerfully as Sab caught her by the arm and steered her away.

“What is it?” asked Joffrey once they were gone a few minutes had passed.

“Laena claims she has information you will be very interested in. I am of the opinion that she wouldn’t have disappeared for two months unless she thought it necessary,” I told him. “Arrange a meeting, I want to know what it is.”

He nodded thoughtfully before pushing himself to his feet and offering me his arm. I took it with a smile and we left for the main hall.

“How are Luke and Rhaena taking Laena’s return?” I asked.

“I have not told them yet. I did not have an excuse for why she did not rush to see them. Now I do.” An old frustration bubbled in his tone. I sympathised with him, with Laena’s children, but I also knew just how bad the place Laena had been in when she’d first left for Essos. Two months after Rhaena had been born she’d taken off, leaving Luke feeling like he’d been abandoned and Joffrey holding their newborn child.

Postpartum depression, guilt for a massacre that wasn’t her fault... She was better now, not quite herself once more, but better.

“She will be delighted to see them once again,” I said, shaking myself out of old memories. “I take it they are breaking their fast also?”

“Alongside Rhaenys and Corlys,” he told me, smiling broadly at the thought of his children. “And your brood.”

“My brood? I only have four and two of those are bed bound,” I replied, false offence suffusing my tone. He snorted.
“As if you have not adopted the rest of them. You adore Alysanne, Jeyne and Aliandra too much to not count them as your own on some level,” he teased and I sighed. It was true, to a degree. I had even mentally adopted Rolph and his Father was in the picture far more than the girls. We had left him behind in King’s Landing, spared from his duties to enjoy a small holiday with his Father.

Neither of us mentioned Luke or Rhaena, even if I did include them in the mental count of my own children.

Joffrey took my silence as an admission of defeat and began humming to himself cheerfully as we passed maids and servants. Before we entered the hall however, he caught my arm and drew me aside.

“Before I tell the children… how did she seem?” I hesitated and he sighed, running a hand through his long hair. “How bad?”

“She hasn’t been eating properly, or sleeping properly for that matter, and she’s got a hole in her stomach and an infected wound on her leg.” He winced.

“I will tell the children she is ill then, better warn them before they go charging in to see her in that state,” he decided. I nodded and he took my arm once more. The hall was a riot of noise and my Father was at the centre of it. He had seated himself at the high table with Alicent on one side and Rhaenys on his other and was shouting down at various knights and lords that had accompanied us to Dragonstone.

“Daughter! You’re late this morning!” he roared as I approached. Evidently not even Joffrey’s presence could dampen his mood. Regardless, Joffrey soon abandoned me to speak to Rhaena and Luke and I was left to face my Father and Alicent alone. Although it appeared Alicent had slept as well as I had if her thousand yard stare was an indication.

“I was visiting Jocelyn, Father,” I told him. “And Alys is ill once more.”

“Ill? What is wrong?” he asked, smile fading a little.

“Nothing serious, Father, just the usual. She will recover soon enough,” I told him and his smile returned to full power. “Good morning, my Queen, I hope you slept well.”

“Well enough,” replied Alicent, looking distracted. No doubt she was worrying for Aemond, she hadn’t even made a comment about Alys being ill. I took pity.

“The watchers have reported no news yet and I have been assured The Cannibal is licking his wounds far from where Aemond is heading.” Her green eyes found mine and she smiled thinly although none of the tension leaked from her.

“My thanks, Rhaenyra,” she managed, nodding graciously. “And I hope Princess Alyssa recovers soon.”

See Father, we can play nicely at times.

“Aemon had been born after Laenor had returned from the Conquest, made the same way the twins had been although it had been… easier with Aemon. We were more comfortable with one another; I was not so terrified and Laenor not so on edge. The first time… it had hurt my pride terribly, but
with Aemon, it was not so. We were able to laugh and joke about it instead of acting like it was some shameful secret. The pregnancy had been easier too, less terrifying the second time around and without the pronounced symptoms the twins had given me.

Aemma… I had not thought Aemma’s conception even possible… it still makes me blush to think of it.

I had been in something of a rage when Laena had left without permission, fleeing in the night as if she feared I would have her imprisoned should I learn of her plan, but by the time she started to show up in the pleasure houses of Lys that rage had turned to grief and ennui. Laenor had held me close during those times, trying to give me the love I craved. Hells, he’d even named his damnable ship after me. That had been an honour, a show of love I had not been expecting, given that he had intended to name it *Sea's Kiss*. In the aftermath we somehow… somehow ended up with an ‘oops’ baby of all things.

“Mama!” screeched Aemma happily. I scooped her up and set her on my knee as I sat down at the high table. She was covered in jam but that was typical of her, especially given that my ladies had arrived late and my charges were unwilling to risk the tears she often pulled out to defend her stickiness. She squirmed in my grasp as Sera handed me a cloth and I wiped her down. She knew not to fake cry for me. I knew when my children were faking. “Mama, I wanted that!”

“There is plenty in the proper receptacles, Aemma. You don’t need to smear yourself with it,” I scolded and she pouted unhappily. I let her get back to attacking the food and turned to Aemon, who was waiting quietly for my attention. When he realised he had it, he perked up, straightening in his seat and I smiled.

“Good morning, Aemon, did you sleep well?” I asked.

“Yes, Mama, I did and I went for a walk this morning too.” I beamed at him and he blushed. He’d always been an early bird. “Dragonstone is very pretty! Do you think I might have a chance to draw before we leave?”

“If you so wish,” I told him, amused. He was more interested in art than swords at the moment, I loved that about him, when it did not worry me at least.

“Can we explore the town?” asked Jeyne, leaning past him, her eyes bright. “I saw a market with lots of pretty things when we rode through!”

Behind her Aliandra was nodding and Alysanne was pretending to frown because a Bracken had suggested it but I could tell she also wanted to go. On my lap, Aemma had gone still and was staring up at me with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Mama, can I see the pretty things?” I caught Sera’s eye and she grinned before turning to Sab, who merely rolled her eyes in fond exasperation.

“Sera and Sabitha will take you but you must do as they say!” I told them all sternly.

“Do you think they will have new colours, Mama?” asked Aemon, eyes bright with excitement.

“I do not know, Aemon,” I said as Aemma wriggled from my knee to go and harass Sera with questions about ‘pretty things’. “Have you given more thought to making your own?”

His face screwed up in thought. One of their tutors had bought the idea up as a way of getting him interested in other subjects alongside learning history through art and beginning to practise his swordplay to learn how to better convey movement on paper. He was prevented from answering by
Joffrey appearing at my elbow and bending low to whisper in my ear.

“Rhaenyra, Alyssa is not in her room.”
When the knight saw me stalking down the hallway, he struggled in the grasp of his captors. The two men in Targaryen livery kept good hold of him though, and eventually Ser Rogar strode past me and kicked him in the stomach. He doubled over, gasping for air. I heard Ser Steffon snort in derision and the guards hauled him back up onto his knees none too gently.

“What. Happened.” I managed through clenched teeth. The man whimpered at the ice cold tone of my voice.

“Y-Your Grace!” he said, trying to bow only for one of the men flanking him wrench him back up. “Your Grace! Please! I swear I guarded the room! I did not leave my post nor did I sleep, I swear on the lives of my children!”

After Joffrey had informed me, I’d been frozen in an odd combination of fear and rage for long enough that Rhaenys and Corlys picked up on something being wrong. Once I’d explained it to them they had moved into action. Corlys had headed towards the docks to quietly raise as many of his and Laenor’s crew, as possible for a search of the town and docks. He was seventy three now and much the same as he had always been, although with considerably more wrinkles and laugh lines and less muscle. Time had also forced him to start dressing warmly, lest he catch his death because he wanted to show his chest off to everyone.

Rheanys had gone with Joffrey to organise the children and begin a search of the castle. Time had been very, very kind to the Queen Who Never Was. She was still as tall as she had ever been with the same striking features although her hair was beginning to turn silver at the temples now, not a surprise given that she was fifty two. The blade she had taken during the Conquest still troubled her on occasion which limited her flying at times but apart from that she was as hale and healthy as her husband.

The knight’s throat bobbed in terror as I met his eyes and stared him down.

“Ser Rogar!” I barked. The man straightened. A fuck-up on his men’s part reflected badly on him. A fuck up of this magnitude… I had already decided that if Alyssa was hurt he would be stripped of his title. “How many children does he have?”

Ser Rogar’s eyebrows rose in surprise before they furrowed in thought.

“Three, Your Grace. Two sons and a daughter,” he finally replied. “They live in town.”

“And you would swear on all their lives that you did not fail in your duty?” He was shaking now but I wasn’t inclined to mercy. If my daughter was hurt he would be stripped of his title. “How many children does he have?”

Ser Rogar’s eyebrows rose in surprise before they furrowed in thought.

“Three, Your Grace. Two sons and a daughter,” he finally replied. “They live in town.”

“And you would swear on all their lives that you did not fail in your duty?” He was shaking now but I wasn’t inclined to mercy. If my daughter was hurt… There was a moment’s silence before the threat sank in.

“Y-yes, yes! I would swear! Plea-” I cut him off.

“Has this man ever fallen asleep at his post before?” Ser Rogar was quick to reply.

“No, Your Grace, I make sure none of my men ever do. I run random checks, if they are ever caught, they are stripped of their position.” The man was nodding along desperately, tears now running down his face. I studied him and made up my mind.

“I leave him to you to deal with then, Ser Rogar. I am satisfied he was not derelict in his duties.” The trembling man sighed in relief as he was released by the other guards. Ser Rogar half-bowed in
“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Ser Rogar. “Shall I have my men join the search?”

“Do so but as quietly as possible for the moment,” I told him and he bowed again. “I shall release your squire to you once I have finished questioning him.”

He moved off, his men dragging the guard with them and I stepped into her room. It was the same as it had been yesterday. The blankets and covers on her bed had been thrown aside to reveal two pillows stacked against each other, presumably to provide the illusion of the bed still having an occupant.

“They were fooled by this?” I asked.

“It would appear so,” said Ser Steffon, examining the room. “Perhaps the maids should be spoken to.”

“They will be,” I promised. “Still, no struggle and she deliberately tried to hide her absence…”

“She left by her own will,” concluded Ser Steffon for me, lifting open one of her trunks and finding only dolls and dresses. He let it slam close with a loud snap and stepped past me, sticking his head out the window and peering down. “Probably through here. Who is in the room below?”

“No one, to my knowledge. It should be empty, why?” I asked as he pulled his head back inside.

“The window below is open.” A quick trip down there told us that the dust had been disturbed recently by at least two people. One of which arrived via the window and was pulled in by her larger compatriot.

“Damn her. So, she had help, did she? Not Aemon, Aemma, Rhaena, Aly or Jeyne - they’re all too small to have made these footprints,” I mused, as Ser Steffon finished examining the room. It had yielded nothing but a half melted candle and more footprints. “Aliandra, Lucerys or Addam then?”

Aliandra was my first stop. My ward was agitated beyond belief when I arrived, pacing back and forth whilst curling her hair around her finger. She sat when she saw us, perching on the edge of one of her couches.

“Did you find her?” she asked, dark eyes wide in fear. Fear of what, I was not sure. Me, punishment and Alys being injured were all possibilities. She did not look tired, had she stayed up all night to help Alys escape then she would almost certainly be struggling to keep her eyes open.

“We did not. It seems she left her room via the window so as to not alert the guard. Given she is three stories up, this implies she had help,” I told her and she froze, dark hair curled around her fingers.

“I swear to you on all the gods I did not help her! I did not know!” the girl begged and I found myself believing her. The two were good friends which would make her prime suspect but that also counted against her. Aliandra was not an idiot. If Alys had confided in her a plan to run away, Aliandra would have come straight to me. She knew well that Alys was fragile and sickly, any terrible fate could befall her without protection.

“She mentioned nothing to you? She has not been behaving strangely?” Aliandra paused at that and then opened her mouth before hesitating and closing it. “What?”

“She… well, before we left King’s Landing she asked me to cover for her one afternoon. She had
some papers with her and she said she had to deliver them to a friend but she wouldn’t tell me whom,” she said, squirming in her seat. “But it was at least a week before we were due to sail and she never mentioned it again!”

I sat back and closed my eyes. If that matter was related to this, and there was no guarantee it was, it could be any of the staff that we had brought over with us. That significantly widened the suspect pool, although papers? I would have expected money… actually, I would have expected whichever fool she had picked to help her to report it to me or someone in charge so that I could have dealt with this before my daughter went missing!

“I swear, Rhaenyra—” I opened my eyes and forced a smile.

“I believe you, Aliandra. You would not be so stupid but I had to ask.” She nodded, still looking worried. “Collect the others and enjoy a trip into town with Sera and Sabitha.”

Her worry gave way to relief and I smiled at her.

“Thank you!” she said, rising out of her seat. I rose also.

“You should not be punished for someone else’s actions but if you do hear anything or see her—”

“I will tell you! Or well, Lady Sera or Lady Sabitha.” I nodded and left for Lucerys’ room.

When I got there he was sitting with Joffrey and Rhaena, the two siblings curled close to their Father. Luke looked more like Daemon everyday, although that had long since ceased to bother me. He was boisterous, loud and impulsive but he was also unfailingly kind. His silver-gold hair was cut short, I think because he was mimicking Laenor although at eleven he was nowhere close to a beard. Rhaena was Laena in miniature although her hair was Joffrey’s dark brown. Small for her age, much like Alys was, and if I were to be completely honest, as Laena and Joffrey were supposedly being about Alys, spoilt beyond measure. Apparently she and Aemma were best friends although I could not imagine my quiet little girl getting along with such a terror.

“I thought it best to wait for your appearance before I took them to see Laena,” said Joffrey. Luke looked worried but not the fear I would expect from him if he thought he was close to being caught as Alys’ mysterious helper. Rhaena just glared at me, no doubt she resented being held back from seeing her mother after Laena had been gone for so long.

“I have just a few questions,” I said gently. Joffrey tapped both his children on the shoulders and they reluctantly sat up to face me properly. “Alys had help to leave her room, did she mention this plan to you?”

“No,” said Luke, frowning. “She was just being her usual self.”

“And that means?” I asked gently. He looked at his Father, even more worried but it was Rhaena that answered me. She curled her knees close to her chest and glared at me as she did so.

“She was being mean! She was teasing Luke and Jocelyn about having small dragons and Aemon, Aemma and me about not having any!” she burst out. Joffrey froze, eyes wide.

“Alys doesn’t have a dragon,” I pointed out dryly. “And will not be getting one until she is two and ten at least.”

“Don’t be foolish Rhaenyra,” Joffrey burst out. “You are cleverer than this!”

I swallowed my rage. Screaming at him would not be conducive to finding my daughter. Not to
mention the bad example it would set. I had no doubt the children would be eager to spread tales of my anger about the group. Instead, I took a deep breath and fixed him with a look.

“What do you-” I stopped as what he was getting at hit me like a brick to the face. “No… no, she would not be so foolish.”

“Would she not?” asked Joffrey. I stood up and clenched my hands tightly, ignoring the pain that brought.

“Do you dare say it to my face now? Or will you rely on Laena to do it once more?” My voice was cold. Joffrey watched me for a good long while before sending Luke and Rhaena from the room. When he turned back, there was fury etched in his face too.

“We both know she can manipulate you with ease. She is spoiled. She has a nasty streak. How many times has she escaped punishment with faked illness even Aemma can see through?” he asked and that fact was like a punch to the chest, driving the breath from my lungs. “You favour her so obviously that even your other children feel they can not complain.”

It was hard to tell when Joffrey was lying, downplaying events or omitting the truth but it was always easy to tell when he was telling the truth and nothing but the truth. His features had morphed into triumph.

Damn him! Damn Laena!

I would know!

I did not have time to formulate a response because somewhere a bell began to ring. We both froze, previous anger forgotten, as we remembered what that bell signified today of all days. Two curious heads poked around the doorway Joffrey had sent them through and then the room exploded into action.

I was first out but Joffrey was not far behind, surprisingly speedy despite his cane. Ser Steffon was behind, herding the two children ahead of him, his armour clanking as we made our way down stairs and through corridors. The entirety of Dragonstone seemed to be rushing towards the agreed location. Of course the others were there before us, they had been waiting with bated breath for his return.

“Which one is it?” I asked a guard who was peering through a far eye, already knowing the answer in my heart.

“Vermithor,” replied the guard, tone grim. “He’s got the Bronze Fury.”
Tension - Chapter 109

It seemed the entire courtyard was holding its collective breath as the vast bulk of Vermithor, second only to Vhagar in size, cast us all into shadow as it came in for landing. I forced myself to tear my gaze from the dragon to examine the crowd. Aegon’s grin was wide, Daeron and Viserra were curled close to Alicent… Alicent looked as if all her dreams were coming true. A son of hers riding the dragon of the Old King. Actually, it probably was a dream come true. Even Father looked proud, his chest puffed out and a smile so wide I feared he’d strain something.

Then Vermithor landed, its rider sliding off its back with an audible thud and a stagger, and all the smiles died.

The silence of the crowd was deafening as Alys regarded us all before seemingly falling backwards onto the mass of her dragon. That got me moving, shoving some of Aemond’s river knights aside to reach her. Joffrey was in pursuit behind me but it was Father that beat me to her, his face a mask of worry. She smiled at him weakly as he pulled her into a hug, her tiny arms only just able to wrap completely around his bulk.

Whispering broke out across the courtyard, interspersed with some cheers. Mostly though, people were confused.

“Grandpapa,” she mumbled, clearly tired. “Look, I have a dragon now.”

“Indeed you do!” he laughed, putting her down gently. Then he turned to me with tears in his eyes. “She’s just like her namesake! Who else but my mother would have done such a thing! Except my daughter, of course!”

Her grin only widened, then she seemed to notice my shock and horror and it dimmed considerably. I could barely summon words… my daughter… a dragon that size…

The reality of just how much danger she had been in hit me and I took a deep breath, willing myself to be steady.

“Are you angry with me, Mama? I’m sorry. I just wanted a dragon like Jocelyn.” I stared at her, her little chest rising and falling with the exhaustion of trekking up a mountain and taming a dragon. Then I stared at Vermithor, the second largest dragon in existence and Jaehaerys’ mount…

As quickly as my horror had come, relief flooded through me and I rushed forward to pull her close, laughing with the force of it. She sank into the embrace happily, her little hands tangling in my dress. I lifted her up and twirled her around, my earlier anger at her disappearance gone in the face of the sheer knowledge she was here and okay.

“Angry? No, no - as long as you’re okay...” I told her breathlessly as I set her down. She leaned against me and I could feel how warm she was through her thin clothes. Worry crept its way back in as Laenor crashed to a halt next to us and set about his fussing. I wanted to laugh again, to pull her close and never let her go.

I caught sight of Alicent and was pulled back into the present unpleasantly. She would need to be watched. She looked as if she might throw up or decide to attack my daughter where she stood. She wasn’t even bothering to hide the fury that sent her face pale and her youngest children fleeing to their older brother in fear.
Even Aegon looked discomfited when he met my eyes. He had helped Aemond research Vermithor and dragon lore for years… he would have something to say about Alys beating him to the punch. Still no sign of Helaena… damn, this would not look good to any of them.

I looked at the great dragon my daughter had claimed and swallowed back my no doubt hysterical giggles. Who could have thought? Who? I had been resigned to the fact that Aemond would claim Jaehaerys’ dragon… and my daughter had instead.

“Rhaenyra,” whispered Joffrey. “If Alyssa just climbed a mountain whilst ill and wearing a tunic that thin, we should probably get her seen by Gerardys.”

He had a point and she had felt warm to the touch when I held her and she had been ill the night before.

“Laenor!” I called. “We are taking her to Gerardys!”

“Come on, little one,” he whispered to her. “Let’s get you seen to before your mother worries herself half to death.”

It felt like the eyes of the world were on me as we left. My legs felt like jelly as I wobbled my way to the old Maester’s tower. It was all I could do not to stop every few moments to reassure myself that she was really there. Should I be thankful that I had only realised how easily she could have died after it was apparent she was alive and well?

I did not know whether to laugh or cry and that same indecision was still gripping me by the time we found Gerardys, Laena and Jocelyn. Alys was laid down on a bed and Gerardys was soon examining her with a concerned look on his face. I seated myself next to Laena and Jocelyn and gazed at my daughter.

“She claimed Vermithor,” I heard Joffrey whisper to his wife, yet I could not summon my usual ire over the matter. I could not even summon it when I felt Laena’s glare on the back of my head.

“Ill, was she?” she asked finally. I heard Joffrey sigh and in the corner of my eye, Laenor’s gaze swung to his sister. “Yet well enough to climb the Dragonmont?”

“She has paid for it,” I pointed out, feeling the need to defend that at least. “She’s running a fever.”

“And that is punishment for disobeying your orders and taming Vermithor?” Her tone was tart and I swallowed. It was not punishment but…

I turned to them, dragging my eyes from Alys. Jocelyn watched me with wide, violet eyes. Confused, she turned to Laena for clarification. As if she did not believe Alys could have truly tamed Vermithor and I was surely somehow mistaken. I remembered Joffrey’s revelation from before her landing with a guilty start.

“But… but you banned everyone from taming a dragon from the Dragonmont before they were six and ten like Grandpapa did with Uncle Aemond?” she said in a small confused voice. “Why did you let Alys go up?”

I stared at her, mouth hanging open and Laenor answered for me.

“Alys did not ask for permission,” he said gently. “She will be punished for that, do not worry. Your mother is waiting until she is well enough to appreciate what she did wrong.”

Joffrey caught my eye and nodded to the corner, incurring a suspicious look from Laenor. I laid my
hand on his knee and got up.

“You need to punish her,” Joffrey said quietly. “Even if you don’t yet realise what she has done is wrong, you need to.”

I could feel Jocelyn’s gaze on me, despite Laenor and Laena doing their best to try and distract her from the matter. Did he assume...

“I am well aware of that,” I breathed, wondering why my knees still felt like jelly and my heart still raced. He tilted his head as if puzzled at my response. “She went up the Dragonmont…”

Yet she had only done what I myself had done… and she was older now than I had been then. Could I truly punish her for following my bad example? My gaze went to her as Gerardys listened to her chest.

She looked so small. No… No, I had to. If I didn’t, Aemon would be next and Aemma as well. Jocelyn scowled at her bed sheet and I bit my lip. She had disobeyed me, planned this little trip before we’d even sailed for Dragonstone.

“How did I miss it?” I groaned as the implications of that unpleasant thought made themselves clear.

“She is as clever as her mother,” he said dryly. “And twice as spoiled.”

“You say she is spoiled,” I said. “Maybe she is. Maybe I should be angry and maybe I should yell and rage at her…”

“I would not ask you to, I know well how traumatising a screaming match with you is,” he said and I recognised his tone with a flash of annoyance, the tone he took when he was playing the gracious victor. “I am not saying you need to be angry… just apply consequences. This is an escalation.”

I took a few more deep breaths.

“Yet how? Do I ground her? Ban her from the library? Have her struck? No. No, the punishment must be related to the crime.” Of that, I was certain. When Jocelyn grew angry and struck other children, she was banned from the training yard. When Aemma stayed up past her bedtime to read, her book was taken away.

Yet what punishment fits the crime of taming a dragon? We made our way back over to Jocelyn and I dropped a kiss on her forehead, being sure to avoid her stitches and the truly impressive bruising that had formed around them.

An idea formed in my mind as Laena took Joffrey’s hand as he settled beside her. An idea that could kill three birds with one stone if I were lucky.

“Your sister has done something terribly bad by sneaking out in the dead of night,” I told Jocelyn and her eyes lit up. Did I truly fail to acknowledge Alys’ wrongdoing to that degree? “So she will not get to choose whom she takes her riding lessons with.”

Black eyebrows furrowed together in confusion.

“But, my little warrior, you do. I know Grandmama Rhaenys wanted to teach you, as did Auntie Laena and Papa but I also want to teach you. I promise that if you choose me, I will never be too busy for you.” Laena glanced at Joffrey, confused, but Joffrey hadn’t yet seen my plot either. Jocelyn pushed herself into a sitting position and gazed at me.
“You would teach me to fly Morrigan?” she asked in that same small voice. I smiled, hoping it wasn’t too pained, and caught her hand.

“If you want me to, I would be honoured.” One arm wrapped around my neck as she flung herself forward to cuddle into me. I heard Laenor chuckle delightedly at the scene. She drew back, looking excited.

“When can we start? Mama, can we start soon!? Morrigan is here on the island so we could start tomorrow!” I pointed to her arm and she glanced down before frowning unhappily. “My arm doesn’t hurt. Please, Mama?”

“We shall read dragon lore together,” I told her. “In the comfort of my offices until your arm is better. Then I will teach you how to ride.”

She would have to be happy with that. I had first hand knowledge of what could happen if a break went bad. She seemed to be on the same track because her eyes travelled down to the prosthetic hidden by my glove. Then she scrunched her face up and nodded seriously. Laenor covered his mouth with his hand to hide his amused grin.

“But Mama, shall we be able to start tomorrow?” I turned to find Alys. She gave me a grin and clambered into Laenor’s lap. I smiled in relief, before remembering my resolve to punish her, regardless of whose example she had followed and how much it had benefited me.

“You may if your tutor allows you,” I told her and she frowned.

“But I want you to teach me, Mama? You’re teaching Jocelyn.” I winced at the tiny voice she said it in. She was so frail, for a moment I nearly wavered, until Joffrey cleared his throat and I remembered myself.

She’d tamed Vermithor, I told myself. It had been dangerous and ill thought out. Aemond would be after her and the Greens would consider her greater target than usual. She had tricked me, lied to me…

When I thought of it that way… anger stirred in my gut.

“You disobeyed me. You went up the Dragonmont. You lied to me,” She sniffled, rubbing at her eyes.

“But Mama, I didn’t want Aemond to get the dragon! He’s nasty and he didn’t deserve it,” she explained, fighting tears. “And you did the same thing when you were younger! I just wanted to be like you!”

I forced my face to remain in its stern expression even as my heart hurt with the knowledge.

“And I tricked him! He helped me take Vermithor right from beneath his nose!” I stared at her and even Joffrey let out an impressed whistle. The she added in a begrudging tone. “Well, Aunt Helaena helped too, but she only helped a little bit! She didn’t know either!”

“How did you trick them?” asked Laenor, seeming genuinely curious. I filed away that information about Helaena’s involvement for later.

“Remember when The Cannibal went into his home? And the watchers sent you a letter about him moving? I gave that letter to Aemond and I told him that if he helped me claim Silverwing I’d tell him where Vermithor moved to.” Okay, maybe my daughter was slightly more devious than I had thought.
“Very funny,” said Laena dryly. “But have you thought about the consequences?”

“I got the dragon first! He can’t have it now,” Alys said, her silver gold eyebrows coming together in an angry V. “Mama, tell her!”

“He can not take it from you,” I replied. “But he will be angry. His friends will be angry… Do you not understand? What you did…”

“Was wrong,” finished Laena. “No matter the result.”

“I got Vermithor though. So will you teach me? With Jocelyn?” she asked as I recovered.

“No! You have to be punished!” said Jocelyn, looking at me as if she expected me to give in. Alys blinked and her bottom lip quivered. I sighed.

“Jocelyn is right, Alys. So as punishment, you don’t get to decide who teaches you. I do.” She glared at her sister as Jocelyn glared right back before turning to me sullenly.

“Alright, so who is teaching me?” I caught Laenor’s eye and tried to communicate that he needed to keep a good hold of her as I sensed she definitely would not like my decision.

“You needn’t sound so upset, Alys. Your Aunt Laena is the best rider of our generation.” It took about three seconds for that to sink in. Then Joffrey’s eyebrows practically disappeared into his hair, Laenor grinned widely and Laena and Alys exploded into furious denial and screaming.
“Mama! Please,” begged Alys, squirming on Laenor’s lap. There were tears in her eyes, I noted with a wince. “Mama, please, Auntie Laena doesn’t like me! She’ll be mean! Please don’t make her be my teacher.”

“She is not making me do anything. I refuse,” said Laena icily. Joffrey placed his hand over hers and she paused in her tirade, glancing back at him, confused. He leaned in to whisper something in her ear but I was distracted by Jocelyn.

“Why does she get to be taught by Aunt Laena!? That’s not a punishment!” she asked, angry tears in the corners of her eyes.

“And what should her punishment be, little one?” I asked Jocelyn gently. My firstborn furiously rubbed at her eyes before turning to Laena in appeal. Laena for her part appeared to be lost in thought about whatever Joffrey had just told her. Finding no help there, Jocelyn pouted and sank into the bed. When I reached for her hand, she pulled it away and fixed me with such a glare my heart hurt. Yet before I could deal with that, Alys gave a furious screech and struggled in Laenor’s arms, clawing at his bare arms, leaving angry red marks behind.

“Very well,” said Laena. Alys froze, staring at her aunt with a shocked expression. One that mirrored Jocelyn’s perfectly. “I’ll teach Alys.”

My sigh of relief came too soon though because Laena was not done. I perhaps should have consulted her before bringing it up but I had always been of the opinion punishment should be swift, not some drawn out mess.

“On two conditions,” she elaborated. “One, that I have total control over her lessons and two, I decide if her skipping them was acceptable and her punishment if it is not.”

“No!” screeched Alys, suddenly desperate. “No! Mama, she will punish me for everything! She will be mean! Mama, please!”

I met Laena’s eyes. Was that true? I did not think so, if I were forced to think objectively. Laena took riding, and teaching, as seriously as Rhaenys did. She would not risk compromising Alys’ lessons for petty reasons even if I had no doubt she would be strict with her.

And after this? Yes, strict was what Alys needed. Some part of that numb shock became determination.

“I agree to those terms,” I said. She sighed in relief and I did not miss Jocelyn’s smile brightening up her face once more as she no doubt imagined Laena given free reign with Alys.

“Mama…” whined Alys, staring at me. “Mama, please, I only wanted to be like you.”

“And your mother was punished also,” said Laenor. “She was banned from all her friends and the library for nearly a month!”

True… but how had Laenor known that? He had been on Driftmark, his parents still sulking because of Rhaenys being passed over twice. I am sure I never told him of such in our letters either. Alys’ eyes narrowed at the revelation though and Jocelyn’s smirk became wider, bordering on a shark-like grin. Then Alys slumped against Laenor and closed her eyes.
“May I go to sleep now, Papa?” she asked, sadly. He gave me a pained look before scooping her up and carrying her over to the bay Gerardys had made up for her. As he drew the thick velvet curtains around it, I heard her ask if he would tell her a story and I was forced to clench my teeth until they ached.

I always told Alys and Jocelyn their bedtime stories.

“Mama? When I go to sleep later, I still want you to tell me my bedtime story,” whispered Jocelyn and I glanced down in surprise. She smiled at me and I found my hand pushing the hair back from her face, grief and love welling up within me in equal measure. The bell began ringing as a tear trickled down my face. I froze, remembering what that meant before pushing myself up.

“Laenor, stay here. Ser Steffon, you as well. Aemond is not to enter this ward unless he’s on a stretcher.” My white knight hesitated for a moment but fell back, taking up a vigil at the end of Jocelyn’s bed. It was Laena that followed me, limping slightly on her injured leg now, no doubt due to Gerardys finally giving it a look over. The race to the courtyard felt even longer than the last one had. This time, I was one of the first there.

Alicent had beaten me, of course, but then I wasn’t sure if that should count because I wasn’t sure if she had actually left after I had taken Alys away. A few other knights who had been close by… I squinted into the sky, making out the vague shape of a dragon. Which one had he tamed? My question was answered the moment I had thought of it.

“Silverwing!” called the guard with far-eye and I forced myself not to laugh at the sense of victory that bought. Silverwing was still a dangerous dragon in her own right, I reminded myself, but oh, to lose Vermithor and be forced to settle with the dragon associated with the Good Queen…

I forced myself to look solemn and concerned, it would not be well received if I made my amusement too obvious. I frowned as I remembered Alys’ earlier words, if she had told the truth Aemond had helped her leave the castle… he’d helped her put herself in danger...

Silverwing was navigated down fairly deftly by Aemond. He’d clearly taken those dragon manuals to heart. If he ever managed to find himself a teacher, he’d be a fearsome rider indeed, I had no doubt about that. I watched as he slipped off Silverwing’s back and stalked forward. The crowd itself was back to that confused muttering that rose like a hiss. They knew that something had gone wrong for Aemond today, they just weren’t sure what.

Viserys pulled his son into a tight hug. Aemond’s arms hung by his sides for a moment too long and then rose slowly, returning the embrace.

“My son! My son, I am proud of you. Silverwing!” said Viserys, releasing Aemond, seemingly oblivious to the fury that was pouring off of his son. After a moment of silence, Aemond forced a smile.

“Thank you, Father,” he managed, through gritted teeth. Aegon swept forward then, seizing his brother about the shoulders. He made it look like a joyous motion but I detected the true purpose. He was putting himself between Aemond and the crowd. He must have said something to father too.

“Come! There will be a feast tonight and I wish to prepare for it,” he called to the crowd, after giving his oldest son a somewhat puzzled look. The crowd took quite some time to disperse. I considered leaving with them but decided against it when Aemond scanned the crowd and his eyes met mine. I saw the hate and anger spark in his eyes. Better to head this off now than have him do something foolish to Alys. I would kill him if he did anything to her, I hoped my eyes conveyed
that as I returned his gaze.

I picked my way through those leaving, ignoring the curious glances I was getting from onlookers. Aemond watched, looking as if it were only Aegon’s hand on his shoulder holding him back.

“Congratulations, Prince Aemond. Silverwing is a fine mount,” said Laena, once we were within spitting distance.

“Don’t act like my friend, Witch!” snarled Aemond. “And you! See what happens when I get my hands on that little traitor!”

“Aemond,” said Aegon sharply. “You are angry, but this is not the way to behave.”

At his brother’s admonishment, Aemond’s eyes dropped to his boots. Yet his shoulders were still tense and his hands still clenched tight. His chest fell and rose as if he had spent the day running with the force of his anger. Aegon watched him with a stern expression before turning to me.

“This was ill-done, sister.” He looked too much like father when he was like that. I am so glad he chose not to copy the moustache in this timeline. “You know how long Aemond has sought Vermithor.”

“Do you honestly think that I sent my daughter, my ten year old daughter, up a damn mountain with no escort when she was ill to beat Aemond to a dragon?” I asked, making sure he understood I was disgusted with the accusation. “Perhaps you should ask Aemond who did send her up the Dragonmont?”

At the mention of his name, Aemond’s head jerked up. Aegon’s stern gaze flickered and became one of confusion as Aemond did not move to deny my accusation.

“Aems? What did you do?” asked Aegon, aghast. Aemond’s face screwed up in anger before he turned to his brother.

“She had detailed reports on all the dragons on the Dragonmont, did you know that brother? She kept them from us! From me! That little shit agreed to give me Vermithor’s if I helped her tame Silverwing!” Even being caught in the wrong by his precious older brother was doing little to cool Aemond’s anger. Aegon just sighed, bringing his hand up to his face.

“She is being punished for what she has done,” I told them. “But Aemond went behind my back, he put my daughter in danger.”

“He is sorry for that,” said Aegon in a tone that implied that if Aemond were not already, he would be when he was done with the chewing out he was about to get. “Aemond, go to my quarters and wait there!”

Aemond trudged off, foot bouncing off of the doors that led inside. We watched him go in silence.

“May I speak to you, sister?” asked Aegon, before his gaze flicked to Laena. “Alone?”

“Of course. Laena?” She hesitated and I raised an eyebrow. “Aliandra was hoping for some instruction tomorrow, I believe. You need to gather your strength for that.”

“Very well,” she sighed before bowing mockingly. “As my princess demands.”

The moment she was out of sight, my brother and I began a slow, meandering walk through Dragonstone. It gave me time to reflect on the man he was now. Nearly twenty, he was every
maiden’s dream and a far-cry from the man of canon, with his silver-gold hair cut short and no facial hair to speak of. A tall, trim knight with a reputation for honour. He was more than good with the blade and lance as well, he had a lot of tourney wins to his name.

The perfect Prince. That was by design, I suspected.

I had long ago realised he wanted the Throne. He may love me as his sister but that did not mean he was willing to stand aside and let me take what he perceived as rightfully his. Yet he was not a threat to me yet, he was still building his legend.

“It was a cruel thing Alyssa did,” said Aegon. “And it is a cruel thing for you to take joy in it.”

“I will not pretend to be unhappy that my daughter tamed Vermithor. It keeps him from you, after all,” I told him and he straightened up considerably. He may be just shorter than Laenor but he towered over me. “But if you believe I take joy in it you are very wrong, Aegon.”

“You still believe there will be rebellion? No one will rise against you, sister.” He sounded frustrated.

“Yet you have visions of a crown dancing behind your eyes. I will not give it up and neither will you.” It was an old argument, as old as his return from the Westerlands. He had returned with the idea that Viserys should hold another Great Council, arguing that he should use it to gain the lords approval of his choice of Heir as Jaehaerys had once done for him.

Father had told him no, of course. There would be no Great Council whilst he lived, as he had decreed me his Heir and his word was the law. How dare Aegon imply that a monarch’s power was not absolute? My dear brother had run into the usual Green flaw. If a King could not overrule a previous ruler’s laws, or indeed overrule his lords, then how could he maintain the illusion he was the ultimate power in the realm?

“Must we have this argument once more? I merely propose a Great Council after father’s death,” he said. “To prevent any conflict between our lines.”

A Great Council where my votes would be split between me and my son. A Great Council where I would be at a disadvantage from the beginning.

“A Great Council you believe you will win, else you would not propose it,” I pointed out, trying to hide the frustration I felt. He sighed, clearly aggravated over the matter.

“I did not come here to argue about the Council. A wrong was done to Aemond today.” When I looked unconvinced, he added, “And to Helaena, too. She worked hard, helping Aemond study. You owe her an explanation, Rhaenyra.”

“I owe her nothing, for it was not me that engaged in a harebrained scheme to send a ten year old after a dragon!” I shouted, remembering Alys’ words. He stopped, staring at me before he sighed deeply.

“Helaena to? Well, at least speak to her. She is quite upset by the whole matter,” he told me. “And if you do, please try to be rational about it. I will not allow you to yell at her.”

Sometimes I wonder if canon Aegon would have been better, was my thought as he strode off, determined not to give me the final say.
Entering my old labs filled me with longing for simpler times, when it seemed I was only one step away from an easy answer to all of my problems.

They were much different these days. Their current occupant had certainly changed them to reflect her own research and style. One part of the wall had been filled with old and dusty tomes likely filched from the Alchemist’s Guild and perhaps, if I knew Laena, even further afield. The great table that had once dominated the centre of the room was gone, leaving a vast amount of floorspace, and as a result a great deal of the floor now bore signs of scorch marks and… miscellaneous stains. Which is not to say she’d rid herself of all my furniture. A great oaken bench was still there from the days I had wasted away my time in here. The cabinet above it too, although I had filled it with chemicals which I very much doubted was what Laena used it for.

“Oh, you’re here early?” said Laena, entering behind me and definitely not frightening the life from me.

“I thought it prudent, you said you had something of great importance to discuss.” She picked her way past me carefully, carrying a wooden box in her arms. I winced as she let it collide with her workbench with a loud bang.

“You’ve even beaten Joffrey though. That counts as early,” she teased, fumbling at the box’s clasps. Trying not to look as if I were watching her every move in a manner that implied I was judging her, I made my way over to the window and peered out of it. Dawn had only just broken and the castle and town beneath it were beginning to stir to life.

“I have other things to attend to this morning,” I told her.

“As do I. Alys for one.” The box was opened to reveal three dragon eggs resting in straw. I stared as she hummed in satisfaction before closing it once more and placing the box beneath the workbench. I wasn’t sure which bait she wanted me to take but I was sure both were bait given the raised eyebrow she was now directing my way.

“And Aliandra,” I replied. She smiled at that.

“A short session, I think. Travel took a lot out of me.” It was not travel that had taken so much from her but I wasn’t going to have that conversation now. It was different this time, she had come back better and mostly whole. This was not the Laena that I had found here all those years ago yet I could still see that miserable figure hunched in a corner; defiant as she always was but broken in a way even she could not deny. Still, perhaps she was not entirely wrong with her assessment, this journey had taken something from her. “Who has roused your anger today?”

“Why do you assume I’m angry?” I asked and she chuckled, turning to face me and leaning on the workbench with crossed arms.

“You’ve been glaring out that window for a while now,” she said, smiling. “I can only hope it is not me.”

“It is not. I am thankful, you know, that you have agreed to train Alys,” I told her. “I should have asked you before announcing it. Yet you are the logical choice. You fly the only dragon larger than hers.”

“Am I now?” she chuckled. “Alys would not agree.”
“It has become apparent to me that Alys needs your scepticism,” I sighed. “So thank you.”

“You may not be so thankful when you start fielding her complaints. You believe I will find her a perfectly nice girl and I believe I shall finally introduce her to consequences for her actions. Time will tell who is right.” I frowned at the unusual bluntness of her manner but was prevented from pursuing the matter further by Joffrey and Laenor arriving together. Laenor was already kitted out for his daily training, I noted with amusement.

“Do you not believe in chairs, Laena?” complained Laenor. She didn’t answer him, instead standing aside so that Joffrey could lean against the worktable.

“You will be fine, Laenor,” I said and he sighed but didn’t push the point. Then I directed my attention to Laena once more. “Well, what is this information?”

“Whilst travelling the Demon Road I began hearing rumours,” she began. “Merchants travelling west began speaking of… well, of dragons.”


“That was what I thought. Yet your sister’s warning rang in my ears-”

“You still have not told us the contents of the warning,” said Joffrey, cutting her off. “Only that it concerned what would happen should you travel to Gogossos.”

Laena took a deep breath and then let it out slowly.

“And I will not tell you. It was meant for me alone,” she stated firmly. “I went as far east as I dared.”

“And what did you discover?” asked Laenor, his face grim. Joffrey took his hand, running his thumb over his palm and Laenor spared him a small smile in turn.

“Daemon was in Qarth and he has another dragon rider with him.” The statement was like a punch to the gut. Another dragon rider? How!? Whilst I could not set aside the possibility he had managed to lay his hands on a dragonseed, where would he get a second dragon? “I did not explore further. Only long enough to confirm the matter.”

“So he has reappeared with another dragon at his side. An alarming development to be sure but right now, Daemon is a world away-” Joffrey began but I cut him off.

“He will not stay a world away. He will come back here and he will be looking to make us suffer.” Laenor stood a little straighter at that while Laena merely squirmed, clearly uncomfortable.

“I will send spies to him,” vowed Joffrey. “I will ensure we know what he is doing and when he is doing it before he does.”

Silence reigned a little after that. We were all tense. Daemon’s return would be fun for none of us and we had children to think about now. I would die, I would kill, before I let him lay his hands on my children. Yet it was not only me in danger when my Uncle returned to Westeros.

“Warn Lady Rhea if you would. I fear he may strike at her,” I said and Joffrey nodded, a frown on his face.

“We will be ready for him,” said Laenor. “We will be ready for him and he will pay for what he has done.”
The grim look on his face was enough to let me know he meant every word. A far cry from the man I had married but a change for the better, no one could deny that. Then as soon as the fierceness had come, it was gone again and he gave me a small smile.

A knock on the door was enough to put an end to any more discussion about Daemon for now, although I knew it would be a topic we were likely to revisit many times in the future. When Laenor opened the door, one of the maids stepped in and bowed low.

“Your Grace, you asked to be notified when Princess Helaena left to attend morning practice?” she asked and I did not miss the way her eyes flickered curiously about Laena’s workspace. We’d both decided letting the servants in here was too dangerous - physically and socially. This was likely the first time she’d seen it since its transformation into Laena’s lair. No doubt it would be a blood soaked torture room in the stories spread by evening.

“Thank you, I shall endeavour to meet her there,” I told the maid and she bowed once more, scrambling off with wide eyes.

“You are angry at Helaena?” asked Laena, sounding confused. “What has Helaena done?”

She allowed my daughter to put herself in incredible danger, was the simple answer. I had thrown the accusation at Aegon yesterday as a way of going on the offensive, forcing him to defend Helaena and Aemond to me, but the more I actually thought on the matter the angrier it made me.

"It is what she didn’t do that has made me angry,” I replied, wondering how on earth I could explain it to her.

Helaena and Aemond had gone behind my back and helped my ten year old daughter run off up a mountain and confront a dragon. They both knew, beyond all doubt, that had I known of their plan I would have put a stop to it in an instant. Yet they had both done so regardless.

Perhaps it was easier to swallow that behaviour from Aemond. He was still, in many ways, the angry young boy that had been sent to Riverrun, even if he had learnt the Tully words and the lessons they imparted well. We were not close, the rift that had opened up between us when he had been a child had never truly healed, yet he acknowledged me as family and I knew he was, or had been before the business with Alys, more fond of his nieces and nephews than he liked to claim. I had been told of three occasions in which he’d challenged some luckless idiot to a duel for spreading unfortunate rumours about my children.

But Helaena… Helaena should have known better. Helaena should have been better. The very fact that Alys had blindsided her by taking Vermithor meant she had not been operating on some kind of vision. Even if she had, that was still hovering on the barely acceptable side of the scale. She had been the first of my siblings to hold Alys, she had been one of the first people Alys had ever smiled at… to think that she might have gotten her killed…

Yes, I had made myself very angry thinking about this.

“Ah,” said Laena. “Alys.”

I paused by the door at the tone and gave her a raised eyebrow. She rolled her eyes in response.

“Before you leave it was my hope to speak to you about… about certain matters.” Puzzled, I stepped back into the room.

“Is it about Alys? If it is, I will stay,” said Laenor, his eyes flickering back and forth between us. Laena looked as if she wanted to squirm.
“I don’t think it is,” I replied when she didn’t answer straight away. “Go train.”

“Could you—” Laenor paused at his sister's voice. “Could you tell Aliandra I may be a little late?”

“Of course,” he said, his gaze finally softening from suspicion a little. She was silent for some time after we were left alone.

“Am I forgiven?” she asked, voice small. The question took me by surprise and she blushed, eyes finding her shoes. “You were quite clear on what would happen if I were late this time.”

“Idiot,” I said, wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. “Have you truly been worrying over that?”

She half-shrugged, scuffing her shoes over a particularly odd looking purple stain before looking up again. I was startled to find tears in her eyes.

“I made a mess of things,” she said, finally. “And you forgave more than I thought you ever would. I do not want to test that forgiveness again.”

“Idiot,” I said again, moving forward to embrace her. She sighed as she laid her cheek on my head and if she was shaking, I wasn’t about to point it out. “I love you. I forgave you the moment you got back.”

She chuckled and I knew she was crying in earnest now. I pushed myself closer into her, hoping I wasn’t hurting her chest.

“If I am harsh, it’s because I fear for you,” I whispered. “It’s because I do not know what I would do without you.”

She drew back to look at me properly, a few tears running down her face.

“You do not know how much that means to me and how much… and how much I love you in turn,” she replied, raising a hand to my cheek. I smiled at her and leaned into it, savouring the warm touch. After a moment, she seemed to shake herself out of whatever thoughts she had been lost in.

“Go find your sister and take her to task! I shall clean up here and hope Aliandra hasn’t exploded with impatience.” I laughed and dropped a kiss to the palm of her hand.

“I shall clean up here and hope Aliandra hasn’t exploded with impatience.” I laughed and dropped a kiss to the palm of her hand.

“Oh course,” I replied. “Do not be too long though, else Laenor will have her half convinced she should be using a sword again.”

I left her giggling helplessly.

The training yard was not busy this early. I spotted many miscellaneous knights, Ser Rogar instructing Addam with Laenor watching, Aegon duelling a knight in Westerling colours and, of course, the woman I had come here to see. Helaena was seventeen now, and as different from her canon counterpart as Aegon was from his. Tall for a woman and well-known for her skill with the bow, whether the target was a deer or more dangerous prey. Her silver-gold hair was styled in a braid similar to mine and despite my anger, it did cause me to smile slightly. She’d always be my little sister, even when she was pulling shit like this.

“You’re better today?” I asked, causing her to curse as one of her arrows missed its mark. She turned to me with wary eyes and my hands found my hips almost without conscious thought. “I do believe we are due a talk.”
She winced and it was enough to tell me that Aegon had likely warned her I was aware of her involvement. I remained silent as she placed her bow down slowly, as if she had just been invited to take a walk to the headsman’s block and was determined to delay it for as long as possible.

“I am sorry,” she said when we finally found a corner with some privacy. I was not unaware of Aegon’s eyes on us from across the yard, though. “It was reckless of me.”

“What possessed you to think it a good idea?” I asked with heat in my tone. She was staring at her boots and that annoyed me enough that I had to put effort into controlling my temper. “To go behind my back and send her up the Dragonmont alone at ten?”

“Alys is very persuasive… she begged me. I thought of Aemond and how it was not fair he had to wait…” Her shoulders slumped and she raised her head to look me in the eye. “I was wrong. I am sorry.”

“Sorry!?” I cried and Helaena flinched. “Sorry is when you accidentally break a vase! Sorry is for when you spill wine on a rug! Sorry is for when you borrow jewelry and forget to return it on time! Sorry is not for when you send my child up the side of a mountain!”

From the corner of my eye I saw Aegon move to stalk towards us only to have Laenor drop a hand on his shoulder.

“I thought-”

“Did you? Did you really think? She was sick!” I cried. She shifted from foot to foot. “No amount of persuasion should be enough to send Alys to tame a dragon! You should have come straight to me the moment she brought the matter up! She is ten, she has no sense! You could have killed her!”

“I knew nothing bad would happen!” I stared at the sudden anger. “I am not so foolish as to hurt her, on purpose or through recklessness! I love Alys, Rhaenyra, I merely thought I could bring Aemond closer to your children…”

The regret seemed genuine at least. Or maybe it was because their idiocy had lost Aemond the dragon he truly wanted. I did not know for certain, but at least she had not chosen to complain about that. I watched as she brought a hand up to her face to rub at her eyes. If I knew her, and I did, she was likely castigating herself for the matter worse than I could.

“Anything could have happened,” I said, lowering my voice. “As it happens, she is well if bemoaning her punishment, but if you ever, ever, pull something like this again…”

I left the threat hanging as she nodded so hard I feared she may pull a muscle.

“Did it change your visions or something? You didn’t leave your room yesterday?” I asked, trying to inject some gentleness into my tone. She blinked in surprise and then rubbed at her forehead with one hand, grimacing.

“No, not my visions,” she finally said. I understood why she had reacted so. She hated to even acknowledge them. Those months after she had warned Laena of whatever future she had seen had been some of the worst of my life. My sister in a near coma-like state - her very sanity at risk? I did not know what would have happened had the worst come to pass. If Helaena had sacrificed herself for Laena….

“What is it then? I can have Gerardys attend to you if you do not wish to speak to me,” I told her and she sighed before meeting my gaze.
“It’s not you. It really isn’t… it’s just a big thing.” Her hand curled at her stomach, protectively. I stared at her as the meaning of her words hit me.

“Oh,” I said. “You’re pregnant.”
Steam curled from the tea into the pleasantly warm air. I watched it disappear, dispersing the smell of fruit throughout the room, trying to marshal my thoughts into something resembling order.

“You are not angry with me, are you?” asked Helaena. Her own tea was similarly untouched. I raised my head to stare at her before mustering a smile.

“Not about this!” I insisted and she relaxed a smidgen. The matter with Alys still rankled but I had said what I needed to say on that matter. Anything more would mean repeating myself. “I am merely worried for you. You will accept a midwife, will you not?”

“Aegon has been frantic, he wanted to bring the matter up with you himself,” she told me, a small smile fighting its way onto her face. It was still incredibly creepy to me that they were married. I had hoped that my increased political manoeuvring would force Alicent to seek strategic marriages for the two of them and not… incest. Yet she had sought the legitimacy it would offer over the power the marriages could bring and my siblings were betrothed.

It had not gotten off to an amazing start. Aegon had been hoping for a Lannister match, I think, and had made his dissatisfaction with his mother’s choice very clear when Daeron had been betrothed to Cerelle Lannister and not he to Jocasta Lannister. Certainly the sour look on Alicent’s face when he spent the entire betrothal feast by my side, badgering me for information about dragons, was something I would treasure for the rest of my days. Helaena had gone one further, in typical Helaena fashion. It had taken an official order from father to make her come home for the wedding, her way of making clear that she did not approve.

Helaena loved her mother but the two got along like water and oil. Leave them in the same room together without a go between, or worse, only Aegon, and the two would be at it like cats before an hour. Yet I never missed my own mother more fiercely than when I saw them reunited after Helaena’s frequent trips to the Vale, in which Alicent would cling to her and weep and even Helaena had teary eyes.

“I shall make an appointment for you,” I told her. Then a flicker of amusement went through me, despite my misgivings. “As long as you promise to let me be there when you tell Alicent you intend to employ one.”

Helaena pulled a face, scooping up her tea and taking a hesitant sip. No doubt she was thinking on the inevitable argument that would provoke. Alicent would see it as a betrayal, she’d been furious enough when father had thrust Alannys upon her for Viserra’s birth.

“Mother does not know yet,” she replied finally. “Aegon and I want a little more time without her being completely insufferable.”

I remembered well how everyone had sought to wrap me in cotton wool until I felt I could not even breathe without someone fretting over my health… and if I thought Father was bad, Helaena would be dealing with him and Alicent combined. I caught her eye, noting the look of someone who was staring down nine months of imprisonment at the hands of her frantic mother. True imprisonment would probably be kinder as she wouldn’t have to deal with Alicent hovering over one shoulder and Grand Maester Edmund hovering over the other, cataloguing her every move and breath.

“I will not be able to help you on that front, I am afraid,” I told her, sipping my own tea and savouring the fruity flavour. “Alicent would take my interference poorly. She will already see a
Helaena tried to smile but it turned into a grimace halfway through.

“Is it wrong to fear what her influence may do to the babe?” I raised an eyebrow at that and she sighed. “Aegon and I - she put so much pressure on us. Even now... if I am carrying a boy, she will do the same to him.”

“It is not wrong to fear such a thing,” I told her and she did smile at that. “You have my support, Helaena. I will be by your side the moment you need me. Even if what you need me for is distracting your mother.”

That startled a laugh from her but there were tears in her eyes when she leaned across to embrace me. I held her tightly, fighting the misgivings her words had awoken in me regarding my own children. The slithering suspicion that they would come to see me in the way Helaena saw Alicent...

“Thank you,” she whispered. “You are the best sister I could have asked for.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure you could do better,” I told her, drawing back. “For example, when it comes to telling father, you are on your own. I have had quite enough sore ribs to last me a lifetime!”

That set her laughing and by the time I left she looked much more at ease. If only I could have that. The way she’d spoken of pressure, of how she feared her own sons would be caught in the same trap. Aemon... was I doing the same thing to him? When it came to him, all I could see were the potential rumours. He was eight! My son should be able to enjoy his hobbies, I shouldn’t have to force him to the mold of the perfect Prince.

Yet that was exactly what I was doing every time I forced him to attend training or accompany me through my day so that he could begin to understand what was in store for him when I took the Throne and he was my Heir in turn. He was a quiet boy and all he wanted to do was create; to draw or paint. He was good at it too, for an eight year old anyway.

I decided that whatever else I had on my schedule for today could wait and I began my hunt for him. I had always known I would not be the best parent, I had known that since I had promised away three of my four children before they could even walk. Yet I hadn’t thought myself too terrible, at least until I had somehow missed Alys charging up the side of a mountain and Jocelyn’s resentment towards me.

What was I potentially missing with Aemon?

He was drawing when I found him, perched on a balcony overlooking the dragons, a chunk of charcoal moving across the paper. His tongue was poking out of his mouth, as it so often did when he was completely focused.

Gods, he looked so much like Laenor. There was no question at all as to who had fathered him. I watched for a while as he began finishing up, admiring the skill he had even at his young age. Had I tried such a thing, it would have been a smudged mess.

“Tessarion,” I said, when he was finally done and was rewarded with his fright. He dropped his charcoal and peered around before a smile lit up his face.

“You got it right!” I said, when he was finally done and was rewarded with his fright. He dropped his charcoal and peered around before a smile lit up his face.

“Mama!” he cried before throwing himself at me. I caught him and lifted him up high, whirling him around as Laenor was fond of doing. “You got it right!”
“It’s the horns that give it away,” I told him, and his grin grew even wider. “It’s very good. You must do one of Syrax for me.”

“I will Mama,” he promised, then his smile dimmed and he looked at me almost warily. “Are you here to tell me off?”

“And why would I do that?” I asked carefully. He sighed and adopted his usual solemn expression. It had never torn at me this way before. Damn it Helaena, couldn’t you have chosen your words more carefully?

“Because I didn’t go to training like I promised I would,” he admitted. “I skipped it to go draw Tessarion.”

I sat down on a nearby bench and drew him onto my lap, a lump in my throat at his expression. It had been like watching a light bulb switch off. Was that happy little boy my son and the solemn one I knew so well what he felt he had to be around me?

“Why did you skip your lesson?” I asked, searching for any hint of the answer in his features. He squirmed under my scrutiny.

“Daeron is asleep and he won’t wake up for ages. So I can draw Tessarion now without him yelling at me. If I went to practice I wouldn’t finish it and then he would be able to catch me.” I smiled at the explanation. My son was delightfully straightforward. I doubt it had even occurred to him to lie and claim he wasn’t feeling well or some other excuse. I lifted up the drawing again, staring at it.

“It’s a very good picture of Tessarion,” I told him. “But why would Daeron yell at you?”

“Daeron is mean!” he cried, louder than he intended if his wince was any indication. “He shouted at Jocelyn and he wouldn’t let me teach Vis a dance once!”

I had known Daeron’s temperament, of course. Snivelling little bully. I’d caught him teasing Jocelyn over a few weeks ago and given him a tongue lashing for it only for him to tell Alicent I’d yelled at him for playing with his nieces. It had taken Ser Steffon relating the tale to my father for the truth to come out and even then Alicent had demanded I leave any punishment to her when it came to her children. Which would be tantamount to no punishment at all.

I deeply, deeply regretted not taking the chance to have him fostered out when father had given me the decision.

“Enough about Daeron, Aemon,” I said and he nodded. “How was the market yesterday?”

“Oh! It was very fun, although everyone was very upset about Alys. Can we go again?” I refused to let his comment about Alys dim my smile.

“We might but I do not see why we can not go to the bigger markets in King’s Landing.” He went very still as the possibilities made themselves known.

“Maybe we could explore lots of King’s Landing?” he asked. “I want to see the Great Sept. Lady Fal says there are some very good paintings and tapestries there and Aemma wants to go and see Septon Patrek anyway.”

I blinked at the sudden word vomit before filing away the interesting news that Aemma was agitating to go for later. My youngest was even quieter than her brother and much, much more well-behaved than her sisters, preferring to spend her days quietly in the company of Septa Leyla. Perhaps a trip there would be a suitable reward for the both of them? I doubted it would interest the
twins somehow so it could be a nice thing for my youngest children and I to do together.

“We could,” I said slowly and he realised where I was going straight away.

“But only if I work hard at training?” he asked, not as upset as I thought he would be.

“I would accept attending all your lessons for a month,” I told him and he rolled his eyes.

“Why go if I don’t work hard there?” he asked, as if the idea of merely turning up was not one he’d even entertained before. I tried to cover my amusement at that up with my hand but he spotted it anyway and pouted.

“Oh my dear boy,” I chuckled. “You are a treasure. Now, how would you like to spend the day with your dear mother?”

“Really?” he asked, his eyes flickering to his drawing.

“Oh? What is this? My own son does not wish to spend time with me?” I cried, throwing myself to my feet and sending him scrambling away with laughter.

“Mama! I do want to spend time with you!” he said, wrapping his arms around my midsection. “But I thought you had lots to do?”

“Lots to do, certainly, but nothing is more important to me than you all,” I told him and he beamed up at me. “Besides, spending the day with you is much more fun than spending the day with my lords.”

“Well,” he said. “If it’s more fun with me then I wouldn’t mind, but if people will get angry at you, you shouldn’t make them wait.”

“No one will be angry,” I told him, kneeling down to his level. “And if they are, for whatever reason, they will have me to deal with.”

“Alright,” he mock sighed, adopting his solemn expression once more. “I suppose I could spend the day with Mama.”

I swear he gets this side of him from Laenor.
I was somehow not surprised when Rhaenys invaded Laenor and I’s room on the Princess Rhaenyra. Anyone else might have been wary about barging in to the private quarters of the Heir to the Throne and her husband but Rhaenys wasn’t just anyone.

“Mother!” said Laenor, half rising out of his chair and dropping the book he’d borrowed from his father’s library. He was beaten to the hug by Aemma all but flying from her position on the carpet and entangling herself in her grandmother’s legs.

“Thought I’d come straight to the source. Why did Viserys cut our little trip short?” asked Rhaenys, crouching down to her youngest grandchild and gathering her on her knee. It was an odd feeling to be looking down at Rhaenys Targaryen, given our height disparity. She’d boarded with us, after father had decided it was time for us all to leave, instead of boarding the Sea Snake with Corlys as I’d expected her too. I should have known it was because she wanted information and not because Corlys was returning via Driftmark as opposed to our more direct trip.

“Rioting in Dorne,” I told her, although I could tell that answer had not satisfied her. I groaned and sat up on the bed, putting aside my book. Aemma pulled a face at me, evidently recognising the adults would engage in boring talk and her grandmother was unlikely to play dolls with her just yet. Behind Rhaenys, Laenor swivelled around in his chair. “It’s the second time this month.”

“And the boy he put in charge can’t deal with it?” she scoffed.

“Gwayne is hardly a boy, mother, and he has dealt with it. No deaths and only a few injuries, all ringleaders brought to justice,” said Laenor. I’d filled him in on the news the moment father had told me, if only so he could prepare the Princess Rhaenyra for the announcement and ensure his men were all present, correct and at least mostly sober.

“Then what has your father so spooked?” asked Rhaenys.

“The fact that it is the second time this month, as like as not. Yet not enough for him to agree to let me take Aliandra home.” The Lady of Driftmark’s lips pursed at that news. She was not my ward’s greatest fan and she did not approve of father’s decision regarding her marriage.

“Unsurprising. You know what the Dornish are like. What’s to stop her poisoning you? Poisoning any you bring with you?” she asked in tones just the wrong side of frosty. Over her shoulder, Laenor rolled his eyes theatrically. Rhaenys had never truly forgiven the Dornish for the ambush. I don’t even think it was the wounds that stung but the fact she had been pulled back from the front lines and had missed all the action.

And that, subsequently, had led to the first crack in Laena’s mental health. Although I wasn’t sure how right she was in blaming the Tolands for being murdered as they surrendered. It was Ser Dickon Bulwer’s fault more than anything and… well, he was far beyond anyone’s reach now.

“The Dornish are treacherous, or so people say. Aliandra is a good girl and she has never shown any of this supposed nature to me,” I said, thinking of the girl who tried so hard to be older than she was. Well, she’d had to grow up fast in such a hostile court where even grown men would join in on the bullying. Not even my protection could see her safe from sneers and the stories spread by the other Dornish hostages.

“There is time for her to grow into it yet,” Rhaenys grumped.
“Do you have so little regard for my ability to raise children?” I asked but it seemed Aemma had finally cottoned on to what we were talking about because she squirmed off of her grandmother’s lap and stood to look her in the eyes.

“Grandmama! You mustn’t be angry with Ali, she’s nice!” my daughter told her, very seriously. I struggled to contain my giggles at the surprised look on Rhaenys’ face and Laenor was forced to hide his grin behind his hand.

“Out of the mouths of babes,” she finally said after a moment of silence had passed. “I am not angry with Aliandra, Aemma. She seems like a nice child.”

“She is nice! She caught a cat for me in the market! And she lets me borrow the nice scarves her mama brings her!” I caught Laenor’s eye with a meaningful look and he rose from his seat with a chuckle.

“Come along, little one, let’s leave your mother and grandmother to talk.” She pouted as she was lifted up, squirming in his arms until she could see me once more.

“You will tell grandmama that Ali is nice, won’t you?” she asked me plaintively.

“Of course! Now, go and find Auntie Laena for me and keep her company,” I told her, standing up to help Rhaenys to her feet. There was an audible crunch as she stretched and I grimaced in sympathy.

“Don’t get old, Rhaenyra,” she told me with a chuckle. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

She took Laenor’s recently vacated seat and sighed.

“How is Laena?” she asked a moment later, as if she were debating on even asking. Then added, sadly. “She does not come to me with her problems anymore.”

“Better,” I told her. “She picked up a few knocks on her travels but she is better.”

Rhaenys nodded and we were both silent for a while as Laenor’s ship creaked and groaned around us and the waves battered the sides.

“How serious is the Dorne matter?” she asked suddenly.

“Bad enough. Nothing widespread but… more and more people call for Prince Garin’s return these days. The Stony Dornish are almost certainly backing him, the Vulture King grows bolder by the day and neutral Lords are beginning to waver,” I explained. “Ghost Hill has become a rallying point for them, Lord Allard Toland a figurehead… this Myles Sand does not help matters either.”

“The bastard?” grunted Rhaenys and I smiled, surprised she’d even heard of the name. A rabble rouser that had been given control of Ghost Hill as regent for his young sister until she gained her majority and returned home. Then, he would become our hostage in turn as Myles Toland, legitimised bastard.

“He has a year left as his sister’s regent. Lord Dayne believes he may be… reluctant to give the post up to his sister and become a hostage. If he does refuse Lord Dayne’s commands, a second army turning up at Ghost Hill would not look good for our side.” Rhaenys snorted.

“Sounds like Garin is the issue. Can my beloved goodson not aid you in this matter?” Rhaenys asked. “A dagger may solve what swords can not.”
“Contingent on the dagger reaching him. He has proved… elusive so far,” I admitted and she leaned forward, rubbing her hands over her face.

“I don’t like this,” she said finally. “Seems everywhere has something going to shit these days and it stinks of her doing.”

“Our Good Queen? Surely not,” I mocked and she smiled, although there was no joy there. “Perhaps I should give thought to my procession once more.”

“You should have been and gone already. Your father should have had one long before our grandfather died.” I picked up the usual judgement in her tone when she’d spotted what she saw as a failing in us. Although these days she was much less vocal about it.

“He feared you might come and steal back your Crown if he abandoned the capital… as for me, you know I planned one. Then Dorne and Aemon and—”

“Never enough time,” said Rhaenys, ignoring my jab about father. “Perhaps you should make time.”

“I have the children to think of, Aegon constantly looming over my shoulder and I dread to think of what Alicent would do with the capital as her uncontested playground.” Not to mention the duties I had as my father’s Heir and Lady of Dragonstone-

“Excuses. Pretty ones but excuses all the same.” She pushed herself forward and met my eyes. “You have gotten too comfortable this past decade. You’re letting Aegon do as he wishes, you are letting Alicent plot against you in the shadows… the Rhaenyra back then would have had a plan in place to deal with Larys Strong by now, she would be dealing with Aegon and Aemon—”

“The Rhaenyra back then walked straight into Otto’s trap and got us mired in a war with Dorne!” I shouted, standing up, suddenly full of restless energy. “If I make another mistake like that… what do I risk then? Laena? Laenor? Joffrey? My children?”

“Are you your father’s daughter as I once feared?” Rhaenys hissed, standing and towering over me. “You seem happy to merely hold your position! To merely respond to the plots of others! Exactly as your father would do in your shoes!”

Anger slithered through my veins at the accusation igniting into a burning fury that robbed me of my ability to even scream at her for such an insult.

“I am far from passive, Rhaenys, far from it. I have brought my loyal lords to Court, I have shored up my support, I have two lots of professional soldiers ready to move, the Small Council is loyal to me, the Gold Cloaks are loyal to me, the Kingsguard are loyal to me! What more do you want!?” I managed to choke out, trembling with the sheer rage that accusation brought.

I tried to tell myself it was because she did not know about canon Rhaenyra. That version had done nothing, had hidden on Dragonstone for most of her life, and had made bad decision after bad decision. Even then she had come so close to victory over her half-brother.

I was not her, I had done more than she had ever done!

If the Dance kicked off then King’s Landing would fall behind me. There would be no riots, no stolen treasury and no loyal lords killed for their support. Soon after, the Stormlands and the Vale would declare for me, the North would not interfere and Dorne was more likely than not to declare for me as well. The Riverlands would bow to pressure from the Vale as long as the Lannisters were kept busy by my Reyne allies and their little coalition. That left the core Green lands, and many in
the Reach were standing ready to give the Hightowers what they so richly deserved…

Aegon could call for his Great Council all he wished, he would not get it. There was no true dispute, not after my Father had been so vocal in his choice of Heir, and Helaena would ensure he fell in line soon enough.

“I’ll not deny you’ve done much in the past,” said Rhaenys, interrupting my thoughts on the matter. “But it bothers me you could be doing more. You have shown the ability to do more. What was the College if not the start of a fight against the Maesters and their Hightower overlords? What was this whole business with your Septon if not working to break Oldtown’s stranglehold on the Faith?”

“Such things do not happen over days. It is as Laenor so often says, I am seeking a Throne, not the total reformation of Westeros,” I snapped.

“Bah!” I sensed she was well aware she’d roused my anger, and it only further annoyed me she seemed not to care. “Your daughters have more fire than you these days.”

“I suppose Laenor told you what happened?” I asked through gritted teeth. Rhaenys chuckled before stretching, filling the cabin with yet another crack.

“Joffrey, actually. Boy seemed to think I should persuade you to punish Alys more harshly,” she explained. “I admit she can be trouble at times but she is showing the backbone you appear to have lost. Or are you denying you did the same thing when you were even younger than her?”

I stared at her, at the way she was meeting my eyes so defiantly, and had a small revelation. This wasn’t a new frustration. She’d been feeling this way for a long, long time and now it was all coming out.

“How long have you been waiting to have this conversation?” I asked and she shook her head again.

“A few years… since Aemma was born.” Ah. Six years then.

“I am not nineteen anymore, Rhaenys. I have made my mistakes and I have learnt the lessons they imparted well.” Corlys, Otto, Larys - all had been harsh teachers.

“That’s horse crap and you know it!” I winced at the sheer frustration in her voice. “Corlys once complained you were doing too much, too fast, that you played the game too aggressively. Now he complains you barely play it at all. What new lords have come to your side this past year? What new resources have you brought your cause? Let me save you your breath, the answer is none. And the year before you secured three, one of which I would argue is of questionable value at best and all little more than landed knights.”

“And just what would you have me do? Slaughter my brothers? Murder my father’s wife? You and I both know how that would end!”

“I would have you send your men out to root out the Vulture King, I would have you court the Tyrells once again, I would have you try for another son… I would have you play the game once more instead of miring yourself in contentment! You are a dragon!” she bellowed, leaning forward with a fierce expression.

I might have argued but the sound of a bell ringing above deck and one of Laenor’s men calling out that King’s Landing was in sight had us both peering around.
“Think on what I have said, Rhaenyra. Think good and hard because I am not the only one who feels you do too little.”
The blade met the solid pine of the spear shaft as Laena managed a hasty block. She soon put distance between her and her opponent though, dancing back as he too drew back as if to decide how best to push forward and break Laena’s defence.

“Go Papa!” shouted Jocelyn from the small crowd of children that had abandoned their own practice to watch. Hell, many of the actual knights had abandoned their practice so I wasn’t inclined to blame them.

“Show her who is best!” shouted Alys. If it was usual, before she broke her arm at least, to find Jocelyn in the training yard practising with a blade under her father’s supervision, then it was extremely unusual for Alys to be here. Yet Laena had decreed there would be a lesson after she had finished up with Aliandra, and my daughter may sulk and rage, but she had not tested Laena’s punishments yet.

Other members of the crowd included Aliandra, Rolph, Lucerys and Aemon. It might usually include Alysanne too, but she had remained in bed this morning as Helaena, her usual teacher in all things archery, was not feeling up to a lesson.

She would not be able to hide her condition for much longer.

“Well done, Papa!” cheered Lucerys, much louder than my two daughters, earning himself a shove from my firstborn. I gave her a warning look before it descended into a fight and she returned it with a cheeky grin before her attention went back to Laena and Laenor’s match as they clashed once more. She had been more cheerful since our return and her lessons with me, even just a month’s worth of reading together, had done her a world of good confidence-wise.

I can’t say the past month had done much for me though. Whenever I had any free time, whenever I entered the Throne Room and gazed up at the twisted monstrosity of metal we call a throne… even whenever I slipped the Good Queen’s crown onto my head, all I could recall were Rhaenys’ words.

“Are you your father’s daughter as I once feared? You seem happy to merely hold your position! To merely respond to the plots of others! Exactly as your father would do in your shoes!”

I tapped out an annoyed beat on the bench, hearing them echoing again in my head. I had long been frustrated that father was too keen to rest on his laurels, were people experiencing that same frustration with me? Laenor had not seemed to think so when I had questioned him in the early morning hours. Perhaps it should be considered a sign that I was not able to bring myself to ask Joffrey his opinion?

A sudden restlessness seized me and I might have stood up and left had Laenor not pushed past Laena’s guard and knocked her into the dirt, placing the tip of his blade against her chest. She yielded with grace and my children burst into wild cheering and swarmed over to their father to congratulate him. Aliandra and Lucerys were quick to help Laena to her feet, a quick glance telling me she wasn’t in too much pain. Rolph hovered nearby, clearly wondering if he should congratulate his mentor too.

I met Laenor’s eyes as he pulled his helmet off and stood, making my way down towards him and the veritable mob of children he’d attracted. They parted before me and I dropped a kiss to his cheek, prompting Jocelyn to make an exaggerated gagging sound, to the amusement of her peers.
Her arm was still bound and it would not be fully healed for a few more weeks yet. I could tell she was frustrated with the matter. Still, that did not preclude a little revenge.

“You will have a husband of your own one day,” I told her, nodding towards Rolph. His face promptly went the same colour as his hair and Jocelyn’s eyes narrowed dangerously. Both of the twins had discovered their betrothals during this year’s nameday celebrations. As had Rolph, as a matter of fact, something that surprised me. Still, there had been no meltdowns or tantrums so far, although there had been some teasing of the twins on the matter.

“At least you get Rolph,” said Alys, tartly. “I get to marry Osgood.”

“What is wrong with Osgood?” asked Aemon, sounding perplexed. After Alys and Jocelyn’s betrothals had been announced, he had come to me and asked if he had a similar arrangement waiting to be announced on his tenth nameday too. I had told him that he was to marry one of Lord Borros’ daughters. The Three Storms, in this timeline, as Lady Elenda had given birth to a boy, named Orys, instead of Floris.

“He’s boring. And only a kid, like Aemma!” protested Alys as Laena joined us.

“He will grow up,” said Laena. “And it is your duty to marry him.”

I wasn’t going to analyse the tone she was using there. Although it earned her a questioning look from Laenor at least.

“An excellent fight, my children.” We turned as one to find Corlys strolling up to us, seemingly without a care in the world. He clapped his son on the arm as the attention of every child narrowed in on him. They loved Corlys and his stories, the ones that grew ever more exciting and dangerous as he told them. “Perhaps I may steal away my son and gooddaughter for a moment?”


“It’s alright, Mama! I can practice with Aemon while you talk with Grandpapa!” I glanced down at her earnest face. I did not think she was lying.

“Do not pick a blade up yourself!” I told her sternly before turning to Corlys. “A few moments then but no more, I did make a promise after all.”

Corlys smiled warmly and gestured towards an empty part of the yard where we would be afforded a little privacy at least. His face soon became serious and I bit back the urge to groan.

“I thought it best to speak to you myself,” he said quietly. “Rhaenys informs me you and she had words on the trip back from Dragonstone.”

“We did,” I said, hearing those words once more. “She implied you agreed with her.”

He watched me with narrowed eyes for a moment and then nodded.

“We have not always been so close, Rhaenyra, and I will not deny that we had a difficult start to our alliance. Yet, I will not play the sycophant even if you are given to distrusting me.” I felt Laenor tense next to me and I resisted the urge to reach for him. “You once played the game aggressively, so aggressively I was worried it would bring us to ruin. Yet it did not, even if it did bring many unnecessary complications.”

I bristled without meaning to at the words ‘unnecessary complications’ and what they implied. He had profited well from my ‘unnecessary complications’ and he knew it. The Glassworks at
Driftmark had repaid the Velaryon investment many times over and that was just one of my projects.

“Father-” began Laenor but Corlys cut him off.

“You are playing the slow game now, reacting rather than making your own moves, but it is a valid strategy, even if I disapprove.” He leaned back to look his son in the eye. “It’s Driftmark I worry about the most, Laenor.”

“What is wrong with it?” asked Laenor, perplexed.

“Nothing, our home thrives,” he said. “Yet what will happen when I die, Laenor?”

“I will inherit and serve as Lord of the Tides,” said Laenor, confusion giving way to caution. I remained silent. Driftmark was not my wheelhouse.

“And who will inherit after you?” Corlys asked. “Aemon will be King in time and Jocelyn the Lady of Castamere.”

“They could still inherit,” he protested. “Or one of Jocelyn’s children with Rolph.”

Corlys turned his head to me then, jaw set in determination.

“Their time would forever be divided between Driftmark and another. Driftmark has thrived because I was there to guide it-”

“Aemma then!” said Laenor, frustrated. “Aemma is not betrothed. If it bothers you so much I shall seek a betrothal from one of our cousins.”

“Raising a daughter over her younger brothers is one thing, but a daughter over her elder sisters?”

“Our argument on inheritance does not preclude doing so,” I told him. “You are as Valyrian as we are. Why should you not name your own heirs as well?”

“It would be better if you had another son,” he said firmly.

“Or if we legitimised Addam and Alyn?” Laenor snorted at his own question. He adored his brothers in his own way but he did not want them closer to Driftmark than they already were as his ‘sons’.

“That would be a last resort… given the complications in doing so.” I was surprised to find myself pitying him when the brief look of frustration flashed over his face. His children, whom he loved, did not see him as their father. They played along, but they’d made it clear with their frequent slips when with Laenor that, in their minds, he was their father and Corlys their grandfather.

It seemed less funny now than it did before.

Laenor ran his hand through his hair looking beyond agitated. The way he often did when he had genuinely not seen a problem coming and was unprepared to deal with it. Corlys had adopted a solemn look, his violet eyes on his son rather than me.

“At least discuss the matter,” he said quietly. “I do not wish to take matters into my own hands.”

“We shall, Lord Corlys, and you will be the first I come to with our answer,” I said coolly as Laenor glared at his father mutely. Corlys nodded and shot a final, pained look at his son before departing.
“Why is he like this?” Laenor asked once he was out of sight. “Why does he always say things like that when he knows what it sounds like?”

“He is proud. For all that he wants his blood on the Throne, he wants Driftmark secured first and foremost.” I didn’t need to say it, Laenor knew his father well. I reached out and took his hand. “It is not just your father that worries on the matter. We will speak about it with Laena and Joffrey later.”

“Later is best, lest our little dragons get out of hand,” he chuckled, although I could tell it was forced. I turned in time to see Jocelyn awkwardly demonstrate a few swings to Aemon with only one arm. She caught my gaze and dropped the sword quickly, looking guilty.

“I suppose it was too much to ask her to restrain herself,” I sighed, making Laenor genuinely chuckle this time.

“She is your daughter,” he said.

“Sometimes I wonder if I somehow gave birth to your mother,” I said, and he doubled over in laughter, which definitely got the children’s attention. I left him giggling helplessly and took Jocelyn’s uninjured hand. “Now, are you ready?”

“Yes, Mama!” she chirped before looking past me curiously. “What is papa laughing at?”

“Nothing, he is being a fool.”

“As usual then,” said Laena, falling into step next to us, Alys trailing after her with a sullen look. “Are you flying today?”

“On Syrax,” I said, ignoring Jocelyn’s sigh of frustration at that information. “What have you got planned?”

“Oh, Alyssa and I will be going over riding equipment and how to ensure it is in good order—”

“Do I get to ride Vermithor? Or even Vhagar?” I smiled at Alys’s eagerness.

“No.” It was only Laena’s warning look that prevented me from saying something. Although I did deliver Jocelyn her second Look of the day when she stuck her tongue out at her sister, who was staring at me with tears in her eyes. “Safety is a huge part of dragon riding. What will you do if you fail to correctly look after the saddle and miss damage to it?”

“Fall off!” said Jocelyn in a sing-song voice.

“Oh? Do you know this already?” I asked and she nodded eagerly.

“Aunt Laena already taught me and Luke! And… uh, Aunt Helaena as well.” Laena frowned and I struggled not to smile at the guilty way Jocelyn had thrown my sister’s name in there. “Alyssa didn’t come to either lesson.”

“Then Alyssa can have her lesson now and Jocelyn can enjoy a ride on Syrax,” Laena finally said. Alys was still muttering about the matter, and throwing dirty looks at her aunt when we reached the dragons half an hour later.
Syrax was still one of the greatest joys in my life. Nothing compared to the endless freedom of the skies, the feeling of her moving beneath me and the wind whipping by me as we soared. I could just hear Jocelyn’s laughter and exclamations of delight as we swooped and circled, dropping low to the sea and flying so high that we flew above the clouds themselves. She screeched when I coaxed Syrax into a barrel roll, clutching at me half in fear and half in excitement. Eventually, I took us low over the Bay and tapped her to get her attention.

“Watch how I use the whip,” I told her. “You will need to use yours a lot when you start riding, but you will get better and then you will need to use it less.”

I demonstrated a few turns, cracking the length of leather this way and that. Syrax turned obediently, the way I’d trained her to all those years ago. It was amusing to see my daughter so intent on the way my wrist moved and just where the whip cracked in relation to Syrax’s head and what reaction it produced in my mount.

“What if I accidentally hit Morrigan?” she asked, suddenly, her violet eyes wide. I responded by hitting Syrax as hard as I could on her armoured shoulder. Jocelyn squealed in fear but I doubted my dragon even noticed it. It was the sound they reacted to, of course, despite what non-riders may claim.

“These scales can take a hit from a ballista,” I told my daughter, after she had opened her eyes once more. “My Syrax can stand up to a strike from a whip.”

Jocelyn moved her hand out, leaning forward until I feared I would have to reach out and pull her back, and ran her fingers over the scales with a sigh of awe. I let my own, of relief, when she finally settled back. She was chained to me, and I knew that logically, but still…

“But,” I said. “That is not to say you can’t hurt them.”

“But if they can take a bolt, how could you?” she asked curiously.

“Remember how Syrax likes to have her head rubbed? And the skin is very soft?” I smiled as she wriggled against me in excitement, catching the answer before I was able to tell her.

“No scales! What about the wings though? And what would happen if you did hurt her with the whip?” she asked.

“The wings are hardened, to a degree. They wouldn’t take a bolt but they shrug off arrows. Well, my Syrax would, you will need to be careful with Morrigan… her wings will still be quite delicate”, despite the sheer size of her. She was bigger than Skywalker and bigger than Morghul too, although Frost still beat her in size. Tesserion too, strangely enough. The Blue Queen was a monster of a dragon and I had been alarmed to realise that if she kept growing as she did, she would soon challenge Frost in size. And from there… Syrax was the next biggest dragon up from him.

It infuriated Laena to no end, of course. Tesserion was a pit dragon, yet her growth was faster than even non-pit dragons. Hell, it infuriated me. Yet it was Laena that pointed out the issue… it was magic, quite simply, and magic was never predictable. The knowledge had yet to stop her grinding her teeth whenever she encountered the Blue Queen.

“And what would happen if I did hurt her?” she asked. I hummed with thought.
“I have never hurt Syrax so but I would imagine she’d throw me off if I were incautious enough to,” I told her. She pressed close to me and I wrapped my arm around her, smiling when she brought her unbroken hand up to grip at my forearm.

“We will begin training Morrigan to respond to the sound of the whip,” I told her. It would not be too hard, dragons only got hard to truly teach when they’d breached one hundred, as Laena had discovered with her bad tempered old lady. “Now, would you like another ride? For educational purposes, of course.”

When we finally landed, I had been in the air far longer than I had initially planned. Jocelyn was wide-eyed and panting with exhilaration. I kept up the thin pretence of a lesson though, by having her help me remove Syrax’s gear and examine it, very solemnly, for signs of wear or damage. Then we stored it safely and turned our attention to the other occupants of the shed.

Alys was not enjoying her lesson. The new gear, made especially for Vermithor, was laid out in front of her and Laena loomed over her, arms crossed with a frown. My daughter glanced up and gave me a mournful look.

“Mama, please,” she said. “I know all of this! She is making me do it again when I get it wrong but I get it wrong because I’m tired.”

I opened my mouth to say something and then closed it again when Laena raised an eyebrow, as if challenging me to say something. I had agreed I would cede all power to her…and Jocelyn was staring at me too.

“You have the option to leave,” said Laena. “I did tell you that.”

“But then you’ll punish me!” protested my daughter. Laena merely hummed in agreement. “That’s not fair!”

“It is. Now start again.” Laena was relentless, staring down my daughter, who turned back to her gear with an angry sigh. “Oh, one of Joff’s men is waiting for you. Something about an urgent raven.”

Now that was alarming. I didn’t bother saying goodbye as I strode towards the door, Jocelyn trotting after me obediently. As promised, I found one of Joffrey’s runners taking refuge from the summer sun under the eaves of the shed. When he saw me he scrambled to his feet and bowed low.

“Y’grace,” he said, his accent betraying his Fleabottom heritage. “Ser Joffrey sent me wi’ news.”

“I thank you for making the trip, what news does my goodbrother send me?” The man patted down his pockets and removed a note, written in a hand that I recognised immediately. Joffrey’s neat letters. I took it and passed him a moon for his troubles. He bowed low again, and then bowed to Jocelyn for good measure, before trudging back to his horse and setting off back towards the city.

“Jocelyn, go and keep Syrax company,” I told my daughter. She hesitated, her eyes fixed on the note before giving in. I watched her jog over to where Syrax was bathing in the shallows before breaking the seal. I made one read through before smothering the urge to scream in annoyance.

Bennard fucking Stark.

I had known, of course, that he had not given up on his dreams of the North. Just like I had known his success in Dorne had given him bargaining power with the Northern Lords who resented being held back as others went to win glory. When Rickon Stark had died unexpectedly as winter finally retreated from even the North he had been at the forefront of installing Lord Beron Karstark as
Regent for his young nephew.

Normally, I would not have cared. If Bennard prevailed, he would owe me. If Cregan prevailed, I had not invested anything in Bennard to lose and while he was a known Black, he was not so close to my cause that Cregan might think I had a hand in his attempt. Perhaps Bennard had figured this out because he had promptly all but publicly tied my name to his by ‘arranging’ the trade deal that saw the Glassworks sell to White Harbor at a cut price.

In one fell swoop, the annoyingly charming Stark had made it all about him. That he had so won my favour that I had been moved to gift the North with cut prices and that I would only continue to favour him as time went on. Which, of course, was when Borros gave him Red Wolf’s Hold, the lands that had once been Wyl, albeit with a healthy chunk cut out of them and given to Nightsong of course.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew what the optics were like. The people of the North praised both my name and his in the same sentence, a fact Cregan could not ignore if he won in his struggle against his uncle.

So I had given Bennard leeway I should not and hoped that he could weather the storm he had started in the North gracefully enough that Cregan could not afford to go against his uncle for fear of offending Lords more loyal to Bennard than him. It would appear that I had been proven wrong. Not three weeks past, Lord Cregan Stark had imprisoned Lord Beron and his sons, declaring them traitors that sought to profit off of the regency.

No mention of Bennard of course but the message was clear to any looking for it. It was a challenge: ‘Come face me uncle and you will find I rule the North’

Now Bennard rode for King’s Landing, seeking my aid and advice. No doubt he would bring with him a horde of Borros’ Marcher kin, the Lord of the Stormlands would become vexed if I refused to help and so Bennard would get his way once more. If what was written in Fire and Blood had the right of it, then Cregan was even better than Bennard at this. The Hour of the Wolf was beginning to make more and more sense as time went on and I was consistently made a fool of by these Northerners.

“Are you your father’s daughter as I once feared? You seem happy to merely hold your position! To merely respond to the plots of others! Exactly as your father would do in your shoes!”

I crumpled the note, annoyed. I should have seen this coming. I should have headed it off at the pass. Rhaenys’ words stung worse as I realised they were true. Damn her! And damn me for letting it get this bad...

“Jocelyn! We are heading back to the city,” I called. My daughter ceased in her attention to Syrax and began scrambling back towards me. Syrax grumbled, annoyed, but soon clambered to her feet and waded even further into the water, seemingly enjoying the water lapping over her.

“What was in the letter?” Jocelyn asked, eyes flickering to me nervously, after we had mounted up and begun our ride.

“Lord Bennard is coming to visit,” I replied. She grinned.

“Really? Do you think he’s bringing Ben?” I paused and examined her. Benjen was Bennard’s oldest and the current heir to Red Wolf Hold. He was betrothed to a Caron and was a few years older than the twins. He was also the spitting image of his father and the two shared a good portion of their personality too. She blushed under my attention and I smiled knowingly, which only made
her face redder.

“In all likelihood, no,” I told her finally. “He is coming because his goodfather has gotten into a spot of trouble.”

“That is… a Karstark?” Oh my. A crush indeed if she’d even taken the time to remember what family his mother came from.

“Lord Beron Karstark,” I told her. Then I let my features become grim. “Lord Cregan alleges that the bookkeeping for Winterfell during his time as regent was of dubious quality.”

She was silent for a long time and I rolled my eyes.

“He has accused Lord Karstark of stealing his money, little one.”

“Why would he do that?” she asked, perplexed. “Surely Lord Karstark is not so hard up for coin… or so dishonourable.”

“Never underestimate the depths a man, or woman, can plumb when they are desperate… or are given unchecked power,” I told my daughter. “But I am of the same opinion. Lord Karstark is not the type. It is why Lord Bennard seeks my aid on the matter.”

“And what will you do?” she asked.

“I do not know,” I replied, honestly. She looked at me with raised eyebrows. “But I have until Lord Bennard arrives to think of something, little one.”
“Alright!” I called, sweeping in Joffrey’s offices with Aemon at my back after ruminating on the Northern matter for a couple of days. “I have delivered my son for a lesson!”

Joffrey dropped his quill to the desk with a bemused look. No doubt he had been expecting a ‘surprise’ drop-in. He was a master at reading my moods… better even than Laena and Laenor, for all I was supposedly closer to the two siblings.

“Ah,” he said. “Regarding the North, I assume?”

Ah, he’d even guessed the topic. I should be creeped out, or flattered maybe, but mostly it was just useful to have someone that could anticipate what I needed.

“I know about the North,” my son protested as he took his seat. “I’ve read about them and their culture and their art!”

“Yes, I have no doubt you have done,” I said dryly. “But what do you know of Cregan Stark, or even the Starks in general?”

He opened his mouth, no doubt to lecture me on the research he had done over the course of his lessons with his tutors, and I waved my hand back and forth. He had picked that particular habit up from his aunt and his father and could go on for hours when he was speaking on a topic that interested him. Evidently, our Northern neighbours had piqued his fancy. The way he had said ‘culture and art’ told me exactly what drew him to them.

Something told me that under my son’s rule, there would likely be a golden age of culture if nothing else.

“Let’s skip to the start of this little mess in particular, rather than starting with the King Who Knelt. Walton Stark,” I said.

“He was Lord of Winterfell when King Jaehaerys ascended the Throne. He was slain in a rebellion by Maegor’s former supporters, the ones the King had sent to the Wall,” my son told me, sounding as if he were reading straight from a book rather than recalling from memory. “He was succeeded by his brother, Lord Alaric Stark.”

“And what can you tell me about Lord Alaric?” I asked as Joffrey leaned back with an amused expression. I caught his eye and he smiled, his features shining with fondness. Their lessons were not as regular as I liked but Aemon loved his uncle Joffrey and my spymaster could bring him out of his shell in a way no one else could. Joffrey liked to pretend he was the quiet and dangerous spymaster, the man who could order a death or disappearance without blinking, but that mask could never stay up in the presence of our children.

“Lord Alaric became Lord when his older brother died. He… uh, he hosted Queen Alysanne and King Jaehaerys when the came North and his daughter was sent south with them after that. He was Lord when Queen Alysanne created the New Gift.”

“A mistake, if there ever was one,” I said. “Well done!”

“How was it a mistake?” he asked, eye round with curiosity.

“Because, dear one, the lands that form the New Gift have been steadily losing population for
years. The Night’s Watch, as stalwart as they are, can not defend the realm and administer the
lands Alysanne gave them. They are too few and this long peace has only whittled down their
numbers further. The lords that ruled the lands before had no other duties to distract them from it. I
would guess that within a hundred or so years, the New Gift will be as empty as the Gift is now.” I
was cheating, I knew, yet it was the truth all the same.

“Then we should give it back to the lords?” asked Aemon. “So they can rule it again?”

“Ah, now there’s the problem,” I chuckled. “Pride will not allow it.”

“Queen Alysanne is a legend and there are those still alive today that met her personally… to so
openly reverse one of her decisions would provoke opposition,” Joffrey told him.

“Yet I will find a way,” I promised. There had to be some way of utilising this conflict between
nephew and uncle to return the New Gift to the lords of the North and strengthen the Watch at the
same time. There was evil in the North and although it would not strike in my time, or even the
time of my grandchildren, it would strike eventually. “The Wall was not raised so high for
nothing… nor was it raised so high for wildlings. It is our duty, Aemon, to ensure it is kept strong
and not left to rot. If only to keep the wildlings from causing trouble.”

“What are wildlings like?” I would have answered my son’s curious question but Joffrey cleared
his throat in the manner that indicated he felt we were straying too far from the topic. I shot him a
Look. My son needed to learn about Westeros and what threatened it. I vaguely recalled that a
King Beyond The Wall had come to threaten the North during the rule of… now who was it?
Daeron II? Maekar? One of the kings of that era, regardless. “Perhaps you could summarise the
next few Lord Starks, Ser Joffrey?”

“Very well,” he replied smoothly, ignoring my ire. “You are correct in what events happened
during Lord Alaric’s reign, Aemon, but you lack the context for them. Alaric was known to have
adored his older brother and when there were none left alive who were directly to blame for his
death, he shifted his attention to those indirectly responsible. It was King Jaehaerys that had sent so
many traitors north and so it was King Jaehaerys’ fault in Alaric’s mind. This blame festered, with
hate for the faceless royals of the south growing worse, until Queen Alysanne came north.”

“But it wasn’t the King’s fault, not really?” said Aemon, Joffrey shrugged.

“Men are not rational, Aemon,” I told him sadly, thinking of Westeros as a whole more than what
the Dance would make of my family. “Love, war, loss and heartbreak - such things can make
monsters of anyone. Look at the Blackwoods and the Brackens.”

My son, who had been raised with Jeyne and Aly, nodded thoughtfully.

“Something the old King was well aware of. Queen Alysanne came alone to the North because
preventing that hate from forming into rebellion could not be delayed. It worked, for the most part.
Queen Alysanne became the darling of the North and she did so in a way that even Alaric could not
protest at. She wore down his stoic demeanour, she supported the Watch, she flew about the North
and met the smallfolk. By becoming loved by his people, Alaric could not move against her or her
husband,” Joffrey explained. “And when Jaehaerys finally came north himself, Alaric could not
deny their request to give the lands now known as the New Gift to the Watch. How does your
mother put it? Alysanne was the velvet glove to Jaehaerys’ iron fist. Alaric had been shown what
would happen if he was loyal… and given a taste of what would happen if he was disloyal.”

“Soft power and hard power, Aemon. Do you remember my lecture on the matter?” He nodded
furiously. “Queen Alysanne stripped the North of land without a single blade at her back.”
“Indeed,” said Joffrey. “Lord Alaric never forgave them though, even if the North did so happily. When he died in 72AC, he was succeeded by his grandson, Edric Stark. Edric was the son of his first son and although the boy had only just obtained his majority, Edric had been taught Alaric’s grudge at his mother’s teats and was happy to continue it.”

“He was not taught common sense though, he barely ruled for a decade before falling from his horse after a dare.” Aemon flushed guilty. Before I had caught onto her games the first time around, Alys had gotten Aemon to carry out a fair share of dares. He had not been as bad as Jocelyn or Lucerys but it had been annoying to deal with. “And then came Ellard.”

“Lord Ellard Stark was the son of Alaric’s second son,” said Joffrey, retaking the reins of the lecture from me. “He succeeded his cousin in 81 AC and, like Edric, resented House Targaryen for Walton’s death. He summoned his aunt Alarra home from her place by Queen Alysanne’s side and turned down the King’s offer to have Benjen, her son, squire with Prince Aemon.”

“He is the Lord Stark we credit with the founding of the Northern Isolationist Movement,” I told Aemon and I could almost hear the capital letters in my speech. My poor son looked a little overwhelmed with all the sudden information. If I knew him, he’d likely scramble off to write as much as he could remember down as soon as our little lesson was done. “He was the first to actively step away from what the south could offer and focus entirely on the North.”

“Yet even then, the memory of Queen Alysanne’s visit was strong amongst the Northmen,” said Joffrey. “When Prince Baelon died and the Great Council was held to select King Jaehaerys’ heir, they voted for your Papa in honour of her wish for Grandmama Rhaenys to be Queen.”

“And against King Jaehaerys’ wishes.” That was, in my opinion, their biggest motivator. A reminder that, ahem, ‘The North Remembers’ those who have done them wrong. Spite, in other words.

“Lord Ellard passed away not long after that, also without issue, and Winterfell passed to his cousin, Benjen in 103 AC. Lord Benjen had been born in the south and had long resented the lost opportunities there. He sought to mend the relationship the North had with the south but he did not make much progress with his stubborn lords nor did he last long as ruler. He died in 106AC, leaving Winterfell to Lord Rickon Stark,” Joffrey droned on. I remembered the old curmudgeon’s face clearly, even after he’d been dead for five years. He had never forgiven his brother for going south to fight in Dorne and had taken his refusal to return when commanded to even worse.

He had spent his last few years ranting and railing against Lord Borros, Bennard and me for abandoning the North. He had become a divisive figure by the end, with families like the Flints, Umbers and Boltons rallying to him and the Karstarks, Manderlys and Dustins quietly withdrawing their support in favour of the much more charismatic Bennard, a war hero by that point.

Then he’d died and Bennard’s faction had made its move, checking the Isolationists’ power with Lord Beron Karstark’s appointment and luring supporters to their banner with cheap glass and farming techniques.

“Which brings us to Cregan Stark,” said Joffrey. “Who has recently taken control of Winterfell after accusing his regent of dishonestly using his position to steal coin that rightly belongs to himself as Lord of Winterfell. He has also imprisoned his former regent’s sons and placed Karhold under his own stewardship until the matter is resolved.”

“We have concerns that the arrest was politically motivated rather than for justice’s sake,” I told my son. “And that without our intervention, Lord Beron may not be given a fair trial.”
“But… why?” asked Aemon.

“Do you remember your mother’s friend, Lord Bennard?” asked Joffrey. “He is Cregan’s uncle and the two disagree on many things. Lord Beron is Bennard’s godfather.”

“Oh,” said Aemon, his eyes lighting up at his realisation. “So Cregan is warning Bennard that he is in charge.”

“Indeed,” I said, smoothing Aemon’s hair back from his face. “And we hope to ensure Lord Beron does not become a victim of that rivalry.”

“It is not to say that Lord Cregan is entirely in the wrong,” said Joffrey. “In many people’s eyes, Lord Beron is part of a plot against him as they seek to weaken him to push their own vision for the North forward.”

“Also true,” I sighed. “And that is another problem, for Bennard was able to entangle your papa and I in the matter.”

“With the glass?” asked Aemon. “For their gardens?”

I nodded and he settled back, looking thoughtful. My College had never truly interested him beyond the two or three scholars that studied architecture. He’d begged Joffrey to take him to see lectures and begged me to buy their books.

Another form of art, I suppose, was my fond thought.

“What will we do?” he asked finally.

“Now, that is the question, isn’t it?” I said. I had a half thought out plan in mind, it would all depend on what game Cregan was playing of course. “I intend to prevent Bennard storming north as he no doubt intends to, for a start.”

“Wise,” drawled Joffrey. “Cregan would have him in the dungeons before he could demand Lord Beron’s release.”

“Which is what Lord Cregan wants,” breathed my son, his eyes wide. “Because his uncle is threatening him!”

“Well reasoned,” Joffrey said, barely keeping his proud smile from taking over his entire face as he ruffled Aemon’s hair. “We shall make a schemer of you yet!”

“We keep Cregan from his true objective with one hand,” I told them both. “And we offer him a truce with the other. I will send a delegation to Winterfell, one he can not afford to imprison, to gauge his mood and see what peace can be made between us.”

“And what if he doesn’t want peace?” asked Aemon, flattening his hair down anxiously. I grimaced. That was the worst case scenario. If he did not play nicely now, I would more than likely be facing a Green North. Even though he had not spent his full strength to aid Rhaenyra in canon, he’d still been one of her greatest supporters.

What would Alicent do with a mind like Cregan’s at her back?

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it… if we get to it,” I murmured, worrying at my lip. “Tell me Joff, what is Forrest doing these days?”
Forrest Frey was attending on his father at the Twins and would not be back in King’s Landing for a week or so, although he should return before Bennard reached us. Thankfully.

It gave me some time to relax anyway. Relax being a relative word given a few days later, I was summoned to my father’s quarters. Family dinners may have become less awkward over the years but I still found myself dreading them.

“Good evening, Aegon,” I said as I rounded the corner, arm in arm with Laenor, to find my sibling staring out the window with a grim look on his face. At the sound of my voice he whirled round, looking as if he might be having some sort of heart attack. When he saw it was me, he pulled a face.

“Rhaenyra, you know I hate that,” he grumbled. The Court was keen to point out that both my brother and I frequently became lost in our own thoughts. The only difference was that these days Ser Steffon, Laenor or one of my ladies were quick to prod me from mine if it became too obvious. Ser Garibald had no such care when it came to my brother. Still, I chuckled in response to his fright before nodding graciously at Ser Steffon’s brother-in-arms.

“Your Grace,” Ser Garibald said in reply with a solemn nod.

“Have you seen Helaena?” asked Aegon, peering around me as if I might have hidden her beneath Ser Steffon’s cloak.

“I have not,” I replied… and then it hit me and I was forced to smile, despite the way my skin still crawled at the knowledge. “Today is the day?”

He fidgeted with his doublet; black edged with green dragons.

“Yes, we can not put it off any longer, your midwife will arrive soon and Grand Maester Edmund is not… he is not as blind as Mellos was.” The statement was accompanied by a guilty look at my hand. I clutched at the prosthetic without meaning to and summoned a weak smile.

“He is certainly better than our last two.” It was as neutral as I could get. Grand Maester Edmund was full of platitudes and apologies, ready to restore the Citadel’s standing in the eyes of the Royal Family, or so he said. He had even offered Gerardys his chain back and had been affably understanding when Gerardys had informed him he wouldn’t take it back even if the Citadel paid him.

And yet it had not taken long to spot their plants trying to infiltrate the College. It had not taken long for Edmund to preach against the Alchemists Guild every time he could reasonably jam it into conversation. It was never about me when it came to Edmund, to do so openly was a one way ticket to being sidelined by my father once more, but he damn well wasn’t on my side. Aegon seemed not to have noted my carefully neutral statement and carried on speaking, his eyes flickering back and forth about the corridor.

“Yes, well, it would be hard to be worse. I thank you for lending us one of your women. Many at Court sing their praises.” Is it possible to feel disgust and happiness at the same time? His nervousness was adorable and yet… it was Helaena! Brother and sister.

“They have earned every shred of praise. The Seven know I might have lost Alys had they not been so talented,” I said, thinking back to the tank. No pregnancy since had been so difficult. I looked at
Laenor, who merely looked at me sadly in return. He would welcome another child with joy.

As would everyone else in my life, practically. Even my ladies, who bore the full force of my pregnancy moods. I had left Sab and Marya back at the manse with a good meal and my children to entertain theirs.

“She was very small,” he said gravely. “Aemond has still not forgiven her.”

“And I have not forgiven Aemond.” He winced at my tone and Laenor’s grip on my arm tightened as if he could not stop himself.

“I understand, Rhaenyra, I really do but… do you not think it underhanded?” His wide violet eyes met mine and it was almost like looking at a puppy that was trying to understand what it did wrong by chewing on the carpet or something.

“Underhanded without a doubt,” I replied, thinking of Jocelyn’s fury and the uncomfortable feeling the idea of Alys being a bully brought. “And I have unleashed Laena on her in turn.”

When Aegon just frowned, Laenor chuckled which made Aegon stare at him in surprise. Laenor never much got involved in conversation during these events father liked to hold. Father loathed him and did not bother hiding it and the feeling was not quite mutual but it was close. He was also neutral at best when it came to the rest of them - well, perhaps that was wrong, like me, he adored Helaena.

“Laena and Alys get on like cats and water,” said my husband, and Aegon’s surprise and confusion drained away to amusement.

“Do they? Helaena had mentioned something to that effect but I truly did not think it so bad.”

“It is quite simple,” I said dryly. “Laena believes Alys to be trouble and is happy to ferret out her bad behaviour as proof whilst ignoring her good behaviour and Alys is convinced Laena hates her and is out to get her.”

Aegon wasn’t listening anymore, however, instead he’d stiffened up. We both turned and followed his gaze to find Helaena approaching us. She was pale and as nervous as her husband, dressed in a deep purple dress and draped in silver jewelry I just knew had been a gift from Jeyne. She smiled when she saw us but it was a weak one.

“It won’t be that bad, sister,” I told her. “It’s Aegon who must worry for his ribs.”

It startled a chuckle from my brother at least. Then he held out his arm, which Helaena took, and we finished the walk to the private dining rooms we were all so painfully familiar with these days. Daeron, Viserra, father and Alicent were already there which was unsurprising. We were all treated to father’s usual bear hugs followed by my own polite but awkward hug with Alicent, an icily correct greeting for Laenor and a much warmer embrace for my siblings.

“Good evening Daeron, good evening Viserra,” I said cheerfully.

“Good evening, Rhaenyra,” they chorused back dutifully. They were dressed neatly in their Mother’s favourite colour and both had been sitting quietly before we entered. Father gave them an indulgent smile as they turned to greet Aegon and Helaena. In truth, I reflected, I should have made more time for Daeron and Viserra. I had made more time for Aegon, Helaena and Aemond but it had been easier then. Even Helaena had discovered how hard it was to play the adoring big sister around the clock.
My youngest sister was reserved and quiet. She lacked Daeron’s more annoying behaviours and was always polite to everyone but I sensed I did not much figure in her life, even though father had been desperate for her to forge a friendship with the twins. That had gone as well as expected. Viserra had been almost baffled by them, scared of Jocelyn’s rambunctiousness and especially of Morrigan. It was enough to make me wonder if she even wanted a dragon, as even Tessarion frightened her.

I had thought she would get along better with Alys but it seemed destined not to be.

It was Aemond who slunk in last, his doublet rumpled and his hair still damp. The look he shot at me made it clear he still resented the loss of Vermithor. I didn’t need Joffrey to know he spent most of his time this past month on dragon back, practising manoeuvres from the manuals and growing ever more familiar with his new mount.

“How was your day?” asked father as our meals were laid out before us. He was ignoring Aemond’s sullen silence apparently.

“Well enough, Jocelyn is coming along well. She will soon have both arms free once more.” He smiled at that and dug into his meat pie. “And you, father?”

“Bah, Lord Manfred complains to me once more about Lord Royce.” I grimaced at the pastry I had just scooped up. Lord Manfred Swann and Lord Royce Caron… the two were more argumentative than Jeyne and Alysanne and that was saying something as I once caught the two of them arguing over the colour of a damnable dress. It did not reflect well on Borros that Lord Manfred had bought his complaint to the King but then again, Lord Royce was his goodfather…

“A headache to be sure,” I said with sympathy I actually felt. “It is still about the title Lord Royce claims, I suppose?”

Father nodded grimly and washed down his food with a little wine. Yet before he could reply, Aegon piped up.

“He ought to complain to Lord Borros,” he said as Aemond nodded along with him. “It is not the Crown’s job to interfere with the business of the Lords.”

“I have something to say!” declared Helaena as father dropped his cutlery and opened his mouth to respond. “I… that is, Aegon and I… we are expecting. A child. Probably.”

“Truly?” breathed father, his eyes wide and Aegon’s insubordination forgotten. There were tears in his eyes. He didn’t wait for confirmation but surged to his feet, seizing Aegon and hauling him up before drawing him into a bone crushing hug that had Laenor wincing in sympathy. He had endured his fair share of those when Father forgot his dislike in the face of yet another addition to the family.

“Another niece or nephew,” said Aemond, smiling for the first time I had seen since Dragonstone. “Congratulations.”

He had already known, just like I had. Helaena smiled at him fondly and thanked him all the same though. Laenor rose to clap Aegon on the back after Father finally released him. I might have further congratulated Helaena but Alicent finally recovered from her shock and almost dragged her eldest daughter across the table in her haste to pull her close. Indeed, she ended up spilling wine all over Daeron. I sighed and acquired a napkin to mop him up as Alicent swapped children, leaving Helaena to Father.
“My doublet is ruined,” he sniffled as I patted him down.

“You have others,” I told him gently and he glared at me.

“This is my favourite though.” I examined him, the way his hands twisted on the arms of his chair… then how Viserra was clutching her dress tight as she watched Father twirl Helaena around in joy.

Ah.

“Your mother will not mind. I am sure if you ask, she will take you to have a new one fitted,” I told him. He sniffled again and Viserra moved closer, as if she were trying to ascertain if I were the cause.

“What is wrong?” asked Aemond, apparently noticing our little aside. He was staring at the snot flowing from Daeron’s nose with not a small amount of disgust.

“Helaena spilt wine on him. It is fine,” I told him. When Viserra distracted her brother by laying a hand on his shoulder, I leaned over and whispered to him. “He fears losing his mother’s attention.”

It was enough for Aemond’s eyes to soften, no doubt remembering the days leading to his fostering at Riverrun. He had been afraid then and he had lashed out. Time had taught him his mother still loved him and that nobody had forgotten about him.

“Daeron,” said Aemond, capturing his brother’s attention. “I need a squire.”

Daeron’s violet eyes went round even as Viserra frowned, clearly annoyed. Daeron was the brother she was closest to, if he squired for Aemond then she would be short her usual playmate.

“Perhaps it is best to let Aegon and Helaena have their night, tonight,” I said. “And ask father in the morning?”

“But you would take me as a squire?” asked Daeron quietly. “Really?”

Oh, I had done Daeron a disservice by not playing the older sister, hadn’t I? I had been here. The others had not, so his loneliness was on me, as was Viserra’s. How many times had I told myself I should visit more?

“Really,” said Aemond. “I did say I would take you.”

“Daeron? What is wrong, sweetling?” Evidently, Alicent had just noticed the small crowd around her youngest son. We parted for her to come and fuss at him. She didn’t seem to notice the stain when she drew him onto her lap and rocked him back and forth as he sniffled into her shoulder. Aegon and Laenor both gave me the same bemused look and Aemond snorted at the sight.

“I will tell father in the morning,” he murmured finally.
I was sitting with Laenor in the drawing room, sipping an excellent vintage from the Reach and dozing, when I had a revelation. I had been thinking about how happy Helaena had looked and remembering that feeling of knowing a new life was growing within you. That another one of my children was coming into the world and the joy that brought both me and my husband, my husband who had always been saddened we’d officially stopped at Aemon, who had been so overcome at the idea of Aemma…

“Let’s have another child.” It was worth it to see Laenor choke and spew red wine down his beautiful sea green tunic before staring at me.

“Truly?” he asked, voice faint. “You were set against it… even Aemma was unplanned!”

My reasons for being so seemed faint and far away now; fear it would kill me, fear it was merely an avenue for Corlys to exercise what control he could over me, fear the child would be a daughter and I would go through that pain for nothing. I put my wine glass down and sat forward on the couch, taking his hands in mine and meeting his eyes.

“Perhaps seeing Helaena so has changed my mind, yet I find myself unable to recall why I dismissed the option.” He swallowed thickly, tongue darting out to wet his lips. “You wish for another child, your father and mother as well. The Seven know Laena and Joffrey would not object… they would delight in another little one.”

We had yet to discuss the matter Corlys had raised, too little time and too much to do. Laenor reached up and pushed some of the hair that had escaped my braid back from my face and smiled, yet it was sad and I couldn’t quite understand why.

“You have had entirely too much wine,” he told me. “I shall escort you to Laena’s side.”

I remained sitting as he stood, ignoring his offered hand, instead favouring him with an annoyed look.

“I am not so drunk that I have lost my wits to wine,” I groused.

“We are hardly going to make a child now,” he said tartly. “So what should it matter if we wait until morning to decide the details?”

Oh, he had me there, even if it was because he thought I’d change my mind on the matter without wine and sleep making my head heavy. I accepted his hand and he drew me to my feet.

“I thank you for the sentiment,” he said. “Truly, I do.”

I smiled into his chest as he pulled me close, he might be a little weepy himself yet there was no sign of it when I drew away.

“Well then, my loyal knight. Perhaps you should escort me to my lady-in-waiting?” He smiled and dropped his arm around my waist. He need not have bothered, I was as steady on my feet as I usually was. Perhaps pretending to himself that I was sloshed was his way of protecting himself from the inevitable disappointment he thought he’d feel tomorrow when I awoke having changed my mind about another child.

He kissed my cheek as a way of good night and I let myself into my rooms to find Laena perched
on the bed, absorbed in some sort of tome and... not wearing a whole lot, actually. The wound on
her torso was healing well though, I was glad to see her sparring had not reopened it, even if the
bruises had faded to a sickly yellow and even green in places.

“Good book?” I asked and she glanced up, smiling when she saw me. She had her own rooms of
course, close to where her children slept but it was not unusual she slept in mine. She was my lady-
in-waiting after all.

“Certainly interesting,” she said, putting it aside and smiling at me. “How did your meal go?”

“Helaena made her announcement, Aemond is still sulking with me and... and he intends to take
Daeron as his squire.” She rose as I moved to look at myself in the mirror, tugging on her shirt as
she seemed to realise she’d gotten distracted undressing. Her long fingers were soon relieving me
of my jewelry before she worked at the laces of my gown. I could tell she wasn’t much interested
in the minutiae of my family, she cared about who would be a threat in the future and Aemond was
high on that list.

“And take over his training in riding at the same time no doubt,” said Laena. “He’s better than I
would have thought he’d be with no teacher and in such a small timeframe.”

“He has father,” I said, shrugging off my clothes until I stood in my shift. “And Aegon and
Helaena.”

“Your father, forgive me, but he was no great rider and he does not even have a dragon these days.”
I thought about that as she found a brush and began unbraiding my hair.

“I do not know if I could ride another if Syrax were taken from me.” It was like contemplating
losing a limb and stitching on a completely different one in its place... one that did not even match
my body.

“I feel the same. I do not judge your father, Rhaenyra, none could compare to Vhagar in my eyes
just as none could compare to Balerion in his,” she told me, running the brush through my hair.
She had gained some weight this past month, I reflected. She looked far healthier now than she had
on her return.

“Do you recall the subject of your father’s little ambush near a week ago?” I asked in the silence
afterwards. She paused in her brushing.

“About Driftmark’s inheritance? I recall, yes,” she said. She had apparently seen her father’s
outburst coming since her mother had confronted me so brazenly. Not that she’d seen fit to mention
either to me or her brother, too involved in her studies and her children. Luke and Rhaena were
thrilled at her return and wanted to spend every moment of the day with her. Not that I could
begrudge them her time, they had been overjoyed to learn she did not plan another journey anytime
soon. “Why?”

I did not miss the look in her eyes, one of cautious hope.

“I may have reconsidered my stance on babes in the face of Helaena’s announcement.” The brush
went down and she almost forcibly swivelled me around, her hands on my shoulders as she peered
at me.

“That’s great news!” There were tears in her eyes as she drew me in close, holding me tight. Laena
had struggled to conceive Rhaena and my niece had been premature. Alannys and Gerardys were
of the opinion that she was unlikely to get with child again - another contributor to that terrible
breakdown.

Her reaction to Aemma on her return to King’s Landing told me all I needed to know about her plans to deal with that: she would live vicariously through my children as well.

“Laenor thinks I have drunk too much and will change my mind in the morning.” She guided me to the bed and I sat down, watching as she flitted about the room with nervous energy, putting out candles and dowsing the fire in the grate.

“Laenor does not like disappointment,” she told me, blowing out the last candle and leaving us in darkness. I smiled to myself as I felt her clamber into bed next to me, the way to bed dipped under her weight and how pleasant it was to have her curl into me. “I wish you had not mentioned it, I doubt I shall sleep tonight from excitement.”

“What a shame,” I said and pretended to curl into my pillow, turning my back to her. I heard her choke in indignation and a snicker escaped me.

“Tease,” she muttered, she shifted closer to me under the coverlet. “Help me sleep, my Princess?”

“Are you attending me tomorrow?” I asked, rolling over into her embrace.

“With Falena, yes.” There was an odd tone to her voice but I did not want to think about Falena Waynwood right now, so I kissed her deeply and she returned it happily.

The next morning saw me slowly arrive at consciousness as the birds outside started up their usual loud greeting to the day. I stretched underneath the covers, sighing heavily when my body cracked and popped.

“I hate that,” mumbled Laena from next to me. “I really do.”

I chuckled as she rose, wrapping her robe around herself and shuffling off to tell the maids I was awake and ready for some juice and sliced fruit. We were digging in when a knock on the door disturbed us and Sab slipped in, her customary chain and short sword on display. I paused.

“Is she ill this time or did she finally come out and say it?” I asked, to both of my ladies obvious amusement.

“She begged me to swap shifts,” said Sab dryly, dropping into one of the chairs by the table. “Marya had something to do with the charity and Sera never gives up her shift with the kids.”

“And Maris?” Laena asked, sounding more curious than upset. Falena had refused to have anything to do with her since her return from her second journey and despite the many conversations we’d had on the matter she refused to budge.

It wasn’t even religious in nature truly. Septon Patrek dealt with the rumours surrounding my lover by pretending she was not a follower of the Seven and therefore not subject to it’s rules. Even Marya had come round, letting her son play freely with Luke and Rhaena and happily gossiping with her old friend.

“She told her to extract her head from her behind and quit being…” Sab trailed off with a glance at me. “Well, let’s just say Maris had words.”

“I will have words with her myself if she keeps this up,” I grumbled, rising from my bed finally and making my way over to where Sab had begun preparing today’s dress. I let myself be tended to as my hair was put into its customary braid and my dress was pulled on around me. “Where has my
husband got himself to?"

“He is with Jocelyn in his office, waiting for his man’s arrival,” Sab informed me and I half wondered why he hadn’t gone training until understanding dawned.

“Ah, no doubt my daughter will be thrilled,” I said. “Feel free to have some time to yourselves whilst I oversee my daughter’s checkup.”

I left them chatting amongst themselves. Laena had hated Sab when I had first invited her into my service. I had been grateful… Sab had saved my life. I could still see her charging my would-be assassins as if it had happened yesterday… actual Dornish assassins this time, courtesy of Walter Wyl.

I wasn’t even sure why Laena had felt that way, it just seemed to be hate at first sight. Yet Sab had persisted, especially after she had returned from her exile on Dragonstone. Laena had come round eventually and the two had become close enough, no doubt their shared interest in women had helped.

Laenor and Jocelyn were exactly where Sab had said they were and I dropped myself into a chair opposite him. Jocelyn was sat on the floor, frowning at her work book as if it had done her some great insult. My husband looked as if he had not slept although he greeted me with a pleased enough smile.

“Does your head hurt you much this morning?” he joked as I sat.

“Not at all, my love. I did tell you my wits were not addled.” His eyes widened a little and he glanced at Jocelyn. He needn’t have bothered, she was absolutely absorbed in whatever problem she was trying to reason out. “Where are the others this morning?”

“Lessons,” he breathed. “Did you truly mean what you said last night?”

Now Jocelyn glanced up, her face scrunched up as she tried to parse the meaning of her father’s words.

“Did Mama say something mean?” she asked. Laenor chuckled.

“No, little one, she did not. It would only be mean if she did not tell the truth.”

“And I did tell the truth,” I said, triumphantly. “So it is not mean.”

That just puzzled Jocelyn more if I read the expression on her face correctly. No doubt trying to figure out what would be mean if it wasn’t the truth but not mean if it was. I had a feeling it was because the conundrum was more interesting than her homework. Laenor just stared at me, shifting in his seat as if he wanted to spring up and dance at the news. I gave him the most earnest smile I could. The one he gave me in response was a little watery.

“Do you think they’ll take the bandages off today?” asked Jocelyn, failing to read the mood. “My arm itches all the time!”

Laenor shook himself out of his stupor and gathered her into his arms, ignoring the way she whined in protest at how embarrassing he was being. The sight had me smiling like an idiot again.
The removal of Jocelyn’s bandages took most of the morning, mostly because my daughter was unable to sit completely still for any length of time. By the end of it all, I was sure that poor Sanderson might weep as she leapt from her chair a sixth time to run and tell her father about something she had remembered.

“Jocelyn,” I said, my tone carrying a warning. She froze, as if she had forgotten she was supposed to remain seated and trudged back to her chair, the back of her ears turning red in embarrassment. Laenor chuckled as Sanderson gave me a grateful smile.

“Did you truly mean it?” whispered Laenor again, as if he suspected this some cruel trick I was playing on him.

“Yes,” I whispered back. “But we will discuss it with Joffrey and Laena later. Right now we must focus on our little warrior.”

“Tonight?” he asked, fingers tapping out a nervous beat on his thigh.

“Tonight,” I promised and he smiled at me again, tears threatening to fall.

“All done!” sighed Sanderson in relief. I watched with amusement as Jocelyn held up her arm and marvelled at how pale the skin was. She prodded it experimentally before directing a bright smile at us all.

“Thank you,” she said, evidently remembering her manners before Laenor and I needed to remind her. “Will I be able to play normally now?”

“Be careful for a few more weeks, Princess,” Sanderson told her, placing the soiled bandages into a bag. Likely to be burned, if I knew the practises Gerardys beat into all his students. “You do not wish to break it once more, do you?”

She shook her head very seriously, her features solemn. My firstborn had chafed at the injury… well, it would serve her right for clambering up things just because her sister dared her to. The gash above her eye had healed well enough, although she had earned herself a scar. It was not her first, she was like her aunt Laena that way, she collected them.

“Now, little one, I believe it is time for you to rejoin the others!” She groaned as I stood up and held out my hand but took it anyway. It took her a full minute to be distracted once again by her newly freed arm once more.

“It’s so skinny,” she whispered. “And pale!”

“It has not seen the sun in some time,” laughed Laenor from behind us. “And it is skinny because you have not used it.”

“It will be normal again, won’t it?” she asked, suddenly concerned. “It won’t always be smaller?”

“It will go back to normal soon enough,” I told her and the worry in her eyes faded but did not die. “As long as you are gentle with it.”

“What if it doesn’t?” she whispered. “Then-”
I frowned at her as she cut herself off.

“It will, I promise,” I told her. “What is wrong?”

She pressed her lips together in a manner that told me I was unlikely to get an answer from her. I sighed and caught Laenor’s eye. He looked just as helplessly confused as I was by the matter. She was clearly worrying about something.

“I will not force it from you,” I told her, as her violet eyes met my own. “But if you ever want to talk to me about anything, even if you think it is silly, I will always have time for you. So will your father.”

“Thank you Mama, thank you Papa,” she mumbled before tugging insistently on my hand. “We have lessons!”

“Ah, our little one is eager all of a sudden,” japed Laenor as we began walking again. It had unsettled him as well, this strange behaviour from her. Perhaps it might be worth asking Laena, although the thought made my heart ache with the knowledge she might know my children better than I did.

It turned out we needn’t have hurried Jocelyn along anyway, for when we opened the door to the room the children took their lessons in, they were enjoying a snack break. I marvelled at how it changed, from a dining room that was considered small by the manses’ standards to a brightly lit and even more brightly decorated classroom.

When Corlys had bought the manse, most of it had not been in use. It was huge, ridiculously so, even for a building close to the Red Keep. I had been told, and I could believe it, that it had been some lord’s prestige project back when Jaehaerys had been young. Perhaps that explained why Corlys had bought it all those years ago. Yet I could not deny how useful it had been in keeping me out of the Red Keep. Most manses could boast ten, perhaps twelve, bedrooms with a fair few of those being for the use of live-in staff.

We did not have much live-in staff here, not anymore. We needed the space. There were sixteen of us, all that needed their own rooms… the manse may have about twenty bedrooms but all of them were full and only a vanishingly small amount of that space was staff space.

It was costing a fortune in the ‘housing benefit’ we gave to those who should have a room here but didn’t. There had been no argument about moving to the Keep though, even a decade later I still could not do it. Still, there might be something in buying out the next door neighbours…

“You’re doing it again,” chuckled Laenor, poking me in the ribs. I jabbed him back and forced myself to focus on the children now that they had greeted Jocelyn, thoroughly examined her wrist and then gone back to whatever they had been doing before our entry.

“My apologies,” I said dryly. “I’ll try to keep myself as thoughtless as possible. Would that please you, husband?”

That made him snicker. I turned my attention to the children. Aliandra was regaling Jeyne and Aemma with some tale from Dorne’s past, Alyssanne and Jocelyn appeared to have gotten into an intense discussion about bows and swords… a discussion Rolph was occasionally interjecting in, weighing in on Jocelyn’s side. That did not surprise me, he had talent with the blade and Jocelyn was a frequent sparring partner. Alyssa was watching them bicker, amused. She’d thrown her arms around Jocelyn’s neck and begged for forgiveness once again, which Jocelyn had stoically granted before collapsing into giggles.
Aemon was curled up with a book on art he’d likely liberated from the Keep library last time he had been set loose in there. I blinked as I realised what I had mistaken for a blanket over his knees was the damn cat, taking advantage of the only still child he could find. I met his green eyes with an unblinking stare.

“Really?” snorted Laenor. “It’s a cat, Rhaenyra.”

“It’s evil,” I told him, memories of scratches and bites making my arms tingle. I regretted getting them that cat so much. He loved the children but he hated me. “Where are Luke and Rhaena anyway?”

“With Joff,” he said cheerfully. “His father is in town.”

“Ah,” I said. It did not surprise me that I had not been told. Hells, I doubted Laena knew in truth. Joffrey was touchy when it came to his family. Lord Gyles was proud of his son but I know it still stung the Lonmouth lord that he had not risen so high with his own family name but the Velaryon one. It also did not help matters that Lord Gyles had come to hate Laena… he had pushed for Joffrey to annul the marriage after she had fled in the aftermath of Rhaena’s birth. Something Joffrey had only admitted at the hour of the bat after Rhaena had been screaming for most of the night. He had been tired and upset, the only reason he had even allowed himself to rant and rave about Laena in the way he did.

He had apologised for it later, in typical Joffrey fashion.

What I did know for certain, however, was that Lord Gyles believed Lucerys to be his grandson, believing Joffrey had gotten Laena with him after their respective childhood crushes had gotten out of hand. Luke and Rhaena were fond of their father’s father. I had been told Lord Gyles was given to spoiling them both - sweetmeats and presents that had Laena huffing with equal parts annoyance and laughter when they returned from a visit.

“No doubt he will be thrilled at your decision,” said Laenor. I smirked, I knew he’d be unable to contain himself for long. “I did not tell him last night.”

“I told Laena. So it appears Joff will be the last to know.” And he would likely sulk about being so too, although he would understand why Laenor had not brought the matter up.

“He hates being the last to know anything these days,” said Laenor dryly. I pushed myself off of the door frame and shut the door to the classroom gently, bidding goodbye to them all with a wave.

“Do you miss your Knight of Kisses?” I asked, as we ambled off. “The way he was before Criston?”

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “Joff was… you did not really know him then. He wore his heart on his sleeve, he was honest and warm.”

“He threatened to duel me for your honour,” I teased and Laenor smiled before sighing again.

“I wish he could regain some of that openness, Rhaenyra. Now he hides it all away from me.” And Laenor hated that because it was partly leftover from the days Joffrey had felt he needed physical distance from Laenor… and a decade had not healed that, just as it had not healed his leg.

“He hides it from everyone,” I pointed out. “Then he weeps about it when it all becomes too much.”

“To Laena,” he groused. “Or you.”
“Only because we were convenient and because he loves you too much to want to burden you with such things.”

“I would gladly bear those burdens a thousand times over!” protested Laenor.

“Have you told him this?” I asked and he blushed red.

“He is adept at ensuring I never get the chance,” he grumbled over my snickers. “I am not saying I want the man he was back, I love the man he has become, I just wish-”

He trailed off, waving his hands about and I sighed. I understood, even if Laenor was not able to put his desires into words. Well, it too eerily mirrored my thoughts on Laena. She had grown so much since Daemon and she had been damaged so much as well. It forged someone I loved with all my heart and yet part of me wanted to see that carefree ditzy version of her instead of the focused and occasionally grim woman she could be now.

“How do you think they talk of us like this?” asked Laenor suddenly.

“Complain about our shortcomings more likely,” I japed and he giggled. I could well picture Joffrey and Laena’s conversations about us. A sudden flicker of glee ran through me. “Certainly Joffrey and I complain about you to one another!”

He gaped at me like a fish before I could not restrain my smirk and gave the game away.

“How do you get together when Laena and I go riding with mother?” he asked, struggling to contain his giggles at the thought. A family bonding exercise Rhaenys had instituted after Laena’s return. Sometimes I wondered what might have happened had Laena returned hale and healthy… certainly she would not have earned anyone’s forgiveness. Least of all Rhaenys, who had been a frequent visitor to Dragonstone in the year it had taken me to calm down after her return.

It pains me to admit but had it not been for Rhaenys’ increasingly panicked letters regarding Laena’s state, I might not have seen her at all, merely concluding my business with Ser Rogar and Marilda and then going on my way.

“Sometimes. Other times we observe Court with a good vintage to savage the different fashions.” That got him laughing harder.

“Ha! Perhaps I should take up a similar practice with Laena?” he joked.

“You should. Your disagreement has gone on for too long.” My unexpected firmness ended his laughter.

“Our disagreement… do you forget what she did to you? To Joffrey? To our children?” There was heat there.

“Do you not think she has paid for it?” I asked.

“No. You say she broke but I saw Joffrey break too. I saw you break. I saw mother grieve and rage and I saw my father… he gave up on her!” I winced. “I swore I would be civil, Rhaenyra, but I did not swear to clutch her close once more. To accept all she did and forgive her for it.”

“I am not asking you to,” I replied. “I am asking you to build something new from the wreckage of what you were to each other.”

He dashed away the tears that threatened and I caught his wrist with my hand, placing it over my
cheek. He swallowed thickly, struggling to hold himself in check.

“You need not hide it from me,” I whispered. “Let the mask of perfect prince fall and be my friend and husband in truth.”

“That is not fair,” he said. “You were the one that forced me to wear it to begin with.”

“As I wear my own. We can not be who we wish to be. None of us can, Laenor. We should at least bind ourselves to one another. We are the only ones that know, that understand.”

He stared out of the window, throat bobbing and features formed into a terrible frown. When he spoke, his voice was rough and raspy.

“I will speak to her and to Joffrey,” he said, removing his hand from my cheek. “But I make no promises when it comes to her.”

“All I ask for is that you try.”
If there was one thing I regretted, it was that my control on the Small Council had slipped ever so slightly. I still held the majority but Green power had unmistakably grown although with Lord Borros allied with me, Lord Jasper wavered more often than not.

Perhaps I may be able to sway him yet. All the rewards in the world would matter little if I could persuade Borros to crack down on House Wylde.

“Your Grace, might I be able to escort you to today’s meeting?” I swallowed my urge to shudder and smiled at Larys Strong. I even managed to make it look half natural.

“I would be pleased to accept, Lord Strong!” We were so very good friends, after all he had freely sworn every oath my father, and his, had made him when he took his place as Master of Whisperers. Somehow the act that was supposed to reassure me just set my teeth further on edge.

His little obsession with Joffrey was still ongoing and had only grown, like some kind of horrific fungus, since we had first come to realise it.

“Tell me, might our Master of Whisperers know what is on today’s agenda?” I asked. Father had not mentioned but it was likely more of the same. Westeros’ many woes and little good news to be found amongst all the shit.

“I believe there is a small incident in the North His Grace wishes to discuss,” Larys said, his smile mocking. “And of course, the Braavosi grow ever more tiring.”

“They still push for a permanent representative at Court?” I asked and Larys nodded grimly. Well, at least Alicent and I had found yet another topic we could agree on… even if we disagreed on what needed to be done about it.

The Braavosi had undergone a change in management. A hazard of sorts when it came to Sealords, I had come to understand. The previous one had been rather hands off when it came to the Iron Bank and who it loaned to. The new one was not pleased the institution had enabled the Conquest of Dorne.

Which is not to say he could officially punish them or sanction them in anyway but he had made his displeasure known. Poor Laraz, who had approved our little loan, had been found dead a month after the new Sealord had been elected. Everyone agreed it had been his heart giving out finally and that the man had gone peacefully in his sleep. Jaerys Sorrelion had gone next, stabbed to death in a tavern brawl that had gotten out of hand.

As for dear Tycheo’s kinsman, Maranos… well, he was in the wind as far as the Braavosi were concerned. As far as I was concerned, he was employed in the custom houses of Spicetown. Should he prove useful, I might refer him to Lyman to train up.

He’d come begging on bended knee to Corlys. The Hartios family was ruined and he was next on the Sealord’s hit list. He’d had nowhere else to flee to, not truly. He did have a tiny shred of leverage against Corlys, although it was a shred. Had Laenor not been present at the meeting, the Lord of Tides would likely have sent him on his way regardless.

“Indeed. And we, of course, can not afford to pay them should they call the debt,” Larys sneered. The Greens wanted father to borrow from the Lannisters or the Hightowers and rid ourselves of the Iron Bank that way, but father was not so far gone that their suggestions sounded like good ideas so
I wasn’t sure if that would change as the Iron Bank applied yet more pressure.

“They will not call the debt,” I said with confidence I was entirely sure was warranted. “It would damage them far more than us if we did not pay it.”

Larys merely shrugged as we reached the doors of the Small Council chamber. Lyman, Edmund and Jasper were already there, talking quietly among themselves. Corlys and Lyonel would likely arrive together, I know the two men were still fond of sharing a drink before making their way down.

As for father… well, that was anyone’s guess. He attended religiously, of course, in the way he had done since Daemon’s final banishment, but he was not always on time these days. No sooner had I taken my seat then, as predicted, our Master of Ships and Hand of the King arrived together, looking as if they had just finished sharing a wonderful joke between them.

Their smiles dimmed noticeably as they took their seats in the silence that sprung up since Larys and mine’s arrival had killed whatever debate Lyman, Jasper and Edmund had been having.

“Has anyone seen my father today?” I asked after too long passed with no words.

“He is attending to your brother, Daeron, Your Grace,” Edmund informed me. He was a tall man, Edmund, with a kind face. His fair hair was threatening to turn grey soon enough and his hazel eyes almost sparkled when he smiled. He certainly had the best bedside manner I had seen in any Maester, excluding Gerardys of course, whose cool competence had never failed to put me at ease.

“Is Daeron well?” I asked and Edmund nodded.

“He has complaints regarding his squiring.” That got chuckles of amusement out of us all. Aemond had done exactly as he said he would the morning after Helaena’s announcement almost a week ago now. By all reports he’d marched into our father’s chambers and declared, leaving no room for argument, that Daeron would be his squire going forward and that he had a list of rules for this.

Alicent had gone ballistic, of course, but with every member of the family supporting Aemond bar Viserra, it was a foregone decision. Daeron had been given a room in Aemond’s suite instead of his own, he was in Aemond’s service six days out of seven and had been told, in no uncertain terms, he was to act like it. Which meant no running to Alicent unless it was his day off.

“Aemond is a fine knight,” I declared, to the surprise of the table. “Daeron could do much worse by being in his service.”

“I agree, Your Grace,” replied Jasper. “Both of your brothers are fine knights and finer men. Daeron would do well to heed the advice they give him.”

We were saved from further discussing my brother’s virtues by the doors opening once more and my father marching inside, his face a rictus of anger. I winced. Such an expression did not bode well for this week’s meeting. Even seeing us readily assembled did not give him pause. Instead he threw himself into his seat and fixed us all with a glare that bordered on sulky.

“Well?” he demanded. “Get to it.”

I placed my hand over his and he blinked, violet eyes falling to it, before he sighed heavily and summoned a small smile.
“My apologies, my lords, I have had a trying morning.” He clutched my hand, giving it a squeeze, before releasing it back into my custody. I did not miss the grateful looks some members of the Council shot me for so adeptly diffusing their King.

It still did not mean they should not tread carefully around him.

“Perhaps we should start with domestic matters,” said Lyonel, giving each of us a sharp look.

“We have had no more riots in Dorne this past month and a bit,” I pointed out. “And the Vulture King met the forces of the Ullers in battle. A battle they supposedly lost.”

“Indeed,” said Larys. “Although the Garin matter continues to vex me. I have to discover where the man is… or how he communicates with his followers.”

I might have sneered at that but Joffrey was similarly stumped. We had gone as far as searching Tyroshi brandy imports for hidden messages at one point. Nothing.

“I once again recommend that we seize the Stepstones,” said Corlys. “If Garin intends to take his Sunspears to Dorne, he will have to use the islands as a staging area.”

“The islands are infested with pirates and sellsails. They serve as a more than adequate defence at no cost to us,” said Lord Jasper. “I fear that the realm’s finances could not manage an invasion and the cost to hold it afterwards.”

“It could not,” said Lyman as Corlys sat back in his chair, scowling fiercely. Gods, Lyman looked so frail now. It made my heart hurt to look at him. “We already struggle with the payments to the Iron Bank alongside the money for Dorne’s economy.”

“Your Grace, if I could suggest scaling back some of those payments?” said Edmund. “The Dornish economy is the strongest it has been since the Dragon’s Wrath. We win no more hearts by continuing these payments.”

“Lord Aron and Ser Gwayne report that it inches closer to being profitable every year. It will begin making money within the next few years,” said Lyman. Father stroked his moustache in thought. The Dornish Economic Plan had been Lyman’s idea and the amount of cunning it betrayed had surprised me.

He had put forth a model to develop the production of luxury exotic goods within Dorne rather than focusing on food. It was expensive, our treasury certainly knew that, but when it was complete, Dorne would be very profitable indeed.

And nearly all of its arable land would be taken up by spices, grapes and other such enterprises. It meant that they were entirely reliant on food shipments from other areas of Westeros and their dream of being self-sustaining was dead in the water.

“As long as the markets are there,” said Edmund, proving that he had paid attention in his Economics lectures.

“Westeros is market enough in the beginning,” I replied. “Then Braavos, who will be happy to have luxury goods not produced by slaves.”

“Yet the Sealord sulks with us,” said Larys. “Trade is difficult.”

“Not too difficult,” rebutted Corlys. “His disapproval has done little to limit the glass the Braavosi buy from us.”
“Enough!” barked father finally, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “I will not deviate from Lord Beesbury’s plan for Dorne. Nor will I send a fleet to the Stepstones. If you wish to seize them once more, Lord Corlys, you are free to do so but you will do it on your own.”

“As for Dorne,” he continued when we all remained silent. “Send for my cousin. I want her to fly down there and remind them why they should fear us.”

I did not miss the way Corlys tensed slightly at that but he did not protest. His wife was loathe to let on how much damage that Dornish knife had done to her leg. She’d fly to Sunspear even if it flared up once more out of pride if anything else and the fact she’d barely be able to move once she got there would not even enter into her decision.

“By your will, Your Grace,” said Lyonel, noting down father’s decision.

“What other matters trouble my realm?” asked father.

“The Northern issue,” Larys replied. “Lord Beron is still imprisoned and the lords of the North become restless.”

“It’s preposterous!” Lord Jasper burst out. “Lord Karstark is clearly innocent of these charges. The boy lord seeks to lure his uncle North to settle old scores!”

“Yet he claims to have proof,” pointed out Edmund, voice mild. “And we can hardly go about interfering with the Great Lord’s rights to visit justice on their own vassals without invitation.”

“I intend to send a delegation,” I said. Father stared at me, mouth set in unhappiness. “Lord Bennard is a friend and will be arriving within the week to personally request that I intercede in the matter. I trust being invited by one party is enough to interfere?”

“Why does Lord Bennard even seek to go North?” asked father, perplexed. “What case does a man who has not set foot in his realm for near a decade have to answer?”

“It is complicated,” I replied before even Edmund or Jasper could. “But the long and short of the matter is Lord Bennard feels his goodfather will not receive a true trial. Cregan has his father’s resentment of Bennard.”

“Humph,” said my father, not wishing to question family dynamics lest the stone he threw shatter his glass house. “I shall leave it to you then.”

“I believe that covers the more pressing domestic issues,” said Lyonel. “Does anyone else have anything to add?”

“I wish to discuss a small matter.” Edmund’s mouth takes on a particular set when he’s about to bring the Guild up. Ten dragons says it regards my most controversial supporters. “It has come to my attention that part of the research quarters occupied by the Alchemist’s Guild on Dragonstone blew up recently...”

Oh boy, that was going to be a fun evening when Jeyne and Aly found out.

“The Tullys have it well in hand, however,” continued Lyonel. “Does anyone else have anything to add?”
The sight and smell of King’s Landing had put him in a miserable mood. He felt it fair, for the South was a miserable place. Even in the winter months it had been too warm, the air too still and rank besides… and the land far too tame.

He missed the wilds of the North, he missed the danger of it. He missed the winds howling against the walls of Winterfell, he missed the snows and the rains and the way the fire that roared in the hearth warmed his bones in a way no fire of the south ever could.

He was a son of the North, not even a decade of exile, a decade of playing the tame northern barbarian could take that from him.

“Have you had word from Her Grace?” asked Lord Royce Caron as they rode through the city.

“No,” he growled back. It did not surprise him. If he knew the princess as well as he thought he did, she’d be livid with him in the way she often was when she spotted his little schemes too late. Ha! Perhaps he would flirt with her as she ranted and cursed, really see the dragon come forth…

It was the little pleasures that had made this last decade bearable; riling his patron, southern women and the fights against the Dornish.

“This is foolishness,” growled the Marcher Lord. “We should be sailing there with good men at our back, not scraping before a woman so that she may solve our problems for us.”

“That woman will be our Queen,” he told him. He found he did not mind the prospect at all that much. She was fierce in a way most southerners were not. And, he thought with a grin, especially fun to poke into anger. “Nothing to say to that, Royce?”

“My liege lord has made his intentions clear.” And your daughter is making damn sure they’re followed, he thought with a savage grin. Lady Elenda wanted one of her daughters on the Throne and now that she had finally provided her husband with a son, she could focus on doing so.

Woe betide the man that did not fall in line behind her. She would scour the Stormlands of the ‘Greens’ before long.

“She is a dragon. Well above wolves and nightingales.” He turned to his son. Five and ten now and already a man in truth. He’d killed his first man not a few months back… and bedded his first woman too. “So is her daughter.”

Benjen flushed red, the patchy beard he was still trying to grow doing nothing to hide it.

“Princess Jocelyn is ten years of age.” And had followed his boy about like a lost puppy the last time they’d been here, not even a year ago. “And betrothed to Rolph Reyne, father.”

“Ha! Who said anything about marriage!” He ignored Royce’s scoff. Benjen was betrothed to the man’s granddaughter. Elenda’s price for what had been Wyl… and for her ongoing support. Another woman who played the game like a northerner did. Still, at least Elena was being fostered with her lady aunt, if he were lucky she’d have a spine and make a worthy wife for a Lord of Winterfell.

That massive manse was soon in sight, a small hoard of servants in sea green waiting to serve them as if they were the average incapable lordling. They were greeted by her man, of course. She sent
him to do all her dirty work… and rumour had it, it was dirty work indeed. They said Joffrey Velaryon could make a man disappear overnight. He believed it. The man had a hungry look to him, his pleasant smile doing little to hide those cold eyes that seemed to judge him… and find him wanting.

“My Lord, welcome to King’s Landing. Her Grace invites you to enjoy a dinner with her tonight but regrets to say she can not host you personally. I have taken the liberty of booking your party rooms at a reputable inn nearby.” She was furious indeed if she wasn’t even bothering to have them hosted in the Red Keep. Her man’s polished manners did little to mask the sneer in his voice.

He dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a waiting groom. The rest did so as well. He was happy to see Benjen did not look as ill at ease as the rest of his little party did. The Stormlords had not met the Princess personally, they did not know her temperament.

She waited for them just inside, dressed in far too much fabric and jewels. It was the only off-putting part about her. Just as well he’d never made a play for her hand, she would not have enjoyed the fashions of the North.

“Lord Bennard Stark, Lord Royce Caron, Ser Rolland Morrigen, Ser Olyvar Penrose and Ser Benjen Stark!” called the Herald.

They made their obeisances and he was sure to keep his eyes on hers as he bowed, letting her see his grin and his teeth. He had been sure, all those years ago, that bedding her would be easy. Her husband preferred his knight, after all, and a rogue was always a temptation to her sort. Alas, it was not to be. It would have been easier if he had snared her, but a dragon was not so easily baited by the wolf it seemed.

Her blushes were still sweet.

“Your Grace,” he said finally. “Thank you for seeing us on such short notice.”

She glared at him, almost pouting. Oh, angry indeed! Ser Joffrey limped off, not bothering to say his goodbyes to them.

“I am always pleased to host friends.” Her tone was sharp. “I have made rooms available for you to freshen yourselves for the meal.”

He would not have taken the offer but even the Stormlords, the least pretentious of all the southerners, fell into bad habits. He and Benjen whiled away an hour or two, speaking of the things that passed between father and son before the rest of their party re-emerged.

A servant came by to collect them soon after. The Princess was nothing if not efficient… and disinclined to let bored strangers loose in her home given what had happened to her lady.

The dining room was already near full. Her husband was there, of course, with his habitual suspicious stare, and her goodsister too. The one that rumours swirled about like a black cloak. He made a note to be respectful of that one, she had the same look as her husband. The type of look that promised a quiet disappearance in the night.

Although he could detect no trace of that in her now, with her youngest on her knee, nodding along in what seemed to be genuine joy as the girl regaled her, and her husband who sat her side with some tale or other. He did not miss the way Benjen’s eyes flickered with longing to where the rest of her small horde of children had been seated. He also did not miss the eldest twin, the one that had the look of the Queen Who Never Was, sit up slightly straighter in her chair as she spotted his
A missed opportunity there, but it was no matter. Perhaps the next generation would see a Stark queen or a Targaryen Lady of Winterfell.

“Is Lord Gyles not joining us?” asked Royce as they were seated. He watched the witch’s eyes narrow at her husband. The man ignored it, of course. If what he had pieced together from long forgotten rumours was right, their marriage was a sham… but a necessary one, given her rumoured lover had been the now exiled Prince Daemon.

“Grandpapa is sick,” said the one Benjen called Luke. “He has a cough.”

“A shame,” said Royce. “I will call on him tomorrow.”

“Father would be happy for that,” said Joffrey. “He has long respected you, Lord Royce.”

“And I will have one of Gerardys’ men sent to look in on him as well, Joffrey,” said Rhaenyra, smiling softly at him. “A cough can be dangerous for a man of his age.”

“Indeed,” said Laena Velaryon and he detected frustration there. “I would not wish anything untoward to happen to him.”

Her brother kicked her under the table and the Princess frowned angrily. He poured himself some wine and sat back in his chair, meeting her eyes with a smile. These little visits never failed to amuse him. If only his brother had been like this… he might have stayed in the North and played the loyal dog.

But his brother had been a dour man, content to let the North die by a thousand cuts as he ignored all the opportunity the south could bring them solely for one man’s grudge… a man who had died decades ago. The North would drown and die in that grudge eventually.

There was a part of him, a small part, that had whispered he ought to sit back and see what his nephew intended to do about the matter. To see if he would go the path his father would or if Cregan Stark would be more like his grandfather.

Benjen Stark had understood what the south could do for them and Rickon had betrayed him when he has reversed his decisions and plans…

No. He was the one that truly saw what the North could be, what Benjen Stark had wanted the North to be, and only he could bring it about. He sipped his wine as they brought the first course in, studying the Princess once again.

Now how to approach the matter? Righteous fury? The schemer? What would have her dancing to his tune this time?
Dinner had been interesting, to say the least. Between Laena and Joffrey glaring at one another, Laenor trying to subtly play the peacekeeper while also run interference between Bennard and me and Bennard grinning at me like some kind of lunatic I felt ready to scream. Finally we finished up and Bennard dispatched his party of Stormlanders to the inn I’d hired out for them; he did not need them for the main event, for their presence rammed home the point he wanted to make quite handily.

Okay, technically, Joffrey already owned it so I hadn’t hired anything out, I was not spending any more money than I needed to on Bennard fucking Stark, but my point remains the same. Yet before I could attend to my unwelcome guests, I needed to ensure the children had a suitable amount of watchers.

I did not need them raising hell while I was trying to negotiate with Bennard. I would need all my wits focused on him and not on what my children had just broken.

“Auntie Rhae, will you read us our bedtime story tonight?” asked Rhaena as I dropped a kiss on her forehead, smoothing back her dark hair.

“Of course! If you all go and play quietly with Lady Sera and Septa Leyla, I will come by and read you all a story,” I told them, well aware of Bennard’s eyes on my back. “But only if you are good.”

“Will it be an adventure story?” asked Jocelyn, looking excited. I caught Sera’s eyes and she was quick to forestall the conversation for me.

“Come now,” she laughed. “We shall pick the story together for your Mama to read to us.”

“Can we have a story with a handsome prince?” I heard Aemma ask as they filed out. I could not make out Luke’s scorn filled response but I was able to hear Sera’s sharp command that they not argue in the hallways while guests were present.

“My apologies, Lord Bennard.” The Northern lord merely shrugged, his grey eyes were glinting dangerously though. Truly, with the frustration pouring off of him now, I was amazed he’d kept his temper through a long dinner and so much small talk – even Joffrey and I had been bored by it.

“Shall we proceed to the drawing room to discuss matters?” asked Joffrey.

“I’ve had father’s best vintages brought out for your perusal, Lord Stark,” said Laenor, smiling without a great deal of friendliness. Laenor was of the opinion that blushes from me were his to win. Well, and Laena’s and Joffrey’s. Certainly not Bennard Stark’s, though.

I wasn’t even sure what it was about the man that had heat rushing to my cheeks when he smiled in that roguish way of his or when he made some blatant innuendo and waited for my anger.

He was stiff when he dropped into a low couch. I allowed myself to sit a tad more delicately, smiling slightly when Laenor dropped his arm over my shoulders and Laena fixed him with such a look it was probably a miracle he did not turn to stone on the spot.

“I care little for wine at the moment,” he said before Laenor could offer him any. “I care about what can be done regarding my goodfather.”

“We have discussed the matter intently, Lord Bennard. Joffrey has done some further investigation
into the matter as well.” Joffrey nodded seriously at that yet the discontented look in Bennard’s eyes did not die.

“No doubt it has turned up Beron is innocent. The man might be a stick in the mud but he’s no fucking thief,” barked the Northerner.

“Hmmm,” said Joffrey and Bennard bristled. The fact that Laenor leaned forward had me worried I might soon see a battle. “When Lord Cregan accused him of stealing, he was not entirely wrong. It hinges on the laws surrounding regency, you see.”

“Go on,” I said, before Bennard could speak up and interrupt once more. Joffrey gave me a gracious nod and next to me, Laenor settled slightly. Laena’s eyes were still fixed on our guest though, for all he seemed not to care.

“There is something of a grey area when it comes to the actions of Lord Regents, as I’m sure you all understand. There is a little they are expressly banned from doing, you see, as long as they feel they are, in the exact words of the law, ‘acting within the best interests of their ward’.” Bennard was still scowling when Joffrey finished.

“Beron took his duty seriously. Are you implying otherwise?” he asked, tone causing Laenor to tense up again.

“Cregan certainly does,” said Joffrey, ignoring the hostility. “His argument surrounds the subsidies Beron was quick to give to Northern lords as long as they used the funds to buy cheap glass from the Glassworks and constructed glass houses. Cregan claims this has saddled the North with debt, forced them to further serve the south over themselves and that the policy was only available to lords who agreed to support your claim to Winterfell.”

Bennard said nothing to that, his grey eyes blazing with anger.

“He is reaching, of course,” I interjected smoothly. “We know well that isn’t true.”

“Have you ever gone hungry? Any of you?” growled Bennard. “The North needs that glass. I brought three thousand men south last winter, they abandoned their homes and families because they knew that if they stayed they’d doom them.”

“I would point out,” spat Laena, sending all of our heads whipping around, “that you have never gone hungry either, Bennard Stark.”

“Yet I agree with the sentiment,” I said, amused beyond belief that Bennard seemed to have nothing to say to that at least. “The North does need glass houses if it wishes to survive the harsher winters. Glass houses and southern allies willing to send food.”

“We are proud men,” he said.

“Pride does not fill bellies and even proud men can trade. Yet we did not come here to discuss such matters,” I said. “We came to discuss what we are doing about Lord Beron’s arrest.”

“My nephew is spitting on everything Lord Beron has done for him! Has done for the North!”

“Calm yourself, Lord Bennard,” I said. “We have a plan ready for your approval.”

“I would rather you accompany me north, Princess,” said Bennard, leaning forward. “My nephew would not risk making a travesty of justice with the eyes of a dragon on him.”
Ah. So that was what he truly wanted. He wanted to march north, humiliate his nephew and do it all with a dragon at his back to avoid the consequences. I was starting to understand why Cregan had thrown him in prison along with his sons in the original timeline. He was like a cockroach.

“I can not go to the North, I am afraid, as much as I wish I could,” I sighed, hoping I looked genuinely regretful. “I have many duties to fulfil here.”

“Surely a month or two—” Laenor leaned forward, dropping a hand over my stomach.

“Many duties, my lord, many important duties.” He got the hint and leaned back into the couch, looking like a petulant child.

“Then what is your plan?” he asked. “Any you send to accompany me will merely be arrested as well.”

“I would ask you not to go, Lord Bennard. The trap is obvious, after all. The best bet you have is not to spring it and instead allow us to negotiate on your behalf.” I could tell from the moment I finished my sentence he would not go for it off the bat. He wanted that confrontation, he wanted to rile Cregan and he wanted me to be at his back while he did it.

“You would bar me from my home? You would have me sit in King’s Landing whilst others did my work!” he almost screeched. I checked my amusement, I had not known his voice could get so high. I should prick his pride more often if he were so intent on winding me up.

“Yet if Cregan captures you, there is little hope of retrieving you from his dungeons,” I said, voice still sorrowful. “We must deny him any opportunity to.”

“So I must cower in the south whilst a boy of seven and ten threatens my family,” he sneered.

“It is distasteful, yet should you go north, we can not aid you.” Joffrey’s tone carried just the right amount of warning and Bennard swallowed thickly. No doubt he had visions of charging north anyway, of forcing us to follow, if only to keep the consequences of his actions from catching up to him.

“Who will you send then?” he growled.

“We have secured the assistance of Forrest Frey—”

“The Fool Frey!?” bellowed Bennard, surging to his feet. “You insult me!”

“I’ll grant he was an optimistic youth,” I said, keeping my tone mild and refusing to crane my head to peer at him. “But time has tempered his view and he is loyal to me. A few of your Stormlander friends will accompany him of course… and a few knights from my own household.”

Cregan would find it hard to imprison them, given none of them were associated with this so-called crime. I did not expect him to fall over himself to release Beron or be overwhelmed by the attention of the Heir to the Iron Throne. A man like Cregan wasn’t the type, yet I hoped he’d at least meet me halfway on the matter.

Or, in the best case scenario, try and win me from Bennard’s side with promises of support. Of course, throwing Bennard under the bus would be tricky but as long as I could get Lady Elenda to agree…

This is probably why Bennard really doesn’t want to give me control of the negotiations, now I think on it. Well, tough. I will not bend on this. I have had enough of this guy messing me about
and putting my bid for the Throne in danger. He does not know who his nephew is yet but I do.

I may not be willing to chase after Cregan like a bitch in heat but I do know I don’t want him on Alicent’s side because Bennard put him there in his blatant quest to usurp the North. That sounds like a recipe for a personal meeting with Roddy the Ruin. Bennard may have done his best to get the Dustins on our side but Roddy was, and still is given they are both seventeen, Cregan’s childhood buddy, alongside Arra Norrey.

Hmmm, there is a thought. I’ll send one of the midwives to Winterfell with Forrest and see if I can’t have her wages paid for the next five years. His childhood love failing to die in childbirth will probably do much to soften his attitude towards me.

“And what would you have me do while you solve my problems for me?” snarled Bennard, having finally calmed down and retaken his seat.

“I’m glad you asked,” I said, then nodded to Joffrey.

“The Vulture King troubles Her Grace. She is willing to pay for his head.”

“A third Vulture hunt?” he asked. “You saw how the last ended.”

“Betrayed, we’re fairly sure,” I replied. He snorted.

“No shit. When I find out who…” He left the threat hanging.

“We’re no closer to pinpointing the exact culprit but I would advise trusting none of the Stony Dornish on this next hunt,” said Joffrey and Bennard huffed again.

“And what men do I hunt Walter Wyl with? Borros will lend me some, sure but I need every Northerner that settled my lands else I’ll be dead by sundown,” he groused.

“We have volunteers,” said Laenor. “Men who are willing to fight with you in return for land in the lands of Red Wolf’s Hold.”

“Not Northerners though,” he sniffed. I shook my head at the same time Laenor did.

“Riverlanders, Crownlanders and few from Driftmark and Dragonstone,” he explained. Unmentioned were the few spies Joffrey would be sending along in their number. Bennard must have realised we had him because he seemed to deflate soon after, scrubbing at his face with his hands.

“I dislike this,” he said. “You play with my goodfather’s life and send me to chase pests instead.”

“There is no playing,” I insisted gravely. “You are a valued ally and I do not wish to see you harmed.”

It was nice that his past plots had so fooled him on this occasion. Yet, as always, I could not take all the credit. I might have come up with the bare bones of the plan but it had been Joffrey and Laena that had helped me hammer out the strategy we had used to so neatly force him to follow our lead.

Had I attempted to do it alone, he would no doubt be boarding a ship north already, smug in the knowledge I would follow him.

“I will abide by your decision for now, Your Grace,” he said, giving in after seeing no way out
without exposing his true goal so blatantly. “But should your man fail…”

Well, we’ll deal with that when it happens.
“… and so they rode off into the sunset,” I intoned, gravely as a small crowd of sleepy children watched me, “ready to face their next adventure, together.”

The nice romantic ending would have gone better had Aemma not fallen asleep a small while ago. I smiled as Sera scooped her up, barely hiding her own smile. She mumbled nonsensically and curled into Sera’s arms and my smile widened.

“So they will go to Dorne next?” asked Aliandra, sounding dubious. I would have to question Laena to get the details right, no doubt she would be quick to pull apart any inaccuracies that Ser Jason and his squire, who was secretly a Princess called Daenerys, came across in their journey to pursue the evil Prince Maegor, who had kidnapped Princess Daenerys’ sister in a plot to steal the throne.

Okay, it had started as a blatant rip off of Dunk and Egg and… evolved from there somewhat. Firstly, Jocelyn, backed by Alysanne, had insisted Egg be a girl. Further changes had come along in the demand that there should be a bad guy and a princess to rescue from Jeyne, Rhaena and Aly… there was even a swashbuckling pirate the two ran into on occasion, a demand Lucerys had pushed for.

The result was something slightly akin to an old nineties fantasy television shows with Ser Jason and Princess Daenerys slowly falling in love at Aemma’s insistent demand, as they pursued Maegor across Westeros seeking the return of Daenerys’ sister, Elaena, and helped those they met along the way.

At least Aemon, Rolph and Aliandra weren’t set on changing the story and seemed happy with how it was. I suspected my son was just happy I described the beautiful landscapes and characters so well, Rolph… well, I think Rolph had decided Ser Jason was his new role model in life and Jocelyn was his Princess Daenerys, and as for Aliandra… I wasn’t sure if she wanted changes or not, she had never mentioned anything.

I admit, this plot line was mainly for her. Then, she might find a character she likes, or would like to see in the later stories.

“Yes!” I said happily. “Where Maegor seeks to hide with Elaena in the Red Mountains, so Ser Jason and Princess Daenerys will need to treat with the Princess of Dorne—”

“You needn’t treat me like a child,” she interrupted, voice full of frustration.

“And you needn’t be such a pill about it,” snarled Luke, clambering to his feet before I could forestall the coming argument. “She only wants to be nice to you, not that you deserve it!”

Aliandra’s eyes blazed with fire.

“Enough!” I called and both of their heads whipped towards me. “Stand in the corner and face the wall both of you!”

They did not move.

“Now!” Then they did, trudging off. I turned my attention to the other children, who looked more upset now than the sleepy they had been before. I bid Rolph, Jeyne and Aly goodnight, both girls shooting worried looks at Aliandra’s back before they left, Rolph merely looking worried.
Once they were gone, I drew Jocelyn and Alys close.

“You won’t punish Ali, will you Mama?” asked Alys, voice plaintive. “I don’t think you should send Ser Jason to Dorne. Not until Ali has been.”

I sighed, internally. That was a good point from my ten year old daughter that I had somehow missed.

“I will take that into account,” I told her and I felt her relax a little in my arms. “Now, go to sleep. I love you both.”

They left, giggling amongst themselves and my son stepped forth, looking unsure. I dropped a kiss to his cheek.

“Any insights for me that I am blind to?” I asked and he gave me a broad smile.

“No,” he chirped. “Only that if they aren’t going to Dorne I need to know where they are going so I can draw them.”

“I will let you know,” I told him, privately wondering if he wasn’t just angling for spoilers. “Now, off you go. I love you.”

Rhaena accepted my hugs and kisses with a giggle and tight hug of her own in turn, much more demonstrative with affection now she felt secure in her mother’s return.

“Ali was being mean to you, Auntie Rhae,” whispered Rhaena into my ear. “Don’t punish Luke for defending you.”

I sent her off with goodbyes and ‘I love you’s under Septa Leyla’s supervision and turned my attention to the two left. I could see both had their fists clenched and I knew from long experience Aliandra only bowed her head like that when fighting tears. I sighed and called Luke over to me.

“I’m sorry I yelled,” he said as he reached me. “I promised Mama I would stop yelling indoors.”

“And stop calling people names, I would warrant.” Luke picked up bad language like it was a personal hobby. Pill may be a mild insult but it didn’t mean I wanted him yelling it and neither did Laena.

“I am sorry, Ali,” he said, as if the very apology pained him. He was glaring at the back of her head. I hoped that time would see them grow closer because as it stood now, their marriage would not be a happy one at all. Aliandra loathed him because he was another symbol of what her life had become and Luke loathed her because he’d tried to be friendly and been rejected in turn.

A trait that his true father shared.

“Go and tell Septa Leyla that you are to write twenty lines tomorrow about bad language and shouting,” I said solemnly and he winced. Luke did not like lines… or sitting still. He was a bit like Jocelyn in that regard, which was probably why the two got along so well. Both wanted to be out in the air and charging about or hitting one another with sticks…

“Yes, Auntie Rhae,” he sighed eventually. I dropped a kiss to his forehead and sent him on his way.

“Aliandra.” She was crying when she trooped over although she was trying her best to hide it. I pretended not to notice her subtle attempts to wipe away her tears as they came.
“If you disagree with the story, just let me know,” I said gently. She said nothing, scowling at the carpet instead. “I only wished for you to enjoy the story as well—”

“It’s for children and I am not a child,” she said, interrupting me.

“You are three and ten,” I pointed out and she frowned. “You are not an adult. Yet you are right.” Her head jerked up and she stared at me through wide eyes.

“You do not have to sit and listen to them every night. You are old enough to decide your own routine, I think.”

“And I can go to bed when I want?” she asked. “And I don’t have to come see you every evening?”

“If you do not want to, no,” I replied, trying to cover up how much that hurt. I was a jailer, I reminded myself, not her mother. She has one of those. “And I will have a sign made for your door… if you hang it on the handle, no one will enter.”

“Really?” she breathed, smiling widely.

“But,” I said and her smile flickered slightly. “If you don’t let the maids in on a regular basis, you must keep it clean yourself.”

“I can keep it clean!” she protested.

“And can you wash your own sheets? Clean your own clothes?” She deflated a little. “I thought not. Just do not let it become out of hand. It is a privilege and privilege—”

“…comes with responsibility,” she finished, her features going serious. “I know.”

“Good,” I said. “Now, off you go. I will instruct the servants on the change tomorrow.”

She was almost out the door before she darted back, throwing a quick hug around my waist and murmuring a thanks before running off once more. I did not want to linger in the room for a long time, thinking on Aliandra’s behaviour, so instead I made my way downstairs to discover a rather relaxed atmosphere now that Bennard was long gone and Laena, Laenor and Joffrey had broken open the wine. All three were drinking together and sitting in front of the fire, basking in its warmth.

Even if it had not healed all ills, the talk Laenor had finally had with Laena had done some good at least. I dropped into my lover’s lap and buried my face in the crook of her neck.

“What’s wrong?” she asked gently, rubbing circles about my lower back.


“What did he do?” she sighed.

“Shouting… and he called Aliandra a pill.”

“Sounds like Luke,” laughed Laenor and was rewarded with what sounded like a shove from Joffrey given Laenor let out a small squeak of indignation a moment later. “Joff, you spilt my wine!”

I decided, as Laena began giggling at her brother’s misfortune, to explain my somewhat off the cuff decision regarding Aliandra tomorrow, when they weren’t in such moods.
“It’s what you deserve,” deadpanned my loyal spymaster, to Laena’s mirth and Laenor sputtered in indignation once more. I let myself enjoy the warmth of her embrace, driving away the stress of Bennard being here and the murky feeling of shame that occasionally ambushed me when dealing with Aliandra. I felt her kiss the top of my head.

“What did Aliandra do to warrant being shouted at anyway?” asked Laenor. I groaned.

“She found my blatant pandering too patronising and Luke rushed to my defence.”

“Only because he benefits from your pandering. Is his character not a younger version of father?” asked Laenor and I could hear the smirk in his voice.

“It’s his goal in life,” I mumbled into Laena’s shoulder. “He wants to be your father.”

“There are worse things to aspire to be,” said Joffrey, sounding a touch offended. “A dashing adventurer who always gets the girl and saves the day is not a poor role model.”

“Quite,” said Laena primly. “Besides, your daughters insisted on princesses and an evil prince.”

“That was your daughter too!”

“Why are you even arguing about this?” I asked, pulling my head from Laena’s shoulder. She shrugged and pulled me close for a quick kiss. She was still too thin, was the irreverent thought that floated through my head.

“It is the nature of children to bicker, Your Grace,” teased Joffrey.

“See if I grace your bed tonight, Joff,” grumbled Laenor as Laena gaped at her husband in mock offence.

“You should be gracing your wife’s anyway,” said Joffrey ruefully. “Did we not decide on another little one?”

“We did,” I said, suddenly nervous at the thought. From the look of it, I wasn’t the only one as Laenor hid his face inside his wine glass, sipping at the dregs in the cup.

“There is no time like the present to start then, is there?” asked Laena, sounding anxious. “Unless you have changed your mind?”

“I have not!” I was quick to assure them all as Laenor glanced up in alarm. “I am still willing. I just did not expect the suggestion.”

“I find it more amusing that it should be our lovers that push us together,” said Laenor, smiling once more, although his own nerves still shone through. “Should they not be trying to tempt us from our marriage bed and our duty?”

I giggled as both Laena and Joffrey coloured in embarrassment.

“Perhaps they want a quiet night to themselves?” I asked back, taking on a teasing tone. “We are the younger ones after all, perhaps they simply can not keep up with us these days?”

“Oh! How cruel we have been Rhaenyra! We should leave them to their much needed rest, else they’ll never stop complaining about their afflic-ugh!”

The second pillow Laena threw hit me point blank in the back of the head, toppling me out of her lap and into a giggling mess on the floor.
“You are not as funny as you think you are,” she said dryly, although I wasn’t sure which one of us she was addressing. Possibly both of us.

“And I’m only three months the elder, Laenor,” said Joffrey, sounding faintly offended as his lover cackled away at the reaction his joke had produced. I felt something ease within me as I stood, still giggling to myself. Laenor managed to bring himself under control, by degrees, as both Joffrey and Laena glowered at him.

I wasn’t sure why he was getting the blame… I was the one who had started the whole matter. When his laughter became an almost gurgle I held out my hand and he took it and pulled himself to his feet, impish grin still in place.

“What do you say, Princess?” he asked. “Shall we leave them to their medicinal teas and early nights?”

“Yes, let’s. We wouldn’t want them to break a hip now, would we?” He laughed again and waited until we were out into the hall and safe from any thrown projectiles to drop a kiss to my lips, surprising me.

“Thank you,” he whispered again. “Thank you.”
“You have thoroughly read everything Joffrey has given you?” I asked. The earnest face of Forrest Frey nodded back me, his face a pleased smile. He was a sweet man at heart and had Laenor not been available I would have preferred him over men like Tyland Lannister and others of his ilk.

I wouldn’t have had a choice, of course, but it was nice to imagine a scenario where that half forgotten trip to the Trident had seen me married to a genuinely nice man who respected and loved his wife even though he knew she could not love him back, not in the way he wanted, anyway.

“Yes, Your Grace. I will send a raven when I reach White Harbor letting you know of any further information I require,” he promised.

“Then I shall leave you to your wife, Ser Forrest.” Sab hardly waited for me to gracefully retreat before she swept forward and pulled her husband into a rough hug. He grinned, delighted, and wrapped his arms around her in turn.

“It will be fine, Sabitha,” he assured her in amused tones. “I have a dragon merely a raven away.”

“Be assured,” said Joffrey, “That should Cregan take action against your husband, Lady Sabitha, he will have every dragon we can send bearing down upon him.”

“Come back to me, you fool,” she muttered to him, her voice thick with emotion. “I will not raise Manfryd and Olyvar without their father.”

“You will,” he said, with that boyish grin again. “And they shall be finer sons than I have a right to because they have you as their mother.”

She sent him off to his ship after punching his arm. I did not miss the constipated look Bennard watched the ship begin its journey with, nor the way he all but stormed back to the inn without speaking to any of my party. He was nervous, according to Joffrey’s spies. He knew there was little chance of me playing his game now that we had so effectively barred him from pulling our strings.

He’d only been here a week and yet I was already tired of him. He was like a constant storm cloud marring the otherwise perfect weather we’d been having recently. Weather that made me want to spend my time with friends, my children and my extended family. I wanted to make a new babe with Laenor, help Helaena through her own pregnancy and woo my supporters and tempt new ones to me… I did not want to deal with a scowling Northman.

“Who is watching the children today?” Sab asked as we rode back to the manse. I had already made a brief appearance in Court and I was looking forward to a nice day of relaxing. Well, when the dark stormcloud of Falena Waynwood was not on the horizon, anyway.

“Septa Leyla,” I answered.

“So we might yet see Laena at our little gathering?” asked Sab.

“With Falena there?” I asked, more bemused at the fact she’d even asked when she was well aware of Laena and Fal’s little feud. Laena had left early today, citing another make-up session with Laenor. I’d tried to question her over it but she had been evasive enough I’d dropped it after a while.

Things had gotten better recently, I really hoped they didn’t argue themselves into another rut
“You know I prefer her over Falena,” she groused, but ruined the effect by smiling straight afterwards.

“You know I do too,” I replied. I knew Sab knew about us but I was unsure how much Laena had shared with her when it came to their gossip sessions.

“So we have her holiness to look forward to today,” sighed Sab, aggrieved. “Is it too late to sign up to Forrest’s northern convoy? Or convert to the worship of the Old Gods?”

“Little Alysanne is the one to talk to about that,” I japed. “She thinks I do not know her dedication has more to do with her naps in the Godswood.”

Sab snickered in amusement and I turned to find Joffrey grinning as well.

“I’m not sure it’s the approved method of worship,” I continued.

“But Mother’s Mercy, she doesn’t have her own personal Falena telling her how to do it properly!” cackled Sab.

“Perhaps we could send for one,” said Joffrey solemnly. “Surely we are remiss in our duties if we let instruction in religion slide.”

Sab nearly fell from her horse as we dismounted, too busy giggling at the thought, I supposed.

“We are being cruel,” I pointed out, feeling vaguely disloyal. “She is overbearing because she loves us, in her own way.”

“That’s true,” said Joffrey, well aware of the fact that she knew of him and Laenor and had said nothing regarding it. “But none of your other ladies so flatly refuse to serve with Laena.”

“Not even Marya,” said Sab. “And she’s just as preachy.”

“Hush,” I said as we made our way into the manse. Joffrey bid us goodbye soon enough, having paperwork and reports to attend too while Sab and I made our way to the garden. Sure enough, there were my ladies, minus Laena, and I was struck with such nostalgia I was forced to pause.

“I miss Alys.” It was all I could think when my legs refused to carry me further.

“I never met her,” said Sab gently. “But if she was anything like Sera describes her, I wish I had done.”

I was saved from ruminating on just how deep Sab’s crush had gotten by Maris noticing us and calling us over. It was enough to get my legs moving once more and I was soon sat on the blanket they had laid out. Perhaps I should have been able to predict Maris bringing cards. Ten years and marriage had not dulled her cunning in that regard, although we strictly no longer played for money these days.

“Ah, our Princess and her loyal knight!” Maris laughed as Sab dropped to her knees as well, eyeing the cards Maris was dealing with trepidation. “Did you see off Ser Forrest? Tell me, did our stoic Lady Frey shed a tear or two?”

“She wept like a babe, Maris,” I joked, taking my cards from her and examining the others. Marya had her look of fond indulgence, Falena her look of vague amusement and Sera looked as if the
idea of Sabitha of all people weeping was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

“I can see that,” said Falena. “She strikes me as the type to weep when separated from Ser Forrest.”

“I am being mocked, my Princess, what is it you call that? A hostile work environment?”

“Indeed,” I replied. “Be careful, Falena, or HR will need to speak with you.”

She snorted.

“If we even had a… HR, I would have liked to have spoken with them long ago,” she sniffed, before smiling a little more genuinely. “In truth, I hope Ser Forrest returns home soon and whole, Sabitha.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling genuinely, if looking a little puzzled. Sabitha did not often see this side of Falena. She saw the stubborn woman who refused to be in the same room as her friend when no one else had such a pronounced reaction far more often.

“How are little Alys and Jocelyn getting along in their flying lessons?” asked Marya, changing the subject. “Alys had a lot to say on the matter.”

“I bet she did,” laughed Sera. “She ended up taking them with Laena of all people.”

“And what does that mean?” asked Falena, too fast and in a strangely neutral tone.

“That our good Lady Velaryon takes it about as seriously as most men take training a squire. She’s had Alys learning about diet plans and riding gear more than the poor girl has actually flown her mount,” came Sabitha’s reply.

“It’s true,” I replied. “I’m the one that fields her complaints.”

I watched as Falena relaxed slightly and resolved to speak with Patrek on the matter next time I ran into him. She could not keep assuming the worst in every given situation when it came to Laena, people would soon notice and it would only further add fuel to the flames of rumour. The Septon and I did not speak enough, he was too busy with his Sept and his school, and I had let this odd not-quite feud go on far too long.

“Poor Alys. And Jocelyn?” asked Sera.

“Well enough. Morrigan grew with her so it’s an easier job to teach her. She’s responding well enough to the whip but both still have a long way to go.”

“Well,” said Maris. “That is the nature of things, is it not? Practice, practice, practice!”

“Indeed. Dedication has its own rewards,” said Falena with a smile.

“So I would encourage you all to pick up the cards and play so that one day you may challenge my skill,” said Maris happily.

“At cheating,” whispered Sera in a manner so that we could all hear it.

“What was that?” called Maris, eyes glittering.

“She said, Lady Strong,” drawled a familiar voice from behind us, “that we might all hope to one day challenge your skill at cheating.”
Sabitha wheezed in shock as we turned to find Laena approaching, a grin on her face for all that she was dressed in her padded gear still and looking fresh from the training yard. She dropped down next to me and I wrinkled my nose. She had not bathed, that was for certain.

“Have you got anything to drink?” she asked, pulling her gloves free. “I’m parched.”

“I thought you were spending the day with Laenor,” I said, keeping one eye on her and one eye on Falena as Sera poured her some juice. Fal had gone pale with the realisation she had no polite escape from the forced socialisation with my dear goodsister, and judging by the way Marya had just laid a hand on her shoulder, I was willing to bet Lady Hastwyck had just ended any rude ways to escape as well.

“I was intending to, but he went off to sulk after I knocked him into the dirt!” she crowed, far too pleased with herself.

“And you came to tell us all about it before bathing?” I asked and she blushed a pretty red.

“It is an achievement for her,” said Marya and then blushed the same colour Laena had gone when we all turned to her in surprise. “Byren told me. Laenor usually wins but the bouts grow ever closer.”

“Well then” I said turning back. “I will think of some way to reward you later. After you have bathed.”

“And how long will you be out here? I want to join in, you know?” My ladies snickered as Laena pouted, her own violet eyes flickering towards Fal who looked torn between amusement and being tense.

“I offered to let you join this morning,” I told her mildly. “Besides, Sab and I have only just arrived. Go take your bath, I swear we shall all be here when you return.”

In Falena’s defence, she waited until Laena had disappeared inside the manse before rising to her feet. Or trying to, anyway, Marya was quick to pull her back down.

“Come on Fal, when was the last time we were all together?” she asked.

“We have been planning this for a while and we do have a meal planned,” said Sera, smiling. It was a nervous smile though. You would have to be blind not to pick up on the poor relations between the two.

“Very well,” she sighed. “I will remain.”

“We have spoken about this,” I reminded her, accepting a glass of juice from Maris. “Multiple times as I recall.”

“Don’t spoil it now,” cried Sera. “Fal will stay!”

Falena Waynwood’s eyes did not leave mine until Maris forcibly parked herself in between us.

“What I want to know is how the children have been silent for so long? Should we not invite them to come and play with us?” A good suggestion, I thought with a sigh, although my ‘brood’ and my ladies children all at once…

Alas, nobody else piped up any objections and soon the garden was awash with our children. Sixteen children… although they all seemed content to play and leave the adults to their boring
talking as they ran Septa Leyla and themselves ragged. Even Aliandra’s mood had evidently improved as she chased Alysanne about for something the girl had said in jest.

“Do you not feel the urge, Fal?” asked Marya as her own son, Edmund, successfully tagged Manfryd Frey, a boy twice his age and size.

“No especially,” she replied. “I am content with my service to Rhaenyra… and to the Faith.”

I let them chat as I watched the children play. There were the two Frey boys of course, they both resembled their father and thankfully he was a far cry from the ‘weasels’ that Walder Frey would make of his House. Manfryd was ten and Olyvar was seven. Two boys for the spare, it was enough for Sab and enough for Forrest too.

Maris had nearly caught up to me. She had gone into her marriage terrified she would not birth a child, that she would suffer as Laena had, that she had fought against the Hand himself so hard only to condemn Harwin to a childless marriage… and promptly popped out three Strong boys; Joffrey, Osmund and Walter who were eight, seven and five respectively.

The last was Marya’s boy, Edmund. Helaena’s extended stay in King’s Landing as war with Dorne raged on saw her sworn sword in my proximity a hell of a lot more than he had ever been before and he had finally noticed Marya’s interest in him. It had been a sweet thing, to see her marry for love. She had given him a son too and wished to give him more, although Helaena was the preventive issue there. The five year old Edmund was hardly going to get more siblings with my sister haring about Westeros.

“Well,” I said, as I spotted Laena approaching once more. “Laenor and I are trying for another.”

At least the baby talk would keep Fal and Laena occupied. I hope she appreciates my sacrifice.
“I’m considering pushing him down the stairs and having done with it,” groused Maris. “The man is infuriatingly hard to pin down.”

“I have noted as such as well, Rhaenyra,” said Corlys. My goodfather had been thrilled to learn we had taken his advice and started trying for a child once more. Weirdly thrilled, actually. It must have been weighing on his mind for quite some time. I had been expecting him to nod in that regal way of his and be on his way as if we had done nothing more than inform him of the weather, and yet he’d sighed in relief and thrown his arms about his son happily.

“So we are unable to pinpoint exactly what he is up to?” I asked, frustration evident in my voice.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” sneered Maris. “He’ll be jumping to obey Her Grace like the good dog he is.”

“If he is hers in truth I would be surprised,” said Joffrey. Maris rolled her eyes.

“So you have said before, yet we have seen little evidence of this,” she replied. “He strikes at the Blacks when he can, he chases off those we try to tempt in and he makes examples out of lords when she snaps her fingers.”

“Yet he likely killed her father,” said Joffrey. “I doubt even Alicent would order that.”

“Never underestimate her type,” said Corlys, solemnly. “She has shown there are few depths she will not sink to in order to put Aegon on the Throne.”

“But the fact remains we have no clue of his day to day operations,” I pointed out after we were silent for a moment. “We have no clue if he intends some grand scheme or whether he is barely keeping afloat.”

“I’m inclined to think that playing the role of lapdog is keeping him busy… that and his official duties, of course.” Joffrey was still somewhat miffed I had refused to put his name forth after Jaremy’s death. Yet as I had explained then, to reveal his talent was to ensure Alicent would seek to kill him.

“But why?” I asked, rubbing at my face and grimacing when I managed to hit myself with the prosthetic. “Why play the lap dog so ardently?”

“Because he has something planned later,” said Corlys. “And he needs Alicent’s trust and cooperation.”

“His true goal likely relates to myself,” Joffrey told us. “Although I confess myself at a loss at what he could want.”

“I still say we ought to look into Alys’ death again,” mumbled Maris. “You haven’t seen him with his family. He hates them. He can barely hide it.”

I squirmed in my seat. The idea of Larys being responsible for Alys’ death… I had often ruminated it could have been him, that he had accidentally poisoned his sister in an attempt on me and yet Maris… Maris was adamant that if it had been him, it would not have been accidental.

“If he so hates you all, why work to help you marry Harwin?” Corlys asked. There was little
judgement in his tone, I suspect she had him half convinced, but he was a sceptic at heart.

“Because he thought I was barren. Then he could kill Harwin at his leisure and seize Harrenhal legally,” Maris replied as if it were obvious truth and not mere speculation.

“And when you started having sons?” I asked dryly.

“Our little alliance ended. I have told you all this before.”

“It is a hard thing to swallow,” said Joffrey. “That a man could do such a thing to his family. It would be like… hating father or seeking to kill Luce and Martyn…”

“And I will say what I always say,” she said, frustrated, as I tried to wrap my head around the idea of Larys killing Alys and seeking to kill Harwin. It was hard… yet hadn’t he been suspected in Harwin and Lyonel’s canon deaths? It all seemed so far away… so hard to grasp.

“This is getting us nowhere,” I finally said. “Joffrey, have some more men set on Maris’ sons. If Larys is a kinslayer, he will want to kill them as a priority.”

Maris shuddered and Joffrey nodded, his hazel eyes serious. I turned to Corlys, who had sat back in his chair, evidently satisfied with the move.

“Have we any news from the east yet?” I asked. His violet eyes darkened and he sighed, running his hand through his hair. I hated moments like this, moments when he truly looked his age. It seemed wrong, somehow, for him to seem so frail.

“No. I was not expecting anything solid yet, in truth, but I expected… something,” he said. “None gossip more than sailors, Rhaenyra, if Daemon were in Qarth then we should know about it already.”

“Laena says she spoke to people who saw the dragons, though,” said Joffrey. “And she did not think they were lying. They seemed genuinely afraid.”

“We can not go to my father with only one report, though,” I explained. “He will want details… especially if there is a second dragon involved.”

“Where would he get one?” asked Maris. “I admit my knowledge is mostly second hand but… you hardly find them just lying about.”

“He had eggs,” said Corlys. “Viserys made him give them up after the whole debacle with Mysaria, but we all know Daemon, he is the type to keep some behind.”

“To never let go of a potential tool,” I spat, the old hate taking me almost by surprise.

“Then we are going in circles once more,” said Joffrey. “On both the matter of Larys and your uncle.”

“We can not tell father until we know more,” I insisted and Corlys nodded.

“And neither the King or the Hand will hear complaints about Larys without proof,” sighed Maris.

“With no new information to truly discuss on either matter…” Joffrey trailed off but we got his message. Corlys and Maris rose all at once.

“I shall see if I can not win more stories of Larys from Harwin and Sera,” said Maris, giving me a mock bow before leaving. Corlys did not offer any more solutions, merely giving us both a grave
nod and disappearing. I leaned back in my chair and groaned in annoyance.

“Can you not give me good news?” I asked plaintively.

“I was saving my good news for the family meeting,” said Joffrey sounding amused. My eyes snapped to his.

“Tell me you aren’t lying? Tell me there is good news?” I asked and he shrugged.

“It is promising news,” he told me, voice hesitant. “Lady Tyrell has agreed to a meeting between little Lyonel and Aemma the next time she can bring him to the capital.”

That was… more than promising, I thought as relief and shame fought for dominance in my gut. The Tyrells may not be the rulers of the Reach that they were in the time of Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon but they still commanded respect. Them coming down on my side would give me more ways to check Hightower power in the Reach…

“Truly,” I breathed, closing my eyes for a moment.

“She is also considering a Florent betrothal as well,” he reminded me dryly.

“What is a Florent to a Princess?” I asked tartly and he chuckled again. Then he frowned.

“Speaking of which… come in Aemma!” he called and sure enough, the door was pushed open and my youngest put her head around the door.

“Hello,” she said upon seeing us. “I was looking for Mama.”

“You have found me, little one,” I said, patting my lap. She trotted over and seated herself upon my knee, putting up with my cuddles and kisses with a solemn air. I sighed.

“What has happened?” I asked. “You are not usually so quiet.”

“I am very quiet,” she said, offended.

“True,” I conceded. “Then may I rephrase my question? You are not usually so grim.”

She frowned as she thought that over and my heart sunk further. Had she heard Joffrey and me talking? The door to his office was thick and it was easy to see if anyone was standing close enough to listen in due to the shadow they cast.

“Auntie Helaena visited while you were talking,” she told me. “But she’s gone now.”

“Oh,” was all I could say to that.

“She said she was here to talk to Alys but Alys said no and hid in her rooms.” My gaze travelled to Joffrey, who just looked tired. “So Auntie Helaena went home but she told me to say hello to you for her!”

“I see,” I said stiffly as she wriggled about on my lap happily.

“She was telling me lots of fun things… and stories. Don’t be sad, Mama, but Auntie Helaena is as good as telling stories as you are.”

I smiled at that and Aemma smiled back.
“She learnt from the best,” I said and Aemma giggled.

“I will see if I can’t have some juice sent down,” said Joffrey, standing up and making his way to the door. I frowned. He was slow today and leaning on his stick more heavily than I would have expected. Aemma hopped off of my lap and scrambled to open the door for him. He beamed at her before disappearing. She closed the door after and made her way over, her smile having faded a great deal.

“And now you are grim once more,” I chuckled, trying to hide how nervous her behaviour made me. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, really,” she said, looking suddenly nervous. “Mama, I am six now.”

“Yes, you are.” I said, a pit of dread opening up in my stomach. She was not the nervous type, she wouldn’t last as Rhaena’s friend if she was given Laena’s daughter was bossy at best and an absolute horror at worst. Yet here my daughter was, maintaining eye contact with me and looking as if she were on the verge of throwing up. Then she took another deep breath and clenched her hands, jaw set in determination.

“Aunt Helaena tamed Morghul when she was six—”

“No.” The volume of my voice surprised even me but Aemma was completely undeterred by my refusal, although she did take another deep breath.

“Mama,” she said, as if I was the unreasonable one. “Grandpapa always said six for the Dragonpit and six and ten for the Dragonmont.”

“I am not Grandpapa,” I told her, voice stern. “And I say, no Dragonpit or Dragonmont until I say so.”

“And when will that be?” she asked, looking frustrated. “Alys is allowed a dragon!”

“Alys broke the rules! And she is being punished!” I cried.

“But she is allowed it!” Aemma protested. “And you’d let Aemon go to the Dragonpit!”

“He is eight! Besides, Aemon has never brought up such a desire to me,” I told her. “He is content to wait until he is six and ten.”

“But I’m not,” she whined. “I want to fly!”

“You may fly all you wish on Syrax,” I said, wincing internally as frustrated tears began gathering in the corner of her eyes. “Aemma, please—”

She shook her head violently.

“I will be good! I promise! I will look after her and care for her! I will fly her everyday and learn all the lessons you want me to!” When I was speechless she forged onward. “I will even learn from Auntie Laena! Or Grandmama Rhaenys!”

Outright refusal was not going to work, I realised. She wanted this dragon too badly and saying no was only making her more desperate to convince me to let her try for one… I thought of the little hatchlings in the pit, of the heat and the danger… my stomach turned and I closed my eyes as visions of her injured, or worse, danced across them.
I thought of myself, aged seven, trekking across that mountain looking desperately for Silverwing. If I had known what trouble it would cause, would I still have done it? I had no doubt Aemma would bring the matter up if we were to keep arguing.

I ran my hand over my face and sighed heavily.

“I will speak to your father,” I decided finally. “And we shall decide together.”

I watched as she clasped her hands together in glee before rushing forward and throwing her arms around my neck.

“Thank you Mama! I promise I will be good!” I rubbed her back as she did her best to cause me physical pain with her squeezing.

“It’s not a yes,” I protested.

She drew back, smiling broadly. “But it isn’t a no!”

“It depends on what your father says,” I warned, privately adding that it would have to be a convincing argument as I still had no intention of letting her have one.

“Papa will say yes,” she said with all the confidence of a six year old that had her father wrapped around her finger. Yet this was not a new pony or a trip to see Hull.

“We will see.”

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