The Dragon of Harrenhal
by CaekDaemon

Summary

Carik is the perfect prince and bastard son of the Emperor of Rivellon, groomed for the role of inheriting the planet spanning realm by his father's greatest friend and most trusted ally, Maxos, the greatest wizard to have ever lived. He is sixteen years old, and his mentor believes he is almost ready for the day he will inherit his father's realm. He has been schooled on law, governance, the sciences both magical and physical and how to lead an industrialized army to victory.

He's also half-dragon...and sixteen years old, with all the problems that entails.

Not long after finding out about his parentage, magical shenanigans result in him being sent to Westeros, just before the tourney of Harrenhal...

Notes

This is the ISOT of a single man, the protagonist of the DraCo, when he was only sixteen
years old, to ASOIAF right before the start of one of the most important events in the recent history of the Seven Kingdoms; the Tourney at Harrenhal.

For people unfamiliar with Dragon Commander, I'll explain some important stuff about the character before we get going, so people new to the setting can get their bearings as quick as possible!

Carik - the character being ISOT’d - is the player character of the Dragon Commander game, which is part of the Divinity universe and is actually the earliest game in the setting by chronology. Magic is common there, very common even, with enchanted weapons and armor being plentiful, and the Undead - walking skeletons - being one of the five main Civilized Races that form up the Empire of Rivellon, the world spanning nation that conquered everyone else a generation before. Carik is the bastard son of the Emperor of Rivellon, sent into secrecy with the Emperor's best friend and raised in secret to inherit the Empire as the perfect prince, as all the Emperor's trueborn children have been corrupted by demonic whispering and are, well, stark raving mad, as bad if not worse than Aerys the Mad King.

Oh, and he's also half-dragon. His mother, Aurora, was a dragon wearing the guise of a human woman who fell in love with his father, Emperor Sigurd, after being fascinated by the war machines he had used to conquer the world - hovering tanks, walking tripods and zeppelins when everyone else was still using pikes and muskets - which themselves were designed by a card carrying villain, Corvus, a demon who had happily designed them for Sigurd so that the entire world could be carried forward a few centuries in technology...and thus bring the entire world to an age of industrialized warfare on a planet wrecking scale.

It's complicated.

Anyway, Carik has a small portion of his mother's abilities, a power that is growing stronger and stronger with age and experience. The best way to describe his mother's own power is as ASB, since she could certainly do cross universal ISOTs on her own accord, not to mention create objects from nothing and such things like that. Now, Carik doesn't have that level of power, and he won't have it for a very long time in normal conditions, but he does have the power to switch forms between human and dragon, as well as possessing a wide variety of physical traits, like exceptional eyesight, great memory, great strength and innate magical potential, combined with being groomed to inherit the Empire from birth. However, he does have some baggage coming along with that - his father never visited him...and his mother was killed by Corvus while still recovering from his birth, as well as being raised with a different political system in mind.

Not to mention being sixteen...with all the hormones and problems that entails. A normal teenage boy getting dumped by his girlfriend might go cry as if it was the end of the world or hit a wall. A teenage Dragon Knight like Carik getting dumped might punch through a wall, or fly off for a while to cool down...or maybe start a fire to try and vent their feelings.

That doesn't mean they might not have good intentions, though :D

Anyway, hopefully that helps explain what our protagonist is The rest should be easy to get from the story, but if you want me to explain more, just throw a question in the comments!
Uh-Oh.

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Somewhere on Orcha, 22nd of February, 8797 Anno Rivellonis.

Carik looked up at the tall and proud tower that had been his home for the last sixteen years, the battletower of the most powerful wizard who had ever lived, his foster father Maxos. The tower's great libraries were filled with books from a hundred different lands, some written in languages that had been dead for millennia.

He'd seen thick, hefty Dwarven runes, smooth Elven calligraphy, and even the beautiful handwriting of those Undead who had chosen to continue being scribes in death as they had done so in life. Rumor had it that his mentor, this one-of-a-kind wizard, had tomes from other worlds, too. But that's just a rumor, isn't it?

He found himself looking up, towards the tower's summit, from where he was standing in one of the great gardens that surrounded its foundation. The peak of the tower seemed to pierce the skies above, as tall as a mountain and easily the biggest building for a hundred miles around in any direction. He appreciated the thought; looking down on the land from high above felt natural, thanks to the dragon's blood that coursed through his veins and called for him to spread his wings and leap into flight to soar amongst the clouds.

He chuckled to himself. After what happened the last time he'd tried to land on the tower roof, he didn't want to trouble his foster father more than he ended up absolutely having to do so.

But he doesn't mind letting me fly around or go to the mountains.

...though the list of things he lets me do is shorter than those he doesn't.

He sighed. The wizard was the closest thing he had to a father in life, having never known his real father or even the mother who'd birthed him, but Maxos also tried far too hard to keep him under control. Only on rare occasions was Carik allowed to leave the tower after sunset to wander the nearby town, and these moments were getting rarer and rarer by the year.

Carik was sure that Maxos was even trying to stop him from getting close to any of the local girls that he liked. He knew this because, each and every time he so much as held hands with one of them, their fathers would suddenly get a job offer in the Heartlands that paid so well and had so many privileges attached to it that none of them ever refused. Noticeably, each of them also took their families with them. Carik loved his foster father, he really did, but this incident had occurred maybe seven times before he realized what Maxos was doing. Perhaps it was his dragonblood, but he was getting tired of it.

He's been trying to control me for too long! I want to have a life of my own, not just do everything he tells me to!

That's where his plans started. He wanted to leave Maxos' rigid control of his life behind, and fulfill his lifelong dream of exploring the uncharted wildernesses of Rivellon as an adventurer, in search of fame and fortune.

Most importantly, though... he'd find a place for himself in the world.
I can't just stay here as his... pet Dragon Knight forever. He shook his head at the thought. I want to do things with my life, see the world, make a difference!

I don't want to just... fade away into obscurity and only be remembered as the boy who was half-dragon! Oh, Maxos had taught him all sorts of things as Carik had grown. How to mend his own clothes, how to speak formally, but the strangest of all was how to use a sword, which he could only describe as... quaint, considering that bolt-action rifles and now the new automatic ones had utterly replaced swords, bows, and muskets in warfare.

Sigurd's Conquest had seen to that. Absently, he drew the sword from its sheath and held it up to examine its blade by its hand-and-a-half grip. He even gave me an enchanted sword, though most of its magics are still locked away until I'm of age. The blade was a remarkable weapon, the steel a unique smoky dark grey with faint ripples running through its body. He'd never seen such a design in any other sword; a beautiful and artistic look that stood in marked contrast to the plain design of the cross-guard, hilt group and seven-sided pommel. Maxos had told him that the smoky dark grey color of the sword blade was the result of a great deal of magic spells being imbued into the sword at every step of the forging process, never mind all of the enchantments that had been laid upon it as well.

He says it'll get stronger with each birthday. That was an interesting statement, given how he'd once cut an anvil in half by accident and the blade hadn't snapped or even lost its edge! How much stronger could a sword be? How would its other magics be unlocked? Questions, questions and not an answer in sight!

He looked to the top of the tower again and sighed, sheathing his sword. Well, let's get this over and done with. I'll ask him to let me go, and if he does, no problem. If he doesn't... well, I guess I won't be coming back the next time I go flying.

Carik entered the tower, determined to talk to the man who had raised him all these years. As he reached the top, however, he grew rather nervous. He had dreamed of being an adventurer once, just like the ones in the old stories who went off in search of hidden treasures and powerful artifacts, becoming rich and famous and eventually marrying the woman they'd fallen in love with, somewhere along the way. What would be better suited for a Dragon Knight like himself?

It was the stuff that legends were made of, and besides, it wasn't like he was the son of the Emperor of Rivellon or anything.

Right?

Carik stepped forward, a fire of determination raging in his heart. The tower was made of brilliant white marble, the floor cleaning itself behind him with floating dust pans and brushes constantly at work with every step he took, all to ensure that the room was always in immaculate condition. A torch drifted over towards him from a mounting on the wall, hovering a foot away from his left side as he walked across the room to the only staircase in the tower. Even then it only had a dozen steps, the bottom ones moving to the top as he walked up them. The sight made him chuckle. Maxos always likes trying to do new things with his magic, just to see if he can. He's the most powerful wizard ever, he's done things no one could have ever imagined before. The steps constantly shuffled themselves as he passed dozens of doors, heading to the top floor where Maxos kept his study.

...and he has a flair for the dramatic. He'd caught a look outside from a nearby window, where the clouds had gathered. I'm half expecting it to suddenly start thundering outside.
His ascent up to Maxos' chambers felt like an eternity as he thought about what he wanted to say, what he would do when he was free of the wizard's dominating restraints... and then he saw the door, tall and oaken at the top of the tower, as the steps finally came to a complete halt and refused to go any further.

He swallowed down his anxiety and took a deep breath. Knocking on the door three times, he heard the kindly old wizard say, "Ah, come in!"

Carik wore his most confident face, trying to mask his own nervousness as he opened the door and stepped inside. Near the open window stood Maxos, wearing a long white robe, staff in hand, pondering a crystal ball sat upon a table as it growled the sound of static, like an out of tune radio, its contents a cloudy most flickering with light. The wizard turned to him with a smile on his face as always, looking over him with his kind eyes glowing bright blue, before returning to his work.

"Welcome back, my young friend," Maxos said warmly, absently putting a hand on the surface of the glass orb. Instantly, it began flickering, the cloudy grey disintegrating into a whirling morass of color and the constant buzzing turning to garbled sound all started to merge together into clarity. Noticing Carik's gaze, the wizard explained, "Emperor Sigurd's giving a speech later. What can I do for you?"

Carik breathed in deeply, steeling his nerve. "Maxos, I'd like to leave the tower for a while to go adventuring."

The crystal ball instantly shattered into a dozen pieces as Maxos turned to him, shocked and hurt. "What? Why?"

Just as quickly, he sighed in resignation, turning back to the broken crystal ball and shaking his head. "Never mind. I want to let you go, truly, but I'm afraid that I cannot let you leave Orcha."

"Why?!!?" Carik demanded indignantly. "I'm sixteen years old now, Maxos, I think that I'm old enough to... I don't know, visit the capital or something?! And I'm a Dragon Knight, too, it's not like anyone can hurt me without making it obvious that they're going to try!"

Maxos looked away from the smoking remains of the ball and turned to face his ward, his usual friendly face was now an impassable stone face. Carik bit back a groan, instantly knowing that he was in for a lecture. Long discourses emphasizing loyalty to his friends and family, and how he should always help those worse off than himself and never stand idly by as an injustice was happening, were as welcomed as they were annoying.

Even with the nearest city a dozen miles away and the nearest post of civilization little more than a rude hamlet a half-mile away, Carik still managed to have a few friends whom he met whenever he could. Even if the girls had a habit of moving to the capital not long after he went out with them.

"I'd be happy to take you around Orcha, even into any of the cities," Maxos sighed. "But I can't let you leave the province, Carik, especially not for Ravenseat. The capital would be..."

He shook his head amidst Carik's inquisitive stare. Finally, Maxos said, "I know the question you want to ask, my young friend. Why won't I let you leave Orcha, to find your own way in the world?"

At his ward's wary nod, the wizard stood up, looking more tired than Carik had ever seen before. "Well, I suppose you're old enough for the truth now. I'll say it quickly, to lessen the shock."

A cold chill ran down Carik's spine at those words, as Maxos then said, "You are Emperor Sigurd's
bastard son." He had not hesitated, nor broke his gaze from his ward.

Carik instinctively laughed, thinking that his foster father was playing a joke on him. But Maxos just shook his head. "I'm not joking, Carik. You are the Emperor's bastard son, a child he had with Aurora, a dragon."

Carik's laughter died away, leaving him to stare at Maxos incredulously. The wizard just nodded. "I am not joking with you, I would never think to do such a thing. You are the Emperor's bastard son, and he intends for you to inherit the throne upon his death."

Shaking his head in denial, Carik snapped, "That's the biggest load of--" but Maxos cut him off with an upraised hand as he stood up and walked over to a cabinet that opened up to reveal a false panel in its back that had never been noticed before, concealed by powerful illusion magics. The wizard pulled out a small bundle before he walked back across the room and placed it in his ward's hands.

Vaguely finding himself in a chair, Carik looked down at his hands and found himself looking at a set of dozen hand-colored photographs. Picking up the first photo, he held it up to the nearest light for examination.

He found it... uninteresting. It depicted a man and a stunningly beautiful woman together in a park, with the man hugging the woman at the waist from behind, drawing attention to her belly showing only the slightest hint of pregnancy. He didn't understand at first, only then noticing the woman's shoulder-length golden hair and her loving golden eyes. The same golden hair and eyes that he had.

He looked to Maxos with disbelief. "What is this?"

The wizard nodded at the image. "That is your mother, Aurora. I told you many times in the past before that your mother was a powerful dragon, and that was the body she wore in public until her death." He sighed again, smiling sadly. "Her looks conquered your father's, I would say, though you have his eyes. If not the color, then certainly the shape."

The next photo had Carik realizing that Maxos was telling the truth. The picture showed Aurora, looking tired and sweaty. She was lying in an immaculate white hospital bed, smiling with absolute delight. Sitting besides her was Sigurd, a wide smile on his face. The two of them were looking down at the newborn baby in his arms; a baby with a few small tufts of thin golden hair on its head. "That's...me." Carik realized belatedly. "If this is true...why didn't they ever visit me, Maxos?" he asked, more dazed than anything else. The rest of the photographs showed his mother and father together in various slice-of-life scenes. There was even a photo with Maxos in it, looking uncomfortable as both Aurora and Sigurd mugged for the camera around the dismayed wizard. His heart churning inside him, Carik finally managed to say, "Why did they give me up?"

"It was all because of Sigurd's wife," Maxos began with a sigh. "Their marriage had been purely political, intended to shore up support on Orcha at the start of his conquest, truly, theirs is a loveless marriage if there ever was one. She knew about Sigurd and how he loved Aurora and not her; indeed, she tolerated it, as it was not uncommon for a king or an emperor to take a mistress. She never learnt that Aurora was a dragon, I am sure...but then, you came along."

"She must think I'm a threat."

"She knows you exist, but she is not certain who or where you are and not because of a lack of searching. Your father and I have far more friends on Orcha than she could ever imagine, enough that her agents would never find you here...but the rest of the Empire is not so safe, and as soon as
she found you she would try her hardest to have you killed." Maxos sighed again, turning to look out the window, looking towards the distant capital of Ravenseat over a thousand miles away. "She will do anything in her power to stop you from becoming a threat to one of her children and their inheritance."

Carik frowned in spite of himself. The truth of his origin, learning that he was the bastard son of Emperor Sigurd was certainly exciting, but ruling the Empire as a whole had never occurred to him before...but the idea appealed to him, fanning a flame in the core of his being that had been carefully nurtured by the wise wizard over the many years he had been at the tower. That's why he taught me so much about the Empire's government, the Imperial Army, the economy...I had never realized why, but everything is starting to make sense.

Maxos must have read the confusion on his ward's face, because he said, "Sigurd knew that seeing you would be politically... inconvenient. So he asked me to take care of you here, in this tower, until your mother could arrive to help me raise you."

Here, he shook his head in regret. "As events played out, though... your mother died before she could show up here. Poisoned." He sighed again, and for the first time Carik saw the wizard without any answers. His voice grew low as he continued. "I know not who did it, only that they had to be incredibly skilled to be able to slay a dragon with it, even one recovering from your birth. I have lived for a long time, my young friend, for near two thousand years and in that time I had never seen one like the one that was used against her. Worse, whoever did it knew her habits very well, enough to know a time where she would be on her own, away from any help or anyone who might've been able to witness the event."

"All this tells me that it must have been a member of your father's court. Could it have been the empress? Perhaps, but any poison she might have would never be enough to slay a woman as powerful as your mother. I have been trying to unravel the mystery and I know now that it must have been someone in Sigurd's inner circle - a list of only a dozen names, but I am slowly but surely piecing the puzzle together. Regardless of how it happened or who did it, the death of your mother all but destroyed your father." Maxos shook his head sadly as he thought about his best friend. "After she died...everything that your father was died with her, Carik, perhaps the only thing keeping him alive now is the attempts he makes to help keep you safe."

Carik slumped in his chair. For as long as he could remember, he had seen all the other children with their parents. Loving mothers who gave them hugs and kisses, proud fathers who helped them every step of the way, and even the older and younger siblings with whom they squabbled in sibling rivalries. All he'd ever had was Maxos, who had always said that he was only his guardian and not his father. He couldn't remember a time in his childhood when he hadn't wanted to see his parents, never mind knowing who they were. The tightness rising in his throat was grief, he suddenly realized.

Grief, for a murdered mother he would never meet. For a mourning father who risked everything for the son he had wanted. For an extended family who would do their best to kill him, and whom he would have to kill in turn.

He placed all the photos of his parents in the innermost pocket of his waistcoat, above his heart, where they would be safe and close at hand. He swallowed deeply again, taking in Maxos' words. "So what do we do now? If I'm going to be Emperor of Rivellon, I want to rule as best I can. I want to be a better ruler than my father ever was."

*How hard could it be to rule Rivellon, anyway?*
The wizard put a hand on his shoulder with a smile. "Most of the work has already been done, my young friend. Of that, I am sure. But there are still things to be done, and little time, I would think."

At Carik's questioning gaze, Maxos shrugged. "When I said that your mother's death destroyed your father, I wasn't exaggerating. Your father has lost himself to drink and food well past excess. This lifestyle will kill him before long and he has refused to listen to my advice."

Carik was a little disheartened at the idea that his father, a conqueror, could let himself fall so far. "So...how do we begin?"

"We will travel Orcha, I would think." Maxos offered. "This way, you can see the lives of all the common men and women, the people who work in the fields, the factories and mines from whence the Empire draws its strength."

Carik found himself excited at the idea. Being the emperor will be even more fun than just being an explorer. And, this way, I can help more people!

He smiled. "Then I'll go get ready for an adventure. Come get me when you need me."

He spun on his heels and walked out the door... only to see that the stairwell was pitch black, darker than the darkest night.

Then there was a blinding flash of brilliant white light.

...and then nothing.

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Carik yawned and rolled, his head sliding along grass as he blinked open his tired eyes and started to stretch. Tall trees rose around him; moss covered oaks, beeches, and a dozen different varieties standing for as far as the eye could see, lit by the orange light of a setting sun.

Wha-? What just happened? he wondered, looking around. He'd just been talking to Maxos, getting ready for an adventure, and then... darkness.

The air was moist, much warmer than the cold Orchan winters that he was familiar with. He staggered to his feet to take a look around, and saw only a forest all around him, thick and primeval, as if it had never before been touched by the hands of a lumberjack, the trees truly ancient.

"Maxos?" he called out, hoping the wizard was close by before shouting again, louder. "Maxos!"

There was no reply other than the sound of the leaves moving in the wind.

Well... hell. This is not good.

Instinctively he reached for the pommel of his sword, uttering a sigh of relief when he felt the cold steel of the seven-sided pommel slide against his fingers. He searched the area carefully, trying to find the wise wizard, hoping he was there just as he was. Maxos would know what to do, he always knows what to do!
"Maxos?"

He walked between the great trees, trying to find some sign of the wizard. *Come on, he has got to be here!* He pushed past a low hanging branch... and saw a great tree of white and red, like an oak, except it had blood red leaves and bone white bark, with a face carved into the trunk with eyes weeping tears of red sap. It looked like something the Elves would have made, but he had never even heard of a tree with red leaves and white bark before... and it sent an unwelcome idea through his mind.

...I'm not on Rivellon anymore, am I? And... I'm alone. Maxos isn't here to help me...

He sighed, looking towards the ground, trying to think of his next move when he felt a piece of cold metal at his breast. Looking down, he saw an eye-shaped red crystal tethered to a chain of gold, pulsing a dim red light every other second, giving off an air of great magical power.

*Not that I'm much of a magician*, he lamented to himself. *Things don't go well when I try throwing spells. Maxos always said practicing magic was like trying to tame a wild animal, and mine... well... I should be a powerful mage, I've got magic in my blood, but that just makes it harder for me to take control over it.*

He wasn't sure where the amulet had come from, but something about it told him that he was meant to wear it at all times, to keep it close at heart. So he tucked it beneath the shirt he wore underneath his waistcoat. *Good thing this is just casual wear... now, to take a better look at wherever this is...*

He stood tall, walked into an opening... and switched bodies without so much as a thought, changing skins as easily as a normal man might change clothes. In an instant, he was in his other half, his draconic body, a body that felt like his *real* one, sometimes. He stood taller than an elephant and only a little smaller than most houses, but his dragon's body grew more than double its size every year, and Maxos had told him that by the time he was twenty he would be truly colossal.

*This body has been growing ever since I realized I had it when I was eleven.* With a push of his powerful arms and legs, Carik hurled himself into the sky, unfurling his dark wings and carefully flailing them back and forth in midair to climb further and further into the skies. He relished in the sound of the warm winds racing past him and felt utterly at peace.

*I love the sky. I'm meant to be up here, I can feel it.* He looked around from on high, searching for any sign of civilization.

In the distant horizon of his vision, he saw smoke rising up from the ground. A campfire of some kind, he was certain. *If that's a campfire, it's to be a big one... a hint of civilization after all. Looks like I'll be getting an adventure after all.*

He tipped his wings and made a beeline for the source of the smoke, flapping hard and often to keep himself high in the sky and hopefully out of any danger. Although he knew that he'd be spotted the moment anyone looked up at the sky and saw his great bulk, or saw the shadow he cast upon the ground. *Maxos probably wouldn't approve, but I should find out what the locals are like. I hope we speak the same language...or at least they understand enough that I can get my point across.*

The air grew warmer and warmer as he got closer to the fire in the center of that camp. He started being able to make out the shapes of people as they made preparations to rest for the evening. The presence of humans in this strange new world was a welcome surprise, if a puzzling one. Just then, someone noticed him and shouted, pointing up at him quite rudely. Amidst the screaming panic that
erupted, men rushed out of tents in half-complete suits of plate armor the likes of which hadn't been worn on a Rivellonian battlefield since a century or two before the founding of the Empire. They were holding blades of steel and nowhere he looked could he find anything that looked even remotely like a musket.

A man with shiny grey hair and a crown of gold stepped out of a large tent, with a woman besides him. Another man, visibly younger and with a head of long silver hair and wearing black and red plate armor, sat astride an ashen-colored horse that stopped before the crowned man and the woman next to him. This man in armor was followed by six men in white armor and with white cloaks. That must be some kind of bodyguard detail. I might have great vision, but I can't make out any faces from this high up. They might not look like they have guns, but I won't take that chance. I'd rather not find out if I'm bulletproof the hard way.

Darkness fell across the land as the sun set fully, and almost by instinct he yawned... the sound of which was a deep, bellowing roar in his dragon form. Damn Maxos and that sleeping routine he has me in. From dawn to dusk, every day, regardless of what time it was. That mustn't have made a good impression...

He looped around on himself and headed back the way he'd came, now searching for a safe place to rest for the night. Ideally, it would be somewhere out of the way and out of the woods, where it was far too easy for someone to stumble upon him in the middle of the night. Not to mention leaving him exposed to the elements. I hope there's a cave around here somewhere, but even if I find one, I'll sleep in my dragon form all the same, just in case.

After a short flight, the thick forests thinned out as they met rolling hills. He coasted downwards, gliding close to the ground until he spotted an opening in the side of one of the larger hills. Circling about, stretching his wings as far as they could in his spinning turn, he crushed a small pine tree in his path as he slammed into the ground in a hard landing before the mouth of the cave entrance. It's hard to land when there's so little room... Good thing I'm almost indestructible! He furled his wings again at his side, lowered his head and carefully walked in through the narrow opening, hugging the ground when it became too tight. Fortunately for him, the cave widened on the inside, making it much easier to move and relax. If there's a bear in here, they've got one hell of a surprise coming for them.

The cave opened up into a cavern, which wasn't too moist or too cold, but that certainly didn't make it a comfortable place to sleep for the night. But it is safe. Right now, staying safe is my top priority.

Carik let himself slump to the ground, placing his head in the general direction of the cave entrance before he pulled his wings in close and his tail circled around him all on it's own.

Maxos... I hope you get here soon. Carik thought, feeling miserable. Forget what I said about wanting an adventure, I just want to go home.

He sighed sadly, then let himself fall to sleep.

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The following day...

Rhaegar turned to his companions, pointing the tip of his sword into the heart of the forest. "It looked...
like the dragon flew this way."

It'd been spotted above their camp only the night before, awing everyone who'd managed to lay their eyes on the magnificent creature before it spun about and headed away. Just as his father had shouted for it to come and land. Furious at the beast's defiance, his kingly father had commanded that every able man in the group were to search for the dragon, and he'd promised a lordship to whoever managed to find it and bring it to him.

Of course, Rhaegar had already been putting on his armor when he'd learned about his father's offer. He had already planned to try and find it as soon as possible, whether his father willed it or not. After all, ever since the reign of Aegon Dragonsbane, all dragons were thought to be extinct.

But this one wasn't just alive, it was strong! Its powerful roar had made that clear enough, if not the sight of the huge blades that held its wings together or even its fiery golden eyes, whose gaze seemed to burn into the souls of all who'd seen them, letting the dragon judge them as it saw fit...

_The last dragon was a small and stunted creature..._ He knew this from family lore and from his lessons with Grand Maester Pycelle. _It was very unlike this one. The tourney of Harrenhal will have to wait, no matter how long it takes for us to find it._

Walter Whent's tourney presented the perfect chance to meet with the lords of Westeros in secret and discuss his father's ever worsening... _condition_, that had been weakening House Targaryen's grip on the Iron Throne with every new outburst. Dragons had been the key to uniting the Seven Kingdoms into one whole in centuries past, and they had been the mortar holding it together.

With their effective extinction after the Dance, his ancestors had needed to act far more carefully in the realm that they had built. But if they could find a new dragon and hatch its eggs, then the words of his family would be backed by dragonfire once more, not just by a small number of men able to be raised up from the Crownlands.

Aegon the Unlikely had realized that, but his attempts at hatching dragons had caused the Tragedy of Summerhal and left Rhaegar's grandfather Jaehaerys, the Second of his Name, to rule. Three short years later, Rhaegar's father Aerys, the Second of his Name, sat the Iron Throne during a time of dangerous uncertainties and political weakness. Which Duskendale had so aptly pointed out.

_If we had still had our dragons, the Defiance of Duskendale would have never happened, nor would anyone speak about my father's madness behind his back._ Rhaegar lamented, and not for the first time. _But maybe, if we find it and bring it back to my father... perhaps it might mend his madness enough for him to do no harm to the realm he is meant to rule._

So, it was common sense for him to set out with four of the King's Guard, leaving behind Ser Oswell Whent to inform his brother Viserys and Prince Lewyn Martell to keep his sweet Elia and little Rhaenys and even young Aegon safe while he was gone. There was still an opening in the Kingsguard, but his father had made it clear that he already knew who he wanted to take up the white, though he was reluctant to say who he had in mind. In any case, this meant that Rhaegar had left his family camp with the best swords of the Kingsguard. Ser Barristan Selmy, the Bold, hero of the War of the Ninepenny Kings. Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, slayer of the Smiling Knight. Ser Jonothor Darry, the Brave, a man of few words and uncommon courage. And the Lord-Commander of his father's Kingsguard, Ser Gerold Hightower, oft called the White Bull for his great stature.

Ser Gerold looked up at the sky, at nothing in particular. "Are you sure this is wise, my prince? A
dragon hasn't been sighted in Westeros for nearly two hundred years."

"Until now." Barristan Selmy replied, offering a grin to his commander and brother-in-arms.

"Besides, Ser," Arthur Dayne added with a laugh, "...the Prince has us to protect him. Between the four of us, I'm certain we can slay a dragon if we have to."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary." Rhaegar said vaguely, too focused on finding this great beast.

Jonothor Darry nodded in silent agreement as the Kingsguard followed what they thought to have been the dragon's path through the woods. A creature as large as a dragon was easy to track when it was in the sky, but on the ground or outside of sight? Then it became much harder, and there was the ever present risk of the trail going cold. Worse, this dragon had cunning, as it hadn't burnt anything at all, not even prey. The forest gave the dragon many advantages; the thick canopy meant that it was hard for any of them to see anything past the treetops, and the densely packed forest meant that they couldn't bring their horses... or see very far, thanks to the tree trunks blocking their line of sight.

Clever. Rhaegar noted wryly. *In my books, most wild dragons preferred to fly either to the Dragonmont, or to fly over open land where it was easier for them to hunt.*

The Lord-Commander led the group from the front, so as to be the first target if they were ambushed by dragons, though Rhaegar knew that the memories of the Kingswood Brotherhood were still fresh in the minds of both the White Bull and his friend Arthur, who both looked around often in wary anticipation of an ambush of brigands. *Though I doubt there would ever be any this close to Harrenhal, Gerold and Arthur learned much of how to move through the woods quickly against those bandits, which makes them well qualified to lead the way.*

Suddenly, the Lord-Commander came to a halt, raising an armored hand in utter silence. The entire group coming to a halt as he crouched down and moved forward as quietly and as stealthily as a man in shining white plate armor could. "What do you see, Ser?" the prince asked in a hushed whisper, keeping a hand on the pommel of his sword at the ready.

"Tracks, your grace," the White Bull cautiously spoke at near a whisper, looking around before rising to his full height when he saw no sign of the dragon. The group emerged into a small clearing... and that's when he saw the four prints. They were great depressions into the earth, as big as a barrel was wide, with even deeper sections where the dragon's claws had sunk into the ground.

*But... why are there four prints?*

He walked over to the print closest to him, crouching down besides it, taking in the shapes and details. Some of them were longer than others, matching the lines of the opposite print, but no two of the claws on the same track were the same length or depth.

"This dragon has four legs, Your Grace." Barristan Selmy noted as he examined the tracks for himself. "I thought most of the Targaryen dragons had only two?"

"They did, from what I know," Arthur Dayne nodded in agreement. "I've never heard of a dragon with four legs, only two hind legs to stand on and two wings."

*Two legs...*

Rhaegar looked at all five of the claw marks in turn, then he took his hand away from his sword
before putting his hand into the print's surface... and where his fingers were long or short, so too were the dragon's claws; even with room for his thumb.

"You were right, Ser Barristan." Rhaegar said as he stood up. "This dragon only has two legs. Two legs, and two arms. The front prints are hands, with thumbs and fingers, just like our own." He looked away from the print and to his protectors. "This is no dragon that my family has ever had, nor like any dragon in any of the history books."

Ser Gerold put his foot into one of the hindmost prints. "A dragon like Urrax, perhaps?" he offered. "The stories of that dragon all differ in how it looked, your grace."

A Westerosi dragon instead of a Valyrian one... hmm.

He was about to speak when Jonothor Darry suddenly spoke up from behind the Lord-Commander. "Your Grace, look here," and as the rest of the party turned to him, he was pointing to something with his sword. "These are the footprints of a man." As if to prove his point, he drew a line across the ground with the tip of his blade from a set of footprints behind the feet. Sure enough, this strange man and that dragon were somehow in the same place at the same time.

"You cannot mean to say that the man turned into a dragon, are you?" Arthur Dayne voiced his disbelief.

Rhaegar sighed, sharing Arthur's skepticism. "Aerion Brightflame thought the same, as had my father on more than one occasion... Perhaps the man was accompanying the dragon. A rider?"

"There's more prints over there, your grace, by the trees," said Jonothor, pointing towards a great oak tree not far away. "It looks as if someone slept beneath the tree, you can see it in the moss." Sure enough, a nearby bed of moss had a dip in it about the size of a man's body, one fully-grown. "I believe the rider slept there during the night. Without their watch, the dragon flew off at dusk before returning and being mounted."

"But if they had a dragon, why were they never seen before?" Rhaegar shot back. "Why did they not come to King's Landing to pledge themselves into our service, or even to try and take the throne for themselves?" He shook his head. "None of this makes sense in the slightest."

"We'd best return to the camp-"

Whatever the White Bull had been about the suggest was interrupted by a low and angry rumbling... that stopped just as soon as it started. Then it started again and stopped, just as soon as it had begun, coming and going constantly. Immediately, Rhaegar and the Kingsguard started to hunt for the source of that rumble. As Crown Prince, he was in the middle of their party, sword in hand. If my father was here, he would've burst into a run the moment he heard that noise. I'm not quite so mad as to think that running towards that... that noise could ever be a good idea.

At first, his father had wanted to accompany them, even going so far as to have someone find his armor, but Rhaegar and his mother, Queen Rhaella, had prevailed upon him to think otherwise. Not with reason, but with flattery; who in the family would claim the dragon if it returned to the camp while he was away on the search? His father had begrudgingly accepted that explanation before putting on his finest clothes, but Rhaegar dreaded the idea of his father ever having a dragon at all.

The first thing he'd do is burn Duskendale, and then burn everyone and anything that he thought had ever slighted him. It'd be a catastrophe. He sighed sadly, as he often did. If the dragon bonded with
him, and not his father... then he'd be in the perfect position to snatch the Iron Throne away from his father in a bloodless takeover, letting his father spend the rest of his days at Dragonstone in peace. Never mind ensuring that his father never got his hands on his mother again, as Rhaegar knew full well what his father's "tender" lovemaking did to her even on the best of days.

But if his father claimed it... worse, if it bonded with him... then the whole realm would suffer immeasurably. And the moment the dragon dies, it would be the end of House Targaryen. I've read as much dragonlore as I could find in the camp before we headed out, not that there were many books on it...

_I have to have this dragon, myself or no one else..._

_Although... the scrolls never mentioned a dragon..._

_No, best not to think of that now, I can ill afford the distraction._

The sound grew louder and louder as they headed towards the source; a cave nestled amongst the hills and trees of the Riverlands, a shattered pine tree left smashed against the entrance and a trail of tracks leading inside. Then it stopped rumbling... and he heard the sound of the powerful creature inside the cave toss and turn in its sleep. The angry, almost thunderous sound of its snoring were replaced by much gentler breaths, which reminded him of a pair of bellows.

Every breath the dragon took, he could feel hot air rush out of the cave's mouth, his heart beating to the sound. Everyone could see the scratch marks on the stone where the dragon had struggled to squeeze itself into the cavern.

"When we're inside, make no sudden movements, and not a sound." Rhaegar muttered quietly to his Kingsguard complement, who just nodded silently.

He entered the cave slowly, leading the way as he felt its breathing washing over him, the sound of its breaths echoed off the walls. It was a comforting softness as each new breath from the dragon made the air around them grow hotter and hotter with each step.

Inside, they found the dragon they had searched for.

_We've found it._

"By the Seven..." Gerold Hightower muttered quietly, awestruck by the enormous beast before them.

In front of them was the dragon, now sleeping. Its _forearms_ had talons that were twice as long as daggers, its powerful muscles covered in smooth blackish-grey skin that rippled in the orange light of their torches like flowing quicksilver. From the front of its armored head to the tip of its bladed tail were thick, jagged scales that gleamed like freshly sharpened steel. Two great wings were furled against the strong bulk of its body and from the bones that supported them came five blades on either wing, as long as swords. Rhaegar wagered with himself that those blades were just as sharp as swords, even as he stepped closer to it as quietly as he could within his armor.

_A magnificent creature, greater than I could have ever imagined. Small when compared to Caraxes or even the mounts of Aegon the Conqueror and his sister-wives, but dragons were been said to never stop growing all throughout their lives. I wonder how old this one is..._

Ser Arthur Dayne placed his hand upon the pommel of the great sword slung across his back, Dawn.
Looking towards the sleeping dragon with unease, he murmured quietly, "My prince, we should be cautious. We wouldn't have much roo-

Suddenly, the dragon stirred slightly, moving around in its rest. The wings shifted, revealing great crimson red patches along the side, as its tail slid away from the dragon's body and came to a rest in front of the prince, its blade tip pointing towards him, almost as if the dragon knew where Rhaegar was standing, even as it slumbered. The Sword of the Morning stepped forward, his white cloak rippling with each of the dragon's hot breaths, ready to defend the prince with his life.

Rhaegar looked towards his sworn protector. "Careful," he whispered. "One mistake, and we all die."

He took another step, feeling the great heat of the dragon's body wash over him, as if embracing him, and he reached out with a hand to touch it, his heart thundering in his ears. Just as quickly, he took his hand away at the last second, knowing that to wake a slumbering dragon was beyond foolish.

No, 'tis suicide... but to see a real dragon, with my own eyes... I never could've imagined...

The bladed tail moved again, only a foot away from him, as the Sword of the Morning and the rest of the Kingsguard anxiously gripping their blades tight in their hands. But the quiet rasp of Dawn sliding from its sheath echoed off the cavern walls, and the dragon shifted again at the sound, its tail suddenly jerking away from him in retreat as it began to wake, its breaths quickening.

Rhaegar glared at Ser Arthur Dayne... and then he sighed, resigning himself to the inevitable blast of dragonfire that would kill all of them.

"My prince, the dragon is waking!" the White Bull said urgently, calling the whole party's attention to the dragon itself.

The dragon's tail moved away from them completely, behind its body. Its massive arms moved towards them, setting clawed hands on the ground in front of them. Rhaegar moved back with the group, the Kingsguard drawing their blades in the event they are needed.

The dragon's tail moved away from them completely, taking its place behind the rest of its body as the dragon moved its massive claws towards them, setting them down on the ground directly in front of them, everyone taking a step back as its body turned to face them, everyone drawing their swords for a fight that he prayed wouldn't happen.

Then the dragon arched its back, stretching like a tired dog, its mouth opening in the loudest yawn that any of them had ever heard, its mouth opening up to reveal sharp white teeth as long as daggers.

Mother have mercy... Rhaegar silently begged the Seven for their saving graces.

The dragon then arched its back, pushing itself up off the ground and stretching, as any man would when waking up in the morning.

It took one look at them and exclaimed, "Oh, hello!" Never mind the absurdity of a dragon talking, it sounded cheerful.

Rhaegar felt as though he would faint at any moment.
End of Part 1!
Rhaegar cries...and not in a sad way!

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

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Carik blinked the tiredness away as he looked down on the people who had woken him, standing not far away near the entrance of the cave, with their swords drawn, looking at him with fear even in spite of what he had hoped to have been reassuring words. They were the bodyguards he had seen from the sky before, the men wearing shiny white plate armor with brilliant white cloaks, though not all of them were there, and all of them were unsure how to act. But in the center of the group, in a suit of black and red armor decorated with draconic imagery, with a head of long silver hair and dark indigo eyes, a shade closer to purple than to blue, was the man who seemed to be in charge, his face covered by a look of utter astonishment and confusion. *Maybe they can't understand me?*

He sighed, the men taking a great step backwards as he did, a handful of sparks leaving his throat by accident. What if they spoke a completely alien language, and heard only gibberish from him when he tried to speak? He looked at the men again; the ones in white were obviously knights, and not a single one amongst them looked as if they did not know how to wield the swords they held. Combined with the high quality equipment, it made sense that they were not just an escort, but an elite guard of sorts...and that meant that the one in the middle had to be someone *very* important...a duke, perhaps, or a king or prince. *Or maybe they've never seen a dragon before...* he leaned towards the prince and looked at the patterning of his armor, the dragons lacking forearms and on the breastplate there was one with *three* heads. *...or maybe I'm not the kind of dragon they were expecting.*

He leaned back again, taking in the man's whole shape. He looked...familiar, in a way that Carik couldn't quite place, and the black and red of his armor were the same as the royal colors of his own family, now that he knew he was the bastard son of the Emperor Sigurd. *We even have crests that are almost the same. Gods, what are the chances of that? Finding someone who looks familiar, has the same colors and almost the same crest, on what I think is another world entirely...now, if this is a prince, I best make a good impression. Stay calm, Carik, act natural and don't make any sudden moves...simple enough. How hard could it be?*

His tail idly circled around, placing itself on the ground in front of him as he thought of what to say. *Well, let's hope they're just awed and can understand what I'm saying.*

He rose to his full height by standing on his hind legs, trying to stand as tall as he could so as to be as impressive as possible...but he was half a foot too tall for the cave, and there was a loud, echoing bang as he slammed his horns off the ceiling.

"Bugger!"

*...Maxos would be so proud of me...*

He sighed as the men in front of him went wide eyed. "Sorry," he said, trying to salvage the situation as best as he could, "I didn't realize the roof of the cave was so low. Can you understand me?"

The prince nodded slowly, before asking with hesitation and no little amount of surprise, "You...you
can talk?"

Carik laughed at their surprise and confusion, the deep noise bouncing off the walls of the cavern, almost thunderous within the tight confines of the small cave.

*They're definitely not used to seeing a talking dragon, that's for sure. This'll be interesting, but at least they can understand what I am saying, thank the Seven. It'll make things much easier.*

"I can," he looked to the knights with their blades raised, just as confused as their prince was. One of them had a blade made from some kind of milky white metal that gleamed in the little light there was in the cave, the golden light of Carik's own eyes being reflected in the weapon's perfectly smooth surface. "And I would like it if everyone put their weapons away."

The group stared back at him even more surprised than before.

"Great!" he said, offering what he hoped to have looked like a friendly smile. "I was afraid you wouldn't be able to understand me," He paused for a second to think before carefully saying, "My name is Carik, and you?"

*I'm not on Rivellon, and I don't know how long it might take for Maxos to get here, so there's no real point in bringing up my titles. They'd just cause people to go looking for the Empire, then get me in trouble when they don't find it anywhere.*

Carik smiled again as he extended an open claw, offering a handshake as if he was still in his human body. I'm not stupid enough to switch forms till I know a little more about these people. My human body is strong, but it can't breathe fire and for all I know these people could be cannibals. The prince tentatively stepped forward, sheathing his longsword in the scabbard on his belt.

The prince looked to his escorts before taking a deep breath as he tentatively stepped forward, sheathing his longsword and trying to appear as nonthreatening as possible. Immediately, the largest and most muscular of the men guarding the prince stepped forward as well, speaking lowly, "My prince...are you sure this is wise?"

"If the dragon wished to do us harm, Gerold, it would have done so already."

The prince turned to face Carik fully, looking up to him as he reached out and placed his own hand inside of Carik’s and shook. "I am Prince Rhaegar, of house Targaryen. My father is the ruler of these lands, and sent us to find...you, after you flew over our camp. I must say I am...surprised to meet a dragon that has the ability to speak."

The hand of the prince was tiny in his, like that of a newborn baby when compared to Carik's great claw, so he took care to avoid accidentally crushing his hand, or worse, ripping his arm from its socket by putting too much strength in, letting go as soon as he could to avoid the risk of maiming or killing the prince. Better safe than sorry. I don't know if I could rip him limb from limb, I don't want to find out.

"A pleasure to meet you, your grace."

The prince smiled at him, though it looked as if he only ever did so rarely. "Likewise."

He shifted around to get more comfortable, seeing the glares from the white cloaked knights as he moved...and hearing the soft clang of the red crystal's chain as it tapped against the hardest plates of
his belly. Ever since he had first learnt how to switch between his two bodies, he had known that his clothes had always stayed with the human body, no matter how long he was in the draconic one for. Not once had anything ever persisted from one body to the other, even in reverse when changing from his dragon's body to his human one. But the crystal, the little glowing eye of ruby red wrapped around his neck by a chain of gold had not only come with him, but changed to fit him, regardless of which body he was in. That's never happened before. I've never had anything come with me before, not a single thing. There's...something special about that eye. I'll have to talk to Maxos about it, whenever he gets here. The crystal throbbed with power, glowing with a faint crimson energy and drawing everyone's attention.

"So," said Carik, trying to relieve some of the tension in the air, "Who are your guards?"

"They are the Kingsguard, the sworn protectors of my family." The prince introduced each of them in turn, starting with the large one who had advised caution earlier. "Ser Gerold Hightower is the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard," his attention turned to the man with fair hair and violet eyes of his own, the one carrying the white greatsword, "Ser Arthur Dayne is the Sword of the Morning and one of the most renowned swordsmen in the Seven Kingdoms."

"Wait. Seven Kingdoms? Who are the kings of the other realms?"

The prince quickly began to explain. "There are no other kings, not anymore at least. In the past, nearly three hundred years ago now, my ancestor, Aegon the Conqueror, defeated all of them but Dorne and all the kings swore fealty, giving up their crowns and becoming the Lords Paramount and Dorne later joined the realm through marriage."

Carik couldn't help but smile again. His own father had not just conquered the lands around the island kingdom of Orcha, but the entire world of Rivellon, uniting every single realm beneath his great empire, though the kings and queens and the lords and ladies of those lands became nothing more than ceremonial figureheads. He did it to bring peace to the world, and he succeeded. "Aegon the Conqueror sounds like a truly great man."

"Indeed he was. My family has ruled ever since, though our dragons had died out a century and a half ago, but none of our dragons had hands or the ability to talk, for that matter. You're the first dragon to have been seen in Westeros for almost a century and a half."

So, that explains why they were so awed by me. I'm not just a dragon that can talk, I'm the first dragon they've seen in a long time.

Carik shifted again, eager to stretch his legs properly. "Can we continue this outside? I only stayed in here to avoid getting wet if it rained and to avoid being found."

The prince nodded. "Certainly, I have no fondness for dark caves, either."

Carik smiled again, as the prince led the men of the Kingsguard outside, into the bright sun of the morning. Carik rammed into the stones, forcing himself through the hole by placing his claws on either side and pulling himself out, relieved to be out of the tight cavern. Fresh air filled his lungs as he took a deep breath, then sighed as he stretched out properly. I've only ever slept in that body a dozen or so times...and never in somewhere so damned tight... ****
What a curious dragon...I have never read anything about one like this, in any book. Gods, I could have never even expected anything like this.

Rhaegar watched with a small smile as the dragon stretched out, unfurling its wings as far as they could go, the golden sunlight shining across his black scales and blades as if they were made from castle forged steel and not flesh, blood and bone. Incredible... Massive muscles rippled as the dragon pulled his wings in again, smiling as he often did and looking around at the world with curious, golden eyes filled with what could only have been enthusiasm and a desire to make a name for himself in the world; the same eyes an eager squire might have had. He might be small, but I have a feeling he is still young, with years of growth left. With how clearly the dragon could speak, without much of an accent even, it was clear that the dragon must have learnt how to speak from a lord or a lady, perhaps even having his pronunciation corrected whenever he made a mistake, a mystery that was almost as great as how the dragon had been talking at all. Perhaps the dragon, Carik, is a noble...or mayhaps he was raised by one...hmm.

He made a note to return to Dragonstone as quickly as possible after the tournament was over, the libraries there had more dragon lore than anywhere else in the world, bar the tomes kept inside the Black Wall of Old Volantis. There were thousands of books, carefully kept in the innermost part of the castle, away from the damp mists of the ocean's waves, but even older still were the Valyrian scrolls, some dating back to the time where Valyria was but a small realm in the Lands of Always Summer, but most were from the time just before his family had left the city and moved to the island of Dragonstone. It would be a good place to start, maybe some of the old texts have some information I can use...and perhaps Aemon has a few words, too, I could use his advice...now, more than any time before...

He sighed quietly, hoping it went unnoticed. This could change everything.

The dragon - Carik - looked around as it walked away from the cave's entrance. It looked to him and asked, "What brings you so far away from civilization, your grace? When I was in the skies, I didn't see anything but trees, the road and the camp."

Prince Rhaegar answered, walking at a brisk pace to keep up with Carik's strides. "There is going to be a grand tournament at Harrenhal, the largest tourney the realm has seen since the end of the last Blackfyre Rebellion. Almost every lord and knight in the Seven Kingdoms will be at the great castle when it begins."

Ser Barristan Selmy added, "Harrenhal had been a great castle before it was burnt by dragons."

Rhaegar nodded, "Indeed. Now, it is little more than a shadow of what it once was."

Like my own line...We had been so mighty, once.

Carik stopped in his tracks...and then he smiled again, a toothless smile rather than the more threatening ones he did when he bared his teeth. "A tournament? Can I join? I know how to use a lance, but I am much better in the melee."

Ser Arthur Dayne began to laugh. "I doubt many knights would try and joust against a dragon, yet alone fight one in a melee."

He knows how to joust, as well as how to speak? What else does he know?

Rhaegar put on a smile he rarely felt like wearing, trying his best to keep the dragon as relaxed as possible. His father had always been temperamental, even before Duskendale, but afterwards he
could switch moods as quickly as a changing breeze, being happy, friendly and generous one moment and then being as furious as a wildfire and utterly without mercy in the next, and for all Rhaegar knew the dragon besides him was the same. But whereas his father might hit someone in his anger or sentence a servant to death for arranging his plate wrong or simply because he didn't like the look of them, a dragon that could speak and understand was a thousand times more dangerous; if a dragon - the very symbol of the Targaryen family and the living weapons that had made their conquest possible - condemned them, it would not take long for the rest of the Seven Kingdoms to follow, he was sure. But even if it put less thought into its actions and simply went on a rampage, burning and killing wherever it went, his father was more likely to approve and laugh at what it was doing than to try and stop him, another death sentence to their rule. He seems to be calm and relaxed, but for all any of us know that could be a trick to encourage us to lower our guard.

But so much of what he says just...doesn't make any sense! How in the name of the Seven could a dragon know how to talk, yet alone joust?

Aemon always told me there was an answer to every question, but the only way I will find one for this is to ask him. He might react badly...but I am willing to risk it, if it means I never have to think about the utter madness of a jousting dragon...

Rhaegar looked towards the dragon and carefully asked, "Tell me, Carik, how did you learn how to speak and how to joust, even?"

The dragon looked towards him as it walked and spoke. "Oh, I was taught by a wizard."

...this is starting to sound like the start of one of those adventure stories my nurse used to tell me when I was little...

He looked towards Arthur Dayne, who instantly saw the feelings on his face. Relieving his prince of the duty of learning more about the dragon, he asked on his behalf, "Where do you come from? Dragons have been gone in Westeros for centuries."

"I'm not from Westeros."

"Where are you from, then?"

The dragon's reply was as careful as the question Rhaegar had asked. "A place very, very far away."

Will he ever tell us anything? This is...this is utterly maddening! He refuses to give any answers, and the ones he does give just raise more questions!

The dragon stopped dead in its tracks and began looking around with concern and making the Kingsguard look around for a threat they might not have noticed. Then the dragon sighed sadly, looking at the ground as it continued walking.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked, concerned, but hungry for the barest scraps of knowledge he could get from the dragon.

"Oh, it's nothing."

His brow twitched and he took a deep breath in his frustration, feeling as mad as his father for a brief moment. But then there was a long and deep growl coming from close by, like the sound an enormous bear might make when someone had walked into its territory, but then he realized it was
not coming from around them but from besides him, from the dragon's empty belly.

*It is worth a try.*

"You know, Carik," Rhaegar said with another deceptive smile. "If you come back with us to where my father is, I'm sure he would let you eat as much as you might want in exchange for nothing more than honest answers. I'm sure they'll be breaking their fast by now."

The Lord Commander flashed him an understanding smile before adding, "There is little in the world better than a honey glazed ham."

Ser Barristan caught on just as quickly. "Or a fresh cut of venison in its own drippings."

Jonothor Darry added, "Bacon, cooked crispy, with an egg cooked in the grease."

Arthur Dayne laughed. "All good, but *nothing* is better than a baked pear, sprinkled with cinnamo-

"Fine!" snapped the dragon, glaring at Rhaegar. "Fine. I'll trade honest answers for a hot meal."

The dragon hunched down, lowering itself towards the ground and bowing its head to make more room...and Rhaegar blinked in surprise as he saw what position the dragon sat in.

"Climb on. I'll answer *any* questions you might have about me...after breakfast."

*I...I could never refuse something like this...never...*

He stepped towards the dragon, awed once more as he put a hand onto one of the dragon's horns and pulled himself upwards, Ser Gerold coming over and helping to lift him onto the dragon's back. Even through his plate armor, he could feel the heat of the dragon's body, and he looked down on the ground from a view higher than any horse he had ever ridden on before. Carik moved again, causing him to slide into place behind its head, his legs on either side of the dragon's wide neck. It was an uncomfortable position to sit in for any length of time...but he couldn't care less about comfort, not with a dragon beneath him. *I never thought I would ever ride a dragon. Not once in my life did I ever think it...and yet, here I am!*

He smiled widely, reaching down to pull Ser Gerold up behind him, only for the dragon to move again, picking the large knight up and placing him behind his prince. Rhaegar took a closer looked at the dragon's body as the rest of the Kingsguard climbed on, content to admire the jagged scales that flowed across the dragon's back, each and every one of them a different shape and size, with edges as sharp as razors, but whenever the dragon moved they flowed over one another with ease, never once creating an opening or hindering his movements, while softer skin covered the rest of him, making it ever so tempting for Rhaegar to take off one of his gauntlets and reach out to feel the dragon with his barehands, even if it meant cutting himself on the dragon's sharp plates. *I would wager that his skin could turn aside a blade just as easily as a shield might...*

Arthur took a place behind Ser Gerold, with Jonothor besides him, the two holding onto the Lord Commander, who in turn held onto Rhaegar, who held onto the dragon's horns.

Rhaegar held onto the dragon's two most prominent horns, while Ser Gerold grasped the two smaller ones that grew from the dragon's "cheek" bones. Arthur took a place behind the Lord Commander, with Jonothor besides him, and the two led onto their commander himself.
"Ready?" asked Carik, turning his head as best as he could to look back at him.

"Ready," he replied with a widening smile. This will be...so great.

The dragon hurled himself into the skies, unfurling his smoke grey wings and taking them closer to the heavens with every flap. Warm air rushed through Rhaegar's silver hair as he looked down on the world from above, seeing the green leaves of the forest stretching to the horizon on one side of him, then the rolling fields of the Riverlands on the other, with the road at the edge of his vision, a view that no Targaryen had seen since the end of the Dance over a century before, an incredible sight that only birds had known till the ancient Valyrians had first found dragons, riding them to the four corners of the world as they forged the great Freehold. Nothing in his life could have ever came close to the sensation as they rose higher and upwards, till Carik finally felt comfortable at their height and held his wings straight, letting them glide through the skies in peace.

From so high, he could see some of the other search parties that his father had sent out, already moving as fast as they could towards the dragon's dark shadow, his sworn protectors talking amongst themselves, though he paid them no heed.

For the first time in his life, he wept tears of pure joy.

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End of Part 2!

Chapter End Notes

Even though he might be half-dragon, Carik is still only a teenager at sixteen years old and he's not entirely used to being separated from Maxos for very long, so he's trying to play things a little safe by staying in his dragon from till he knows people better, since it lets him escape from harm with ease, or fight his way out even easier. He might not be quite as wise or as seasoned as he would be if he had arrived in Westeros in five years time, but what he lacks in wisdom and experience he makes up for with no shortage of enthusiasm.

Still, he's hoping that Maxos comes to get him before long. He was groomed to inherit the Empire by Maxos, who ensured that he is good at reaching sound conclusions and so on, but again, youth is clouding things a little.

Oh, and Rhaegar gets horribly frustrated by Carik's evasive answers to his questions, but he's certainly no fool...and when Carik was obviously hungry, well, he knew how to play that to his advantage.
What is a "cornflake"?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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On the road to Harrenhal, 28th of September, 281 AC. (22nd of Feburary, 8797 Anno Rivellonis.)

Carik looked across the land from the skies high above, searching for the campsite he had found the day before, his hungry stomach urging him onward as the prince and the knights looked around in utter awe. I didn't get a chance to have dinner yesterday, and I haven't had breakfast today...I could eat a whole horse! I think I will start with a dozen rashers of bacon... His mouth began to water in anticipation of the coming meal as he circled around, careful to avoid losing the men sat upon his back. He had always had a larger appetite than most men or women his age, enough that he always ate his meals without leaving a crumb behind, but the more shocking thing was what Maxos had once thought to have been an infinite stomach - in the end the powerful wizard had used his power to try and track a piece of bread that Carik had ate after dinner, only to watch it seemingly cease to exist. After over an hour of trying to figure out why it had happened or where it had gone, he asked Carik to switch forms...only to find the slice of bread inside the dragon form's stomach instead. That's why I can't get drunk...well, I can, but only if I drink so much that neither of my bodies can handle it quick enough. Maxos never let me drink anything anyway, so I don't know where the limit is.

I don't mind having to tell them a little about Rivellon in exchange for a nice breakfast. What harm could it do? Maxos will be here by the time we're done, I'm sure. They'll probably never even find Rivellon, even if they have wizards powerful enough to know how to go between one world and the next.

He looked to his left and in the distance he saw the camp, three dozen or so tents surrounding a much larger one, nestled upon a small hill, the entire site ringed by a few fortifications in the form of trees that had been cut back to give them a better field of view. ...why on Rivellon would they build fortifications around their came if they're only a day or two away from a castle. He looped around on a long and slow turn, giving the men upon his back an excellent view as he moved to face the camp and tipped his wings upwards ever so slightly to let himself glide glide the rest of the way down. Easy. I can't do what a blimp does and just take off and land on the same spot, but I can move much faster and turn quicker. There had been hundreds of Impish inventors and tinkerers who had tried to create a machine that could fly the way he did, "airplanes" they called them, machines that were hoped to have all the strengths of blimps without any of the weaknesses, yet most of the time those inventors made a promise that theirs was the right way only to end up killed in some horrible flying accident that turned the public further and further away from fixed wing flight. One Imp thought he got really close, even getting Emperor Sigurd...my father to give him some funding to see if he had it right. He built a plane with two sets of wings, made from wood and cloth. Then he put a dozen rockets on it to power it.

May he rest in pieces, since everyone knows they never found all of them.

As he got closer to the ground, he could see the people scurrying around in surprise, getting bigger and bigger and more and more detailed as he got closer to the ground. Servants ran to get their masters, brave knights and dutiful men-at-arms gathered...and when they saw the prince and his Kingsguard on Carik's back they let out a loud cheer. Their wives and the children with them quickly
followed when they found out it was safe and soon the entire camp was there, waiting for him to land and eager to get a good look. In the front center of the group was the man with the crown, dressed far more formally than before, a woman that could have only been his wife besides him and besides her was another woman, with a young girl at her side. The silver haired man with the crown is the king and that means the woman closest to him is the queen, so...the other woman is the prince’s wife and that is his daughter. It’d make sense for the royal family to be in front for something like this. He could make out the crests of all the men wearing them, a dragon with three heads on most, but he could see the excitement that was clearly visible on the faces of every man, woman and child in the camp.

Finally, he raised his wings ever higher to take away what little speed he had left, bringing himself to a much gentler landing than he had done outside the cave. He jolted forward as his claws sank into the soft earth, finally at a halt

He raised his wings ever higher to take away most of what little speed he had left, sinking his claws into the soft earth and jolting forward as he came to a halt with a much gentler landing than when he was outside the cave, not even twenty feet away from the group...who started talking amongst themselves after one of them pointed out his arms. The king grinned wider as Carik walked towards him and his wife one step at a time, taking a long look at the both of them. The man looked to be in the middle of his life, maybe forty seven or so at Carik's guess, but despite being a powerful king his long silver-gold hair and thick beard reached down to his waist and were tangled and dirty, as if they had not seen a blade for the better part of a decade. If he didn't have that crown on his head, he'd look like a beggar...I bet I look more regal than he does, and I'm sixteen. His cracked fingernails were like long yellow claws, but they were more a mockery of Carik's own, and the king looked at the dragon before him with violet eyes filled with excitement and a wide smile of pure joy. Besides him was the queen, a contrast as great as day and night when compared to the man standing next to her, she looked every part of her role as the mother of the realm. She was beautiful, stunningly so, with her own silver-gold hair carefully trimmed, wearing a fine dress made from black cloth elaborately decorated with red thread, the sleeves covering her arms all the way to her gloves...but oddly, she bore a small resemblance to the king. They're probably cousins. She stood as close to her husband as was expected of her, but no closer, and was clearly uncomfortable at his presence. ...but they're definitely not happy together.

Then there was the second woman, the prince's wife, who smiled at her husband. She was beautiful, too, but not so much as the queen, with dark hair and darker eyes and a tanned complexion, an uncommon sight on the cold isle of Orcha. He hunched down on the ground, and immediately a young man about his own age with red hair and a crest of two griffins, one red on white and the other white on red walked over, helping the prince climb off of Carik's back to the thunderous applause of all. The Kingsguard quickly followed, and together they walked over to the king.

"Husband," spoke the black haired woman with a friendly smile, "How did you do it?"

"I promised him breakfast," answered the prince with a smile that surprised everyone who knew him well.

"You...you promised the dragon breakfast?" asked the queen in disbelief. "Rhaegar, son, I have never known you to be one who japed."

"It is no jape, your grace," said the Lord Commander. "The dragon can speak...Carik is his name."

"That'll never do," said the king, looking the dragon over, smiling at every part of him. Creepy. "Caerix would be better...or perhaps Baelfyre...or better still, Deathwi-"
"I'm happy with the name I have," he said, his voice surprising all before he realized what he had just done. *I just cut a king off mid-sentence while surrounded by all his men...and he doesn't seem very sane if that beard is anything to go by.* "Oh, where are my manners? I do apologize, your grace, but I am content with the name I already have, though I thank you for the excellent suggestions."

The entire crowd seemed to pale, and one woman fainted at the bellowing sound of his voice. *They'll get used to it, besides, Maxos will be here soon...right?* The little girl, a princess if he was right about her father being Rhaegar, looked at him with confusion, not fear, one of only a few to do so outside the white cloaked members of the Kingsguard, while her grandfather began laughing before turning to the crowd and saying with what could have only been a smile. "Get the dragon whatever he wants."

*That's more like it!*

Carik looked around for a cook as he started listing out what he wanted. "I'll start with...four sausages, six rashers of bacon - cooked crispy - a bowl of frosted cornflakes, a cup of tea - two sugars, please - two slices of toast and a fried egg, but we'll see where we go from there."

Everyone stared back at him blankly...except the member's of the Kingsguard who had been with him, and the king and prince.

"What? You promised me a breakfast."

The king laughed again as he ordered the attendants in the camp to start working. "Go on! Cook his meal!"

One of them stepped forward, half brave and half cowering in fear. "M'lord...what is a "cornflake"?"

...whoops.

"Swap that for a bowl of porridge, covered in honey. And the tea, change that for...wine, I guess."

*Maxos never let me drink much, but I won't be able to get a glass of orange juice if they don't even know what an orange is, and it'd be easier to get a cup of wine than a cup of clean water.*

He started walked forward, the crowd breaking up before him. "Now, I wouldn't suppose there is a tent here big enough for me?"

The king rushed up to his side, pointing to his own tent at the top of the hill. "Mine is the biggest tent. Let us dine together, dragon to dragon!"

Carik smiled at the king again. "I would love to, at another time. It was a long flight, I would like to dine alone."

*Because how can I use a knife and fork in my dragon's form? No, I have to switch bodies, and I'd rather be seen as a dragon for the time being.*

The king turned red with anger at the rejection, but before he could say a word Rhaegar walked over and said quietly, "Father, may we talk...in private?"

The king stared at his son suspiciously for a moment before sighing. "We may."
Carik tried his best to whisper. "Then I will leave you two be and go to the tent, and when I am done you can ask any questions you might want."

*They'll probably need a while to send out riders to any towns or anything nearby to get what I asked for...I doubt they'd be bringing bacon on their journey from one castle to another.*

He looked up towards the large tent, covered in black and red stripes and marked with a large banner in front, the symbol a red three-headed dragon on black. *If that dragon had one head, it would look just like the one the Empire uses.* It was larger than it had first seemed from the distance, much larger, looking as though it could get bigger still on open land, even going so far as to have separate rooms branching from the main body of the tent for whatever purpose, easily making it far grander than any tent he had ever seen before on Rivellon, even the old lordly pavilions he had seen in the museums that Maxos had taken him to visit when he was much younger. He climbed up the steep hill unopposed by any guards while Aerys and Rhaegar went elsewhere.

He climbed up the steep hill, looked at with fear and concern by the guards but left unopposed as Rhaegar and his father went elsewhere, away from the bulk of the camp, accompanied by all the swords of the Kingsguard. Everyone watched as he raised the flap with one claw, hunching down and crawling inside. *Seems like I have to squeeze my way into everything here...I hope Harrenhal is big enough for me to land in the courtyard.* He looked around, the cloth of the tent fluttering quietly in the low breeze of the morning; in the middle of the room was a large table, covered by a fine white cloth, still set from when the royal family had their own breakfast earlier in the morning, though all the plates and dishes had already been taken. *I must've got here when they were getting ready to break camp.* He crawled around the massive tent - it was wide enough for him to move, but the roof was too low for him to stand upright properly - carefully moving the dollhouse sized chairs out of the way as he lay on the other side of the table, facing the entrance and lowering his wings and every part of his body so as to avoid making a bump in the cloth, spiraling his tail around the room and the table. *I'm lying down for breakfast...*

He sighed, his hot breath making the flaps of the tent snap open...and then a group of servants walked in, pale in the face, carrying plates, bowls, and even a fork...but surprisingly, no knife. The first one stopped dead in his tracks as he looked up at him in fear, but Carik gestured with one of his monstrous claws at the table and he quickly picked up the pace, hurrying over and setting the plate down in front of him with trembling hands as another placed the wine cup, though it looked as though that servant had maybe a dozen cups themselves before bringing his cup to him, while a much older serving woman with nerves of enchanted steel calmly walked over and placed his bowl of porridge at the side.

"The king doesn't like knives, so we didn't take any on the journey with us."

*He doesn't like knives, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by all the men around him holding swords.*

"Thank you for being so quick, I'll find a way to manage with just a fork."

She gave him a polite smile before leading the others out, leaving Carik alone with the plates before him, smiling. The delicious smell wafted up his nostrils and for a moment he was tempted to simply lift the silver plate up and turn it upside down into his mouth whole, but he waited patiently till the sounds of their footsteps faded...and then switched forms back into his human body. He stretched long and hard, taking a deep breath and quickly adjusting his clothes before taking a brief look over himself; he was in his casual clothes of Rivellon, the latest fashion of waistcoats, starched white shirts
and long trousers with the joins on the sides rather than the front. I wish I still had my coat...but that's at the tower...now, lets see what came with me, other than the sword anyway. He started rummaging through his pockets...and quickly found his pocket watch, tethered to a strong brass chain, peacefully ticking away as it always had, undisturbed by the transition from one world to another. Though I might need to change the time, if Maxos isn't here soon. He looked at the clock longingly, thinking of home - despite all the unhappiness it might've brought up whenever Maxos controlled him too much, it was still his home all the same. It's the only home I've ever known...

He sighed, then moved one of the chairs in front of the table and sat down, ig, taking the fork, stabbing it into a sausage and taking a bite.

He sighed as he ignored the fluttering of the tent's cloth in the breeze, picking up one of the chairs and setting it down besides the table with ease, then slumping into it, taking his fork and stabbing it into a sausage and taking a single bite. These don't taste half-bad, actually...they're pretty -

"You look like my daddy," said the girl besides him, clutching a doll in the shape of a dragon.

Wait.

He looked straight towards the girl in surprise as he swallowed, who looked at him with curious eyes.

It was the young princess from before, Rhaegar's daughter, who's looks made her look like her mother made small. "How did you get in here?"

"Rhaenys!" shouted the girl's mother as she rushed inside the tent, followed by another member of the Kingsguard he had never seen before. "Don't disturb...the dragon?"

She looked to him in just as much confusion as the man escorting her.

"Rhaegar?"

What?

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End of Part 3!

Chapter End Notes

So in this part, Carik arrives at the camp with the members of the Kingsguard and starts eating his breakfast...only for little Rhaenys to find a way inside the tent after he had switched forms. While Carik can stay in his dragon's form for an indefinite period of time, he still likes to be in his human form every once in a while and the reverse is true, too. And if you're wondering about his clothes, they're from the Edwardian era, which I'd judge to be pretty close to what the Empire should be at, all things considered. Of course, the Empire's technological progress is a little...skewed, so by the time he's twenty they'd be closer to the 1920s or so...thanks to a certain man called the Architect and all his magnificent inventions, which means that while the empire use blimps and
many don't think fixed wing planes will ever work, they've also got walking machines and hover tanks. He's still hoping that Maxos will be there before long to fetch him and take him back to Rivellon, but a small part of him is starting to consider the possibility he'll be there much longer than he might hope.

Anyway, for those no doubt horrified at the lack of Aerys being utterly insane, don't worry, the next part is an Aerys point of view, in fact, it's this part from his perspective...so you can damn well bet its going to be insane!

Oh, and the Imps have absolutely no sense of self preservation and actually think dying in an explosion is the best way to die - so Carik saying "rest in pieces" isn't some sadistic joke :p

Oh, and there's a teensy weensy reference in this part ;)

A Wizard, a Dragon and a King walk into a bar...

Chapter Notes

Well, here's the next part! :) It's taken much longer than I could have imagined due to real world affairs being a nightmarish pain to deal with, but my schedule has finally rolled round to the time for this to start getting updates again!

And we'll be starting back on Rivellon before we get back to Westeros!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Meanwhile on Orcha...

Maxos blinked in surprise as Carik smiled, the half dragon prince walking backwards into the hallway as some kind of portal quickly ripped through the hall. "Then I'll go get ready for an adventure. Come get me when you need me."

"Carik! Wa-"

Carik spun on his heels and walked out into the stairwell...and in the blink of an eye he was gone, the portal closing itself behind of him as quickly as it appeared, the portal collapsing in upon itself in a flash of white light and taking the prince with it.

Seven have mercy, what happened? Where did he go?

He quickly stepped forward with his staff in hand, looking about before throwing a ball of magical energy into the hall, a small speck of light no bigger than the flame of a candle...and to his surprise, it travelled in a straight line before floating through the wall, not once curving towards the magical sinkhole that was the sixteen year old prince or deviating from its course whatsoever. A bad sign... Carik was like any other Dragon in that he was a walking well of magic, an effectively infinite supply of power able to be used at a moment's notice, but his youth meant that he had yet to fill that well of power, indeed, it would take thousands of years for him to become as powerful as his mother had been before her death. Such great power is the reason why his spells never quite turn out the way he expects them to...magic is not so much a force as it is an animal, to be tamed and bent to your will, and Carik's beast is growing faster than he is. Once, when Maxos was teaching the young prince of the most basic parts of illusion magic, how to change one's own eye color, Carik had carried it out perfectly aside from a single, insignificant mistake...only for that one error to have made his face look like that of a wax figurine hurled into a fireplace, and if that wasn't enough his eyes hadn't even changed color. Such a mistake would have given any normal wizard a slightly different shade than that which they had hoped for, but for him it changes the entire nature of the spell he is trying to perform...but even those spells he has a complete understanding of usually don't work as expected.

He paused as he thought, brushing a hand through his neatly braided beard as he stood. Perhaps that is what happened here...? He has no shortage of magical power, indeed, he's already more powerful than most wizards in that regard, but he has almost no control over it. Hmmm...he could have tried to teleport down the steps, only to have gone a hundred miles away by accident...no, Carik wouldn't try to do such a thing, not when he knows that he can barely perform even the most basic of spells. No, this must have been something else...but what?
Maxos stepped out into the hall, looking around the empty steps and searching for even the barest scrap of evidence, crouching down and inspecting the floor as he tried to find the tiniest pinch of ash, the lightest scorch mark or anything else that could have told him what had happened...but there was nothing. Even the tiny bits of dust that sometimes found their way between the stonework of his battletower were they same as they had been before Carik had so suddenly disappeared. Where could he have gone? He sighed, rising to his feet and calling his spare crystal ball to his freehand, the versatile magical tool softly floating through the air before coming to a rest in his hand, its clear surface starting to fog. This should give me some answers.

He focused his mind and his will, and he commanded with a clear and sharp voice: "Reveal to me Carik's location."

The mists inside the ball swirled and churned upon themselves as the ball's magics searched...and then the smoke began to form into letters, rotating and shifting to arrange themselves into words before floating to the surface and creating a sentence.

Better not tell you now....hmmmph. That could very well have been my error...

He paused to think before making his question clearer, to make it easier for the crystal ball to give him answers. "Is he on Orcha?"

The smoke within the ball rolled and spun before it gave its answer once more.

Don't count on it. So, he's not on the isle...how far could he have gone?

"Is he on the islands near Orcha?"

The ball's answer was fast.

My reply is no.

He narrowed his eyes.

"Is he in the Heartlands?"

Very doubtful.

"...is he in the ocean?"

Outlook not so good...gods, just where could he have gone?

A feeling of dread rose in his throat as he asked a question he had hoped and prayed to never have to ask.

"Is he...alive?"

The ball's response was instantaneous and clear.

Without a doubt.

Uttering a sigh of relief and allowing himself to relax, he asked one last question. "Is he on
"Oh..." he muttered as the ball floated back into his study before landing atop a soft pillow. This is...problematic. If he's alive and not in Rivellon, then...he is either in another plane, or another universe...or worse. Regardless, I must tell his father of this, as soon as I can...but first, there is one more thing to try, if perhaps the ball had failed in its task. Such things aren't entirely uncommon, but I know of another way to find out where he might be, and...indeed, it is the most likely place he could have gone.

He sighed, the sound echoing through the tower top as he turned about and headed down the steps as quickly as they floated up to meet him, the tip of his staff tapping gently against the ground with every footstep. He was well versed in all arts magical, claimed by many to be not just the most powerful wizard of his generation, but the most powerful wizard to have ever lived in the entire history of Rivellon, a power so great that only Aurora and her draconic kin were greater. He could brew potions so potent that they could make one's skin as hard as steel, throw balls of flame so hot that they could burn shadows into the ground, create illusions that were utterly without flaw and completely indistinguishable from the real world, he could even enter the minds of other men and look at their memories as easily as going into his library and reading a book, all that and so much more...he even knew how to travel between universes, a feat of magic that very few others knew how to perform. He had fought in hundreds of battles for the Kingdom of Orcha, and had done so against the demons of Acheron on a number of occasions, even sending the Damned One himself running back to his accursed realm with near mortal wounds in one encounter...and because of those very battles, he had learnt of the existence of a type of magic that was little known of, a kind of power more dangerous than any other and more alluring, too, the magic of demons and monsters. *Magia Sanguinis*...blood magic. Foreboding words for an unthinkable evil. I would never dare to such a thing, *never*, not in a million years...but if the demons of Acheron know of Carik's existence, then they would know of the power that flows within his veins. They would never think of killing him, no, he is far more useful to them alive and well, as a power source and as a bargaining chip.

He smiled to himself as he stepped out onto the ground floor of the tower, a plan forming in his mind, turning about and walking across the hall...and into and through a section of the walls on the opposite side, stepping through the illusion and into another stairwell leading beneath the tower into rooms that even Carik had never learnt of in all his years inside the tower and on the grounds. To anyone else in the world the wall would feel as solid as any other, but in reality, it is nothing more than an illusion and a shield blended together. One of my finer achievements, if I might say so myself! He stepped down into the darkness beneath the tower for what felt like half an hour, only stopping his movements when he felt the ground beneath his feet, knowing he had reached the most secret part of his home. With a wave of his left hand and without so much as a thought four braziers burst into flames in the corners of the room, illuminating the hidden chamber and warming the cold air. Here, in the earth far beneath his tower, was the place where he kept the most dangerous artifacts in his collection and the most secret parts of his knowledge, protected by every different type of ward that he knew of, ensuring that it was impossible to even find the chamber without first knowing that it was there, and making it impossible to enter for anyone other than himself...but if that was not enough, he had rigged up an alarm system that told him if someone had managed to find their way inside.

As the light spread around the room, he took a quick glance to make sure that everything was as it
should be, only stepping inside and lowering his guard when he was certain that nothing had changed since the last time. Against all of the walls bar the one he had used to enter were bookcases standing ten feet tall, filled to the brim with ancient tomes about all things magical. Some were the last remaining copies of books long since lost, others were filled from cover to cover with pages of dangerous and forbidden knowledge, kept around for emergencies and emergencies alone. Some few even bore demonic marks, coming from the hellish lands of Acheron itself, pages that he had long studied so as to learn how best to counter the demonic beings that had always been the bane of peace on Rivellon. Demonology is a dangerous field of study. There have been countless wizards who have gone to the pages of such tomes with the best of intentions, only for the accursed magic to conquer and control them instead, instead. It is an anvil that has broken many hammers, but there is no greater weapon against the forces of Acheron than an understanding of the weapons and magic they wield. So we study them, in great detail, all whilst hoping that we never lose the understanding that demonology is a shield against demons and not a tool to be used whenever and however we might will.

On the left side of the room was a door that led to another room, a chamber where he could conduct his experiments and any kind of sensitive spell in peace and quiet, away from the distractions of the outside world. It was there that he had first found out how to travel between universes, among other things, and as he walked towards that chamber stopped besides the nearest bookcase, searching for a special book in particular. I know it is here somewhere...

He hummed softly as his eyes passed over a vial of sparkling pink liquid, the last remaining love potion in the world, an eternal reminder that sometimes a hope to do great could instead lead to unimaginable evils. The first of such potions had been brewed for a simple - if not entirely innocent - reason; a king in an arranged marriage wanted a loving and happy marriage with his wife, since their union was a political one that had left the both of them unhappy. His court wizard was a clever and hardworking man who toiled day and night for nearly three months to see his lord's will done...and eventually, he succeeded. He gave the potion to the king, who poured it into a cup of wine he planned to share with his wife, and to the wizard's great surprise the potion worked better than he could have ever expected, the two falling deeply in love and having many children together because of it. He wrote down his findings and spread his research as far as he could, hoping that there would never again be an arranged marriage that would leave either husband or wife unhappy or sad, believing that his creation would bring nothing but happiness to the world.

Barely a week later, news broke of a lowborn woman who had managed to get ahold of one of the potions and use it on a prince, making him fall madly in love with her, so much so that he broke a betrothial arranged to end a war to marry her instead, kicking off a war that would result in the deaths of tens of thousands on both sides, and if that was not enough then when his father refused to allow the marriage to go through the prince challenged him to a duel and slew him in single combat, his father never once expecting him to actually hurt him. Eventually, the prince was deposed by his vassals and his brother took the throne, and he immediately outlawed such potions, every other realm on Rivellon quickly following after dealing with their own issues as everyone who knew of the formula was either forced to forget it or risk being hunted down, the research was destroyed and every last vial poured into the ocean...all of them but the one he had here, sent as a gift from that realm to the Kingdom of Orcha a day before they developed their foul reputation. It was never given to the king, no, it was left in some drawer and forgotten about for years till I found it. It had been made with good intentions, hoped to make the lives of lords and ladies trapped in unhappy marriages more enjoyable, but in the end it was used as a means to make people do things they would never want to do, perverting their free will. I keep it here, as an eternal reminder of the great power I wield as a wizard, of the responsibility I have to make sure that I am certain that the things that I do here do no harm to innocents, and to ensure that I always remember that the road to damnation is paved with good intentions.
Then, his eyes caught sight of the thick book of black and red, its surface covered in a thin layer of ash. He took the book, blowing the ash clear and gazing upon the demonic texts written upon the surface, flipping it open and seeing where the edges of the parchment were charred. He sighed, closing the book and taking it under his arm before stepping into the next room, a chamber where there stood twelve mannequins left bare against the walls, a shelf of candles and chalk and anything else he might ever need, and another set of braziers in the corner that came to life with his approach, the only other furniture being a small table besides the door. And so it begins.

He set the book down upon the tabletop, then turned his attentions to the mannequins, and he waved an empty hand...and instantly, two of them floated forth through the air, arranging themselves opposite of one another. Next, a piece of chalk drifted through the before snapping into three smaller pieces, touching the ground and quickly drawing a circle, then a pentagram inside of it. Finally, candles rose from the shell and set themselves in place at each of the points, and with another flick of his wrist they set alight. Only one last thing, now. He stepped across the room, towards the mannequins, pausing and brushing a hand through his beard as he thought.

"...I think he likes blondes the most..." Maxos shrugged, then with a tap of his staff upon the ground he put an illusion over the first of the two mannequins, turning the featureless wooden statue into a beautiful, young and green eyed woman with long, curling locks of blonde hair that reached down to her plump bosom, wearing a robe of dark grey cloth that hugged against her body and showed her curves. Perfect.

"As for the other, hmmm...variety is always best." He turned to face the other mannequin, and without so much as a thought he tapped his staff on the ground again, the second mannequin turning into a taller woman than the first, one with shoulder length coal-black hair that reached to her shoulders and no further, with eyes like dark sapphires and a soft, heart shaped face. She had the biggest part to play, so he made sure she was as beautiful as he could make her without making her seem too perfect, so he gave her crow's feet and a trio of freckles on her left cheek, just besides her nose, then finished the rest of her body with a snap of his fingers, giving her a gown much like the one the illusion had, except with a flare along the side from hip to heel, to better show her long, lithe legs.

There. These two ladies might well be my best work, if I may say so myself. A century's worth of experience with illusions has gone into both of them...they'll do their task well.

With everything prepared, he returned to the table and took the book before dimming the braziers and retreating into the shadows, smiling as he suppressed the glow of the great orb at the top of his staff. The demonic tome was not a book of twisted spells or the rituals needed to breathe life into monsters made from sewn together corpses, but a simple play, called Chambers of Blood. It had been a cunning plan, one that had succeeded beyond imagining for the demons of Acheron; though he knew not who did it, one of them had spent long hours writing out an entire play, from start to finish, about a coven of witches. Then, once the plan was complete, the demon had used his power to drop the book into the backstage offices of a great and popular theatre, knowing that the playmaster would find it there, and knowing that they would not be able to resist the temptation of putting it on the stage. Even before the play had ever touched the stage controversy had begun to spread at the mere rumors of the hot-blooded plot, and for good reason; the entire story was a combination of demons, passionate women, an unquenchable thirst for power and lust for lust's sake. All that meant that the theatre was filled to the brim with people eager to watch its first ever performance...however, as the final part of the devious trick, the incantations used by the witches to summon the demon, Astaroth, were real. All that means that when the play neared its ending, the crowd waiting with bated breath for the conclusion, a real demon was summoned. Every man and every woman in the crowd was
butchered, the entire theatre burning down atop of them...but the book remained, impossible to burn, found in the rubble by another playwright, and so it spread from one theatre to the next, as if it were a plague. Were it not for another wizard finding the book I now keep and replacing it with a copy with fake incantations, we would have never stopped it.

He picked up the book, flipping through the pages to the final act, glancing occasionally at the pages as he passed, laughing to himself as he did. *There is a very good reason that this play is Sigurd's favorite, he has always been fond of this sort of thing...fortunately, the son is not like the father in that regard!*

*Or so I hope.*

He sighed as he found the page, balancing his staff against the wall and holding the book open with one hand, bringing the other forward as he began controlling the two illusionary women as if they were mere puppets, whispering the dialogue for them to speak.

The black haired woman, Desdemona was her name in the script, smiled widely as she looked towards the blonde witch, Camilla. *All too easy...*

"We shall now proceed, my sisters one in purpose and one-to-be blood, to summon the great Astaroth who shall engender our might. Answer now the three queries that will bring his majesty forth. Tell this Duke of Hell why we seek his favour," she said loudly, her voice echoing off the walls of the chamber.

Camilla stepped forth with open arms, to the very edge of the circle. "We ask him to honour us with the conception of his offspring."

"Tell this Prince of Night how our loins will sport him sovereignty."

Camilla grinned. "His many-fanged children will find no mortal they cannot conquer."

The candle flames began to flicker and wave as Desdemona continued. "Show this King of Brimstone we have knowledge of the incantation that may draw him from the Pit."

Finally, the two began to speak together...and the smell of sulphur began to waft through the air as a cold chill spread around the room.

"Astaorth Dux magnus et fortis, prodiens angelica specie turpissima, insidensque in dracone infernali, et viperam portans manu dextra!"

A flame erupted on the stone floor in the midst of the pentagram, swelling to a ring of fire as the chalk began to glow bright red,

The chalk lines began glow a bright red, throbbing with demonic magics as a flame sparked into existence in the midst of the pentagram, erupting into a great, raging wall of flame...and then the veil between worlds was sundered, the portal to the depths of hell becoming stable...and Maxos watched as the demon stepped into the world, his body twisted and unnatural. The beast's head was long and plated black, like that of an insect,

The beast's head was long and covered in black plates and horns, like that of some accursed insect, with neither eyes nor ears, not even a nose, only a powerful jaw filled with thin, daggery teeth, yellow and crooked. It's body was thin and gangly, connected to the head not by a neck but by a
dozen fleshy protrusions, bare muscle in all the places there was no plating to cover it, and even hunched over he stood a clear seven feet tall. From his shoulders came arms that ended with huge talons, made not of flesh but of some manner of fiery red crystal, floating in the air an inch away from the wide and thin slabs of muscle that were his wrists, and from his hips came two legs, as armored as his head, the joints at his knees bent backwards like those of a dog and with another set of crystals as his toes.

Astaroth sniffed the air once, then twice. "Rivellon...yes...it has been far too long since I was last summoned here," the demon laughed with a deep, bellowing voice before turning his attentions to the two witches. "You two summoned me, and for - wait...something isn't right here...I know this place."

Maxos emerged from the shadows, smiling with his staff in hand as he closed the book and took it under his arm once again, Astaroth looking to him for but a moment.

"Oh, by hell's heart!" The demon spun on its heels, fleeing for the portal as fast as he could, only to slam into a barrier shield Maxos raised right in front of it. Astaroth looked back to Maxos in horror, cowering down before the shield in terror as the illusionary witches turned back to mannequins. "Mercy! I beg you!"

"Ah, I was wondering if you would remember me," Maxos said with a smile as the demon huddled up, cradling itself. "Do you remember what happened last time you were here?"

"Yes, no matter how hard I try to forget it," the demon sobbed. "I will never forget it."

"Good!" Maxos exclaimed happily...then his tone turned cold and hard, like ice. "Now then. I am certain you know about my charge, and as a demon of your calibre you are privy to anything of importance that happens in Acheron. Tell me now, and tell me truthfully, do you know where he is?"

"No, I know noth-"

A snap of arcane energy arced through the air, as bright as lightning, striking the demon upon the tip of his head and making him scream in pain, Maxos steadily raising the power higher and higher before stopping and giving the beast a reprieve, to make sure he was not burnt out too quickly.

"Lies. Give me the truth," Maxos commanded.

"We know of the prince, but we do not have him!" the demon shouted in his pain. "I swear it!"

"Hmmm...are you sure the Damned One hasn't been plotting anything against him?"

"I cannot know," the demon said quietly. "He has...driven me from his court, in favor of others. I am the King of Brimstone in name only, now."

"Who has he chosen to favor?"

"Ba'al," Astaroth sighed.

Ba'al? He is one of the more dangerous demons in Acheron, a general...he could have been given such a task, but the teleportation was too clean for it to have been his handiwork. No, it was someone more powerful than that.
As he thought, considering who in Acheron could have been powerful enough to take Carik away without leaving a single trace, the demon asked, growing a little more daring. "What happened to the bastard prince? Has he gotten lost?"

"That is none of your business," Maxos answered firmly.

The demon began to laugh. "Did you lose your precious prince? Has he wandered off into the woods?"

Maxos looked at Astaroth.

"Oh...oh no," Astaroth uttered, frozen in place as Maxos tipped his staff towards him, finally using some of his true power.

The orb at the staff's tip glowed brighter and brighter as Maxos poured energy inside of it, putting more power in there than most wizards had whatsoever. The glow grew brighter, bathing the entire room in light till he could see nothing but it's radiance...and then with a soft thud, the glow dissipated, and where the powerful demon once stood there was now a tiny figure no larger than the fingernail of his smallest finger, yelling obscenities in his demonic language. Maxos set the book down before picking the tiny demon up and walking across the room, towards one of the braziers in the corner.

"I suppose I have no choice but to pay your lord a visit in person," he said, holding him over the flames. "But, I suppose I should be thankful for the little information you have given me and for the portal you opened...so I shall give you a mercy, similar to the mercies you have given to all those you have murdered over the years."

Maxos lifted him upwards, away from the flames...and into a cobweb hidden in the corner, a great big spider with long, thin legs coming over to see what had come onto it's web.

"Do say hello to Charlotte for me," he said with a smile. "She hasn't had anything to eat in a while."

There was a quiet wail as the spider approached the trapped demon, Astaroth too small to defend himself against her, but Maxos paid no attention to the demon or to the spider who was already starting to wrap him. He turned to face the portal, the hellish rift held open by his magics long after it should have closed. And now, to visit Acheron. If the prince is not there...then it will be much harder to find him than I would have hoped.

He strode across the room, towards the portal, examining it with a curious eye before lowering the shield he had put around it to stop the demon from fleeing. Astaroth should have known better than to come through so boldly after he had been summoned...had he been more cautious, he might have been able to realize the trap and retreat before I had a chance to raise the shield behind him. But caution is a trait that few demons possess, thankfully.

With a confident but careful step, he entered the portal...and as soon as he did he could feel the hot air blowing past his robe and through his beard, carrying with it the smell of ash, sulphur and burning flesh. The screams of toiling slaves echoed in the winds, as did the howling of the demons and monsters sewn together from the corpses of the damned, and the sky was filled with thick, orange clouds that stretched beyond the horizon, as did the broken, rough hellscape of molten rock and charred earth that surrounded him. In the skies above floated a massive island cleaved from the land below, an enormous fortress raised on its surface and bristling with hundreds, if not thousands of ballistae, covered in thick armour plating and supported by towers filled with dozens of foul
warlocks. It would be difficult if not impossible to assault by an army or another flying fortress...but he was one man, the greatest wizard to have ever walked Rivellon, and he had learnt more than a few tricks during his years of study. *The Damned One keeps his fortress under the highest guard...but, as always, demons lack caution. They are all too eager to rush into action without forethought.*

He smiled, using his magic to lift up a great flat boulder, letting it float towards the portal before setting it down in front of him...then he turned back to the portal and brought one of his mannequins through, setting it down on the rock before giving it a guise he knew all too well - his own, giving the illusion a long white beard of its own. It was not a perfect disguise,

He smiled as he turned to face the portal again, using his magic to change the destination...and then he threw a fireball straight through, waiting three seconds before stepping through the portal again...and when he appeared on the other side, in a throne room of grey slate, a low laugh echoed from the dais, the Damned One himself looking down on Maxos and all the charred remains of all the guards who had rushed over when the portal had opened. The Damned One was far more than any demon, he was the Great Chaos itself, a manifestation of Acheron's existence, an entity that had fed upon the chaos and the suffering of all of Rivellon, thriving and growing strong in the days before the Empire's founding...which made the Empire all the more a blessing, as the peace it placed across Rivellon starved him of power and at the least made sure that he would not grow stronger, if not make him weaker. *We can destroy his body, but that only lasts as long as it takes for the demons to find a way to bring him back into the world, however that might be, and because of that he can never truly die.*

"I warned them to be careful, you know," the Damned One said with a laugh as he sat back down in his throne, his head concealed by a hood and the rest of him armoured in the best plate that the creatures of Acheron could forge. He had the body of any mortal man, even if he was so much more. "My guards never seem to learn that lesson."

"Perhaps you need better guards," Maxos said as he stepped over a body, trying to keep the ashes off of his clean robe and shoes.

"Are you volunteering?" the Damned One asked. "I could always use a wizard of your calibre. My warlocks are skilled, but are only truly dangerous in numbers...not like you and your power. You could do more than the lot of them combined, I would think."

"They would do better if you had them stop assassinating one another for positions of power," Maxos answered. "And you know full well that I would never join you."

"It was worth a try all the same," the Damned One shrugged. "Now, you would not come here, to me, just to talk. What brings you to my...beautiful home?" he asked as he gestured towards a wall covered in spikes, each adorned with the heads of the men and women who had either failed their lord, or displeased him.

Maxos looked towards the throne. "Do you have -"

"The bastard prince?" the Damned One quickly answered, knowing exactly what Maxos was about to ask. "Your beloved, prophesied prince?"

The Damned One shook his head. "No."

Maxos narrowed his eyes, looking towards the throne, and the Damned One laughed again.
"Do you honestly believe me to be so foolish as to kidnap Aurora's lovechild?" the Damned One said, leaning onto his throne. "The boy is half Dragon. He has yet to grow into his power, true, but any act I might do against him could rouse the ire of the rest of his draconic race, a risk I am unwilling to take. I would rather not spend the rest of eternity transmogrified into a rock, or some other such prison...and even if they did not intervene, his father would bring every man on Rivellon here to get him back."

The Damned One said at last, "No, the risk is not worth the rewards."

"Then do you know where he went?"

The Damned One sighed.

"Not even my sorcerers can find where he went," the Damned One sighed. "Whoever took him from Rivellon must have been incredibly powerful, and they knew what they were doing; they left no trace of him in the tower, as you found out, and none of my own warlocks have had any luck in finding any sign of him in your realm or mine."

"So he is in another universe, then," Maxos sighed.

"Indeed."

Maxos looked to the Damned One with suspicion. "You are being rather helpful for a change. What are you planning?"

The Damned One seemed to smile, even behind his robe. "Can I not do a good deed every once in awhile?"

Maxos crossed his arms, his staff standing upright on its own.

"If you must know," he explained, "I had hoped to find him first, so that I could ransom him back to your Empire or to the Dragons in exchange for a...small favor."

"Which was...?"

"Now that would be telling, wouldn't it?" The Damned One laughed, louder than before. "No, I think I will keep that secret to myself."

Maxos turned about to leave, touching the portal and making it ready to return him to his tower, but before he could leave the Damned One said another thing. "Do give Emperor Sigurd my regards. His hedonism has given some of my men something to aspire for, or so it seems."

*He knows full well how far my friend has fallen...Sigurd was once the greatest of us all, a true hero, and now all he does is spend his days drinking and whoring...Aurora was his world, when she died the best of him died with her.*

"Perhaps I will," he said quietly before he stepped through the portal and back into the basement of his tower, the portal sealing itself behind him this time.

He breathed out deeply, worried for the sake of the prince he had promised to protect with his life, the boy he had been so carefully guiding to be the next Emperor of Rivellon for when the time came
for him to succeed his father, the young man he loved as if he were his own son. Carik, where could you have gone? If not the Damned One, then who else could have taken you? He sighed sadly as he headed back to the steps, returning to the ground floor. Everything he had done ever since he had been born he had done for the young prince, to keep him safe from those who wanted to do him harm, to raise him as best as he could, to make sure he was ready to do anything he wanted to do, everything Aurora would have done for him had she never been murdered. They put him into my care, trusted me and I lost him. I have lost their son. Seven help me. He steeled himself as he walked across the hall of his tower, so much quieter without his young friend around, taking his hat from besides the door and heading out into the courtyard. There had once been a pond on the left side of the gardens, with a statue in the middle, but little Carik, barely three years old at the time, had tripped and fallen in and would have drowned had Maxos not been nearby to get him out. I had made the entire tower safe for him, every part of it, but to think I had overlooked such a simple thing...I will never forget it. There are no ponds in these gardens, now, and there never will be.

He sighed again. He would have to speak with Sigurd as soon as possible, to tell him what had happened...and to start formulating a plan on how to find the prince, but for now...he would be on his own, trapped in another universe. He could even be in danger...who knows what tortures he could be experiencing? What nightmarish monsters could be holding him hostage? I swear it now, I will do to them as much as they have done to him a thousand fold! With new determination and new energy, he knew he would have to get to the capital at Ravenseat as fast as possible, and there was an entire sea between him and there...still, distance was not the obstacle it had been before the days of the Empire, their science had made sure of that. Railways crosscrossed Orcha and the Imperial Heartlands, ferrying people and goods in quantities never before imagined, whilst zeppelins let people travel the world in the skies high above, knowing of nothing but true luxury and much quicker than any ship could cross the sea...but the nearest city with a place for blimps to land was the old capital city of Orcha, the very place where the Empire had been born, and that was some two hundred miles away in a straight line. Fortunately, he had a special way to get there, a fast way, and he couldn't help but smile at the sight of it sat besides the road.

My horseless carriage.

The machine had a powerful six and a half litre straight eight engine, allowing it to reach an incredible sixty miles per hour, an almost unthinkable speed that made it one of the fastest ways to travel the land, but they were extremely rare and just as expensive thanks to the sheer complexity of the engineering and the enchanted engine components that made it possible to make such a speed possible, every single piece going under the watchful eyes of a master enchanter to ensure that they were suitable for use. His "autocar" - which is what the Architect had called it - was one of only a handful on Orcha, and one of only a hundred in the world. He walked over to the driver's side door, opening it with ease and setting his staff down in the passenger's side of the soft top cabin, then he started the engine with a pulse of magical power, the monstrous machine slowly churning to life and running off of the great power that came from burning gasoline. To think we never had such incredible machines till the Architect came along. He has truly done a great deed for the world, one that I doubt we could ever repay. How many centuries would it have taken, for us to go from our little steam engines to this, I wonder?

He smiled...then he put his foot down on the accelerator and his hands on the wheel, bringing the machine to life.

Do not worry, Carik, I will bring you home again soon.

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Meanwhile, in Westeros...

Carik blinked as the woman, the mother of the little girl who had snuck her way into the tent, looked at him in surprise. "Rhaegar...?"

...uh oh. Think fast.

Carik quickly switched back into his dragon form, crushing the chair beneath him, the little girl running over to her mother's side and into her arms, afraid. "Nope!" he said quickly, smiling and trying to avoid baring his teeth. "I'm not Rhaegar. He's with his father."

"You...you can turn into a man?" asked the white cloaked knight stood in front of the two, clearly a relative of the two. *He looks too old to be the woman's father, but maybe...an uncle?*

"Uh..." Carik reached down as his horns tore a hole in the tent's cloth above him, lying prone besides the table again. "No...?"

"But...we saw you...you looked like Rhaegar," said the woman, cradling the little princess. "You were a man."

"You must've been seeing things," he said, fumbling with the fork that was now far too small for his claws before starting to laugh. "I'm a dragon after all! Definitely not a man!"

The three looked back at him, looking him over intently...and he sighed at last. "You're not buying it, are you?"

"If that means not believing that you're not a man and a dragon..." the girl's mother said, setting her daughter down and crossing her arms as the girl hid behind her, "Then no. Who are you? Truly?"

*It's not even been more than a day and I've already been found out.*

Carik sighed again, his long breath making the tent flap snap open...then he switched back to his human body, Rhaenys peeking out from behind her mother. "You already know my name."

"Carik, that's what Ser Gerold said was your name," the knight said, taking his hand away from his sword. "What are you doing here?"

*Your guess is as good as mine!*

"Can you do magic?" the little princess asked at the perfect moment as she emerged from her mother's shadow, getting him away from the knight's question. *Thank the Seven for that...I'd rather not tell anyone that I don't have a clue why I'm here, or how I got here. When Maxos gets here, he can apologize for anything I've done wrong and we can all go home and pretend this never happened.*

"Actually, I can," he said with a smile. *I'm...not very good at it, but I can do it. "Do you want to see some?"

"Rhaenys, stay away from him," the girl's mother said sternly as Rhaenys walked over, looking to her mother and then back to him and staying as far as the table was long, but no further.

"I won't hurt her, I promise," he said, meeting her mother's eyes before crouching down to make it
easier for the little girl to see. *Let's do something easy...a little dragon, made out of smoke. That's simple, isn't it? It's magic, and she'll like it.* "Watch carefully," he said with a smile.

The little princess and even the knight and her mother watched as he closed his hands and brought them close to his chest before opening them and throwing them forth...and from his fingertips burst a puff of rainbow confetti, a piece of silvery streamer soaring forward through the air as a party horn sounded, the three of them dumbstruck by the sight as the confetti disintegrated into nothingness.

*That's...not what I was expecting...*

Then the little girl started laughing, happily clapping her hands...and her mother started to smile, relaxing at the sight of her happy daughter. *But it worked! Good thing it didn't turn into fire or something.*

"I'm sorry if I was harsh earlier," the mother said, with a softer, friendlier tone of voice than before. "I thought you might have been dangerous...dragons aren't known for their temperaments. Or their ability to switch forms..."

"No worries...just, uh, don't tell your husband just yet. Or his father. I hadn't expected people to find out, yet..." *Oh, I know what to say now.* "...it makes me a little nervous, since someone could react badly."

"And draw their swords," the knight said, nodding. "I think it would be best not to tell them for the time being," he said as he turned to face the woman. "It would be safer that way for all of us."

"Oh, and I don't know either of your names," Carik said quickly.

"I am Ser Lewyn Martell," the knight said with a bow of his head and a smile. "And this is my little niece, Elia."

"I'm hardly little now, uncle," Elia smiled. "You've already heard my daughter's name, and you know my husband...and we'll keep your secret, so long as you don't burn anything down."

"You don't have anything to worry about from me," he said, returning her smile. "Now, I best finish off my breakfast."

"Can I ride you? When you're a dragon?" asked Rhaenys suddenly, holding her doll close to her chest...the black and red pattern and the shape of its wings eerily familiar.

"Maybe another time," he said, replacing the broken chair with the one besides it. "After breakfast, maybe, if your mother will allow it."

Rhaenys instantly looked to Elia with pleading eyes, making her mother laugh as she walked over and took her hand as Lewyn smiled widely at the both of them. "If you're good...now, leave the dragon to break his fast in peace."

The three walked towards the tent flap, Rhaenys waving to him happily before leaving with her mother. He smiled as he took his fork with his human hand and returned to his plate, not losing his smile for even a second.

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Aerys smiled widely as Rhaegar walked at his side, thinking of the great dragon that had landed at their camp, a strong and healthy male with great wings and deadly claws, nevermind the fact that he was still small, that was probably because he had some growing to do still. *And if there were not enough he can talk, too!* Oh, the dragon had defied him ever so slightly earlier, but it was hungry, and all the old books and songs and the stories his nurse had told him when he was little said that dragons were always temperamental when they were hungry, so Aerys was all too happy to let him have whatever he asked for to fill his belly and make him obedient. *I would given him Rhaegar's children to sup upon if the dragon had asked for them; they're sandspawn, barely worth the name of bastards, yet alone Targaryens. Being ate by this...Carik...would have been a greater glory than anything they could aspire for.*

*But when he first opened his mouth to speak, why, I thought I had gone mad! Dragons never talked in the stories, but this one can...and all the better. He can warn the traitors of what doom will come for them should they continue to plot and scheme, and how they will burn.*

*Then I can turn my attentions to the rot inside the Red Keep. Rhaegar might think he is cunning and clever, holding this tournament where he might meet his band of conspirators, but *I* rule the Seven Kingdoms, not he. When they see me there, with my crown on my head and atop the back of a dragon, any support he might have will crumble...and from there, I can...deal with him. And the others too, in time.*

*Hmmm...perhaps if I give Rhaella to the dragon to relieve him the way only a woman can, it will make him obey...damn the Seven, had I a dragonhorn I would make him mine without so much as a word to Rhaegar about it.*

He sighed as his firstborn son parted the flap to his own tent, Ser Arthur Dayne standing guard outside as Aerys followed his son inside accompanied by the Lord Commander. Rhaegar's tent was not even half the size of his own, but with the dragon supping upon his meal and wanting to do so in private - to the king's grief - it was the best place for them to speak alone...but Aerys refused to let himself be tricked by his son into going in without a guard he could trust, lest he "accidentally" fall over and crack his head off the corner of a table and never wake again. *You have to be more cunning if you are going to steal my throne, Rhaegar.*

"What is it you wish to speak about, then?" Aerys asked as he looked about for any sign of a trap - years ago he had been confident about the mayor's honesty and his simple request to speak in private, and he had spent weeks alone in the pitchblack dungeons of Duskendale because of it - "Make it quick, Rhaegar."

"I could explain it all in a sentence if you so wished, father," Rhaegar sighed. "But for my words to have any meaning it will take some time to explain everything that I learnt."

"Very well, then," Aerys said quietly. "You have as much time as it takes for the dragon to have his meal, but no longer."

"Thank you," his son nodded. "You've met Carik already...father, what do you think of him?"

"What do I think of him...?"

Aerys laughed, smiling widely.

"I think he will make us great again."
"Something is...not quite right about him in my opinion, father," Rhaegar answered hesitantly. "Dragons should not be able to talk. No Valyrian dragon has ever done so, not even the dragons in the songs do it."

"And yet he can," Aerys shrugged. "All the better, in my mind. Who amongst the Seven Kingdoms would defy the words spoken by a dragon?"

"None," his son answered after a moment. "But...surely, you must think there is something...odd about him? A dragon with a voice, and claws too, speaking of things we have never heard of before."

"You mean the "cornflakes" he mentioned?"

"Aye, I do," Rhaegar answered, as if trying to think of what the dragon had meant. "I think he might be a prince of some kind, or at least of noble birth. The way he speaks -"

"Is like that of a young nobleman," Aerys agreed, brushing a hand through his beard. "You spoke almost the same way, when you were his age...hmmm. A dragon-prince?"

"Perhaps," Rhaegar nodded, quickly continuing on as he thought. "When I told him of why we were here, why we were riding for Harrenhal, he said he wanted to ride in the tournament. He says he knows how to lance."

Even Aerys was struck dumb by that. ...what?

"Forgive me for my interruption, your grace," the Lord Commander bowed, "But I do not believe he was lying when he said that. It was not in his voice, and...he has hands...his claws have a thumb."

"There is not an animal in the world that could hold his bulk upon its back," Rhaegar continued. "And I do not believe he could charge by himself whilst holding a lance."

"Did he tell you where he comes from?"

"Only that he said he comes from a far away land," Rhaegar answered with a frown. "But he has promised us honest answers in return for his meal."

"Be very careful what you ask of him," Aerys spoke with a voice like hard iron, little louder than a whisper. "I will strip you of Dragonstone and all the other titles you have, I will go so far as to take your name from you and call you bastard. For that is what you are, if the dragon rejects you."

Rhaegar looked to the ground, sadness flooding his eyes and covering his face...and somewhere, within Aerys' heart and mind, lost inside the suffocating darkness of the dungeons, something cried, and he heard. He sighed, stepping forth and placing a hand upon Rhaegar's shoulder, his twisted and curling nails reaching down to his son's elbow.

"But the dragon did not reject you, did he?" Aerys smiled. "He let you fly upon his back, like a dragonrider of old. That is something that only a true Targaryen can do, and very few of us at that...tell me, son, what was it like?"

Rhaegar's sadness melted away again almost as quickly as it had come, "It was like a dream. I looked down, and I could see nothing but green stretching for miles around. I could see the horizon, and the curve of the world...it was incredible, father."
"I will see it with my own eyes, soon enough," Aerys grinned widely. "We shall speak with the dragon together, and when we do -"

"Daddy!" Rhaenys said, squealing with excitement as she wiggled in from beneath the walls of cloth and ran into her father's arms. "The dragon showed me magic!"

Aerys' eyes narrowed at the sight of the girl, she might have had his name, but she was no true Targaryen. She had inherited her mother's looks instead of Rhaegar's, and though her dark eyes might appear violet from the right angle there was no Valyrian in her whatsoever. She was wilder than most girls, definitely more so that Rhaella had been when she was her age, always exploring and trying out new things, playing with her kitten in the godswood and with her dolls indoors, which meant that she didn't even act the part of a Targaryen princess. She neither acts a Targaryen nor looks it...I cannot know what my sister-wife sees in her, all I see is another Martell. I told Rhaegar as much before, and he avoided me for almost a week afterwards...still, she is half Targaryen at least, she will make a decent-enough bride for Aegon, unless Rhaella should stop guarding her cunt and give me a daughter with pure Valyrian blood.

"Did he?" asked Rhaegar, crouching down before his daughter. "What did he do?"

"He turned into a man, then he threw his hand forward and, and this came out!" she said, handing him a thin piece of metal foil, it's surface a dull grey...and it turned to dust within seconds right in front of them as soon as Rhaegar touched it, even the dust seeming to break up into nothing.

"Did...did you say he turned into a man?" Rhaegar asked.

"He did, and he looks just like you! He told Mommy and uncle Lewyn not to say anything, but he never told me not to and we're going riding after he eats!" Rhaenys laughed happily...and then she paused, frowning before she started to plead. "If you let me...can I ride the dragon? Please? Please?"

"I will have to speak to your mother about that later," Rhaegar answered, sharing a knowing look with Aerys before turning back to his daughter. "Go, go play with your dolls till then, alright?"

"Ok!" Rhaenys smiled, giving her father a squeeze with her tiny arms, then she ran out the tent's flap as if it weren't even there.

"So," Rhaegar sighed. "The dragon can become a man...this grows more complicated with every minute."

"But...if a dragon can turn into a man, why can't a man turn into a dragon...?" Aerys began to smile, his expression growing wider with every second. "Surely if it can be done one way, it can be done the other?"

"Father, you know what happened to Prince Aerion when he tried to do that," Rhaegar said quietly as the Lord Commander looked to the king with concern.

"Your grace, I must urge caution," the Lord Commander said solemnly. "Aerion died an agonizing death from drinking wildfire, and your great grandfather died trying to hatch dragons at Summerhall. It is a fool's folly, something that lures the heart's of men but cannot be done."

"...and yet the dragon can do it..." Aerys sighed...but new determination rose inside of him. If he could not become the dragon, then he would damn well ride it, no matter what he had to do to do
so. I would give up my crown to have a dragon, or anything else that is asked of me! He will be mine!

Rhaegar sighed at last before he continued. "Harrenhal has almost as much dragonlore in its libraries as Dragonstone does...ironic, seeing what had happened to the castle. I will look through it and look for any mentions of talking dragons in old Valyrian fairytales, or anything about dragons being able to take the guise of men."

"The Valyrians were famed for their strength in sorcery," the Lord Commander agreed before turning to the king. "Your grace, it would be best to let the prince find out as much as he can. If it is possible for a man to become a dragon, then...only the Valyrians would know how...but, my prince, what of the tournament?"

"Let Carik ride in my place," Rhaegar said carefully. "It gives me time to find out everything I can and it keeps him busy and makes him stay somewhere closeby, too."

And it stops Rhaegar from conspiring with his allies...

"Yes, this is the right idea," Aerys agreed. "Rhaegar : Once this tourney is over and done, you will go back to Dragonstone and find out everything that you can about the dragon."

"As you command, father," Rhaegar bowed. "But...I think the dragon should have finished his meal by now. He promised us answers in exchange for it, and I think now is the time for us to have them."

And when we have my answers...I will have my dragon, at long last.

Chapter End Notes

And here we are! This part is in three major sections, and there's a lot of stuff in each of them, and I'm sure there's something in here for everyone because of it :)D

On Rivellon, Maxos searches high and low for the dragon prince, using his magic to try and find out where he has gone...and after a magic ball fails to give him the answers he needs, he does something that should be familiar to anyone here who has played Divinity 2 Flames of Vengeance, or the second half of Dragon Knight Saga The play he does is the same one we see in the All the After World's a Stage questline, called Chambers of Blood, and though Astaroth can be a pretty tricky fight if you're unprepared or underleveled, for Maxos...it's like squashing a bug. He had hoped that the demon would have some insight as to what had happened to Carik, but when he failed to get the information he wanted he went straight to Acheron to speak to the big man himself.

The Damned One, the Divine Divinity equivalent of Satan. Of course, at this point in time he's not quite as strong as he will in ten thousand years time, and this manifestation of him is what was probably destroyed in the Wizard Wars, but he's still a very powerful man, but even he does not know where Carik has gone...and so, Maxos sets off to the Imperial capital city of Ravenseat to speak with Carik's father and tell him the bad news before beginning his search proper. In Dragon Commander, the Empire is a sort of blend of steampunk and the edwardian era, with a healthy dose of magic thrown in, and
Maxos' car shows that well enough, I think!

Still, sixty miles per hour on a 6.5ltr inline eight engine is...hilariously bad! The Detroit Diesel V8 by GM is a 6.5ltr engine too, and that was used in the 1999 GMT400 to break 75 miles per hour...and that's an SUV much heavier than Maxos' car :o

We also learn a bit more about Carik's draconic nature; he's an enormous well of magical power, even if he's still growing into said power, but he's so powerful he simply cannot use that magic properly. Even if he was to try and use his power, odds are the results would be less than what Melisandre herself could do - she managed to kill Orell's eagle with a bolt of flame, Carik on the other hand is more likely to set his sleeve on fire - and he has absolutely no warg or greenseer like traits whatsoever. Indeed, he'd probably be able to eat wierwood seeds without them having any effect on him at all, since he hasn't a single drop of blood in him that comes from the First Men.

Anyway, we see Carik in the second section, attempting damage control over being seen in his human form, showing just how bad at magic he actually is, but I think this part is mostly self-explanatory, like the third section is. Just remember, two/three year olds are unpredictable, and in Rhaenys' case, that means that because Carik never told her to keep it secret, well, it must have been alright to tell her father! And of course, Rhaegar is no fool, and despite his insanity - and he's definitely insane, seeing how he was ready to offer Rhaella to the dragon in exchange for loyalty - Aerys himself isn't the dullest blade in the box either. Between the two of them they were quickly starting to figure out who and what Carik was based on what he had let slip even before Rhaenys told them he could turn into a human, and have come up with a plan to keep him busy whilst Rhaegar searches for more information...but that's something for future parts ;)
Elia sighed in silence as her guardian looked over, a disapproving look on his face as her little Rhaenys played with her dolls a few feet away, leaning against the tent's edge and humming as she did.

"What do you want to say, uncle?" she asked quietly. "That we shouldn't keep the dragon's secret?"

"I am used to keeping secrets from the king," Lewyn admitted as he crossed his arms. "But...not telling him that the dragon can become a man? That he has magic? That is a risky thing, a dangerous thing to do. We don't know his intentions, or if he is planning something."

"He is a dragon, uncle," she reasoned. "If he wanted to do something against us, he could have done it already. We're still far enough away from Harrenhal that they wouldn't be able to send anyone to help us in time, and we aren't travelling with so many men that they could stop a dragon."

"Besides," she smiled as she looked towards her happy daughter before looking back to her uncle. "He seemed to be in a good mood; I would rather not risk fouling it by telling my husband and his father what he can do."

"Best to let sleeping dragon's lie, then," her uncle sighed before smiling. "I doubt the king or Rhaegar would have believed either of us if we were to tell them, anyway."

"Would you have believed that he could talk, if you didn't see it happen?" Elia asked, taking a small cup of wine from her table. Her tent was more modest than that of her husband or his father, but it was still comfortable enough for a time on the roads...still, she was eagerly awaiting a time when she wouldn't have to hear the cloth rippling in the wind at night, or feeling the cold slipping beneath her blankets with her. "I would have thought that my husband was mad, and yet he does. They would probably think the same thing about us if we were to tell them." Or perhaps Aerys would think that he could do the same...he would be doing the realm a kindness if he was to do so with wildfire, as Aerion Brightflame had. Rhaegar might love his prophecies and scrolls more than he does me or his children, but at least he wouldn't do the realm any harm.

She knew her husband better than anyone else did, even himself, and she certainly did care about him, if perhaps as a close friend and not as a lover. She knew that he could work as hard as the Smith himself when he was determined, that he could learn things quickly if he put his mind to it; he would make a great king...if only he would focus all his efforts on the state of the realm and his family instead of on the forsaken prophecies that had seemed to hollow him out over the years. All he ever cares about these days are those prophecies of his...I went along them years ago, to make him happy as any wife should and gods, sometimes I wonder if it made him worse. First he thought he was the prince that was promised, whatever that means, and now he says Aegon is...but because he's so focused on Valyrian prophecies and all that other nonsense, he doesn't see what's happening in the realm.

She shook her head slightly with a quiet sigh, sending those thoughts back to whence they had came. Almost as soon as the breath had passed from her lips her uncle asked, "Is there something wrong,
"Nothing," she answered...and Lewyn shook his head, making a smile that said more than he ever could. "I was just thinking of my husband, if you must know."

"I still remember when you used to blush whenever the prince came near and how you cried whenever he played his harp," Lewyn said quietly. "Half the ladies in the realm would have given their hands to be married to the prince, and yet you're unhappy with him. What changed, Elia? You loved him, once."

"That was before I knew him better," Elia answered quietly, making sure that Rhaenys didn't understand what they were saying. "I was in love with what I thought the prince was, not what he is. Oh, he treats me as well as I could have ever wanted to be treated, a thousand times better than the king does Rhaella, but...I had hoped for him to have loved me back, not to just see me as a means to get his prophesized little princes and princesses."

"You know he doesn't think of you like that," her uncle said as he came over, whispering as Rhaenys giggled to herself. "He cares for you, more than you might think he does. He says as much to Arthur and to Connington, too, whenever the two of them meet. He...he might not love you, the only thing he loves in this world are his books and prophecies, true, but he does care about you all the same."

"And I care for him as a friend," Elia said softly. "I only wish that he would take his head out of his books for a few minutes and see what the real world was like. He'll be king soon, and gods help us if he doesn't start looking after the realm."

"Even if he doesn't, I am sure you can handle the kingdom," Lewyn smiled. "You're a Martell, from the line of Nymeria. We've done harder things than ruling seven kingdoms."

"Like fending them off."

"Just so!" Lewyn laughed. "Besides, the prince might be focused on his prophecies now, but you know that he had never wanted to wield a sword till he woke up one day and decided to do so. Who is to say he won't do the same thing for the crown?"

Elia smiled. "I hope you're right, uncle. Now, I think we should..." she looked over to Rhaenys...only to see that her daughter was gone again. "...oh, for the Mother's sake..."

"I hadn't heard a thing," Lewyn said with surprise, looking towards the place where his great niece had been sat. "How does she do that so well?"

"Rhaegar says she acts just like her namesake," Elia sighed as she climbed from her seat. "A perfect lady one moment, a playful little girl the next." And I love her for it. She is everything I could have hoped for in a daughter...if perhaps a little more mischievous than I would have hoped. She gets that from her uncle.

"Maybe she has learnt something from that kitten of hers, too," Lewyn answered with a chuckle as the two walked together to the tent's flap. "She's definitely learnt how to be at one place in a moment and then somewhere else entirely in the next."

It had been her grandmother who had gotten Rhaenys the little black kitten as a gift for her second name day, knowing how much the little princess had wanted one of her own. The only thing she
wanted more than that was a dragon, but dragons are gone from the world...or at least, they were. Her sweet daughter had been in love with her kitten from the very first moment she had lain her eyes on him, and Rhaella had beamed with happiness at the sight...her grandfather on the other hand, King Aerys himself, had smiled and ran a hand through his beard and said that it would be a great way for her to learn about death when she was older, and applauded his sister-wife for the choice before leaving. He tried to spoil Rhaenys' happiness, but she was too young to understand anything he was talking about, thankfully, and I would hope to keep her that way for as long as I can. But despite Aerys being his usual self to his half-Martell granddaughter, Rhaenys had happily accepted her grandmother's gift and Balerion was never far from her, either, staying by her whenever possible...but the journey to Harrenhal gave him too high a chance to go missing on the way or in the ruined castle itself, so Elia had managed to convince Rhaenys to leave him behind. Still, I hadn't expected her to leave him in the care of Ser Alliser Thorne...

"I would hope not," Elia sighed. "Balerion knows about the tunnels in the Red Keep, and that's the last thing I want Rhaenys to learn about."

"Not many people know about those tunnels, Elia," Lewyn said quietly. "You never know when they might come..."

"Mommy!" Rhaenys said with a wide smile, looking happier than she ever had, full of energy and excitement. "Daddy says he's going to talk to you about letting me ride the dragon, and he told me to play with my dolls, so..."

Rhaenys trailed off, looking around for her dolls in confusion before walking past Elia and back into the tent before picking up her dragon of black and red velvet and the little princess who rode it...and smiling, as if all was right in the world as she hugged them both.

"Elia!" Rhaegar said with a smile, looking happier than he had in all the years she had known him, "Father and I are going to speak with the dragon. I was wondering if you would like to join us?"

I suppose there is no harm in asking a few questions, he promised honest answers after all.

"Can I come?" Rhaenys asked sweetly...and her father nodded, never losing his smile as he crouched down and offered her his hand, his daughter quickly stepping forward with both of her favorite dolls before looking to Lewyn and passing him both of them before she took Rhaegar's hand with a smile and a giggle. They're both in a happy mood, and for good reason. They've seen the dragon skulls in the Red Keep, and the rest of the skeletons in the vaults, but that's nothing in comparison to a real, breathing dragon...I never thought I would ever see one with my own eyes, but he is here, and he is real.

"Of course I will join you, husband," she said as she went to his side. "It's not everyday you get to see a dragon."

"Mayhaps he will let us all fly to Harrenhal, instead," Rhaegar said hopefully. "I am sure that will make an impression on all the lords there."

Hopefully a better impression than that of your father...I can only imagine what they will say and think when they see his beard and claws. All the more so if it is Aerys who gets to ride the dragon there. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a dagger in his back by the time the jousting started...

"If we're lucky," she said with a smile. "Maybe he will even let you ride him into the tournament."
"If only the gods were so kind!" Rhaegar laughed, to her surprise. "As much as I might want to, I won't be riding in the tournament. No, I will be looking through the libraries of Harrenhal for anything that might tell us more about the dragon instead."

"...what?" Elia asked quietly in surprise. *This is the best chance we will ever have of taking Aerys off the throne before more damage is done! He has to ride in the tournament, show everyone his strength as a knight and use that glory to build allies! If he doesn't do that, then we won't have the support we need to take Aerys off the throne, and we damn well can't do it at the Red Keep because of all his men there!*

"The dragon is more important than any tournament," Rhaegar said firmly. "There will be more tournaments, Elia, and more chances for you to have your crown of roses."

"Do you honestly think I care about that bloody crown?" she snapped back with a low voice. "You know what this tournament means, what it gives you the chance to do. Are you honestly just going to throw that chance away?"

"Careful, Elia, we can't talk much about that here, it isn't the right place," Rhaegar softly answered, trying to make her calm down. "Let us talk about something else."

"It is never the right place to talk about it..." Elia sighed under her breath before giving in, for Rhaenys' sake, who had yet to notice their argument and was still happily looking about the campground and humming as she walked. "Fine."

Rhaegar smiled, clearly happier than he had ever been at any other time in their marriage. "So, how has my sweet little girl been today?"

...he's actually interested in his children for once. Normally, he just sees them as pieces of one prophecy or another...

"I've been good!" Rhaenys chirped quickly.

"...but you have been running off a lot, haven't you?" Elia asked. "How many times have I told you not to run off when we're away from home?"

"Sorry." Rhaenys looked to the ground sadly.

"You can run around as much as you like at the Red Keep," Elia said with a sweet smile as they came to a stop outside of Aerys' tent, crouching down in front of her daughter. "But you can't do that here, not without telling uncle Lewyn where you're going so he can keep you safe."

Elia mussed her daughter's hair with a smile, all whilst thinking of the Kingswood Brotherhood that had tried so hard to take her away from her. Ser Gerold had fought valiantly with Ser Lewyn and the now dead Ser Harlan Grandison, whilst the rest of the Kingsguard protected the king...still, a dozen brave men, common men-at-arms brought out to join the search, were cut down by the Smiling Knight as the rest of Simon Toyne's brigands grabbed whatever they could, with one of them having the sheer daring to force his way through her guards to try and take her daughter. *But I am a daughter of Dorne, of Nymeria of the Rhoyne and of Mors Martell, the first prince of our lands. I did what any Dornishwoman would do.* She had grabbed the nearest thing her fingers could reach, a wine glass, and smashed it against his head, forcing him to flee with only the necklace that Doran had given her for her wedding day, but she had managed to get that back when the Kingswood Brotherhood had finally been crushed. *I would have been happier had they given me his head for...*
trying to steal my daughter from me...had Oberyn been there, he wouldn't have ever made it within ten feet of either of us, but I can't keep my daughter safe if she runs off all the time.

"Your mother is right, Rhaenys," Lewyn said softly as Rhaegar let go of his daughter's hand, starting towards the tent and paying no attention to either of them anymore. "There is nothing wrong with taking a look around and going for a walk, you just need to tell us first so we can come along and keep you safe."

"Okay," Rhaenys accepted quietly, her sadness turning to happiness again as she cheerfully asked. "Can we see the dragon now?"

"So long as you promise not to wander off on your own anymore," Elia said as she took her hand. "Do you promise?"

"I promise!" Rhaenys said gleefully.

Elia smiled, gently squeezing her hand before taking her up the slope and into the great red tent that belonged to her good father, where she had first seen the dragon up close...and where she had seen him change bodies and do magic, too, things she had never before even thought possible. Ser Barristan Selmy stood on the left side of the tent's flap, his white armor gleaming in the sun like the sunbaked sands of her homeland, whilst Ser Oswell Whent stood on the right, giving her a respectful nod as she between them them and into the cool shade of the tent. Carik - in his dragon body of thick black and red scales and skin - was sat on the floor on the opposite side of the table, his plates and bowls utterly empty and with the pieces of the broken chair pushed beneath the table to keep them from getting in the way, whilst his tail curled about on the ground before rolling across the floor and slipping out from beneath the side of the tent. He looked at them all with curious eyes and a smile, careful to avoid bearing his teeth and risk frightening them.

Not far from the dragon stood Aerys, grinning widely as he looked at the dragon with a hunger in his eyes, the look of a man who saw something he wanted and would do whatever it took to have it. Thank the Seven Carik hasn't yet noticed...who knows how he might react if he did? Rhaella stood besides him in silence, wearing a black dress with long sleeves and skirts to hide the marks and scars of Aerys' abuse and watching the dragon with a mixture of awe and fear, wondering what her husband might have been planning.

"So, dragon," Aerys began, looking as if he might begin to drool into his beard as he spoke. "You promised us answers...give us them."

"That...wasn't really a question," Carik answered with a raised brow. "But a deal's a deal. I'll answer anything you ask."

"Where do you come from?" asked Rhaegar quickly before his father could ask anything. "Are you of noble birth?"

"I come from a land very, very far away," Carik sighed. "That's the best way I can describe it...and yes, I guess I am of noble birth."

"How can you "guess" to be of noble birth?" Elia asked. "Surely you are or you aren't?"

"It's...complicated."

"How far away is this land?" Rhaegar asked. "Is it past Asshai?"
"I'm afraid I don't know where Asshai is, but you honestly wouldn't believe me if I told you," Carik said with a shrug of his massive shoulders.

"Try," Rhaegar said with a smile, growing ever more curious with every passing second. "Where do you come from? Spare us no details, even if you think we might not be able to understand them."

"Before that," Aerys said, his voice hardening as he did. "Show us your human body."

Carik blinked, looking at Elia and Lewyn with sadness and surprise.

"I told him!" Rhaenys said gleefully. "About the magic! Can you do more magic?"

Immediately Elia looked to Rhaenys, cross for her daughter revealing the dragon's secret, but Carik merely shook his head before continuing.

"You already know about my human body," the dragon sighed. "There's no harm in you seeing it now, I guess."

The dragon fell silent for a moment...and then he was a man, a man who looked eerily similar to her own husband. Rhaella gasped in surprise as Aerys froze at the sight, even Rhaegar being stunned into silence. Elia stepped forth, placing her hands on the table as she leaned over and took a closer look at him than she had a chance to before, taking in all the similarities and differences between him and her husband. His neatly cut and combed hair was golden from root to tip, a different shade than that of the sunshine blonde Lannisters or the pale silvery-gold of her husband's own shoulder length locks, no, it was more like the bright gold that the songs said Elaena Targaryen had in her youth, whilst his eyes had irises of that very same golden hue. He was younger than Rhaegar by a good six, maybe seven years, still very much more a young man than one who was fully grown and shorter than the crown prince as a result of this youth, but he had a certain bulk to his body that Rhaegar himself lacked...but there, the differences came to an end other than the shape of his eyes and a few other things that made it possible to tell the two apart. They look so similar...

"Seven hells..." muttered Rhaegar. "You...you look like me."

"Do I?" Carik asked, looking for a mirror.

"You do," Aerys said quietly, sanity coming to him for a moment.

"Brothers," Rhaella muttered. "You look like brothers. One older and one younger...it is..."

"Impossible," Elia spoke quietly. "The only brother Rhaegar has is Viserys, and you look more like Rhaegar than he does."

"I don't know how it happened," Carik shrugged, sighing afterwards. "Maxos says I get my looks from my mother."

*Maybe he's distant kin to the Targaryens through his mother's side? It's not impossible, my husband's family has been sowing their seed far and wide on Dragonstone for centuries...just about anyone with the Valyrian look could end up looking like Rhaegar with luck, though.*

"Wait, who is this Maxos?" Elia asked, trying to work out as much about the dragon-turned-man as she could.
"He's a wizard," Carik said with a small and growing smile and without a single hint of joking. "He's my father's best friend, and the one who raised me after my mother died."

"A...a wizard?" Rhaegar asked. "Someone with magic? Like in the stories?"

"More than you could ever imagine." Carik laughed. "He taught me everything I know."

"Magic!" Rhaenys laughed. "Show us some more magic!"

"Go on," Aerys said eagerly. "Show us your magic."

"Alright, but you asked for it," Carik said quietly before anxiously raising his hand forth. "I'll try and do what I did last time"

He threw his hand upwards...and instead of brightly colored pieces of metal streamer there was a puff of smoke as a deformed bird of fire still half in the egg leapt from his fingers, trying to take flight only to crash onto the table and set the tablecloth alight.

"...that's not what I had planned," Carik sighed as he looked at the burning cloth. "Hold on, I've got this. I'll just put it out with my magic."

He took his hand back and threw it forth again...and the fire froze solid, encased in ice. Gods!

"Close enough," the dragon said with a smile as everyone but Rhaenys stared at the frozen flame in awe, the little girl starting to clap and laugh at the sight of it.

"Seven hells," Rhaegar uttered under his breath. "How did you do that?"

"Maxos never got round to teaching me much of the theory behind how magic works, just how to do some of the more simple spells." Carik shrugged. "I'm not much of a mage, I'm better with this."

Carik smiled widely, putting his hand on the hilt of a sword Elia hadn't even noticed before, a weapon of a completely different kind of make than any Elia had seen before, the sheathed blade long and thin - but wider than that of a Braavosi water dancer - lacking a pommel entirely and with a round, almost basketlike crossguard to protect the curved handle.

Rhaegar walked around the table, curious, and his father did the same as Rhaella sighed and came over to Elia's side.

"This isn't going to be good for Aerys," Rhaella whispered. "A talking dragon who can turn into a man who looks like his son and can do magic...Not even the Crone knows what he will do next."

Elia nodded knowingly, not uttering a single word in reply as Aerys looked over the dragon up close...and then he smiled, a twisted and terrible grimace. "Tell me how you did that. How you swapped bodies."

"Well, as I said, my mother was a Dragon," Carik explained. "I just...figured it out when I turned thirteen or so. Since then I've been able to do it whenever I wanted to."

"I am a dragon, too!" Aerys said with a wide and proud smile. "I merely mustn't have figured out how to do it yet."
"Do you ever get dreams of flying in the clouds?" Carik asked, curious. "Or...cravings, for that matter?"

Aerys grinned and nodded, but before Carik could reply Rhaegar asked another question, focusing again on the task at hand as he worked to unravel the mystery before him. "Earlier, you said you were of noble birth. How high?"

"My father was the Emperor of Rivellon," Carik said honestly, seemingly eager to turn away from the king's smiles and excitement, happy to talk about his past. "He rules all of Rivellon by himself."

With that, something clicked in Elia's mind as the pieces began to fall into place.

"You're a bastard prince, aren't you?" she asked with a careful, unjudging tone. "You never said your mother and father were married, and no would would ever send a legitimate son of his away just because their mother died, he'd want to keep him close at hand even if he could have him raised by his best friend...the risk is just too great of having them be used as a hostage."

Carik swallowed hard as she continued.

"That must be why your father sent you to his friend...if he thought you were the better heir, then he would want you to be raised to inherit his lands and titles, so he'd send you to someone he knows he can trust to raise you well."

"And to keep you safe from anyone who might want to have you killed," Rhaella added quietly, not even earning a glance from her husband. "If your father had legitimate sons and daughters, their mother would want you gone, so you wouldn't be a threat to her children."

"That's right," Rhaegar nodded slowly, starting to smile as the puzzle began to solve itself. "Dragon...Carik, do you have any siblings of your own? Brothers or sisters?"

"Not ones that I ever met," Carik answered quietly without saying anything more.

Half-siblings, then...so, his father sent him away from his court to have him readied to become his heir and to keep him safe from harm. That's something that is familiar enough, even if wizards and half-dragons might not be. Still, I would have expected a bastard prince being groomed to rule a kingdom to be more...cunning, when it comes to intrigues. He's practically told us everything we might need to know about him already.

...unless he is a good liar, and is just telling us what we want to hear.

She looked over the table to the prince, looking him over for anything that might have told her of any deceit, something she had learnt how to do very well from even a young age, what with growing up with Doran Martell as her elder brother and Oberyn as her little one...and yet, for all her skills at reading people and knowing what they were feeling, she couldn't see even the barest hint of a lie on his face or in the way the half-dragon prince stood. On the contrary, he looked about as honest and as innocent as her own Rhaenys did, so rosy cheeked and full of youthful vigour he was, though in his golden eyes she could see that he was thinking of something else entirely in his golden eyes, turning sad for just a heartbeat before focusing on the present again. Or perhaps he really is being honest with us...

"Oh, by the way," the dragon-prince asked, starting to smile. "How far are we from...Harrenhal was it?"
"A few hours at most," Elia answered. "I suppose one of the knights told you about the tourney?"

Rhaenys tugged on her hand, pulling on her in silence and looking towards her with hopeful eyes.

"Oh, I had almost forgot," Elia smiled, "Rhaenys was hoping for a chance to ride you, if it isn't any trouble."

"Please?" the young princess pleaded sweetly, putting her hands together and hopping with hope.

"Alright," Carik smiled at a happy Rhaenys before turning his attention towards Elia. "But you'll need to ride with her, to keep her -"

"Forget the princesses, they're not even Targaryen," Aerys said with a wave of his hands as he stepped towards the prince who immediately took a step away from him. "Let me ride you."

"But I asked first..." Rhaenys muttered, slumping down in sadness.

"Be quiet, girl," Aerys snapped. "The dragon is -"

"The dragon has a name," Carik growled with a dark and cold tone as he stepped towards the king, matching his gaze, all the warmth of his voice gone in an instant. "Now leave the princess alone, and if you want to ride me," the dragon-prince looked Aerys up and down with dismay, eyes lingering on his yellowed and cracked fingernails, "I want you to at least cut your nails and take a bath first. You're supposed to be a king, so I will only think about letting you on my back when you actually look the part of one."

_Did...did he honestly just tell the king to take a bath?

Elia blinked, waiting for the king's infamous temper to boil over...and yet, he did nothing. The king stood still, thinking.

"Ser Arthur!" he said at last, turning away from the dragon prince with a surprisingly calm look on his face as Rhaegar sighed. "Come in here!"

"Your grace?" the white cloaked knight asked as he stepped through the tent's flap, taking a look at the dragon turned man before looking at Rhaegar in confusion. _Had I stepped in here and saw the both of them standing together, I would've been just as confused...

"It's...complicated," her husband answered with another sigh. "I will tell you more later..." he took a lower tone, little higher than a whisper. "But whatever the king commands, do not -"

"Ser Arthur," King Aerys said again, starting to smile. "Find me a groom and have someone run me a bath. It seems I must make myself look the part of a dragonrider."

Ser Arthur stared at the man he was sworn to protect in surprise...then he nodded, smiling. "Of course, your grace."

Ser Arthur turned away to find the king a servant, only for Aerys to stop him dead. "I think it is better to have you shave my beard than give a servant a chance to slit my throat...bring that sword of yours, I will have my beard gone by the time my bathwater is hot."
"Your grace...you cannot be serious..." Ser Arthur said weakly. "Dawn is a greatsword and as sharp as Valyrian steel...one wrong move..."

"Come now, Ser Arthur," Elia smiled. "You're the greatest swordsman of our generation; cutting through hair cannot be harder than cutting through men, can it?"

*With any luck, he'll do a bit of both and take his head off.*

"A large blade cuts more at once than a smaller one," Rhaegar reasoned. "And a sharper one cuts better."

The Sword of the Morning looked at Rhaegar and sighed before turning towards the king and nodding with a grim frown. "As you command, your grace."

Aerys grinned and followed the knight out of the tent, never losing his wide smile for an instant as Rhaella sighed and shook her head at the sight.

"Oh," Carik muttered under his breath. "He's going to go and get himself killed, isn't he? I just talked the king into killing himself."

"Ser Arthur is good with a blade, a champion of the melee," Rhaegar answered. "But there are reasons that no sane man would ever try and shave himself with a sword."

"Still," Rhaella spoke. "I have tried for months to get him to shave his beard and to clip his nails but he never once listened...no surprise that he listens to a dragon when it tells him to do so."

"Well, with the king out of the way..." Carik smiled, "We might as well take the chance."

Before she could take her next breath he was in his dragon's body again, that great muscular beast of black and red sat on the opposite side of the table that already felt so familiar to her, barely an hour after having seen it for the first time. He stretched out of vast wings, letting them begin to unfurl to their full span...then, naturally, the blades at their tears tore through the tent like fishhooks, then they ripped the entire tent cloth apart the moment he spread them.

"Sorry," the dragon apologized, looking around at the terrified servants with eyes of golden fire as he did. "I hadn't meant to rip the tent apart."

"The king has half a hundred tents to choose from," Rhaegar forgave. "I doubt he'll miss this one much."

One of the tent's wooden poles cracked at a flick of Carik's tail, the blade hacking through as if it were a woodsman's axe and making the entire frame fall down onto the dragon...who sighed at the mild inconvenience before reaching out with one of his claws and tearing the entire thing down and throwing it aside as if it were a child's plaything, Elia watching as his every motion made his scales gleam like black gemstones in the sunlight. *Amazing...* The dragon looked towards them both, smiling, then he hunched down, dropping his wings against the ground as low as he could, like a ramp of leather.

Rhaenys shot forward as fast as her legs could carry her, climbing onto his wings and trying to get onto his back, slipping and unable to get a good footing...only for the dragon to put an open palm in front of her and carefully raise her onto his back, the little princess scrambling forward and hugging the horns of his head, laughing with pure and utter joy. Elia smiled at the sight, and then Carik
offered her a hand, too, one she happily stepped onto, letting Carik lift her onto his back. The eyes of everyone in the camp were on her, watching as she carefully stepped over to her daughter's side, Elia not once feeling the skin beneath her feet give way or sink for even a second. *Seven, it must be as hard as steel...*

"Rhaenys, here," she said as she sat down with her legs on either side of the dragon's neck, her daughter looking to her before wiggling over and putting her arms around her mother, the two of them embracing one another to stay together. The position was uncomfortable to sit in - she imagined *all animals* were uncomfortable to ride when they didn't have a saddle or anything else to sit upon - but the heat of the dragon's body, far hotter than any horse thanks to the fire in his heart, made her feel truly *warm* for the first time since she had left Dorne. "We're ready!"

Carik raised his wings and stood upright...and then he saw Rhaella, looking over with sad eyes as she saw the both of them on his back, then she turned away and started to walk towards wherever her husband had gone.

"Wait," the dragon said, Elia feeling the bellow of his deep voice as a tremble in her legs. "I have room for you as well, if you want to ride me."

He put his hand in front of her just as he had for Elia and Rhaenys before, the queen freezing at the sight for just a moment before a delighted smile was on her face as she climbed atop and stood in the centre of his claw, Carik putting her on his back as close as he could to Elia, careful to avoid knocking either her or her daughter.

"Seven..." the queen whispered in awe as she looked about the dragon's body, taking in every part of him before sitting down behind Elia and putting her hands around her middle, to make sure she wouldn't fall off. *Her husband wouldn't be bothered if she did, he doesn't care about her as anything more than a womb to make sons with...and with all her miscarriages and stillbirths, I doubt he even sees her as that nowadays, but this'll make her happier than she's ever been.*

Carik's movements became far more cautious and gentle then they had been when he had the knights of the Kingsguard on his back, obviously trying to minimize their discomfort as best as he could, but after a few slow movements she felt him sigh under his breath before throwing himself forward and into the air, stretching his great wings outwards.

Elia had heard of sorcery and of the prophecies of wood witches, but to look down and see the campsite below getting further away, to hear the utter delight in the happy cries of her daughter and her goodmother, she knew this was more magical than any spell she had ever heard of before. From the very first flap she knew why Rhaegar had been so happy and why his father had been so desperate, and as she felt the cool air of the Riverlands fluttering past her dress and through her hair, she laughed, the first Martell and the first Dornish woman to have ever rode upon the back of a dragon.

The only thing that could have made it better would have been if her brothers was there to see her fly.

****

*A few days later, Ravenseat...*

Maxos smiled as he raised his glass, looking out through the great crystal window of the lounge as the blimp lazily floated through the cloudy skies, propelled by sorcery and science combined. They
were one of the Empire's greatest creations, and one of the first; the old kingdoms of Rivellon had quickly learnt to dread the sight of the grey behemoths, as they had been used to great effect from the very start of the conquest as spotters for artillery, giving the Imperial Army a means to accurately fire their newly built howitzers over hills and other such obstacles without much difficulty, so much so that some less disciplined armies simply broke at the sight of them coming across the horizon...even if there was no artillery for them to aim for. *They had a fearsome reputation indeed, and one we used well. Once Sigurd found out how much people were terrified of our zeppelins, he gave the order for them to start dropping leaflets on armies and towns alike, encouraging them to surrender and promising that they would be well treated...a good and clever thing that saved many lives in the end and made our triumph all the sweeter.*

Turning away from the window, he looked around the lounge with curious eyes, seeing the airship's accumulated battle accolades proudly mounted on the walls for all the passengers to see, a list of every battle and every campaign the blimp had been a part of during its time in the war. *But that was a long time ago, now.* He smiled to himself; like so many other weapons of war, the blimp had been turned over to peaceful purposes after the conquest's end, carrying mail instead of leaflets and passengers instead of bombs, taking them both from one province to the next far faster than anything else in the world ever could. *In time, perhaps we might even have larger blimps able to carry a thousand people instead of a hundred, but that is something for another time.* The room was well decorated, with no shortage of lighting or good decor, but not so lavishly as their rival ocean liners might be, still, there were plenty of wealthy men and women in its halls, heads of industry and old aristocrats of a hundred conquered realms, those who preferred to head to the capital quickly rather than take a slow but luxurious voyage across the waves. *They must have important business of their own to have chosen to come by airship instead of liner...but if they think that Sigurd will give them an audience, they are sorely mistaken. He has little patience for noblemen who think they wield any real power and even less for those who think they can sway his opinions with coin or other such gifts, but even still he rarely leaves the palace anyway.*

He sighed to himself as he downed a shot of strong Dwarven scotch, setting the glass down on the nearest table as he winced. He had stopped drinking and pipe smoking not long after Carik had been born, so as to keep the two habits away from the young prince for as long as possible, but knowing that he would have to visit his closest friend, the father of the son he had swore to protect, and tell him that he had failed and that his son had vanished...it made him nervous, more so than he had been in years, the very thought filling him with bitter shame. *If something happens to Carik whilst he is missing...I would never forgive myself, nor would Sigurd or Aurora if she still lived.*

Maxos had been the wizard of the Orchan kings for some three hundred years before Sigurd had even been born and had known the emperor since he was a young boy still learning how to swing his sabre, even if he spent most of his time at his tower carrying out experiments instead of at court. *A good thing, seeing how many times I have had to have a new tower built...still, I watched Sigurd grow into a man, as I have his son, and there has never been a time I had been so active in the affairs of our kingdom before then. Even before we made the Empire we had done great things together, reforming the army and making Orcha into a power to be reckoned with once again, but that was a long time ago. He's a different man, now.*

One of the waiters - a tall and completely without flesh skeleton wearing a well tailored suit with a tailcoat atop, a blooming red rose on his lapel - walked over and took his glass with gloved hands, setting it down upon a silver platter before turning towards Maxos. "Is there anything else, sir? Another drink? A cigar, perhaps?"

"No thank you," he said with a friendly smile, happy to take his mind off of his old friend for a moment. "I'm curious, how did you come to work as a waiter on an airship?"
"Well, if you are interested, sir," the Undead waiter said with a smile of his own, "A long time ago, when I was still alive and a young man at that, I had a tavern of my own in this little town in Shaderidge. Lords used to stop over on their way to Orcha - this was before the kingdom had taken the whole island - and I was never wanting for gold, and always I made sure to go to church regularly and donate whatever I could spare, whether it be coin or bread."

Maxos nodded in silent understanding. *The Seven have always smiled upon the charitable and the pious, they have always been where the bulk of the Undead have come from.*

"One day," the skeleton waiter continued, "A lord walked in with his companions fleeing from a storm, they were absolutely drenched and I was happy to give them shelter under my roof. They were good people, but when they went to leave a few hours later one of them had accidentally left his coin purse behind, so I rushed outside to give it him...and I slipped on a puddle on the floor in front of the door and broke my neck tumbling down the steps."

The skeleton sighed, shaking his head.

"The Seven made me a skeleton and I have been bartending and waitering ever since, and well, I suppose it is easy for a man with a thousand years of bartending experience to find work as a waiter, even on a blimp."

"I am surprised you never considered a change of profession after all that time. A thousand years tending tables is a long time," Maxos reasoned.

"Old habits die hard," the skeleton laughed quietly. "Besides, I enjoy my work. I can think of worse ways to spend a thousand years than doing what I love..." a bell rang, calling the waiter back to the lounge's bar, "...and though it was a pleasure talking to you, sir, I must go."

Maxos nodded with a smile, turning back towards the window and looking into the clouds, eagerly awaiting a sight of the capital. Ravenseat was a young city, indeed, it had been nothing more than an open field always being fought over by one realm or another before the conquest, but it was already the greatest in the world thanks to its location at the very heart of the Rivellon Heartlands, on an island that was an equal to Orcha in size if not in development. Its waterways were predictable and calm, and the weather was warmer and more pleasant than cold Orcha - to the relief of the coldblooded Lizards who could now go about their business without needing to have a servant carry about a heater to keep them warm - but most importantly of all the land had never been controlled or settled by any of the civilized races, at least for any lengthy period of time, meaning that the ground was truly neutral and without a history that belonged to any one race; on the contrary, all its settlements were filled by a mix of the peoples of Rivellon. *The perfect place for a capital. If so many different cultures and peoples can live in peace with one another in a single city, then it proves that we were in the right. The Empire and the peace we have made will be able to stand the test of time.*

There was the ring of a bell and a clatter of gears from his right, and he looked to see the flipboard - a block of wood some three feet long painted black with white letters raised out of it - roll round at the cockpit's command...and Maxos smiled at the word, turning back to the glass. *Landing.*

"And there it is, ladies and gentlemen," one of the other passengers said with excitement as the clouds parted before the descending airship...

...revealing the greatest city that had ever been built, a true metropolis of over a million souls, with
plumes of thick smoke being carried downwind from the massive factory estates, foundries and power stations that made the city of red bricks the very image of prosperity. Great avenues linked the city's organs together like arteries, the vast crowds and trolley cars as small as ants when seen from so far above, and in the city's beating heart sprawled an enormous park, three miles long and just as wide with a lake embraced in its midst, surrounded on all sides by concrete giants, skyscrapers tipped with golden domes and steeples and with their windows placed within archways, the steel skeletons of their incomplete brethren besides them growing taller with every day that passed. To think that most of the people of Rivellon used to live in thatched huts and wooden cottages...but now we have towers and terraces and factories and so much more, all thanks to one man. Gasps went up from the provincials, those people who lived in the countrysides of what had once been the kingdoms of Rivellon before their realms had been dissolved and the borders redrawn according to a better plan, a crowd gathering at the windows as they all tried to get a good look as the airship floated over the rows of terraced houses on the city's outskirts, but the wizard's eyes were focused on the most important part of the city, its entire reason for being, located far away from the smoke and soot of the city's factories and surrounded by an affluence that was like nothing more than a candle placed before the rising sun: the Imperial palace itself, a city within a city, surrounded by tall walls ten feet high and five feet thick that served to merely mark the perimeter of the enormous grounds that were the greatest of any palace or castle that had come before - the floor space of the main palace building itself was some five and a half million square feet, with thousands of rooms spread over its six floors, and from the corners of the palace to the corners of the walls were another six miles of ground in all directions.

Hundreds of other buildings dotted the fields around the palace - none of them coming anywhere near in scale - giving the servants, the soldiers of the Imperial guard and all the clerks and bureaucrats needed for the day to day management of an entire world a place to stay on site, but there was much more than that - the world's finest hospital stood within the walls, alongside a full cathedral built in the shape of a seven sided star, a garrison of the best troops in the Empire and all the amenities one might ever need. Sigurd had wanted to show the people of Rivellon that the Empire had not just the greatest army in history, but the greatest builders, too...still, I believe he may have gone a bit too far. It is the seat of power and government of our world, true, but was there truly a need to have a brothel - with women from all of the civilized races no less - yet alone six of them? True, he had those built after Aurora's death, but there was still no need for them.

He shook his head in silence as the airship began to turn about, looping around and growing lower towards the ground with every pass, closer and closer to the plaza sat in the centre of the palace's vast gardens that were covered in flower beds and orchards, even black roses placed besides red, all carefully arranged into beautiful swirling patterns, works of art that changed with the passage of the seasons. Something that was intended to please the Elves, if I do remember right. They had never been fond of his warmachines nor the factories used to forge them, for...obvious reasons.

At last, the airship came to a halt not far above the ground, attendants hurrying over to tie the craft to a stone column that was half a mooring tower and half a sculpture, its surface chiseled with a history of the Empire's founding and crowned with a dragon forged from solid gold, its wings spread far and wide.

Then there was a thud as they landed properly, and Maxos was the first to turn and head towards the lounge's exit and the first to set foot on the pearl white marble brickwork. The low winds carried the scent of a thousand flowers, sweet and vibrant, and the quiet sound of the capital city outside the walls. Calmly taking his steps towards the main palace building where his friend kept his residence and his government - even as the other passengers looked around in amazement and searched for a guide - he took the quickest path through the labyrinthine layout of the gardens...but when he passed the large field where the palace's own supply of herbs were grown, as many for the works of an
alchemist as there were for that of a chef, he could not help but to take a brief glance for a but moment before continuing on his way with a smile. *There is more magic in Rivellon than most people realize; indeed, it is present in every part of our world, in every last drop of water and every single blade of grass. Oh, sometimes it might be only a little, but it is there all the same, merely waiting to have its potential unlocked.*

A moss covered boulder floated by with a bulk as large as a bed and arms the size of chairs, an earth elemental, humming a tune with a deep and powerful sound till a few moments after Maxos walked by.

"Sir wizard! I am surprised to see you here again so soon," the giant of rock bellowed with a loud and slow voice. "How long has it been? An hour? A day at most?"

"It has been almost a year," Maxos said with a kind smile. There was little in the universe with the patience of a being made from living stone, who might sit down for hours on end to watch paint dry and name it an exciting and thrilling experience, but they were not known for their sense of time.

A few seconds of silence passed between the two before the gardener spoke again. "A year? By Sigurd's crown, it felt as if you were here only yesterday!"

"How is Sigurd, for that matter?" Maxos asked, curious as to the state of his friend...and hoping that he was in a good mood. *Even if he is, he won't be for long, not after he learns his son is missing...*

Again, there was a pregnant silence before the elemental responded. "The emperor? Why, I have barely seen him all day, not even the Council has for that matter...and speaking of the Council of Six," the gardener sighed, "King Lurrean would be able to hear them arguing in the Earth Realm, no doubt about it!"

Maxos nodded in understanding before continuing on his way, but he was not at all surprised by the news. Sigurd had been not even a shadow of himself for more than a decade, now, finding no joy in the things he once enjoyed and only ever going to meetings of the Council whenever Maxos managed to convince him to do so; no, he spent his time drinking in an attempt to forget his sorrows for just a little bit longer, or with one of his mistresses as he tried to make himself feel something like how he had once felt for Aurora. All that meant that the ship of state was sailing without its captain at the helm, heading into uncharted waters and facing issues that no other realm in the entirety of Rivellon's history had ever had to deal with before, but worse than that, the ship was going in circles, too, since the Council did not have the power to make things into law without Sigurd, and so they simply argued about one matter for a few weeks, grew tired of it and put it aside, then argued about another matter till they grew tired of that one and returned to the first, over and over again till either the issue stopped being an issue or Sigurd roused himself enough to settle the matter once and for all. All that added together to mean that the only reason that the Empire had yet to start collapsing upon itself was a blend of luck and the fact that almost no one knew how dire the situation really was, but if the Empire faced a true crisis - whether it be a famine, a plague, even a revolt - the entire nation could come crashing down...and it would take their hard earnt peace to create with it.

*We have been lucky this last decade and a half that nothing truly bad has happened, at least, nothing the provinces could not handle on their own, but eventually our luck will run out. A crisis will come, sooner or later, and when it does...I dread to think of the consequences.*

The occasional groups of people grew into larger throngs led by guides, tourists who were taking the rare opportunity to tour the palace grounds and visit the museum halls that chronicled the - admittedly short - history of the Empire so far, from a decade before its inception to the present day, but Maxos
took the time to give them a warm smile and a wave whenever he was recognized by someone who had looked at some of the statues and saw the resemblance.

Finally, after a walk that felt as long as an hour, he reached one of the palace's side entrances. Its doorway was protected by an archway of white stone and a number of Sigurd's elite guardsmen, the very best the Imperial Army had to offer. Dressed in all red from head to heel and with long cloaks of a dark scarlet thrown about their shoulders and fastened with clasps of gold, the only non-red parts of their uniforms were the shining steel breastplates they wore and the black band fastened around the left arm that showed their prestigious position as a member of the Emperor's own guard. Though the entirety of the household guard was in reality a mix between Humans, Elves, Dwarves and Undead, something which often gave them a motley appearance when on parade due to the height differences, and their breastplates and sabres made them look old fashioned, the rifles they carried were the best the Empire had yet managed to develop, a weapon of the Architect's own design, and a fortune had gone into every man by enchanting their breastplates again and again to make them resistant to all forms of damage.

"Lord Maxos," spoke one of the guards with a deep bow, a human of fair hair and light eyes. "We were not expecting to see you here today, but as his majesty commands, you are free to come and go at your leisure."

One of the guardsmen turned and opened the door with carefully rehearsed moves, trying to avoid breaking the air of elegance that was expected of any soldier stationed at such an important location, and Maxos thanked him with a respectful nod as he entered the palace's halls...and the inside of the opulent palace was even grander than its exterior. Crystal chandeliers dangled from the high ceilings, and a long Elven carpet as red as rubies stretched down the length of the hallway, placed atop of a glittering marble floor. Golden columns rose along the walls, accompanied by statues of the Seven, and only the finest pieces of furniture, almost all of it carved by ancient Undead artisans who have been able to practice their art for a thousand years.

It was a stunning sight, one he knew well...but the splendour only made the shouting coming from the chamber of the Council of Six all the more prominent. With a sigh Maxos began to head towards the room of the bickering councilors, hoping that he would be able to solve whatever matter they were arguing over and hoping that at least one of them which part of the palace Sigurd was in. The palace is so vast I could spend all day searching for him and still not find him, not before he moved to another room at least, but surely one of them must know where he is. Listening out for the voices of the different councilors, it quickly became clear exactly who was arguing with who, and - as he had expected - it was the usual pair going over the usual issue which had, as usual, escalated into open shouting without Sigurd to maintain order between the two. I should have known it would be those two....

Maxos shook his head in disappointment, then walked into the council chamber. It was a lavishly well decorated room, a place where the finest of metalwork and blooming flowers came together, but the most important and the most iconic feature was the table placed in the exact centre. On one side of it there was only a single seat, an ornate wooden throne for Sigurd himself to sit on, but at the opposite side of the table there were five more for each of the Civilized Races of Rivellon.

Sat at the furthest right side of the table was the representative of the Undead population of the Empire, the pious and cordial Yorrick, who was a true representation of the interests of his skeletal fellows. The Undead were well known by all as the most religious of the world's peoples, as every last one of them came from the Seven giving them the Perpetuity of the Bone when they died, life everlasting in the form of being a skeleton. This meant that their views were naturally aligned with anything and everything the Seven willed and decreed in their holy texts, and that their social views
were usually on the reactionary side of the scale - their eternal lives meant that, although they could do whatever they loved for the rest of time, they usually ended up stuck in their old ways of thinking. As such, they formed the bedrock of the Empire's conservative factions, supporting whatever the Seven supported and hating whatever they hated - with their positions thus so clear, Yorrick was content to sit and quietly read of his gods in peace whilst the others discussed things amongst themselves.

To Yorrick's left sat a red faced Sir Falstaff Silvervein, the portly businessman who was the living manifestation of everything it meant to be a Dwarf. Like all Dwarves he had an appetite for coin and a great one at that, being the richest of all the councilors, but like most of his kind it was family that was first and foremost in his heart; there was nothing in the world more precious to a Dwarf than his family, even putting their wealth and their ale second to matters of home. Thus, Falstaff was always ready to defend the traditional family values that his people espoused, the interests of the Empire's businessmen and captains of industry and the ideal of a small government that had minimal taxes and allowed the free economy to work with the least interference possible. Sir Falstaff and the Dwarves were the natural ally to Yorrick and the Undead, since they agreed on many things, but the Undead's stance on moneylending drove a wedge between them and stopped the two groups from ever truly acting as a single block.

Opposite Sir Falstaff was his natural rival at the table: Oberon, the representative of the Elves. Just as the Dwarf ambassador embodied everything a Dwarf should, so was Oberon a perfect example of an Elf, being a zealous defender of the Green Mother - the world of Rivellon and all the creatures that lived upon it - and a staunch believer in the idea that a good government would do everything in its power to make the lives of its citizens as easy as possible. Elves were typically liberal in nature, happy to allow people to love whoever they wanted to love or do whatever they wanted to do, so long as they did not violate any laws and Oberon was no exception in this approach, which naturally put him in opposition to the conservative Dwarves and the reactionary Undead. To make things even more heated between the two groups, it was Elven tradition to never eat meat and to never drink even the weakest of wines, or any alcohol at all for that matter, and were that not enough the two peoples had a bloody history of conflict.

But to Maxos' unexpected surprise, the seat to the left of Oberon, that of the Imp representative Trinculo Evenshorterfuse, was empty. The Imps had always been scientists at heart, forever experimenting with chemicals and forever tinkering with new machinery, but they also had a complete and utter disregard for the gods they claimed did not exist, as well as for their own safety, which combined with their curiosity to mean that no Imp had ever lived past forty years of age. Only the simple fact that most Imp families had upwards of twenty children who grew up quickly were they able to maintain their numbers in the face of constant accidents, and all that added up to mean that they found a place somewhere besides the Elves when it came to political matters, but usually more so. They not only believed that people should be allowed to consume whatever substances they willed, but that they should also be allowed to bear arms, that matters of faith were entirely secondary to the interests of the state and its peoples and that the greatest aim of the Empire should be progress into the future, preferably a future that involves explosions.

Lastly, sat between Oberon and Falstaff with her head in her hands was Lady Prospera of the Lizards, a venerable woman who was in the centre in more ways than one. Whereas the Undead were devoted to their faith, the Dwarves to their businesses, the Elves to their Green Mother and the Imps to the sciences, the Lizards were not particularly fussed about anything but the rational approach; it was in their nature to carefully weigh the options available before taking the most reasonable and fair course of action, but with the unique tilt towards liberalism. Indeed, their greatest wish for the Empire of Rivellon...would be for it to be a Republic of Rivellon instead, which all the other races disagreed with - the Imps were uninterested in it since it would mean a greater
commitment to politics, the Dwarves saw it as insulting the Empire and its Emperor, the Elves saw it as disturbing the natural order of the world and the Undead saw it as a crime against the Seven and the leader they had appointed on Rivellon - which meant the entire concept of "democracy" was dead in the water. Despite that, however, the Lizards played a vital role as the center, helping to bridge the gap between Elf and Dwarf and generally keeping things moving smoothly by making it possible for one argument to create a majority for a proposal placed before the Emperor.

*Which means very little when the Emperor is not here to settle matters...*

The arguments quickly quietened down as soon as they noticed the wizard's presence, the two sides trying their best to appear the reasonable one.

"Lord Maxos," Falstaff said with a smile and a daggersy glare to his Elven counterpart, "Wouldn't you agree that the best way we can help the Empire's economy grow is by cutting down some more forests? Those old and ancient oaks are perfect for making into chairs and tables, and there's probably coal beneath them to boot!"

Prospera sighed, gesturing with an open hand to the paper in the centre of the table. "Can we please get back to the matt-

"On the contrary, my good wizard," Oberon said with a warm voice, "What the world needs is not more factories, but a prohibition! Already do too many of our good citizens waste their hard earned coin on *drink!* Please, tell our beloved emperor that closing bars and taverns for just a few more hours a day will save us a fortune...and perhaps letting trade unions..."

"Aye!" Falstaff laughed for a moment before falling silent and continuing with a dark tone. "Trade unions! Whatever will the Elves think of next? Maybe they'll have us all running around in the nude to be closer to "nature!"

"Whatever will we think of next?" Oberon smiled a poisoned smirk, "Emissions regulations, for starters, or perhaps a shorter work day. I am sure I can think of many more things that are an issue amongst Elvenkind."

"As can I," replied Sir Falstaff, "Have I ever told you how much the Emperor enjoys hunting?" The dwarf chuckled. "Why, we're going hunting next week! I'm sure he'll be happy to hear my plans for developing Rivellon's gree-"

"Enough," Maxos said firmly as he walked towards the table. "Whatever quarrel you two have with one another, it will end and it will end *now.* Or perhaps Sigurd shall hear that two of his councilors refuse to work together with one another,"

"I have heard enough," Maxos said with an iron voice as he walked towards the table. "Whatever quarrel you two have with one another, it will end and it will end *now.* Or, if you two are unwilling or incapable of doing so, then perhaps it would be best if I helped him find new councilors who can reason with one another, for the good of the Empire. There are, after all, hundreds of Elves and Dwarves who would be all too happy to take your places upon this council."

"Indeed," Yorrick said with a calm and soothing voice as he closed his book and set it down upon the table. "Though you may often fight against one another's interests, you and your kind are both children of the Seven. Surely you can put aside your differences for a few moments, for the sake of the Empire and the world in which we all share?"
"He started it," Oberon said quietly...only to be met with Maxos' piercing glare. "...but that is no excuse. I allowed my temper to get the better of me, and I apologize for it."

Falstaff smiled widely, but only for as long as it took for Maxos to look towards him. "Aye, me too."

Maxos turned towards Lady Prospera with a smile. "Please, continue."

"Thank you," she said with a grateful smile before bringing the others back to the issue at hand. "As you all already know, there is one last race of peoples, the Orcs, who have yet to become one of the Civilized Races and aren't a part of the Empire, despite our best efforts."

"Ah, the Orcs..." Yorrick sighed with a sad shake of his head. "They have always resisted our attempts to convert them, and there has been many a mission who has been brought into the arms of the Seven before their time due to their savagery."

"Not just that, but they're carrying out acts of piracy, too," Falstaff added. "They're hard enough to drive off when they've only got clubs and axes, but when they bring their shamans along, too, they're a bloody nightmare."

"Their attacks have grown more common and more daring over the last few years," Prospera continued. "They still stay well enough away from any of our towns and cities, but who knows for how long that will last? Our garrisons could easily drive them back without much difficulty, but they will have to kill hundreds of them in the process."

"No doubt they think our activities are infringing on their territory," Oberon reasoned. "Perhaps if we withdraw for the time being and try to reason with them, they'll see that we have no interest in taking their lands or belongings from them."

"Withdraw?" Falstaff scoffed. "The Orcs are the ones who come screaming out of the woods, not us, and we can't withdraw even if we wanted to. You have tribes of Sea Orcs watching the sealanes for when our ships pass through, and you have clans of them sitting in the grain belt to boot. Abandon those lands and we Dwarves will be out of ale in just a few days, and then you'll have a famine, too!"

"But there is no Orc who would not do what their All-Mother commanded them to do. Perhaps they can be reasoned with where their men can't?" Oberon suggested.

"Meeting an Orc chieftainess could be dangerous, however, as they are not infamous for their tempers for no reason." Maxos said as he worked to come up with a solution. "But the Orcs respect strength above all, which means that any withdraw will simply make us appear weak and make the situation worse. Perhaps, if we send our soldiers to show the Empire's might without giving them battle, then there is a chance that they would be more open to meeting with us. From there, we could try and discuss an arrangement that is fair to both sides, one that will prevent any loss of life for either group."

"We have no need to negotiate with heathens," said the familiar voice of Sigurd's firstborn son and heir, Farran, a tall and thin man five years older than Carik. He had inherited his father's looks in a way that his half-brother hadn't, and made the effort to dress like him, too...but his clawlike hands bore the scars of madness: Farran was so certain that he was in fact undead that he would fast for days at a time and even go so far as to cut the flesh from his bones to prove it. Such a great level of piety should have won him the devotion of the Undead, easily so, but he also claimed that the Seven visited him in his dreams and declared him to be the Divine, the prophesized hero who would save
the world from the Great Chaos, but he went even further to say that they guided him in everything he did, telling him what to do in his dreams and whispering it in day...which the Undead took as blasphemy. And the Damned One seems concerned very little for him. No, I doubt he is the Divine, if there is such a thing.

The crown prince walked over, the entire room silent but for the sound of his footsteps.

"Have them shot," he commanded with a soft voice. "They could never understand the glory of our empire, no, they belong to a past age. The sooner they are dealt with, the better for Rivellon."

"You can't possibly mean to have them wiped out?" Prospera asked, stunned.

"I very much mean to," Faran answered simply. "The heathens, the heretics, the unbelievers...they will all get their due once I come into my throne."

Even Maxos partook in the councilor's mutual silence in response to the prince's statement, but it made him all the more determined to ensure that neither Faran, Karthan or Cybelle sat upon their father's throne. Some might call it treason, but their madness would bring ruin to all of Rivellon. I cannot allow it, but I will make certain that they are properly cared for once Carik takes his rightful throne. They deserve that much at least.

"Still, I did not come here to speak politics," Faran continued. "In truth, I am looking for the Architect."

"He's over at the opposite side of the palace grounds," Falstaff said instantly. "Testing the newest creation of his in the gardens."

Faran smiled, his teeth like daggers, then walked out of the room almost as abruptly as he had entered, a quiet sigh of relief passing through the council chamber only a few seconds after he did.

"I though the Architect was in his workshop?" Yorrick asked quietly.

"He is, but that's closer." Falstaff responded with a sigh. "What's next for him? Paid indulgences? Brandings?"

"Those are indeed in our holy texts," Yorrick said with a happy voice, an innocent smile and a tap of his bony fingers upon the cover of his book, "And I would be delighted to propose them to this council if there is the interest in implementing them. What say you, Sir Falstaff? Shall we ban usury whilst we are here?"

"I say I need a bloody drink," the Dwarf grumbled as he reached into his waistcoat and pulled out a silver flask before unscrewing the cap and taking a long chug.

"And I think I will take a walk," Oberon sighed as he stood from the table and walked out the room without saying another word.

Yorrick sighed with sad disappointment as Maxos looked to Prospera once more and asked, "Whilst I might enjoy helping to run our Empire, I was hoping to speak with the Emperor about a...matter. Have you seen him?"

"He is in his study, sulking," she answered with a sway of her tail towards the room's fireplace. "He hardly ever does anything but that, nowadays."
Maxos nodded slowly and silently before turning to leave and heading back out onto the halls, knowing at last where his friend and emperor was...and what his mood was like, too. *If he is in a sullen mood now, it will become even worse as soon as he learns of my failure.* The dire thoughts he had struggled to suppress began to creep upon him once more as he made his way towards the greatest of Sigurd's studied, the place where he would tell a father that the son he had placed in his care, the son he had never known, had gone missing without so much as a trace.

There was no one in the world who had known Sigurd for as long as Maxos had, who had been there at his side through his every triumph and through his every failure. He had been there when he announced his dream of an Empire of peace and prosperity and he had been there when it became reality, just as he had been there when a beautiful woman, curious as to why all the fighting on Rivellon had so quickly fallen into silence, came to the palace...and he had been there an hour later when the Architect and Sigurd began to feud over her for the first time. Maxos himself had once considered for a short time whether to try and pursue her hand, but he had quickly set such thoughts aside as he watched his closest friends argue with one another in a way they never had before. The two would vy for her attentions, but Aurora had an interest in the Architect only as a friend, and the great engineer simply left, bitter, not to return till after her death, the two reforging their friendship in shared grief. He had been there for everything, and that was why he had been trusted with his friend's greatest secret when no one else was.

But even he couldn't imagine how Sigurd would react to the news. Would he shout and rage and have him shot for his failure or would he slip further into the depths of depression, or could he simply break entirely and well and truly lose his mind in grief?

Maxos had hoped he would never need to find out, and as he stood outside the heavily guarded room where to one end or another he would speak with the Emperor of Rivellon, he swallowed any anxieties he might have had and stepped inside as quickly as the guards opened the door for him.

It was as if he entered another building entirely.

The stale air stank of the acrid stench of tobacco smoke and strong liquor, whilst darkness seemed to cover the entirety of the room but the patches on the oaken floor where sunlight had managed to pierce through the thick curtains. A great table stretched from across the left and right walls of the room, carved with an enormous dragon stretching its wings from one side to the next, perched atop the world of Rivellon and with two familiar words carved beneath in golden filigree: *Imperium Rivellonis*. Atop of it was an assortment of books and a scattering of papers, flanked on one side by a cigar smouldering in its ashtray and a half empty bottle of whiskey on the other.

And on its far side, stood before one of the windows, was his friend.

"Sigurd?" he asked as the door closed behind him.

"Make it rain, Maxos," the emperor said softly. "I do not feel as if today is a day worthy of the sun."

"Your grace -"

"Humor me."

Maxos did an unseen nod and with a raise of his staff and with the strength of his will, the room was lit for but a second by a soft turquoise glow. He tapped his staff against the wood, ever so gently, clouds forming in the skies at his command...and with them came a downpour of rain that drowned...
out the warm light of the sun, filling the room with darkness.

"Thank you."

Sigurd sighed before turning about and slumping into his chair, giving Maxos a good look of his lord for the first time since he entered: the years, the stress, the loss, none of it had been kind to him. His thick and luscious almost-blond hair had become thin and grey, wrinkles covered his brow and his cheeks were rough and unshaven, looking as if they had been without the touch of a razor for weeks. His greatcoat, once the staple and the crown of his dress, was disheveled and left unbuttoned, falling open as he sat and showing the shirt that covered the flab that had taken the place of his strong body. In his left hand was his wedding ring, which he absentmindedly played with as he looked towards Maxos with dull blue eyes, awaiting his next word.

It was at that moment Maxos noticed the revolver left on the table, not far from the cigar.

"I have thought about it, you know," Sigurd said quietly as he followed Maxos' eyes. "The Undead say we meet our loved ones again when we die, when we pass into the Hall of Echoes. But they also say suicide is a sin, so one should never kill themselves to try and make their way there."

"But more importantly," Sigurd continued, "Dying now would mean Faran would inherit my Empire. Faran, or Karthan who has more anger than a demon, or Cybelle, who a maid caught speaking backwards whilst brushing her hair the other day. None of them should ever have command over anything greater than a canal boat, yet alone Rivellon. A good thing none of those three will be inheriting, isn't it?"

"No, we both know who is going to get that damned throne," The emperor smiled, pouring himself a drink as he spoke. "How is my son, Maxos? How is Caerik?"

"You mean Carik?"

"Seven, what a name," Sigurd laughed. "It was Aurora's idea, you know. I had wanted to name him Harald, but she said Carik would be a good name. Said it would reflect his good carikter."

Maxos didn't smile or laugh as his emperor no doubt expected him to, no, he stood with a solemn silence.

"Maxos," Sigurd said quietly as he leaned forward, dropping the ring against the table and giving him his complete and undivided attention. "Has something happened?"

"Your grace," Maxos began slowly, walking towards the table as he spoke. "Something has happened. Something unexpected. I am already working to solve it as quickly as I can, but it is something that you must be informed about all the same."

He saw the uneasy anxiousness well up in his friend's eyes, the concern, and it was clear that he knew what Maxos was going to say before he had even said it.

"There is no easy way to say this, my friend..." Maxos sighed. "Your son, the prince...he has gone missing."

For but a moment there was utter silence.

Then the Emperor of Rivellon, the lord and master of an entire world, held his head in his hands and
spoke with a voice no higher than a whisper.

"I knew something was wrong the moment you stepped in here," he said. "It's not like you to come here so suddenly, without sending a message first or without being called. I knew. But I didn't know what, or...or anything. How did it happen, Maxos? How?"

"I...I do not know," Maxos answered truthfully. "It could be his own innate power causing him to teleport away, or someone finding a way to breach the wards of my tower."

Sigurd took a deep breath and sighed.

"And what do we know so far? Do you have any leads?"

"I know that he is alive," Maxos said first, seeing his oldest friend relax at the sound of his voice. "But I also know he is not on Rivellon anymore. Or, indeed, in this universe."

"Seven have mercy, where could he have gone, then?" Sigurd asked, taking his head from his hands to look at Maxos once more, eyes reddened by rising tears. "Is it the Damned One? If he has my son, he can name his price and I will pay it, no matter what it is."

"I have already been to Acheron, my old friend, and he doesn't have him. It was the first place I checked once I learnt he was not on Rivellon."

With a sad look in his eye, Sigurd reached into his coat, to a pocket placed above his heart, and lifted out a locket and its chain, gripping it tightly in his palm. "He's...he's all I have left of her, Maxos...I can't lose him. I won't. You have to get him back, no matter what it takes."

Maxos spoke with a certain voice and a certain heart, "Sigurd, I swear it now, I will do everything in my power to bring your son home. I will search until the end of time if I must, but I promise, I will see him here once again."

Sigurd nodded in silence.

"But you will need to stay calm whilst I am gone, my friend. I could be gone weeks, perhaps even longer," Maxos said softly, reaching out and putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Please, I beg of you, don't do anything foolish."

"I won't," Sigurd nodded with a sad sigh. "Just...bring him home. That is all I care about."

Maxos nodded, and with his words said, he turned towards the door.

"Maxos?" his friend said quietly. "One more thing."

Maxos turned towards his friend, giving him a warm smile.

"How is he?" Sigurd asked. "My son, I mean. I would write to him, but if my wife ever found out..."

"He is everything you could have ever wanted him to be, Sigurd," Maxos said with a smile. "Aurora would be proud of him, I know it."

Sigurd smiled sadly, then turned his attentions to the papers before him as Maxos opened the door and headed back into the hallway, the guards as still as statues as he closed it behind him. Now I
must merely find a way to travel between universes once more...a difficult thing to do even at the best of times. Still, I have a tower here, too, albeit a smaller one, but it should have everything I need. He paused for a moment to remember the quickest way, then with a certain stride he headed about the corner, into a long corridor with a hundred rooms connected to it. He was not the only wizard to find work at the palace, certainly not, hundreds of them came and went on an almost daily basis, seeing either himself, Sigurd, or the Architect, seeking either advice, permission to carry out certain experiments or information about new ways to meld science and sorcery together into new, more useful forms. He walked through the busy hall, towards a door that had a strong lock and passed a pair of young wizards still shy of their second century.

"Come now, Behrlihn," Thelyron Hashnitor, a famous healer, smiled. "Surely you cannot loathe the idea of travelling that much?"

"It is not the idea of travelling that I despise," Behrlihn growled. "But to waste months of precious time, in pursuit of a...a rumor? To travel to a backwater village in pursuit of magical secrets? It is a folly, pointless, and a waste of your efforts, yet alone mine."

"But a new form of healing magic would be more valuable than any number of new destructive spells," Thelyron reasoned. "There is little need for fireballs or lightning bolts now that, well, there is no one left to fight! Besides, I am sure it wouldn't take any where near as long as you are suggesting."

"Maxos," Behrlihn said with a sudden, softer tone, no doubt trying to win the great wizard to his side. "Surely you must agree that there is little point in wasting one's time chasing after rumor and hearsay?"

"But think of all the progress we could make - if this source of healing water is proven to be true," Thelyron countered, "Then thousands of lives that would have otherwise been lost can be saved. Even if the rumors turn out to be wrong, any effort spent in pursuit of such a remedy is effort well spent."

"If what you say is true," Maxos answered, "Then there are few things in the world of greater importance than this water source; the health of our peoples is far more important than any weapon."

Thelyron grinned. "Come now, Behrlhn, I'm sure there will be something for you to do in Aleroth!"

Behrlihn simply sighed as he turned to follow him out, sulking and sullen.

He'll realize in time that power and the pursuit of more of it is not the beginning and the end of one's existence, but a means to making the world a better place.

Maxos continued onwards to the door, without interruption this time, and the beautiful, shining halls of the palace gave way to a sparse interior - there was little need for lavish decor when the room was either unused for half the year or being used for potentially dangerous studies in the other half. Indeed, the marble floors and sculptures of the council chamber or the thick curtains of Sigurd's favorite study would simply get in the way of most of his work, and take up precious space in the process. Instead, like within the secret floor of his tower, he kept a simple set of bookcases and shelves on the ground floor, containing everything he could possibly need to bridge the gap between worlds.

It was an easier task than most people realized, and Maxos was thankful for that. Aurora had told him everything there was to know about it one evening when they were exchanging old stories - she
was curious about Sigurd's childhood years, something that caused the Emperor no little amount of embarrassment the next time they met - and was all too happy to tell him how in exchange. And it was far simpler than even Maxos had expected - the walls between worlds were ethereal in nature, impossible to touch unless one knew how to do so, but they were easily broken once they did. She even told him with hushed tones how the gods often travelled from one world to the next whenever bored, opening portals and often forgetting to close them behind them as they set off in search of something interesting to do, and some particularly adventurous gods might simply go from one world to the next for all eternity, dropping in and dressing up to see how things were before hopping onto the next.

But they hardly ever closed any of the portals behind them, either because of simple absentmindedness or because they were counting on something interesting happening and thus would need to make their way out quickly. All that meant that, across Rivellon, there were occasionally places where portals between worlds were already opened, but simply imperceptible and thus inaccessible, typically near cathedrals and altars and the like...however, the palace was not built upon one of those locations.

And it didn't need to be.

He looked towards a shelf where nine identical crystals stood, and with a wave of his hand they floated into the air and onto the ground before him, eight creating a circle and the ninth landing in the exact middle. With a flip of his staff

He spun the staff round in his hand and tapped each crystal in turn, thinking of nothing but of his charge, an important step that would allow him to control the worlds he was meant to visit and make sure he appeared somewhere nearby him rather than on, say, a different continent or on the moon. Finally, focusing entirely on the thought of travel, he tapped the center crystal, discharging no small amount of power into it, then the eight crystals arced to the ninth in the center with thin violet lightning bolts, filling the chamber with their crackle.

Then, above that ninth crystal, something happened.

The air rippled like the surface of a still pond disturbed a stone, flowing outwards from the center...and then there was a darkness. The light bent and warped around it, distorted by the hole in the universe, but that hole quickly turned to shining silver, a portal without a destination, gleaming like a mirror without a reflection. He breathed out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, and tapped its surface with the tip of his staff once more.

The portal swirled and turned to a formless mixture of brown, blue and green. An image appeared on the other side, blurry at first, but in a few moments it churned once again and became as clear as glass, shapes forming from the murky colors and giving form to leaves and tree trunks and the clear blue sky of another world. A warm wind blew through, rippling his beard as he examined the otherside with a curious eye, and he crossed the distance between universes with nothing more than a step as he entered another world.

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The air was cool, cooler than Ravenseat had been, but it was warm enough for him to know he was certainly not in a particularly cold part of whatever world he had come to - at the very least he was not in an arctic region, but he couldn't be certain without seeing a map to make sure. The forest was
alive and vibrant, filled with growth new and old, and he even saw a few types of flowers he hadn't
ever seen before, blossoming near gnarled roots. *Were this a visit of leisure and not necessity, I am
sure Oberon would be delighted if I brought some back and gave him a chance to see them. Perhaps
another time.* He looked around for any sign of a path or a clearing...only to find that he was well
and truly in the heart of a forest, surrounded by trees on all sides for as far as the eye could see.

He sighed, but an idea sprang to mind - his constant thinking of Carik whilst opening the portal were
a guarantee that he was in the world, and perhaps that he was somewhere nearby. He knew the
prince was a sort of sinkhole for magical energies, something that had helped Maxos a great deal in
testing out a wide number of theories about the nature of magic, but that meant he should be able to
find where he was simply by using a little of his power and seeing where it went, just like he had tried
in the tower. 

*An easy enough thing to do, even here in another world.* He opened his hand without so much as a
thought, creating a single wisp of pale white light, letting it go free without giving it any direction to
travel, a speed or anything of the sort. He took his hand back, simply watching as it chose whether to
move or not on its own. *And now -*

It began floating towards his left.

Its movements were slow at first, a gradual drift, but they grew quicker, as if going down hill, and
Maxos smiled as he followed it along at a walking pace. The forest grew thinner, foot by foot and
yard by yard, and eventually he could hear the sound of voices being carried on the winds, a number
he didn't recognize and one he did, one which was ever so similar to that of the young prince
pleading to go on adventures so few days before...only that it was deeper in tone, older and matured,
but it was still the same. *Surely time has passed at the same rate, he cannot have grown so much in
so little time...no, no, this must be a different version of him. There are an infinite number of
universes, after all, so there must be an infinite number of Rivellons and an infinite number of
Cariks, too.* The ball of energy dissipated as Maxos headed towards the voices, quicker than before,
seeing a clearing in the forest; a dirt path worming its way through the deep forests from a mountain
range in the east.

Then the voices became clear enough to hear as he saw a band of six making its way through the
woods: two women, three men, a massive dog and an older, taller Carik, wearing tough and
hardwearing travelling clothes.

"Can't you simply fly us to Redcliffe rather than making us walk through the woods?" asked one, a
woman with black hair and with most of her skin left bare by a motley mix of clothes, even still, she
carried the look of a magic user about her. *A forest witch, perhaps?*

"Because I don't want to draw any unwanted attention this time," Carik answered quietly. "The
Darkspawn like dragons, after all. You never know how they might react."

"Or how other dragons might react," answered the other woman with a teasing smile. She had red
hair and was thin and slender, but she wore strong leathers and had a bow in her hand and a quiver
of arrows across her back, and was far harder to read than the witch had been, that was certain. "She
liked you."

"Seven have mercy, I'm never going to hear the end of it, am I?" Carik sighed.

"Maybe you can get her to come and help us when we fight the Archdemon," said one of the men, a
knight with blonde hair who walked at the head of the group, a sword at his hip and a shield on his
back. "That way, we'll have two dragons!"

Carik muttered something under his breath as one of the other men, the only one in the group who stood taller than the dragon prince and who had white hair and greyish skin, sighed.

"We are not alone," the tall one said as Maxos emerged from the woods, the wizard smiling and trying to appear as unthreatening as possible.

"So there is a Wizard of the Wilds as well as a witch," the knight said before waving at Maxos from a safe distance. "Hello!"

"Maxos...?" Carik asked in surprise as he walked over, laughing. "Gods! I never thought I would see you again!"

Is...is this what he will look like when he is all grown up?

Maxos gave him a warm smile. This Carik was much taller and bulkier than the one he was used to seeing, older, perhaps in his early twenties rather than halfway through his teens, but even his years of growth hadn't made him the tallest or the biggest one there - he seemed to have stopped growing at the exact point it would have stopped being charming and started becoming intimidating instead, and his bulk was the same, too. It gave him a splendid and balanced appearance, Carik being neither too big or too small, much like how his mother had been, but the effect was marred by the clothing he wore.

"I must admit, the feeling is mutual, my young friend," he smiled, happy to see him again, even if he was not the prince Maxos was looking for.

"But, whilst I might want to go back to Rivellon, I've got a...commitment," Carik said softly, gesturing to his companions who had since walked over, curious. "They are dealing with a nightmare, and they need all the help they can get. Can you get my father to send some troops? An army or two?"

"You mean he actually is a prince?" the witch said in surprise. "Surely not."

"Was there ever any doubt?" Carik smiled. "I told you was I was a prince, and you thought I was a Chasind madman, if I remember right."

"Who else would come up with the idea of flying metal barrels?"

"They're called zeppelins," Carik corrected. "Everything I told you was true. Especially the parts about zeppelins and praying undead."

"I think it's great that we know he is who he says he is," the archer woman smiled. "A secret prince, hidden away with the emperor's closest friend and mentor...it's like a song!"

"Great!" the knight smiled. "We need as many men as you can get, the more, the better...because things aren't, uh, going well. At all."

"Unfortunately..." Maxos started, watching Carik's response, "I do not believe we are from the same Rivellon. I am looking for a Carik who is sixteen years old, but you look a few years older."

"Five years, to be exact," Carik sighed, Maxos seeing the disappointment in his eyes.
"I suppose that means we won't be getting an army, then?" the knight sighed. "Just my luck."

"Maxos," the knight continued, trying to act formal "My name is Alistair and I am the last Grey Warden in Ferelden, and..."

Alistair smiled, like a child watching his dream come true. "Can you convince Carik to let us ride him again? Please?"

"It's not happening," Carik insisted. "You know full well what happened last time."

"Oh, please!" Alistair pleaded. "It'll save us time!"

"...and here we are with the begging," the witch sighed. "I for one do not see all the fuss. It doesn't matter if we walk to Redcliffe or fly there in the end."

"Where's your sense of amazement, Morrigan?" the archer smiled. "I've never heard of anyone riding dragons before, not even in any of my songs...or riding a dragon from another world, for that matter."

"But flying atop a dragon will save us time," spoke the tall one simply.

"Why?" Maxos asked. "What happened "last time"?"

The one man who had stayed in the background and said nothing the entire time stepped forward, a middle aged fighter of a tanned complexion, broad shouldered and strong. "Our Lady Andraste claimed him as her mortal husband, just as she has the Maker as her spiritual groom."

"...and here we are with the preaching," the witch sighed again.

"She...what?" Maxos asked in confusion. "What happened?"

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A few days before, the Frostback Mountains...

Alistair stepped through the thick snows, feeling how his boots sank into the white with every step up the mountain, and the piercing cold of the icy winds howling down from the summit freezing his cheeks and making his breathes turn to mist. I should have grown a beard.

"Maker, could it get any more cold?" Leliana asked, hugging herself tight as she slogged through the snows.

Alistair glanced to Morrigan, who was wearing as little as she normally did...and looked as if she might fall over at any moment, but she refused to say anything in complaint, too stubborn to give Alistair the pleasure of proving him right when he suggested wrapping up warm or doing any number of things that would help keep the cold at bay. She thinks I'm an idiot, but I'm not the one who decided to climb a frozen mountain half-naked, now am I?

Even Sten was clearly being affected by the chill, his armor steaming as they walked, but the Qunari warrior stayed vigilant, despite the snows and winds, focused as best as he could upon the task at hand. Alistair could see him silently flexing his fingers, opening and closing his hands over and over
as he tried to keep the joints nimble and warm, despite the worst of the frigid air.

Then there was Carik, walking up the mountain alongside him.

Alistair had found him at Lothering after the slaughter that was Ostagar, where Teryn Loghain had betrayed his king and condemned him to death in the process, alongside all the other Grey Wardens of Ferelden other than Alistair himself, who had the task of lighting the beacon tower. He knew Duncan had planned to recruit three more Wardens before the battle started, he was there to watch the joining. But they all died. All three of them. Had any of them lived, I would have let them command instead of me...I never wanted to lead, but I am the last one left. The last Grey Warden in Ferelden.

He sighed, glancing towards the mountain top and steeling himself for the journey to come. It would be so easy to turn back, to descend back down the mountain and into the forest to try and find another way to save Arl Eamon, to give up.

But Duncan would have wanted me to go on.

He smiled.

Then he put one foot in front of another, continuing his climb.

Brother Genitivi had told them the way, that he was certain the urn was here, and if it was, then that meant he could save Arl Eamon...and saving Arl Eamon would be the first of many steps in saving Ferelden and avenging his friends and family.

That was what mattered, the only thing that mattered.

But he could see how the others were struggling, and an idea came to mind when he saw the rough shape of a dragon embroidered on the side of Carik's sleeve.

He had been wearing far nicer clothing when they had first met with one another in Dane's Refuge, but they were softer and more fragile, ill suited for an adventure, but when Carik realized what Alistair would be doing, he was all too eager to join up, trading them for some thicker, stronger leathers. But Alistair hadn't believed him when he first said that he was half dragon, or when he said that he came from another world, but he proved it quick enough against the Darkspawn...and Alistair had been trying to keep him well enough away from them ever since, for the simple reason that whenever they saw his dragon form, they rushed towards him even more aggressive than they normally did and more of them would follow in their wake, charging at the dragon dozens at a time.

All that meant Alistair was anxious of letting him go into combat against them, despite his skills and ability, since there was always the chance it could lead to there being two Archdemons instead of just one. Still, he and Alistair had become fast friends, and the Grey Warden was eager to let him fight against anything that didn't carry the Taint...and that meant that Loghain was in for a surprise.

"Carik," he said with a smile. "Can you fly us up there?"

"Through the blizzard?" Carik asked, looking towards the mountain top. "You'll need to hold on tight."

Carik switched bodies, and the golden haired man was replaced by a dragon that was larger than any he had ever heard of, in story or song or even in the books he had been made to read as he studied to
become a Templar.

He was a giant, a monster whose front was covered in thick bone colored plating, with blades the length of swords jutting from his wings and a greatsword at the tip of his tail, but that was nothing particularly new to him now, and he had grown accustomed to the sight. But the claws that he had, true hands instead of paws and as capable of movement as those of any man, still made him feel ever so slightly uncomfortable at the sight, because he knew they could crush a man whole...and because his king had been crushed inside his armor, as he had seen when he had returned to Ostagar after the battle in order to search for survivors, looking for anyone who could have told him what he had to do next.

He would have looked terrifying because of it, were it not for the sight of the shoddily assembled harness to which Alistair had fastened their tenting, sleeping rolls, bags and everything else, giving them a means to quickly take everything they might need at night from one place to the next. It had been Alistair's idea, to Morrigan's surprise, and one that had taken a fair bit of convincing, but it made life easier and their travels quicker, giving them a small advantage over the unending, unresting hordes of Darkspawn.

Carik was too big for it to be easy for them to climb onto his back, even if he hunched down and hugged the ground, so instead he offered him an open palm, placing it down on the snow.

"Hop on," the dragon spoke with a deep, thrumming voice.

Alistair swallowed any memories he might have had of his half-brother's broken body. Then he stepped onto the hand.

The dragon calmly placed him on his back, and Alistair let out a breath before walking towards the dragon's head and sitting with his legs on either side of his neck, smiling.

There was nothing he loved more than flying, as only the griffon riding Grey Wardens of old in Duncan's stories had, but Carik was far greater in size and strength than even the largest griffon, and he could breath fire, too. He had been on his back the day that he realized that Carik's draconic body was luring more darkspawn, calling to them them, and he had seen a hundred hurlocks and genlocks burning as they strafed the ground, Alistair running them through on his pike. If the First Warden saw that...well, I suppose he'd want to make him a Grey Warden.

He offered his hand to Morrigan next, who fell onto the dragon's open palm, shivering and pale. Carik quickly wrapped her in his fingers, shielding her from the winds, then brought her close to his mouth and breathed in hot air, stirring her back to normal before putting her on his back.

"Couldn't you have asked him to do this earlier?" Morrigan bit harshly.

"But then the Darkspawn might have attacked Haven," Alistair answered. "I don't want to take the risk of getting people killed just so we can climb a mountain a little bit faster."

"But surely it would be easier to defeat a few more Darkspawn than it is to...to beat the cold!"

"But," Alistair smiled as he looked back at her. "We'd have to deal with the Darkspawn and the cold if they came here. And cultists."

Morrigan scoffed as Carik scooped up Sten, who found room for himself in complete and utter silence, as Alistair expected. Then finally Leliana grabbed hold of one part of Carik's leather
trappings and climbed atop on her own, her movements quick and nimble in a way that neither
Alistair in heavy plate or Morrigan frozen in her robes could even hope to match. He grabbed hold of
Carik's horns, gripping tightly as Morrigan sighed in annoyance before putting her arms around his
waist, Sten doing the same to her and Leliana to him.

"Hold on tight," Carik said softly, or as softly as a dragon might manage.

Then he ran forward, building up speed before finally unfurling his wings and throwing himself into
the skies at the mountain's edge. Freezing winds screamed past Alistair, burning his cheeks with their
cold and blinding him with their brightness, as if angered by the intrusion into their domain, but the
dragon wasted little time, gaining altitude quickly with every beat of his massive wings and looping
about back towards the mountain top.

"I see ruins," Carik said, only his powerful voice able to break through the wind's wail. "We'll land
there."

Alistair's stomach rose as the dragon brought his wings close, diving towards the mountain before
throwing them out again at the last second, soaring down towards the mountain, closer and closer till
Carik's claws sank into the snow and brought them skidding to a stop.

"And there we are," Carik said with what must have been a smile as he lowered himself to the
ground, sinking through a quickly melting mound of snow.

Alistair grinned, letting go of his horns and climbing down off the dragon's side, falling into the soft
snow to break his fall, the rest of his companions quickly following. There! That was easy! Who
needs to climb mountains when you've got a dragon?

The blizzard finally began to subside, thinning out now that the greatest bulk of its strength had been
spent, giving Alistair the chance to look around and see where they had to head next. There were
two paths, a wide and mawing cavern behind him, and the ruins of a temple ahead. Brother Genitivi
said that the temple was here...so that must be where they put Andraste's ashes.

Alistair headed towards the ruins, but Sten put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him in his tracks
before he could go further. He said nothing, turning Alistair's attentions to the cavern behind...and to
the two dozen cultists emerging from its depths, alongside a group of eight archers and a handful of
mages, too. Oh. Bugger. At the head of the group stood a man, larger and stronger than any of his
subordinates and far better equipped, armed from head to heel in what could only be silverite. Behind
them all was the gleaming eyes and scales of six or seven drakes, snarling in the darkness but they
fell silent and fled as soon as Carik turned his attentions to them.

"Intruders," the leader of the cultists said with a voice as loud as it was bitter. "You may have
managed to circumvent most of our defenses, but you shall go no further! You will not defile our
temple anymore!"

He strode towards them, glancing at Carik once before focusing entirely on Alistair. "Why have you
come here?"

We must be outnumbered three to one...best to play it safe.

"We have come for the Urn of Sacred Ashes," Alistair said carefully. "My name is Alistair, of the
Grey Wardens, and I promise we mean no harm."
The cult leader looked at him with an intense glare, then softened as he spoke. "I am Father Kolgrim, leader and guide of the Disciples of Andraste. You are fortunate to have avoided invoking the wrath of our blessed lady with your actions, Grey Warden."

Alistair looked to Leliana for a moment before looking back to Kolgrim. "Right! Andraste! Mind if we get to her urn, then?"

Kolgrim laughed, and some of his cultists laughed with him.

"The Urn is nothing more than a relic, for our lady has overcome death itself! She has returned to her faithful in a form so mighty that not even the Tevinter Imperium could hope to slay her now! No, it is they who would be burned by her radiant flame!"

"But the Urn is still here, right?" Alistair asked. "Because we really, really need the Urn. And a pinch of the ashes."

"I have an awful feeling about this," Morrigan sighed quietly as Kolgrim considered.

"Hang on," Carik said with a curious tone that made Kolgrim and his cultists freeze in place. "I must admit, I am not entirely familiar with the Chantry and Andraste and the Maker, but I thought Andraste took a place at the Maker's side when she died?"

"The dragon...speaks?" Kolgrim muttered in surprise before speaking more loudly, more certain. "The Lady Redeemer was slain by treachery and the flames of the magisters, true, but she has been reborn, to lead the faithful once more!"

"May we meet her, then?" challenged Leliana.

"Leliana, what are you doing?" Alistair asked quietly. "Surely -"

"If she has been reborn as you say she has," Leliana continued with a glare, "Then surely we can meet her?"

Kolgrim smiled. "Of course."

He reached to his belt, taking an ornate horn decorated with a strange version of the Chantry's crest, and sounded it. The loud wail echoed from the mountain top, drowning out his thoughts and chilling him to the bone in a way that even the cold could not.

A few seconds of silence passed.

Then something roared in reply.

Morrigan sighed once again. "You simply had to ask, didn't you?"

A shadow passed over the ground as something flew over them, blocking out the sun for but a heartbeat before it tipped its wings about, spiralling to land, just as Carik had.

"Apparently..." Alistair said as he looked up at the towering beast. "Andraste is a dragon now."

The purple beast was a fully grown dragon, a female, and she was lithe and thin where Carik was bulky and muscular. Her neck was long and bristling with spines, whereas Carik's was short, more
like that of a human, but that was far from the only difference between the two.

"Behold!" Kolgrim said as he turned to face the dragon with open arms. "Our Lady reborn!"

But the dragon paid no attention to him. No, all of her attentions were focused on Carik. She examined him with curiosity at first, but then with a hint of something *more*, softly pattering over and looking on either side of his body as she happily inspected him.

"Uh..." Carik said in confusion. "My eyes are up here."

"My...my lady?" Kolgrim put a hand through his dark hair, stunned at the sight.

Finally, the mighty dragon let out a puff, rising back to her full size, only a little more than half that of Carik. Kolgrim stiffened at the sight, smiling once again as she leaned back away from him...only to watch in horror as she walked round to his side, resting her head against his shoulder as she leaned on him, tail coiling around his.

And Alistair burst into laughter as the high dragon, one of the most fearsome creatures in the history of Thedas, cooed like a lovestruck girl.

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"You...what?" Maxos asked in confusion. "You mean a dragon, not like the kind from Rivellon who might wear the guise of mortals, an actual, bestial *dragon*...fell in love with you?"

Carik shrugged.

"It happened *exactly* as he told it," Alistair said, looking at his friend with a teasing smile. "Except he tried to fly off afterwards and she followed and -"

"And *nothing* happened," Carik insisted. "But it gave Alistair and Kolgrim a chance to talk."

"Indeed it did," the cult leader smiled. "Our Lady's actions made it clear that she favors the Grey Warden's cause, and that we should lend the strength of our arms to his efforts. I myself have come along with Alistair and his companions to ensure that her beloved stays out of harm's way."

"Does she know that you're only half dragon?" Maxos asked. "Can she even understand that?"

"She most certainly does," Kolgrim answered. "But her love for him transcends the barriers of either of his bodies."

"She can recognize me in either of my bodies," Carik explained. "I don't know how she does it, but she does. Somehow."

"Well then," Maxos smiled. "I suppose I should best be off to Rivellon."

"So soon?" Carik asked, sad disappointment showing. "I was hoping you'd stay for a little while longer."

"There's always room for a wizard like yourself in the party," Alistair said with a warm smile. "If
"You're anywhere near as strong as he tells me, the Darkspawn won't stand a chance."

"I wish I could stay and help you in your struggle, my young friend," Maxos replied as he took his staff in both hands. "But I cannot."

"Go on ahead," Carik said to his companions. "I'll catch up."

Alistair nodded, leading the others down the road, with Kolgrim staying behind till Carik gave him a nod and sent him along.

"It was good to see you again, Maxos," Carik smiled, walking over. "For a time...I honestly thought I might never see you or Rivellon again."

"And I you," Maxos smiled warmly. "So, you are helping the...?"

"Fereldans," Carik answered. "When Alistair said they needed help...he wasn't kidding, Maxos. Things aren't looking good."

He sighed, then continued.

"You know me, I've always liked adventure stories, I even wanted to be an adventurer when I was younger...but this is more important than any adventure. There are hundreds of thousands of lives at stake." Carik swallowed, then with a quiet and uneasy voice he said at last. "I don't know if we can do this."

"Carik," he said with pride. "You may not be the prince that I have raised these last sixteen years, you may not have gone through everything he has, but I see before me everything that I hoped he would become. You are everything your mother and father might have ever wanted in their son, and Aurora would say it, were she here to do so. I know not what enemies you fight, what weapons they might yield."

He stepped forward, and with a smile he put his hand upon his shoulder.

"There is nothing you cannot do. I know it."

Carik threw his arms around him, a hug that Maxos returned. He didn't know how long they stood there, but the wizard didn't care, either, and let him go only when he was ready.

"Thanks, Maxos." Carik smiled.

"And don't worry, my young friend," he said as he used his staff to move the portal entrance, just as he did in Acheron. "I am sure your Maxos will be here before long...and what a story you will have to tell him! How you saved so many people from harm's way."

Carik laughed, never losing his smile. "And I suppose Alistair will tell him how I charmed a dragon, I suppose."

Maxos nodded, smiling. "And that."

The portal opened once more, revealing the room inside the palace where Maxos had opened the portal. "I best return to my Rivellon - you won't find yourself, after all."
Carik laughed once more. "And I best continue on my way, before they think I got captured or something. Still, it was nice to see you again, Maxos."

The wizard nodded, smiling, then stepped through to Rivellon. He watched as Carik continued down the road, only to stop and look back, waving at him through the open portal before continuing on his way, a spring in his step and full of energy.

*If he truly is what our Carik will grow up to be like...I could never be more proud. He is willing to risk his life to help people he doesn't know, on a world that isn't even his own.*

He smiled widely, and with a tap of his staff against the center crystal, he closed the portal.

*I wonder what the next world shall be like...*

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**End of Part 5!**

Chapter End Notes

In Westeros we see things from Elia’s PoV: With Aerys completely off his rocker, Rhaella distant and depressed and Rhaegar occupied with pursuit of his prophecy, Elia is the brain of house Targaryen, the sane one charting the course that the family follows, but whilst she might be able to see things clearly for how they are, she doesn't have any real power to dictate to Aerys or any of the others the things that need to be done - instead, she has to try and convince Rhaegar to in turn convince the king, and so far, that's worked...sort of. Her marriage to Rhaegar isn't doing too well, either - whilst she was hopeful about their marriage being one of love earlier on, it's instead become one of friendship where she tries to rein in his excesses and keep him grounded in reality, rather than in ancient prophecies and the like.

And of course, the Targaryens see Carik's human form for the first time...and it's quite the surprise They also witness his incredible skills at magic...but more importantly, Elia cracks the mystery of his heritage, using his replies to their questions as a guide to solve the rest of the puzzle. To say she caught Carik off guard is an understatement - he is a prince who has been groomed to rule an empire, true, but he still has some eight years to go in that regard before the events of the Dragon Commander game, and even still he's in a different game here, even if things like the power of the King and so on are familiar to him. It's like taking a baseball player and tossing him into cricket. Combine that with the fact he still doesn't believe he'll be there for long...and things are easy for even the most basic player of the game of thrones to solve.

And he tells the king to go take a bath...something that Aerys actually listens to, since it was a dragon, the very symbol of Targaryen might, that told him to do so. Sure, it might not look like any dragon he is a familiar with, but he is a dragon all the same. Still, he doesn't trust anyone but his Kingsguard, especially with a blade, and so gives the task of cutting his beard to Ser Arthur Dayne.

In the other half of the part, Maxos goes to the Empire's capital, and what a fun section to write that was At this time, the Empire of Rivellon is at the peak of its power, with
almost everyone believing that it has a bright and prosperous future ahead of it, but inside the palace things are a different story - Sigurd is a broken man, utterly destroyed by the loss of Aurora, and his legitimate children are three different flavors of insanity. Faran, the eldest son, is a religious extremist, Cybelle is babbling demonic tongues and they call Karthan the "Axehand" for a good reason. To make things worse, Sigurd's inability to take charge and command means that the Council is going in circles, since they have no power to actually legislate on their own. Issues that should be easy to handle, like a decrease in farm productivity for example, are impossible for them to solve and end up festering and getting worse, and all that means the Empire is really on borrowed time right now.

And speaking of the Council, we meet all of the representatives! They won't be playing a major part in this story, but they might have a few more appearances in the future...and most of you will have noticed that the Imp representative is missing. Those more familiar with the setting already know why - he's dead. Trinculo Evenshorterfuse is the father of Trinculo Shortfuse, the Imp representative we see in the Dragon Commander game, who is in turn the uncle of Grumio, the ship's engineer...and as we know, most Imps die in catastrophic explosions sooner or later or get ground into mush by machinery, but their high mortality rate is countered by how many children they have, so it equals out in the end. Still, I deliberately arranged the representatives in different seating positions than in canon, to make it easier for people to guess their political persuasions if the descriptions weren't enough

And a bit further on we see two characters who should be familiar to those who have played Divinity 2: Flames of Vengeance and Divinity Original Sin. Behrlihn and Thelyron Hashnitor - both of them are wizards, and both of them were around at this time; in fact, Thelyron fought against Behrlihn during the Wizard Wars, which takes place two thousand years after Dragon Commander, so they've still got sometime to go before they fight against one another on the field.

And of course, they're off to the quaint little village of Aleroth!

There's a bit more to go in this summary, to do with Thedas, Alistair and all the others, but I've got to put it in the comments because of the character count, so if you're interested, you know where to look! :p
The Imperial Palace, Ravenseat, Rivellon.

Maxos brushed his hand through his beard as he looked at the arrangement of crystals on the ground before him. Travelling from one universe to the next was easy, as he himself had just proven, but doing so with precision depended entirely on whether or not one knew what the intended destination was. If he knew where his Carik had gone, he could simply think of that location as he charged the crystals, and he would arrive within a dozen feet of the prince...but without that vital bit of information he could only think of the prince alone...and that meant he was forced to travel to every and any universe where there was a Carik. There are an infinite number of universes and thus an infinite number of Rivellons. I could spend an eternity travelling between worlds and never see so much as a fraction of them all, but surely there must be some way to narrow things down.

He paused...then smiled, as an idea came to mind. Perhaps if I make my thoughts more precise, then it will reduce the number of possibilities available to me, and make it that little bit easier to find him. It is worth a try, at least.

Focusing his attentions on the crystals as he brought his staff down and started the ritual from the beginning, he thought only of Carik once again...but he tried to emphasize the fact that he was thinner and smaller than the Carik he had seen in the other world, younger and less bulky, and with bated breath he tapped the staff against the center crystal once again. The crystals arced to one another, as they had before, the portal opening without issue and turning to a mix of brown, gold and small splashes of green and orange before the image became clearer. It was a study much like Sigurd's own, except through the half closed curtains it seemed as though he could see clouds passing by, and on the opposite side of the desk was a chair, rotated to face the skies. How curious. Still, if Carik is in that world, I am sure he will have much to talk about.

Raising his staff up off the ground, he stepped forward into another world.

Rivellon #1287

One of the first few things that Maxos noticed as he stepped into the study was that, despite the familiar placement of the furnishings and the same styling, he felt far more comfortable there than he had in Sigurd's not long before, but he also felt...different. He could feel the stillness of the floor beneath his feet, that he himself was standing still, yet he could tell that he was moving as if he was in his horseless carriage or a passenger on a train, and moving at speed, too. His eyes passed from the furniture and lingered on the fluffy white clouds outside the window, and the realization was instantaneous. Fascinating...this must be an airship of some kind, and it is certainly moving much faster than any I have ever been on before. Could this be Rivellon? A future version of Rivellon, perhaps? He took a breath of the clean and cool air, then on the other side of the chair he barely heard the soft flutter of a book's pages being turned over.

"Is that you, Maxos?" came an almost familiar voice, older, deeper and more refined - the voice of neither the sixteen year old prince he was searching for or his twenty year old incarnation, but of a
man fully grown and seasoned with experience.

"I am sorry," he said softly as he stepped towards the desk. "My name is indeed Maxos, but I am not the one of your world."

"A pity," came the soft reply. "He told me earlier he was close to finding a treatment for my condition. What can I help you with then? Are you looking for your Rivellon's version of myself, like all the other wizards?"

An infinite number of worlds means an infinite number of men like myself...and an infinite number of them came up with this very same idea, and more than a few of them probably ended up here.

"I apologize for the intrusion, and for those of all the other versions of myself, but you know as well as I do - better, perhaps - why I must go from one world to the next in search of the prince. Have you seen him, Carik? I am sure he looks the same as you did when you were sixteen."

"Sixteen years old..." there was a soft chuckle, and a murmur as Carik spoke. "He would be a little more than half my age, then. No, as far as I know he isn't here, or at least I haven't seen him yet. None of the other factions have boasted about capturing a younger version of myself either, nor the newspaper mentioned any scandals or anything of the like, still, I had my own mages perform a search after the first wizard came looking for a fourteen year old version of myself, and they found no one either."

"Then that must mean that he isn't here," Maxos sighed...but with his curiosity roused by Carik's words, he asked a different question. "I will leave in a moment, but what did you mean by "factions"? From your words they appear to be hostile, but how could that be?"

"Civil war," Carik answered. "A lot has happened in the last fifteen years, Maxos, more than you could possibly imagine. The Empire as you might know it is...gone. My half-siblings and I are fighting for control of Rivellon, but the war is almost won now, Maxos, after countless battles."

Maxos swallowed hard. A war of succession. There was always the possibility that Faran and the others would not go quietly or without a fight...

"Only my sister stands in the way of peace now, but there is no doubt as to how it will end. I only hope my own Maxos is capable of solving my issue before the war ends."

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"I doubt you want to see," came the sad answer. "Few do, I feel, and I know I most certainly don't."

"Whatever is wrong with you, my young friend," he said with a warm tone, "I am sure it isn't as bad as you think."

There was a sigh...and the chair began to turn, its movements smooth and unjarring, slowly revealing the new Emperor of Rivellon in all his majesty. Carik was wearing a full dress uniform that covered him from head to heel in black and red, a pair of crimson stripes running down the sides of his leggings that matched the red trim of his cuffs. Golden buttons gleamed in the lighting of two different worlds, alongside a thick web of golden braids and proud epaulettes atop his shoulders, but nothing was more beautiful than the great piece of jewelry placed above his heart. A six pointed star made from gold, each point symbolizing one of the Civilized Races of Rivellon and tipped with a different gemstone; a ruby for humanity, a topaz for the dwarves, an emerald for the elves, a sapphire
for the lizards, a diamond for the undead and a pink pearl for the imps. In the center of them all was a dragon, wings unfurled and carved from black opal, twinkling like the stars of the night sky in the light.

Only then did Maxos notice that Carik...was a skeleton of pale white bone. *He...he died?*

"Now do you see?" Carik asked sadly, his bony hands setting down a copy of the *Tales of the Seven Gods* on the desk's surface. "I'm ruined, Maxos. What kind of man or woman would follow the lead of an Emperor who is a *skeleton*? They can look right at me and see how good my strategies and tactics are and how I managed to get myself killed!"

"Or they might see a man who gave everything he could for the ideals he believes in," Maxos smiled reassuringly. "Only the pious and the pure of heart are given the Perpetuity of the Bone, my young friend, and that shows to all the people of the Empire that you truly believe in the good of your deeds, and that you do not carry them out solely to make people think that you do. True, some of them might be put off by your new, bony appearance, but stand tall, with your head held up high, and I doubt they will find issue with it for long."

"But there's more to it than that," Carik sighed, and then he continued with a voice that said he would be crying had he still had the eyes to do so. "I miss the taste of a good glass of wine, the smell of freshly cooked bread, the warmth of a long stay in bed. I can't drink anymore, I can't eat anymore, I can't even sleep anymore or show my wife how much I love her, or anything else I might enjoy."

Even Maxos did not know what to say after that. There was only silence, and it reigned supreme till the door was knocked.

"Come in," Carik said, his voice weary and weakened by his emotional burst.

The door opened...and in stepped Yorick, dressed in a dark violet robe with ox skulls on his shoulders connected to one another by a belt of bones and the skulls of small monkeys. He bowed with nothing but the utmost respect for his Emperor, and his words and smile were the same.

"Your grace," the Undead representative said happily, "The referendum has been held, all votes have been tallied and the results are in."

"Oh?" Carik asked, his interest returning, but before Yorick could continue he turned to Maxos and quickly explained, "The Lizards, pointing out the crimes and madness of my half-siblings, asked for a referendum on the codification of a constitution and the creation of a true Imperial Senate, among other things."

"Our beloved emperor chose to give them the chance in his endless generosity," Yorick said with a delighted smile as he reached into his robe and pulled out a copy of the Empire's most popular newspaper, the Rivellon Times. "And the Seven have granted him victory!"

He proudly unfolded the paper for both to see, and printed in a massive font on the frontpage was the results of the referendum on the introduction of the Republic, replacing all but a small headline about a ban on existential philosophy.

*EMPEROR CARIK WINS 117% OF VOTER TURNOUT! LIZARDS CRY FRAUD AS UNDEAD RETURN TO CRYPTS AND GRAVES!* "I don't see what all the fuss is about," says man on the street. "He would have won anyway."
“Not even death could keep the Undead from carrying out their duty of supporting the Seven’s representative on Rivellon,” Yorick said happily. “The Everking commanded us to go and vote, and vote we have done, unanimously in your favor. Truly, this is democracy as it was always meant to be seen.”

Carik took the paper from him and looked closely, reading in silence before laughing to himself. “I must admit, I didn’t quite see that outcome coming...the Lizards claims of fraud haven’t even a leg to stand on, since they are the ones who urged everyone to go and out and vote, regardless of whether they were alive or undead. Still, I had been ready to listen to the people of Rivellon, no matter their choice, and...well, the people have chosen. Please, give the Everking my regards when you next meet him again.”

Yorick bowed again. “Gladly, your grace.”

Finally, Carik reached into his coat and plucked out a watch, glancing at the time before returning it to its pocket as he stood. "...and an emperor's work is never done. I best head back to the front."

"I have one last question, if you wouldn't mind answering it," Maxos said as he watched the skeletal emperor walk over to the window and undo the latch. "How did you die?"

****

Three months before...

The ground trembled from the force of Carik's deep and bellowing laughs, the massive dragon unable to hold back his amusement as he felt the pattering of rifle fire bouncing off of his thick plates. He smiled as he walked forward, the chasm so narrow that they could not get around to his weaker sides, forcing the soldiers of Faran's branch of the Imperial Army to fall back or be crushed beneath him like their barricades, crates and everything else was. All of their heavy equipment, the things that he would need to fear - like their Grenadiers and their dangerous anti-air rockets, their Armours and their twin barreled cannons or Devastators and their enormous siege guns - had been pulled away for another battle...a battle that was actually a feint meant to give Carik the opportunity to spearhead an assault towards Lucidia, a province that had become the capital of his half-brother's own empire.

All that meant they only had small arms to resist him with, and even an old blackpowder cannon or a wooden ballista would have been more useful in the end, as nearly ten minutes of incinerating machine gun nests, crushing trenches and dugouts and being an all about nightmare had proven. I only have an hour before Henry and his troops catch up, so I best pick up speed and make sure the path is open for them when they arrive. Carik hummed softly - which meant his voice was "only" as loud as a roaring engine and not outright deafening to anyone nearby - as he walked along, setting off landmines and crushing barbed wire under his heel.

"Keep firing, men!" cried a half dressed officer covered in dirt, reloading his revolver as the men alongside fired their bolt-action rifles at the wall of armored flesh and muscle heading towards them. "Those plates have to give way eventually!"

"But...but sir!" pleaded a young recruit, pointing to Carik as he walked towards them. "Our guns...they don't do anything against that!"

"Might be because you keep firing them at my strongest point," Carik explained as he shrugged shoulders as large as houses before continuing his walk. "You might as well just surrender and save time."
"Pass it here!" shouted the officer, snatching the rifle from the recruit's hands and raising it up towards Carik's face.

He fired...and the bullet struck the dragon's chin with a loud clang, ricocheting back towards him and hitting the recruit in the shoulder, who shouted and swore with a rainbow of expletives as he clutched at the wound. The officer growled angrily, fumbling with the gun to eject the spent casing, so Carik simply reached out and took the gun from him, grabbing it with claws bigger than any man.

Then he opened his mouth and tossed the rifle inside, the soldiers watching in utter horror as he started to chew.

Then he opened his mouth and tossed the rifle inside.

And the soldiers watched in utter horror as he chewed, utterly destroying the rifle's wooden stock and steel barrel between his teeth before swallowing.

"You...you..." murmured one of the soldiers as he dropped his weapon on the ground in shock. "You just ate his gun."

"I did," Carik answered, managing to hide the horrid metallic taste coating his mouth. "And the rest of you might want to follow, before I start eating things other than guns."

As soon as the words left his mouth, there was the loud clatter of weapons falling to the ground. The officer looked around in surprise, then sighed in defeat, throwing down his revolver and walking off to a corner, sulking with his steps. Carik, smiling at the fact that they had finally seen reason, continued walking along as the men unloaded their weapons and threw them aside to await the arrival of his soldiers, but Carik simply kept going.

Another day, another victory.

"Hey! Hey you!" came a loud, high pitched voice.

"Hmmm?" Carik murmured, looking all around for the source of the disturbance...

...only to see a tiny pink imp stood in front of him, three feet high and dressed in dark green with a helmet that was too big for his tiny stature. In his hand was a black stick with a red button atop of it, a detonator, connected to a walnut shaped device covered in wires a mile away, placed atop a large tower.

"Dat's a Megabomb!" the lowborn Imp shouted defiantly. "Take one more step! I dares ya! Go on!"

"What in the name of the Seven is a "megabomb"?" Carik asked, curious.

The Imp smiled.

"Take a step and find out."

Seeing how much luck they've had so far...

Carik raised a claw and placed it on the soft earth ahead of him, walking forward on all fours. The Imp's smile turned to a wide grin, his eyes filled with insanity, and he pushed the big red button with
a mad, cackling laugh.

For a second, there was nothing.

Then in the next, there was light.

****

"I don't really feel like talking about it," Carik answered sullenly as he opened the window.

"That is entirely your choice," Maxos smiled. *Regardless of how he fell, I am sure it would have been a noble end for any man.*

Then Carik hurled himself out the open window, switching bodies into a gigantic, skeletal version of his draconic form, to Yorick's obvious delight. He was huge, that much was obvious, but Maxos couldn't even imagine how large he would have been with his body intact and unharmed; he would be the size of a castle at least, perhaps even bigger depending on how bulky he was...but what was truly interesting was the large machine on Carik's back, a contraption of funnels, contains and pipes all linked together. *I wonder what that is?*

Carik turned about, away from the airship...and a bright blue light ignited in the engine nozzles and he shot off into the distance and out of sight in just a few seconds.

...well then. *That explains that.*

Maxos turned about, walking back towards the portal as Yorick walked over to close the window behind his emperor, the Undead representative never once losing his smile. Crossing the distance between universes and returning to his own, he put a hand through his beard, thinking, as he closed the portal.

*I suppose my idea to make my thoughts more precise worked better than I had expected...after all, I doubt there are any versions of Carik thinner than an undead version of him, after all.*

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**Meanwhile, in Westeros...**

Ser Arthur Dayne sighed as quietly as he could, slowly removing his left gauntlet and setting it down on a nearby table, flexing his fingers in the leather glove beneath as the king, the man he was sworn to obey in all things, sat quietly in a nearby chair and allowed a servant to moisten his beard and cheeks with a wet cloth. The knight laid down his sheathed weapon besides the gauntlet in utter silence...and slowly drew forth Dawn, the legendary weapon of the Daynes of Starfall, a blade only ever given to the Sword of the Morning, who could only ever be chosen by unanimous decision of all Dayne men. The milky white blade shone in the light bleeding through the tent's wavering cloth, but he could see his reflection in its immaculate surface all the same, as clear as any mirror.

*How did it ever come to this?*

He placed a hand on its grip.

Dawn was much more than just a weapon, it was the very symbol of the Dayne family, a symbol of their heritage as Kings of the Torrentine and the Lords of Starfall, and it had always been there whenever the Daynes had accomplished something of importance. King Samwell the Starfire had
carried it into battle with him when he smashed the armies of the Hightower to pieces and sacked Oldtown, Vorian Dayne had been allowed to take it to the Wall with him and had put it through the heart of two wildling kings before it was sent back to Starfall with him for burial, and there had never been a single Sword of the Morning who had ever been forgotten by history - his own namesake had lived in the time before the Andals had crossed the Narrow Sea and it was with Dawn in hand that he had pierced the thick bronze breastplate of King Boros Blackmont, cutting his heart into two and ending a bloody war in the process.

Millennia had passed since then, other families acquiring great weapons of their own, swords of Valyrian steel that were, perhaps, as strong and as sharp as the Dayne's ancient weapon, Dawn itself remained unique...and there was not a single Valyrian steel sword that could match even half of its history. Only by the unanimous decision of all living Dayne men, even those in the cadet branch at High Hermitage, could a Dayne be given the title of Sword of the Morning, just as he himself had. Dawn had been there at his side when he had first donned the white cloak of the Kingsguard, there with him when he had fought to protect Princess Elia and her newborn daughter from harm and it had been the blade to fell the Smiling Knight after a long and hard fought duel.

It was an old friend, one he would trust with his life...and here he was, about to shave a beard with it.

It doesn't feel right. I am sworn to obey the king, no matter what happens or what he might do or what he might command, but...this would never feel right.

He raised the sword, holding the blade between thumb and forefinger with his leather gloved hand. He would need all of his dexterity, all of his skill, if he was to shave the king's beard without killing him in the process. The king had asked him and his sworn brothers to do many things over the years, but this was easily the most absurd and the one that put the most discontent in his heart, even more so than the time he had sent him, the Lord Commander and Ser Lewyn to all the brothels of the Street of Silk in order to find the prettiest whore who had his usual "preference" of blonde hair and green eyes. It had been shameful, but they had completed the duty he had given them, as was expected, but this was something else entirely...it felt like a deliberate insult, and knowing the king, it probably was.

He despises his son and he knows that Rhaegar and I are friends. That is reason enough for him to give me this...command, as bitter as it might be.

His fingers rolled over Dawn's milky steel...and Ser Arthur Dayne swallowed his discontent and picked up the sword with both hands, turning about to face his king as the servant placed the cloth into a wooden basin and threw a linen sheet around the king's neck, tying it behind his neck to cover his body from any stray hairs before quietly exiting the tent and leaving the two alone.

"Your grace," Ser Arthur said, his voice quiet and with a hint of pleading, "I beg you to reconsider. Let me find a groom and stand vigil as they work -"

"By the time you moved your hand to stop them I would already be bleeding and dead," King Aerys answered with a cold, piercing glare. "You will do as I have commanded, Ser Arthur, else you shall go to the Wall along with the rest of the filth who thought to disobey their betters."

For but a single heartbeat, Arthur was tempted to disobey his king, to storm out the tent and ride north to the Wall and take the black with his honor and that of Dawn intact, but the thoughts of his family at the king's mercy, the thought of what the king might do to them in the rage of being defied silenced all others. He might have chosen to swear the vows and wear the cloak of a Kingsguard all of his own accord, but he was a hostage all the same, a prisoner bound with chains forged from an
oath and imprisoned within a tower of duty and guarded by honor. *I have no choice.*

"As you command, your grace," he said with an obedient, respectful nod as he walked towards his king without any more hesitation.

And as suddenly as the king's dark mood had come, it was replaced by a warm, almost friendly smile as he relaxed into the seat, waiting for him to begin. Arthur moved Dawn's grip under his arm, holding the tip of the blade with his leather gloved hand and with his gauntleted one further down, giving him all the control he might need.

"May I begin, your grace?"

"You may," came the eager reply.

...*may Daynes both dead and as yet unborn forgive me for what I do now...*

He brought the sword forward...and began to shave his king's beard.

Dawn's edge was sharper than any razor and thus it was more than a match for the king's matted and filthy beard, sending clumps of dull silver falling onto the cloth with even the slightest of movements...and making it clear that even the tiniest error would create not a small scratch barely able to draw blood, but a deep and horrid gash that would go through his cheek till it struck teeth on the other side, and with every stroke he said in silence the words of a prayer to the Seven, thanking them for guiding his hand.

And then the king started speaking, and it was everything the Sword of the Morning could do to not kill him by accident.

"Tell me, Ser Arthur," the king began, his tone warmer than the usual and his eyes kept closed to keep his fear of blades at bay, "What do you think of the dragon?"

"I do not believe that he means us any harm, your grace," he answered with a practiced voice as he slowed down his strokes, the king's right cheek almost completely bare once more, all whilst thinking of the dragon...and the man who looked so similar to his friend and prince. "I doubt we would be able to defend ourselves if he was to attack, but the fact that he is willing to follow us to Harrenhal proves his intentions more than anything else could."

"That pile of rubble hardly matters," the king answered quickly, "No dragon would ever harm a true Targaryen, yet alone the one who rides it."

But this is no normal dragon. *Valyrian dragons never had claws, and no dragon ever had the ability to turn into a man before...never mind how that man looks like Rhaegar...*

"Regardless," the king continued. "This tournament gives the chance for the whole realm to see their king riding atop a dragon, like Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters had...it will put an end to any plots and schemes they might be making, that is for certain."

"And speaking of sisters," the king said with a smile and with Dawn upon his throat, "How is lady Ashara?"

A chill went up his spine.
"She is well, your grace," he answered quietly.

"I must admit, she is a beautiful young woman," Aerys continued. "I am sure that men from across the entire realm will be vying for the chance to crown her the Queen of Love and Beauty."

"It is a title she deserves," Arthur briefly replied.

"And one I am sure she shall have, if the gods are kind." The king paused, then asked, "Are you planning to compete in the tournament, ser?"

"I would hope so, your grace, if you would allow it."

"I shall allow it, as a reward for serving your king well," Aerys said happily. "I am sure that lady Ashara will be happy to see your skill at arms at Harrenhal, regardless of whether you win or lose. There will be many skilled knights and lords in such a great tourney, ser, but I am sure none of them could even dream of matching a dragon. Yet alone in the melee."

He knew Aerys better than most knowing well how the king could be generous, bloodthirsty, charming and arbitrary. He was all of those things and so much more, utterly unpredictable, which meant that what could have been a thinly veiled thread towards his sister could instead be simple, friendly conversation with no meaning hidden behind his words. But I won't take that chance. If he wants me to throw the tournament so that Carik has a chance to win, then I will do it happily and with a smile for Ashara's sake. There will always be other tournaments.

"I am sure Carik will be victorious in the tournament, your grace," he said as he continued the king's shave, a little more than half done.

"I look forward to seeing their faces when he does," Aerys smiled. "They have become daring since the last dragon died, always trying to push the crown this way and that, trying to see what they can do and how much they can take before the crown is forced to act. There are vultures, ser, who are just waiting for the right moment to strike against the throne and see how much power they can claim."

"But dragons..." the king's smile grew into a grin. "Dragons are never weak."

"No raider would ever dare to break the king's peace if they knew that they were but a breath away from burning to death in a blaze of dragonfire," the king said, his voice turning hard and bitter. "No sellsword bastard would try and steal the Iron Throne if they knew their ships would be turned to charred flotsam in the Narrow Sea, nor would any merchant even think of supporting them."

"Nor would some petty lord dare to imprison his king when he comes to settle matters," Aerys said, his eyes opening and his face twisting into a snarl as his hands clenched into tight fists. "Nor would he throw them into a dank dungeon for months on end, letting his clothes rot onto his body and leaving him alone in the darkness to suffer."

"Your grace," Ser Arthur spoke with the utmost care. "Is this enough?"

The king leaned forward in the chair with a frown as Arthur turned and picked up a hand mirror to show the king his reflection. He had shaved his cheeks and neck as best as he could, leaving the king with a thick mustache and a large, bushy beard around his mouth, creating a look that Arthur thought suited the king well and Aerys seemed to agree, smiling at the sight...then Arthur noticed the blood dripping from the king's palms, from four shallow cuts on each hand, but he chose to say nothing,
lest he risk returning the king back to his anger.

"Well done, ser," the king said cheerfully, running his fingers across his smooth cheeks. "I knew you would be able to do it."

"Thank you, your grace," Arthur smiled. "Shall I cut your hair, as well?"

"Of course," the king nodded warmly, leaning back into the chair.

*It is as if he was never brooding at all...I should be surprised, but I'm not. He has always been a temperamental king, even before Duskendale, but after it...it's as if he is constantly flipping a coin on how to act. One moment he is happy and excited and in the next he is having a man drawn and quartered for stealing a loaf of bread. But it's not as if the lords of the kingdom care too much about his sense of justice. So long as he leaves his vassals alone, they couldn't care less what he does to the smallfolk who break the law.*

The king's hair was as long as it was greasy, covered in dirt and riddled with knots and having not felt the touch of a razor or been washed for the better half of a decade, but thankfully it was not Arthur's task to comb and clean, but to cut, as the king had no issue with his servants being armed with bone combs and bars of soap, only when they were carrying blades. Holding Dawn under his arm and gripping the blade with one hand and gently grabbing hold of a length of hair with the other, he carefully rubbed the silver strands against the sword's edge...and Dawn simply passed through the hair as though it were water.

*I am oathbound to do whatever he commands, so...surely there is no shame in doing this? I am merely doing what I was ordered to do, even if that command was to cut my king's hair with Dawn.*

"It won't be long before we reach Harrenhal," the king started. "This tournament will be the biggest gathering of lords since the end of the war and the death of the last Blackfyre. Every lord and heir of importance will be there, and they'll have brought their daughters along, too. But to be honest, I think I am looking forward to seeing my cousin's son again most of all."

"I am sure Lord Robert will be delighted to see you again, your grace."

"His father's death was a tragedy," Aerys sighed. "There are some nights I wonder whether I am the one to blame for his death. It was I who gave him the command to find a Valyrian bride for Rhaegar, after all. Do you know why I sent him to do that, ser? Why I sent him to Volantis and the other Free Cities?"

"To keep the blood of the Freehold pure, your grace?"

"That is one reason," the king answered, "Tywin Lannister is the other. He has always wanted power, and when I was young I was fool enough to think he could be my friend. I thought we could do great things for the realm together, so I made him my Hand and trusted in him...only for him to use that trust for his own gain. No, I sent Steffon to Essos to find a bride for Rhaegar to stop Tywin from trying to scheme his way into seeing that wench of his as Rhaegar's wife."

The king laughed darkly.

"If that had happened, he would have tried his best to have me killed. Then he would have killed Rhaegar when he had a son of his own, giving him the power to rule the Seven Kingdoms as its regent."
A man doesn't have to be mad to know that there is actually a nugget of truth in what he says...Tywin Lannister is an ambitious man and one who doesn't take slights well, everyone knows that, but I have known him for over a decade now and know that he isn't the kind of man to take unnecessary risks...especially ones that would destroy the Lannister family if they went wrong. Besides, he has little reason to be ambitious anymore - he is Hand of the King, after all. What else could he aspire for? He already has as great an influence on the realm as if he were regent already. Getting anymore would simply make him a target.

"But Rhaegar himself thought that the marriage would be a good one," Aerys sighed. "He claimed that it would strengthen the crown, though he doesn't know Tywin Lannister as I know him. I had to act, before the two of them could start plotting together, so I sent my closest friend to Essos find him a bride and he died because of it."

"You cannot blame yourself for what happened to Lord Steffon, your grace," Arthur soothed, trying to keep the king's mood from slipping. "No one could have foreseen that a storm would destroy their ship."

"Mayhaps so," Aerys muttered sadly. "But I lost my closest friend and ally that day."

"But you have gained another in the dragon, have you not?" Arthur said as he cut away the last of the king's overgrown locks of hair. "As you yourself said, your grace, no dragon would ever harm a Targaryen."

Slowly, the king started to smile again.

"I must admit, ser," Aerys said with a warm, friendly voice. "I am starting to see why Rhaegar calls you a friend."

"Thank you, your grace," Arthur said once more, giving the king the mirror again.

Whereas the king's hair had been closer to his knees in length than not, now it barely reached to halfway down his neck, which, combined with his tidy beard and the bath he would soon be taking, made him start to look more like a king again. I must admit, I'm rather proud of myself. The king is shaved, his hair has been cut and he is still alive to take his bath. A feat worthy of being put into the Book of the Brothers, seeing how he wished me to do it with a sword and not a razor...

"It seems you are as apt at cutting through hair as you are at cutting through men," the king smiled, neatening a stray strand of hair to the side. "I think I shall have you do all my haircuts and grooming in the future, as my personal barber."

...bugger...

Just as how he didn't know if the king was making a threat or simply trying to pass time by talking about the tournament, so did he not know how the king could react to having his offer declined. He might simply shrug and laugh, or he might believe that Arthur was plotting against him and have him sent to the Wall for treason - a light punishment by his standards...and worse, he could paint his sister and the rest of their family as accomplices to whatever treason he was accused of, and have them punished as well. I have no choice.

"I would be honored, your grace," Arthur said with a respectful bow and a silent sigh before sheathing Dawn and walking over to undo the cloth wrap before finally taking his gauntlet and
"By now, the water should be hot enough for my bath," the king mused as he rose from his seat, brushing away the last few clumps of hair. "You may leave now."

Arthur bowed once again, this time in silence, then turned towards the tent's flap, eager to put the entire morning behind him.

"Oh, and ser?"

Ser Arthur turned towards the king, who met his gaze with piercing amethyst eyes that melted away to a smile and a nod. "The dragon will remember who his friends were, when the time comes."

Arthur nodded. "Of course, your grace."

Then he walked through the tent's flap and into the day, happy to be done with the king at last. *By the time this day is over and done, I will have cleaned Dawn for longer than anyone else ever has.* He looked up into the sky as a shadow passed overhead...and saw the dragon, swirling around and flying with the princesses and the queen on his back, never straying too far from the camp to the relief of the knight of the Kingsguard. *There is no question of their safety, at least...* He smiled to himself as he made his way through the camp, looking out for his sister's white and purple pavilion. They would be going to Harrenhal once Aerys had finished his bath and had a chance to ride the dragon for himself, but till then he had nothing else to do but to pass the time, and already the camp was slowly starting to be packed up, one tent at a time. There was no real urgency to make them hasten their departure, as Harrenhal was only a few hours ride away at most...and no lord would ever think to begin the tournament without the king in attendance, no, they could arrive a week late and Lord Whent would still thank them for coming so quickly...and so the servants were content to take things slowly for the time being, till the king was ready to give the command to break camp.

*After which, they'll have everything done in a few minutes, because they know what will happen if they take too long and displease the king.*

He sighed.

Joining the Kingsguard had always been his lifelong dream, and when he had first put on the white cloak and started to serve beneath Aerys he had done so eagerly, happy to carry out his king's every command. Aerys meant well, and what temper he did have was never anything that caused any lasting harm - though he might shout and yell when someone made a mistake, that was the norm in Westeros, and he would do nothing more and sometimes even apologize afterwards once his temper had cooled...but everything changed with Duskendale. The man that had entered the town was different than the man that had left, and now Arthur was always anxious about what his king's next command might be. Would he send him down to the brothels again, to find him a pretty girl? Or would he see a noblewoman he fancies and command Ser Arthur and his sworn brothers to snatch her from her bed in the midst of the night? Would he send them to carry a message to a nearby lord who asked for more information as to the king's commands, or would they be placed at the head of an army and ordered to lay siege, demanding the lord to turn himself over to be given a traitor's punishment?

Arthur didn't know, he couldn't know, and it scared him more than any foe ever had.

The bitter thoughts churned inside, refusing to leave him be, till at last he finally found his bored sister sat on a chair outside a half packed tent, its bare frame of cedar wood marking the perimeter of
where its cloth would have been staked into the ground. Her long black hair fluttered gently in the winds, in dark contrast to his own pale white, but despite that difference they still shared the same violet eyes of all Daynes, and in her white dress she looked like a statue of the Maiden herself in all her beauty come to life.

"I was starting to wonder where you were," she said with a smile. "What heroic deed were you doing, Arthur? What will the bards sing of next?"

"I was giving the king a shave," he said truthfully and without mentioning how he had done it. *I'm not lying, after all...and I would rather the rest of my family never, ever learnt of it.* "Then he saw fit to give me the honor of being his personal groom."

"That's quite the honor," his sister laughed and teased. "Someone has to protect our king from whenever his beard tries to usurp the rest of his face, so who better than you?"

"Very funny," he said as he crossed his arms with a smile before gesturing to what remained of the tent. "And I see someone has stolen the rest of your tent?"

"Oh, they have," Ashara nodded, "Truly, there has been no greater crime since you thought you looked good wearing white."

Even Arthur couldn't help but laugh then - his sister was as good with her wit as he was with his sword, and he loved her for it.

"And I see we will be going to Harrenhal with one more person than when we set out," she said, looking up towards the dragon with eyes hinting at wonder. "I never thought I would ever see one. I've seen the skulls in the Red Keep, but those are nothing compared to a real, live dragon."

"Perhaps you could ask him for a ride?" Arthur suggested.

"I am tempted, but not before Aerys gets his chance," came his sister's quick reply. "I doubt our beloved king would react well if he found out someone who isn't even part Targaryen rode the dragon before he did."

"He's called Carik," Arthur said as he walked over to his sister.

"And he can talk," his sister smiled again as she glanced at the sky and watched the dragon descend to land once again. "I am sure the Maesters will be very interested when they find out about a talking dragon. I wonder if he can read and write, too?"

"Don't tell anyone I said this, Ashara," Arthur said quickly and quietly, "But he can turn into a man, too."

"Was he handsome?" A curious Ashara asked.

Arthur looked at her in confusion, as if he hadn't heard what she had said.

"Well? What did he look like?" she prodded, smiling.

"He looked like Rhaegar," Arthur relented. "Except his hair and eyes were gold colored, not violet or silver."
"Golden eyes," his sister echoed as she thought. "I've never even heard of anyone with eyes like that before. Rhaegar is handsome enough, so that means yes, he is handsome..."

"What are you planning, Ashara?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"I was curious, that's all," she said innocently. "I was just wondering what I should expect whenever I see him in person. That's all."

Arthur looked at his sister intently and in silence.

"Honest!" she laughed, but her face was sad. "Seven, sometimes I wonder if you don't trust me anymore."

"I trust you," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I trust you more than anyone else in the world," he sighed. "It's the king. I'm getting so used to him saying one thing and meaning another that I -"

"I don't mind, Arthur," his sister said forgivingly, meeting his eyes with her own as she spoke with a quiet voice little louder than a whisper. "The king has everyone on edge these days, you can hear it whenever he holds court. The whispers, the fear of what he might do next...he has everyone in King's Landing scared of him, but none of the lords of Westeros know how bad it really is."

"You think they'll react badly when they see him at Harrenhal?"

"Maybe not as badly as if they saw him with the beard still," she smiled for a moment, but went back to being serious afterwards. "But they're going to find out about him eventually...and when they do, they won't like what they see."

"I doubt they'll act just because his mood changes as quickly as the winds, though," Arthur reasoned. "Aegon the Unworthy did far worse than Aerys ever has, and the lords of the realm never once rose against him."

"Yes, but who's to say the king doesn't get worse?" his sister asked, concerned. "What if he wakes up one morning and decides that he wants to use Tywin Lannister's bones for kindling?"

*Is that even possible?*

"If that happens, then we will need to go and hunt down a lion," Ser Oswell Whent said as he walked towards the two, his left hand resting on the pommel of his longsword as a group of servants trailed behind him. He was older than Arthur by some seven namedays, putting him at twenty nine years of age, but Arthur was an inch taller and a little bulkier too, and the Whent knight had all the looks that his family were known for - a neatly cut head of oak-brown hair, hard features and deep set eyes of dark hazel. "The king has given the command to break camp, and he wants everyone to see him ride the dragon for the first time."

"Then we best be moving," Arthur said, offering his hand to Ashara and raising her up off her seat, allowing a servant to walk past and start taking it apart, piece by piece. "I assume the queen and the others are well?"

"They are," Oswell answered as the three left the servants to do their work and started walking towards the centre of the camp. "Though the little princess is asleep, now. She tired herself out, or so it seems."
All the day's excitement must have been too much for her. There's no one in the Red Keep who didn't know how much she wanted to ride a dragon, no matter how many times she was told they were gone from the world, and now...well, it seems she got her wish.

"She would be," Ashara smiled. "She just had her greatest dream come true. What would you do if that happened to you, ser? If your greatest wish was fulfilled?"

"I am living my dream, my lady," Ser Oswell Whent replied quickly. "Whilst being a member of the Kingsguard isn't what I first thought I might become, here I am. I would not have it any other way."

"I would hope so," Ashara said to the Whent knight with a warm smile. "All those vows would have most men running as fast as their legs could carry them."

"That may be so," Oswell said in reply, "But not every man gets the chance to take the white, and our vows are less restrictive than those of the Night's Watch. We might not be allowed to keep titles, hold land or take wives." He looked towards Arthur with a small smile, both men knowing of Prince Lewyn and his paramour. *Even the Lord Commander knows, but our oaths say nothing about being forbidden from keeping paramours.* "But we are allowed to win as much glory as our skills allow us to. That is enough for most."

"And this tournament gives you a chance to see your brother again, too," she added. "Brothers of the Night's Watch never get that chance."

"Aye," Oswell nodded. "The king has made it clear that he wants me to ride to Harrenhal ahead of the group once he has started to ride the dragon, and I am sure my brother will be grateful for the chance to make sure that everything is ready for the king's arrival."

"And I'm sure he'll be happy to learn that there will be a dragon there, too."

"Seeing as what happened the last time dragons were at Harrenhal," Oswell quickly answered, "I doubt he'll be particularly excited."

Ashara laughed, as she usually did whenever Oswell made a jape - her wit was her weapon, and one she knew well, but she had an equal in Ser Oswell Whent, who could match her word for word and jest for jest, something which sometimes made Arthur think that the two of them could have been very happy together, had Oswell never joined the Kingsguard. *But that doesn't stop them from being friends with one another, thankfully.*

"Let's hope he doesn't do what Balerion the Black Dread did, then," his sister said with a warm smile as they reached the centre of the camp.

Here, the tents had already been dismantled and back back up onto their carts, the fire pits buried and everything else made ready for their departure. A group of men-at-arms, each wearing the red dragon of the Targaryen family upon their black tabards, stood guard, protecting the two groups of horses; palfreys for the journey to Harrenhal and destriers for riding in the tournament, either of the two breeds being worth as much as a knight's ransom, but there was also a sand steed, Prince Lewyn's own mount, which was as costly as a palfrey and a destrier put together...but not even the greatest, most expensive horse could rival a dragon, and all eyes were on the great black and red beast that was sat in the middle, a creature that was as legendary as it was real - a dragon. His sister smiled in a way he had never seen before at the sight of him, and even Arthur himself was filled with a childlike wonder - there was not a child in all of the Seven Kingdoms who didn't grow up on the stories of
dragons and dragonriders and dragonslayers, and it was the story of Urrax and Serwyn of the Mirror Shield that had driven a young Arthur Dayne to practice his skill at arms when he was still young. *I doubt Carik would ever fall for Serwyn's trick, and I doubt there would ever be a need for me to try it, either.*

But regardless of whatever his sister was thinking, she stayed silent, waiting for the king to ride him before saying a word. Arthur stood alongside her in silence, till at last the king emerged from the same tent where Arthur had cut his hair - Rhaella's tent, borrowed for the purpose after Carik had destroyed the king's own with his wings - accompanied by his wife, his son and heir and his wife and daughter. All the Targaryens but the newborn Aegon and Viserys were their to see him fly for the first time, escorted by the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard Gerold Hightower on their right and Barristan Selmy on the left, and with his hair washed and his beard cut down to a fashionable level, the king - dressed in his finest clothes - looked the very image of a proud, Targaryen king, if perhaps a little thin. He walked forward, towards the dragon with arms wide, and his voice echoed across the camp in utter silence.

"For centuries the Targaryens rode upon their dragon mounts," he started proudly. "It was with fire and blood that they took seven kingdoms and forged them into a single, unified realm, led by one leader, one king. Where they went, order and peace followed, as they put an end to the petty squabbling of the kingdoms of Westeros, making it possible for men to live and die without ever once having to take up arms in defense of their homes. It was a golden age."

"But when the dragons died," the king sighed with sadness, genuine grief in his amethyst eyes, "The realm's peace died with them. The conquest of Dorne, carried out by Daeron the Young Dragon in response to Dornish raids, only to end in failure as the Dornish treacherously butchered the young king as he spoke with them under a banner of truce," Arthur looked to Elia and Prince Lewyn as the king stopped for a breath, and saw that their faces as plain as stone. "The Blackfyre rebellions, all of them the result of a bastard usurper trying to claim the throne, the Peake Uprising, Dagon Greyjoy and his bloody band of raiders, all that and so much more only became possible because of the death of the dragons, and now plotters and schemers threaten to break the peace that Aegon the Conqueror tried to so hard to build, festering in the realm like a wound gone bad."

"But now," the king smiled, his words filled with the sound of his obvious delight. "Now we have dragons again. For the first time in over a century, a living dragon stands lit by the sun and breathes, not just in Westeros, but the entire world. House Targaryen is strong once again, and if the crown is strong, so is the realm."

"Now...there will be peace once more," the king said quieter, his voice soft and soothing. "Peace, and justice."

For a moment, Arthur wondered if he had cut away the king's madness along with his hair. *Seven hells...* With the king's silence came a round of applause and cheers from all the knights, the men-at-arms and the servants, too, and even the dragon seemed pleased with the king's speech.

"Aerys!" chanted the crowd as Carik lowered himself to the ground, smiling as the king strode towards him, taking his every step with such bold pride that it was as if the gods themselves were walking besides him. "Aerys! Aerys! Aerys!"

Aerys confidently walked over to the side of the dragon, smiling widely as he put his foot onto a low part of Carik's wing to give himself a leg up as he tried to climb onto his back, struggling to get to grip the smooth skin that covered the dragon's shoulders. Carik shifted slightly to make things easier, to ensure the king didn't fall or hurt himself, and just a moment after Aerys managed to raise himself
up clamber over it, standing tall and around atop the dragon's back. With arms open wide he embraced the cheers and applause of the crowd, he walked towards Carik's head, relishing in the moment, one step in front of the next. Arthur smiled at the sight, holding his sister's hand as they watched their king truly become a king.

But then something went wrong.

A gust of wind or something else had caused the king to wobble, and he swayed where he stood as the crowd's cheers turned to horror. Carik felt the changes atop of his body, and quickly moved to try and balance the king, to counter his sway by raising that side of his body to force the king to fall back towards the middle...but it was too little, too late.

The king slipped with a cry, the crowd shouted, Arthur and his comrades dove forth to try and catch him, knowing that countless men had died from falling off the back of horses that were not even half the height of the dragon...and the king's left ankle caught caught between Carik's right pair of horns, trapped between the greater and the smaller, pinning it in place as the king fell towards the side. Even as the others shouted in panic, he could still hear the \textit{popping} sound of his leg being yanked out of its socket, and the king \textit{screamed} in agony as it did, but Arthur knew that it had stopped him from landing on his head or his back, and could very well have saved his life.

"Stay still!" the Lord Commander shouted to Carik, who had already frozen in place and answered with two quick taps of one of his claws against the ground. "Arthur, Oswell, grab his arms, Lewyn, with me!"

Neither of the two knights hesitated for a second, or even bothered to answer before rushing into action. Arthur grabbed the king's flailing right, Oswell his left, and both glanced at his face to see his face contorted in pain as Gerold and Lewyn rushed up the other side of the dragon, sitting on the side of his neck as they each took one of his legs. The White Bull looked to each of them in turn. "Together, now. Barristan, come here, and take the king's side. Darry, stay by the princesses."

Barristan moved with a speed and a calm grace not often seen in a man closing in on his fiftieth name day, darting towards them and taking his place besides Oswell as Darry stood besides the queen, working to calm the others who thought they were witnessing the death of their liege. Then, together, Gerold and Lewyn moved the king towards the side, Arthur and Oswell doing the same, moving the king smoothly and without worsening his pain. Then, still sat atop the dragon's spine - the jagged scales had more grip than the smoother flesh that covered the dragon's shoulders, the place where Aerys had fell - they slowly pushed him forward, into the arms of the three brothers, little by little. Arthur held him by the shoulders, Oswell by the waist and then Barristan by the legs, and they gently set him down on the ground. Lewyn slid down the dragon's side first, helping Gerold down, who glanced at the king for but a second before springing into action again.

Arthur wasn't sure what he was meant to do, but he knew that the Lord Commander did, so, like all the sworn brothers around him, he refused to allow panic a chance to take over and stayed calm, despite the pain of the man he was sworn to protect. The dragon turned round to watch, saddened, but Arthur paid him no more attention than that as he looked to White Bull for commands.

"Hold him still," Gerold commanded, gripping the king's left thigh and holding it tight as he raised his ankle over his shoulder, holding every part of his leg at once. Arthur kept him pressed against the soil by his shoulders, his comrades each taking a part and keeping the king as still as possible...and then Gerold pushed on the king's thigh and rotated his leg through his grasp on the ankle.

Aerys screamed again...and then there was a clunk as the joint went back into place, then the king
finally passed out.

"We best get to Harrenhal," Gerold said calmly as he stood, putting his arms beneath the king and raising him up off the ground. "Their maester will be able to do more."

"Will he be alright?" Carik asked, the great dragon looking at the king with concern.

"He should be, now that the joint is back in its place," Ser Barristan Selmy said. "It isn't uncommon for a tourney knight to have the same injury when they are knocked from their saddle but stuck in their stirrups. Still, better for him to have dislocated his leg than to have broken his neck in the fall."

"But...it wasn't my fault, right..?" the dragon asked again with sadness. "I never meant for this to happen."

"It was an accident," Oswell answered, to Carik’s instant relief. "Anyone could have slipped, and being caught surely saved his life."

"Aye, it did," Gerold nodded, "Now, let us start moving."

"Leave anything that isn't already packed," Arthur commanded the servants, looking around to see that almost all the camp had been packed away but for a few small things that could easily be replaced. "The king is more important than any of it."

With that said and everyone getting ready to finish the last stretch of the journey to Harrenhal, Gerold walked over to the carriage that was meant for Queen Rhaella, Elia and little Rhaenys, Gerold carried Aerys over to the carriage that was meant for Rhaella, Elia and little Rhaenys, finding room for the unconscious king besides the tiny bed of his sleeping granddaughter, whose arms were wrapped around a stuffed felt dragon, whilst Arthur and the others headed towards the horses, leaving a waiting Carik alone in the centre, the dragon looking around every now and then, as if looking for someone. If there is one thing for certain, it's that there is not a brigand in the world stupid enough to try and attack us now. Not even the Smiling Knight or any of his lackeys would have even thought of it. A man-at-arms brought forth Arthur's palfrey, a great white gelding with a silvery mane he called Morning, and tethered behind was his dark stallion, a destrier named Evening, given to him as a gift by his father for his sixteenth nameday.

Taking the reins of Morning, he led him far enough away from the pen that none of the others would have trouble retrieving their own steeds, then he put his left foot into the stirrup and swung himself onto his mount with a practiced ease, urging his horse onward as Oswell rode past on his own, moving at a fast pace made all the more urgent by the king's injury. With Arthur looking over as Gerold Hightower mounted his own horse and lead the way, riding alongside the royal carriage that carried almost all of the Targaryen family and followed by Carik, he almost didn't notice Rhaegar riding up alongside him, quietly reading one of the few books he had brought along for the ride to Harrenhal - a study of some old Valyrian scrolls the maesters of the Citadel had bought during the Century of Blood after the Doom, all about the strategic use of dragons whilst off of the battlefield.

Without even opening the cover, Arthur knew it would be a dull and very dry topic to read about, and so he turned his attentions ahead, to the ride towards Harrenhal. Now... if only I knew how a dragon was going to ride in the tournament. Even if he can turn into a man, no one has any armor that fits him properly.

He sighed. That would be something to be figured out when they arrived for the tournament...but for
now, all there was to do was to pass the time.

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End of Part 6!

Chapter End Notes

Maxos visits an alternate Rivellon where an older, bigger and more pious Carik has since become the Emperor of Rivellon. He's a lot larger than the Carik who is in Westeros, but that's because of his age - looking at the game model and comparing it to objects in the game world and so on, the full grown sabre dragon looks to be about the same size as Balerion the Black Dread, give or take a few inches, so you don't need to worry about Carik crushing Harrenhal under his feet or anything :p

As for Carik tanking the gunfire, don't worry about that either - whilst Carik's armor plates will get stronger with age, one of the main reasons they couldn't penetrate his armor or anything like that is because...well, they were quite literally shooting at his most heavily armored point since they couldn't get round to his sides, and even then they weren't using exactly the best weapons for the job Imagine using, say, a rocket launcher on a battleship. The battleship's got a ton of armor, which means you can only penetrate it in certain locations, and the sheer difference in size between your rocket and the ship means that a hit that breaches the armor isn't going to do much damage. This is mostly to try and explain why the player never has to worry about small arms fire when attacking enemy bases in game, even if they do have to worry about rockets and the like

And of course, even the fully grown Carik can't withstand an atomic blast Nuclear weapons do exist in the game, since that's what the Impish Bunker Buster is, but more importantly is Project Megabomb, the plotline you unlock if you get high approval with their faction, since it outright talks about mining heavy metals that came to Rivellon on meteors and the like. Even the base version of the Impish Bunker Buster can one shot the sabre dragon at full health, like what happened in the flashback section of the part above, but Carik managed to survive solely because he was graced with the Perpetuity of the Bone, thank the Seven!

In completely unrelated news, he also banned existentialism not long after, since it is the bane of all skeletons in the Divine Divinity setting. No, seriously - contemplating questions such as "How am I talking without a tongue?" or "How do I think without a brain?" can cause them to fall apart if they linger on it too long. We also see the results of Carik's referendum on the introduction of the Republic of Rivellon in the newspaper - something which never takes the player's approval ratings into account, alas - which results in a landslide victory. He would have won it anyway due to popular support for policies like a national healthcare service, better minimum wage and so on, but the fact that every Undead skeleton came out to vote for him, regardless of the last time they went out and did anything, pushed the voter turnout over the known population of Rivellon and into the hundreds range.

Why?

Because...that's democracy :p
Meanwhile, in Westeros, Ser Arthur Dayne does as he was commanded by his king and gives him a haircut using Dawn, the ancestral blade of the Dayne family. From his perspective, we see that he believes that he has no choice but to do as the king commanded, as he was trapped between two different dishonors - using the heirloom sword of his family for so menial a task, or breaking a sworn oath to obey all the king's commands - and so chose the lesser shame over the greater one. He doesn't like most of the king's commands, but sees no alternative to carrying them out, but he makes sure to hide his feelings inside so that the king doesn't see an issue and doesn't take it out on his sister....and speaking of Ashara, he would do anything to keep her safe, even if it means throwing a grand tournament such as the one at Harrenhal just to be on the safe side in case what the king said was actually a threat and not idle conversation, and speaking of conversation, he and Aerys have a long talk about quite a few different things - the death of Steffon Lannister, Aerys' changed opinion of Tywin Lannister, and his thoughts about the state of the realm.

All in all, Arthur is a loyal and honorable knight who is afraid of what he might be ordered to do, and what the ramifications might be if he fails to do what the Mad King commands.

As for Aerys, he gives a speech before climbing atop Carik's back, and...he slips. With Carik being larger than any horse the fall would be far more dangerous, but to his fortune, his foot gets caught between Carik's two sets of horns, which stops him from falling head first against the earth...but also yanks his leg out of its socket. Gerold as capable of putting it back into its socket, as an injury like that would be fairly common in Westeros, and one he would have seen before; and because he is a Hightower and comes from Oldtown, home of the Citadel, he'd have a little more experience treating such injuries.
Chapter Summary

And here we are, as promised! :D This part took quite a lot longer than I would have thought it would, not because I was sidetracked by other projects, but because of the sheer number of times that I've had to rebuild this part. I've practically overhauled it from scratch three to four times, and completely redid the entirety of the second section just as many times in its own right because it didn't meet my exacting standards and had a few...problems I couldn't really resolve.

But here we are! :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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On the road to Harrenhal...

Carik walked along in contented silence as he followed the royal carriage, knowing without even needing to look around that all eyes were on him, the guards and the servants alike taking in every part of his body and whispering to one another about how he had spoken at the camp, though it didn't bother him even a little. They had never seen a dragon before, yet alone one that could talk, but they would get used to his presence before long, as the knights of the Kingsguard and the prince had. They don't look at me for as long as they used to, but they still glance every now and then. Even Rhaegar's stopped doing it as much...but he still peeks out through his book every now and then. He smiled to himself as he caught the prince raise up from his book, looking as if he might ask a question before turning back to the pages, deep in thought.

"Is there something you want to know?" he asked, hoping that conversation might make the journey pass a little quicker.

"Just a few things, if you wouldn't mind," the prince answered with a warm smile. "Can you breath fire?"

"I can," he said. "Not much right now, but Maxos says I'll be able to make more fire as I get older and bigger."

Rhaegar nodded, then he looked back at his book and asked, still looking at the parchment pages, "Can you control how hot the fire is?"

"More or less," he said as a half-truth. He could control how hot his fire was by how much he exerted himself doing so, how much effort he put into his breaths...but as he and Maxos had found out, there was a very fine line between warming something up and turning it into charcoal, and that didn't matter at all if he breathed on something too long. It's not my fault I couldn't hear him telling...
"Then, if this book is right, you should be able to cook a kind of onion and beef broth with your fire..." the prince said quietly as he looked at the book.

Carik blinked. "...what?"

"The dragonlords of the Freehold would sometimes have their dragon's use their fire for cooking with," Rhaegar explained. "It gave them a way to warm their meals without needing to send men out to fetch firewood, so as to keep them from the risk of being ambushed."

Arthur Dayne laughed. "What else is in that book of yours, your grace?"

"Mostly instructions on how to train a dragon whilst it's still "toothless", but that must be a translation error," the prince said with a sigh and a hint of confusion. "As far as I know, dragons are born with teeth. They must mean whilst its still young and defenceless."

"Still," the prince continued. "There are some interesting things in here all the same. Scouting and skirmishing methods, a way to make younger dragons and less experienced riders less at risk of harm by using them as couriers and harassers, a few methods for treating the most common wounds a dragon might receive and a suggestion on using a formation of mostly males and two females to make all of them more aggressive in battle, or to use separate groups of only males and females to make them more docile and easier to command."

"Sounds interesting, actually," Carik said as he looked over, curious.

"There's even a suggestion on how to calm down a raging male dragon by..." Rhaegar looked at the page, blinked, then carefully raised the page towards sunlight to make sure he was reading it correctly before suddenly closing the book. "Actually, I doubt you would want to know."

A moment of silence passed, where Arthur looked to the prince...only to get a single slow nod in reply. *If they're acting like that about whatever it is, I don't think I want to ask, either.*

Taking the chance to break the awkward silence, a curious Carik asked a question he had been wondering about even before they had started travelling on the road. "So...where in Westeros are we?"

"The Riverlands," Rhaegar answered instantly. "In the days before Aegon's Conquest, these were the domains of Black Harren Hoare, King of the Isles and the Rivers, and the site of many battles over the millennia as the Iron Kings fought against the Storm Kings for control...and against the Riverlords themselves. If you were to dig in any field here, you would find bones and rusty swords before long. Nowadays, however, it is Lord Walter Whent who rules over these lands as Lord of Harrenhal and as one of the greatest bannermen to Hoster Tully, who is the Lord of Riverrun and Lord Paramount of the Riverlands."

*So the Lord Paramounts replaced the old kings. That's something I know about at least, since Sigurd...since father did the same thing. Sort of. He got rid of all the old kingdoms and replaced them with provinces instead, which are ruled by handpicked governors instead of passed down from father to son or anything like that. Some of the old kings were allowed to stay in control of their provinces, but only if they surrendered the moment he arrived, and even then only for a generation or so, but a lot of them got shot. Pikemen don't beat tanks.*
"So, what's Harrenhal like, then? I'm guessing it was named for Black Harren?" he asked, looking ahead to see if there was any sign of anything that looked like a castle. *Maybe it's underground, like the way Dwarves build their fortresses...?*

"You will know it when you see it," Rhaegar said with a smile. "In its day it was the greatest fortress ever raised in Westeros, Harren's pride and joy and a monument to the might of his kingdom. Aegon had no choice but to burn it since the Iron King refused to yield, even still, no castle has managed to surpass it in size."

"It must be pretty big, then." *I wonder if its towers are bigger than the one Maxos and I live in...*

"It's walls are second only to the Wall itself," Jonothor Darry added.

"The...Wall?" Carik muttered under his breath. "That's a creative name if there ever was one."

"What better name is there for a wall of ice three hundred miles long and seven hundred feet tall?"

Carik looked over at the knight with a blank expression, as if the knight had suddenly spoken in a language that Carik only half understood, the words feeling as though they made sense separately but not together. "Wait...what?"

"He tells the truth," Rhaegar said, gaining the dragon's attention once more. "The Wall is as large as he says it is. Mayhaps bigger, as the brothers of the Night's Watch are always trying to raise it higher."

...I so need to see this for myself.

"Is there anything else like that in Westeros?" he asked with obvious excitement. "Any other wonders that someone should try and see?"

"The Hightower and the maester's Citadel," suggested the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard from the front of the royal carriage. "The Hightower has stood for thousands of years, and is the tallest tower in all of the Seven Kingdoms, aye, and is located in the oldest city in the realm, too."

"Dragonstone, Casterly Rock and Storm's End, great seats all three," added Ser Barristan Selmy. "The Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing itself is another sight to see, and the Iron Throne along with it."

"Harrenhal itself is one of the places in Lomas Longstrider's *Wonders Made By Man,*" Rhaegar said, "But there are even more such places outside of Westeros. The Black Walls and Long Bridge of Volantis, the Titan of Braavos, the roads of old Valyria...he even mentioned how the Mountains of the Moon in the Vale of Arryn are famed for their beauty as far away as New Ghis, but they are a natural thing, not built by man the way the others were."

Carik smiled as widely as he could in his dragon form, his sharp teeth beginning to show. *Maxos probably wouldn't mind if I went travelling whilst waiting for him to get here. Not much, anyway. He's probably got some way to find me no matter where I am in the world, and besides...I wanted to go and have an adventure, after all. Where better to have one than on another world that I've never even seen before?*

"I'll have to try and see them them whenever I've got the chance," he said without losing his smile for even a moment. "Especially the Wall. Rivellon has *nothing* like that and you could come with me! If
things are like the king said they were, then I bet everyone would be happy to see us together."

And it'd stop them from reacting badly and thinking I'm some kind of monster if they see their prince sat on my back.

"Nothing could make me happier," Rhaegar smiled in return after a moment's hesitation. "There are some things I will need to do before then, however, but I doubt my father would mind if you came back to the Red Keep with us once the tournament has ended. You would have free roam of the capital, the largest city in all of Westeros, so you would certainly have something to do...and besides, Dragonstone is but a short journey away from there, if you wish to see the castle."

"That's fair," Carik said contentedly, already starting to imagine what his travels would be like, what lands he might see, what people he might meet and what things he might do. Staying at the capital will give Maxos a chance to get here, but if he isn't here by the time Rhaegar's done with whatever he needs to do...then I'm going to go and see the world.

"If you excuse me, I best check up on my father," the prince said respectfully as he rode his black steed towards the royal carriage...and Carik noticed as the horse looked towards his way as it did, sniffing the air and looking utterly confused before Rhaegar urged it onward with a soft tap of his spurs, his mount finally ignoring Carik and continuing on its way, albeit a little more skittish than before.

Maxos' illusions never did that before...I guess it can tell that I'm not entirely human and not entirely dragon just from the way I smell. That's probably what's been keeping all the other horses from panicking too much, either; I'm familiar enough for them to be comfortable near me, but just different enough for them to be confused...but if they're like that, then what might they do if I try and ride one? He sighed under his breath, his breath as loud and as hot a forge's bellows.

Then something else caught his attention as he looked around, something so subtle it had gone completely unnoticed till he had a chance to see everyone in one place. At the front of the group were the knights and men-at-arms, riding their proud horses and flying proud banners of black and red, then there was the royal carriage, with the princesses and the king inside, and then there was him and the Kingsguard and the rest of the retinue behind him, men and women highborn and low...and yet nowhere did he see either an Elf or a Dwarf, yet alone an Imp or a Lizard or even an Undead.

That...that can't be right? Every land on Rivellon has at least three different peoples living on it, and Orcha has all of them but the Lizards...maybe there's just none of them in the group, but...

"Hey, Ser Arthur," he asked as quietly as he could, rendering his voice as loud as that of a normal man's. "How come there aren't any elves here?"

Ser Arthur Dayne looked at him in confusion. "Elves?"

"You know...elves?" he sighed, then he quickly started to try and describe the forest dwelling people of Rivellon. "Tall and thin, with blonde hair and green eyes that sometimes blue? Pretty? They don't like to eat meat and they don't drink, either, and they've got pointy ears and live in the forests."

"At first, I would have swore you were talking about the Lannisters," Arthur replied. "Lord Tywin and all the Lannisters I have ever met have had fair hair and light eyes, and while most Westermen are taller than most, they have as much a taste for meat and wine as any man, and none that I saw ever had pointed ears."
"Well...what about dwarves?" he asked. "Surely you have dwarves? You know, the stocky little mountain men? They have a love for ale and axes? And gold?"

"I'm afraid the only dwarfs I've ever seen were those who had the misfortune to be born deformed," Arthur said. "Most of them take to drink, if only because of their hard lives, but...other than that, I'm not familiar with them."

Seven have mercy.

"...don't tell me there aren't any different races here?" he asked in surprise. "Is everyone...well, human in Westeros?"

"I suppose you could count the Others and the Children of the Forest as a different type of man," Arthur considered, "But neither of them have been seen in thousands of years, if they ever existed at all."

Carik was as stunned as he was saddened when he heard the knight's answer. He was half-Dragon, true, but now that he knew who his father was he also knew that he was more Dragon than he was Human, simply because he had a number of Elven and Dwarven ancestors in his family tree...and he could barely imagine what Rivellon would have been like without all the other races that shared the world with Humanity and grown up alongside them. Carik himself - who was only ever allowed to leave the tower whenever Maxos said he could - had always seen Elves and Dwarves going about their lives just as he had, and when he was young he had played with Elven and Dwarven children and his first ever crush had been on a half-Elven girl a year older than him. All that meant that the very thought that he was in a world where Humanity was on its own, truly alone in the world, was as much a surprise to him as waking up in it in the first place.

"Are you alright?" the knight asked after a moment, noticing the change in Carik's mood with ease. "You've gone quiet."

"I'm just surprised, that's all," Carik sighed. "In Rivellon, we have half a dozen different races living together...I guess I was expecting to see people like them here, too. Just...forget I ever asked."

Arthur nodded respectfully, but asked a question not long after, helping to take the dragon's mind off of the dark thoughts that had sullied his good mood. "Have you ever ridden in a tournament before?"

"No, but Maxos taught me how to ride by using a magical horse," he said...and when he saw the confusion come to the knight's face, he explained with more detail, "He used his magics to make something that looked like a horse, then made a barrier to make it feel like a horse, then controlled it himself to make it act like one. That way, I got all the benefits of being able to learn how to ride without having to deal with any of the downsides."

"Like needing a stables," Arthur smiled. "Gods, your people have as much magic as the old Valyrians did, if not more. What else can they do?"

"Well, I'm not much of a mage, but Maxos is the best there ever was. He can do...well, pretty much everything you can think of, really." Carik smiled, thinking of his tutor, the man that had been like a father to him for as long as he could remember. "Fireballs, lightning, portals, alchemy, illusions, shields, enchantment, you name it and he does it. He's really, really good."

"Seven hells," came the knight's reply. "I would have thought you were japing were you not a talking dragon."
"That does make things more believable, doesn't it?" Carik laughed, Arthur joining not long after.

"...and there it is," spoke the Lord Commander. "Harrenhal, in all its glory."

Carik looked to the front...and he froze in awe. *Gods*...

From amidst a rolling field rose the largest fortress he had ever seen in his life, greater in scale than anything he had ever dared to imagine, with its towers as great as mountains and its walls as sheer as cliffs, even though much of it was ruined and burned. The uppermost sections of its greatest tower was half collapsed, little more than a ruin for some two dozen feet, but from below that point it was a giant dotted with windows and balconies, joined to another tower by a great bridge big enough for him to walk across in his dragon's body with ease. Even still, the other towers were little better than the first, scarred and worn, with some parts of the colossal walls having collapsed and been replaced with smaller, easier to build and maintain fortifications...but where they were intact they stood tall and proud, with towers that were as big as Maxos' own. Not far away, on the road that they had followed, was a gatehouse built to a truly monumental scale, as large as a full sized castle in its own right, and besides the castle was a great lake, its turquoise waters gleaming in the rising sun, an island at its center covered in red leaved and white barked trees just like the one he had seen in the wood earlier, and everywhere he looked there were banners - sails more like - fluttering in the wind, wearing bats and dragons and direwolves and stags and a thousand different other types. Men walked atop the walls and at the bottom as small as ants, and he knew that there was not a single fortress that came to even half the size of the monstrous citadel.

"...it's...it's huge!" he gasped, stunned at the incredible sight.

"Indeed it is," Rhaegar said as he rode back towards them on his horse, smiling. "It took Black Harren a lifetime to build, though it only took Aegon a single night to destroy. Were Oswell here, he would be able to tell you everything there is to know about it," the prince said with a look towards the castle, "But I suppose you can ask him once we arrive."

"I think I will," Carik said with a grin. "But I can definitely see why you called it a wonder. Are castles in Westeros usually this big? I mean, are there any that manage to even come close in size?"

"Westeros has more castles and fortresses than one could possibly count, and there are few men who have ever seen them all," Rhaegar explained, "But Harrenhal is much bigger than most, and only the seats of the Lords Paramount come close. They would all be the greatest castles in their region were it not for Riverrun, which is mayhaps not even a tenth the size of Harren's folly...even some of the castles of the black brothers of the Night's Watch are larger than that, but they have had no choice but to abandon them due to a lack of manpower."

The prince smiled, as he seemed to always do whenever Carik was in his dragon form. "Even still, Riverrun is still a greater seat than the others in the region, in the quality of its quarters if not in size."

Jonothor Darry muttered something under his breath, but Carik paid him no attention as he looked towards Harrenhal and walked with the others on the road ahead. *When we get there, I think I'm going to sneak off and switch back into my human form so I can try and blend in. I want to see the sights, meet new people and just fit in, it's hard to do that when everyone sees me as a dragon and goes silent with awe and stares at me and all that, and it just makes things awkward. Besides, it's not like dragons can ride horses, so I'll have needed to change into it later anyway...but...I've got a plan."

"So if the castles of the Lords Paramount are the greatest in their region, then I guess the King's
castle is the greatest in the realm? Other than Harrenhal?"

"Not quite," was Rhaegar's answer, one he was clearly uncomfortable with.

**Guess not.**

As they moved closer and closer to the castle, its incredible scale becoming all the more apparent with every step that he took, Carik moved towards the royal carriage and gave it a gentle tap on the door, softly enough that the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard simply looked towards Rhaegar, awaiting his command only to do nothing when the prince gave no answer. The door opened after a moment, and Elia leaned out, Rhaenys sleeping quietly besides the unconscious king, Rhaella sitting opposite and besides the little princess and looking towards him with interest.

He suppressed his voice as much as he could, so much so that it was more like he was mouthing the words rather than saying them. "Would you mind doing me a favor?"

"What?" Elia asked with a voice so low that he could barely hear it over the sound of the horses.

"I was hoping to ride in the carriage with you," he said, quickly adding an explanation. "I don't want to be seen in my dragon form when we get there. I want to be able to blend in, and I can't do that when I'm the size of a house."

"You don't want to deal with all the attention of being a dragon," Elia nodded understandingly. "I suppose it would get annoying after a while. Alright, fine, but you will need to stay quiet."

Carik gave her a grateful smile before turning back towards the prince, returning to his place in the group as if nothing had ever happened. Rhaegar looked at him curiously, asking a question without once saying a word, and Carik simply said, not losing his smile, "Don't worry about it."

Rhaegar simply nodded in silence, and so Carik asked a question that was just as important as any before it, even if it was a simple one. "So is there anything important we need to do once we're inside?"

"Once we have entered the castle, Lord Whent will make the offer of bread and salt," Rhaegar said, more enthusiastic than he had been before. "It will give us protection under guest right."

"Is that necessary?" Carik asked. "The protection, I mean?" *I've never eaten bread and salt together before. It doesn't sound appetizing, but there's a first time for everything...*

"There is little risk of anything happening whilst we are there, but it is still expected of him as our host," Ser Barristan took the chance to explain, with Rhaegar giving him an approving nod. "It is tradition."

"Though I doubt there will be even a piece of bread there large enough for you, yet alone a flake of salt," Jonothor smiled. "Best to just have a serving girl feed you both, I think."

"Tempting, but no thanks," Carik said as they neared the gatehouse, his voice beginning to echo off of the battlements as though he were speaking into a great, yearning cave. *Almost time to move...*

There was the soft wail of a horn, echoing from atop the gatehouse, and Carik looked to the front to see men standing atop the battlements, like ants atop a mound, crying out and shouting and alerting the rest of the castle of the royal retinue's arrival, the massive gates beginning to clang and clamor
and open, a noise as deep and bellowing as distant thunder, making the earth of the road tremble beneath him as they got closer and closer to the gaping maw that was the passageway into the immense castle. Guardsmen flocked to the battlements to watch, looking down on all of them as they passed beneath not with loud cheers and celebration, but stunned silence and quiet murmurs barely heard over the sound of their footsteps echoing inside the long tunnel, Carik feeling the exact moment the thick masonry stopped the warmth of the sun from being able to reach his wings and back, but never once feeling the stone itself brushing against his wing tips or feeling cramped even with the knights of the Kingsguard all around him, so wide and high was the tunnel. \textit{It's like passing through a mountain! There must be train tunnels smaller than this!}

There was the soft wail of a horn, echoing from atop the gatehouse, and Carik looked to the front to see men at the battlements, like ants atop their hill, crying out and shouting and alerting the rest of the castle of the royal retinue's arrival, the massive gates beginning to clang and clamor and open, a noise as deep and bellowing as distant thunder, making the earth of the road tremble beneath his feet as they got closer and closer to the gaping maw that was the long, dark passageway into the immense castle. Guardsmen flocked to the battlements to watch, looking down on all of them as they passed beneath not with loud cheers and celebration, but stunned silence and quiet murmurs barely heard over the sound of their footsteps echoing inside the long tunnel, Carik waiting to feel the exact moment the thick masonry stopped the warmth of the sun from being able to reach his wings and back...and when he did, he smiled. \textit{Seven, it's like passing through a mountain. There are train tunnels smaller than this.} There were no sconces on the walls to light the way, nor braziers chained to the ceiling, only the empty openings of murder holes and ports for the pouring of boiling hot oil, all of which allowed the contrast of the bright, sunny day on either end of it to make the gloom a thousand times blacker than night.

\textit{They like magic tricks, so they'll love this.}

He switched out of his dragon form in complete silence, the change going utterly unnoticed in the abyssal dark, and then he walked forward, guiding his steps by walking towards the sound of the carriage's rolling wheels and the creak of its axles. It was easy to find his way to the carriage, to remember where everyone was, and with the sound of clopping horseshoes upon the cobblestones underfoot, no one, not even the Lord Commander, could hear the sound of him climbing up onto the side of the carriage and tapping the wooden door. \textit{Easy.} The door moved slightly and slowly, Elia opening it just enough for him to slip inside, her shape outlined only by a dim candle, and as soon as he did she closed it again.

"Now put this on," she said, hurriedly passing him a thick black and red travelling cloak, Carik quickly doing as she commanded.

"There," she said quietly, returning to her seat. "Consider this my apology for earlier."

"For what?" he asked, finding an empty seat opposite the Dornishwoman and besides the sleeping princess and the unconscious king, probably the one meant for her husband...and he sighed in relief as he sank into the downy, soft pillow, the softest he had sat on since he had arrived in Westeros. \textit{Gods, that's nice. Far better than sleeping on rock.}

"For when Rhaenys revealed you could switch forms in the first place," she said quietly, sitting back in her seat and throwing a thick, black and red travelling cloak at him. "Now hide under that. Quickly, before they come and get the king."

\textit{She's got a point.}
Four openings, one on each side of the carriage, flooded the inside with light as he huddled in the corner of Rhaegar's seat and threw the cloak atop of himself as though it were a blanket, hiding underneath, looking like a pile of clothes. He smiled, even though he knew she couldn't see it, and whispered with a grateful voice, "Thank you."

"Your welcome," she answered. "Now be quiet, otherwise they'll find you."

Carik fell silent, slowing his breaths as much as he could and staying perfectly still...and then he heard the loud cheers and applause as the people welcomed the Targaryens to Harrenhal. *I'll have to stay still and stay quiet, but they'd need to be lucky to hear me in here over all that noise anyway.* The carriage rolled over the cobblestones beneath, shaking and jerking as it did to his discomfort, but he heard the clopping of a horse's shoes on the stones even over the sound of the delighted and happy crowd...and he could hear the conversation, too.

"Lord Commander," came the unmistakable voice of the crown prince, cold and quiet where it had once been warm and friendly. "Where has the dragon gone? Did you see him leave?"

"I am unsure, your grace," was Ser Gerold Hightower's reply, pained at the failure of his duty. "He was with us before we entered the tunnel."

**Hehehe...**

"I know full well that he was with us then," the prince replied instantly. "Once we have come to a stop and the crowds have dispersed, I want you to search for him, quietly so that Lord Whent and all the others don't learn of his absence. I won't have our bannermen thinking that their king and all his family has started to see imaginary dragons doing magic and the like."

"He mustn't have gone far," was the seasoned knight's reply. "It should be easy to find him...but, your grace, I am at a loss as to how he managed to disappear in the first place. A dragon surely shouldn't be able to just...disappear."

"Tell no one but your brothers in the Kingsguard," Rhaegar said quietly. "But Carik has the ability to turn into a man."

**Bugger.**

"Are you certain, your grace?" the Lord Commander asked hesitantly.

"I am," Rhaegar sighed. "I have seen it with my own eyes. He looks the same as I did, when I was six and ten namedays, except his hair and eyes are golden."

For a moment, there was only the sound of the peasantry cheering...and then the carriage came rolling to a halt, the cloak falling loose from the sudden halt before Carik quickly corrected it and returned to his still silence as the sound of what could only be the feet of a group of a group of men rushing across a cobblestone courtyard towards the carriage made the hairs of his neck stand on end. *I'm going to get caught.*

The door opened. ...**come on...**

"I apologize for the intrusion, princess," said Prince Lewyn. "But we need to hurry the king to the maester, as quickly as we can."
Then Lewyn climbed up and into the carriage, brushing past the black cloak as he did...but if he noticed Carik, he didn't care, saying nothing and doing nothing but moving past to pick up the unconscious king before carrying him out of the carriage, the crowds outside murmuring with concern at the sight before the group hurried away, as quickly as they had come. *They must have been carrying a stretcher for him. That's why more than one of them came. But that was close.*

"Please, there is no need to worry about my father," Prince Rhaegar said for all the gathered lords and ladies to hear. "There was simply a minor accident on the way here, but I am sure he will be well again by tonight.

Then another man came to the side of the carriage, helping Rhaella climb down as Elia leaned forward and woke her daughter with a gentle shake, the little princess yawning tiredly.

"Come on, my little dragon," Elia said with a soft, sweet voice. "It's time to go."

Rhaenys murmured happily under her breath about dragons and princesses as Elia picked her up and carried her out of the carriage, leaving Carik to take a breath of relief as he sat alone.

"My prince, your grace," spoke another man as he stepped forward, sounding much like an older, more seasoned Oswell Whent, though his voice was a little higher. *He must be the Lord Walter Whent that Rhaegar mentioned earlier.*"Had we known of his injury sooner, we would have sent riders to come and aid you as soon as possible, but my brother Oswell made sure that maester Willum would be ready for the king."

There was a clatter of feet across the courtyard, spreading out in a wave from the Lord Whent as everyone, highborn and low, fell to one knee in silent deference.

"Think nothing of it, Lord Whent," what is done is done." The prince sighed. "Still, I apologize for the delay in our arrival. We had a pleasant surprise this morning. You may rise."

The crowd rose back to their feet, and then the Lord Walter Whent said curiously, but agreeably, "From what my brother tells me, you found a dragon whilst on the road here, and rode him too, but I can't seem to see him anywhere. Has something happened?"

"No, but it would seem he has decided to go for a walk," Rhaegar said carefully. "He'll be back soon enough, and when he returns you will be able to see him for yourself."

"Still, you shall be the first to know if any of my men see the dragon here," Lord Whent continued, "I never thought I would ever have the chance to see a dragon with my own eyes, but perhaps I might yet do so."

*I'm going to hear that a lot, aren't I?*

"You will, I promise you that," the prince said firmly, then his voice softened and grew warmer with every word. "I never thought I would see one either, not till I saw him flying in the skies above us as we made camp yesterday...I had always hoped and dreamed that I would be blessed enough to ride one, however, as Aegon and his sisters had, but with dragons gone from the world I knew I would never have the chance...not till today."

"Please, bring forth the bread and salt so that we might have your hospitality," Rhaegar said at last, back to his normal self. "We have had a long journey, and I would like a chance to rest before the
evening."

"Of course, your grace," Walter snapped his fingers, and two pairs of footsteps echoed in the quiet as two servants came over, wandering around the carriage to where Carik guessed the rest of the retinue was standing. "Though you would never need to eat bread and salt to be welcome in my hall, my prince, that is no reason to not offer tradition."

"Indeed," the prince said, going quiet for a moment as he and all the others ate their bread and salt. *I'm missing out on a tradition...but it's worth it to be able to roam the castle without having a crowd following me everywhere I go.*

"Your grace," Lord Walter said at last, speaking as soon as they had finished. "My brother will show you and your kin to your chambers, if you would allow it, and please, be welcome in my home. It is my highest honor to have you here as my guest, my prince, and all of Harrenhal is yours to use as it pleases you."

"I thank you for your hospitality, Lord Whent," the prince replied, "I will be sure to tell my father how welcoming you were, once he wakes and is well again. He will be delighted to know he has such loyal vassals. Please, lead the way."

"Of course, your grace," Ser Oswell said as Carik heard the clamour of the crowds beginning to disperse at last, smiling behind the cloak as he heard them talking and heard their voices becoming fainter and fainter as they walked away. *Just need to wait for a few more minutes, now...* "You're going to be staying in the greatest of Harren the Black's towers, the Kingspyre Tower, the one where the Iron King was burnt with the last of his sons."

"I am sure my father will...appreciate the history," Rhaegar answered...and then there was silence, broken only by the sound of distant footsteps.

Carik grinned widely. *Perfect.* He carefully waited a few moments longer, to make sure that they really were gone, then he slowly moved the cloak to the side, gently placing it atop of the place where Elia had sat before sliding off the chair and onto the carriage floor, without making a single sound, then stood to full height and peeked out of one of the slits. The massive courtyard was empty but for a few dozen servants, left to unload the carts and carriages of the royal retinue and to take their horses to the stables, with a few men-at-arms left behind to watch over them, some wearing the three headed red dragon of the Targaryens, others with a flock of bats just like the one Oswell Whent had on his helm...but other than them, the entire courtyard was empty. *The guards will probably see me if I climb out of the carriage, but, since I look like Rhaegar and he has a brother...yes, this is going to work!* Carik turned round and took the travelling cloak and threw it around his shoulders, using it to hide the look of his clothes, and then he opened the carriage door and walked out into the courtyard, faking a yawn as he stepped down onto the cobblestones, moving with steps so confident they bordered on outright arrogance.

"Wait!" said one of the men-at-arms behind him, placing a mailed hand on Carik's shoulder. "Who the bloody hell are you? And why were you hiding in that carriage?"

*Pampered prince, here we come!*

He smiled for a moment...then he hardened his face and twisted it to a harsh scowl as he turned around to face the man-at-arms, meeting his eyes with a cold, piercing glare.

"What did you just say?" he said, his voice little higher than a whisper. "Who the "bloody hell" am
He saw the man-at-arm's face pale and continued, thinking back to when Rhaegar and the others had seen his human form for the first time.

"I am Prince Viserys of the house Targaryen, if the dragon upon my cloak was not clue enough. That is who I am," he said with a bitter voice. "And if you do not take your hand from my shoulder this instant, today will be the last day you have hands at all."

"You're...your grace!" the man gasped as he instantly pulled his hand away and bowed deeply, his voice cracking with fear. "I...I didn't recognize you! Please, forgive me, I never meant -"

"You were merely doing your duty, as is expected of you," he said firmly. "For that, you are forgiven. Now go, quickly now, I have wasted enough time as is. Go find a barrel of ale and drown yourself in it or something."

"Of course, your grace!" the man said as he spun on his heels and walked off with hurried steps, exactly as he had been told.

Carik turned away...and started smiling again. Easy.

He took a brief look around and saw a dozen or so signs placed on the walls of the differing buildings, with arrows that marked where the different parts of the castle were and how to get to them, placed carefully so that none of those who were visiting the massive castle for the tournament were ever lost. Well, that's convenient. He walked along slowly, taking in all of the damage that had been inflicted on the colossal castle, seeing how the blackened stones still bore the scars of the incredible heat that had left parts of almost every building looking twisted and warped. They weren't kidding when they said Aegon burnt the castle...

Finally, he came upon a stout stone building placed against the castle's walls, the bathhouse according to the sign placed besides its entryway, and outside were a dozen baskets full of clothes placed beneath an overhanging part of the roof, with a dozen old washerwomen talking amongst themselves as they quickly worked their way through the piles. They must be washing the clothes of those who go in the baths...that makes sense. Someone could go in covered in dirt, get clean and come out wearing clean clothes. I don't see a coin jar or anything like that, so I guess Lord Whent has arranged it for free, so...

He took off Rhaegar's cloak and went over and put it atop of one of the baskets, smiling, then walked off, free to do whatever he wanted and to go wherever he wanted to go without needing to worry about being mobbed by a crowd of people who had never seen a dragon before. But...where to go? This castle is huge!

He walked over to one of the large signposts, one with half a dozen arrows attached to it pointing towards the different parts of the castle, next to which stood three empty stools, looking as if they had only been carved a week before. I guess that must be where the guides sit whilst waiting. I wouldn't ask for one of them even if they were here, though, since it'd be more fun for me to explore for myself. He looked back at the sign and began to read the arrows, the text hard but not impossible to make out: the castle had two courtyards, the first being the one he had arrived at, the second being on the opposite side of the castle and being used as a marketplace. That should be my first stop. There were also directions for the Hall of the Hundred Hearths, the castle's great hall and where all the meals would be taken for the duration of the tournament, towards each of the towers where all the guests would stay, and a few others that pointed to other spectacles around the castle; a stage for
actors, a pit for animal fights and a place called a "godswood" where people could pray. Just like the Elves do...at least that's what I think it means, anyway. It could mean something else entirely for all I know.

Smiling once again, as he usually did, he headed off towards the marketplace, wondering what goods they might have and what things he might see. It was the best way to see as many different things at once, he knew, and he was more likely to blend into the crowds there and go unnoticed than he would if he wandered around the castle on his own. Walking along a path made from dozens of smooth slate blocks, some warped and distorted from the heat that had ruined the rest of the castle, he went round a corner...and coming towards him was a pretty young woman, a lady no older than Carik himself was, dressed all in yellow with a flock of bats embroidered above her breasts, just like the bat banners that covered so much of the castle's walls. Her braided brown hair was thrown across her shoulder, and she looked at him with soft eyes of light hazel and a sweet smile...

...and Carik was utterly helpless and at a loss as to what to do or what to say. He didn't have much experience with girls, if any at all, because and every time he mustered the courage to speak with them and break past the unease, they moved away, and he was sure it was because of Maxos making arrangements in order to stop him from even having a chance to know them, yet alone getting close or getting close.

...well...Maxos isn't here to stop me this time, so...but what do I say? Just...hello? And what then?

She continued her walk, getting closer as he thought as fast as he could. Come on...alright, just...act natural, stay calm, and be yourself. She's a noble lady, remember that, and...

"Hi," he said calmly. "I'm Carik Sigurdsson." Seven, that sounds awful. "What's your name, my lady?"

"I am Alyssa Whent, daughter of Lord Walter Whent," she answered, looking him over curiously. "I must admit, I haven't heard of your family before."

"Oh, my father is the Emperor of Rivellon," Carik said, smiling. I might be a bastard, but he is my father after all. "He conquered every other kingdom in Rivellon and has a palace with a million rooms and billions of subjects."

Alyssa sighed and then started to walk away. She mustn't believe me...but I know what she'll believe!

"Wait!" he said, hurrying after her and drawing her attention again. "I'm also half dragon! You can ride me if you want!"

She stared at him disbelievingly, blinking in utter silence.

Then she slapped him as hard as he could, the loud sound echoing off the monstrous battlements, and stormed off angrily at the very moment he was about to switch forms. What did I do wrong? Carik sighed, then looked into a nearby puddle, looking at his own reflection to see if her hand had left mark. Was it telling her about Rivellon? About being half a dragon?

Rhaegar and the others didn't seem to mind, but maybe that's because their family animal is a drago-

He heard footsteps coming from behind him, and the sound of a woman's laughter. He sighed and turned around to face whoever it was...and froze still at the sight of what could only be the most
beautiful woman in the world, whose long white dress and the golden light shining upon it from the sun above made her look like an angel come down from the heavens. Her long black hair flowed freely across her shoulders, long enough to reach her bosom, and her eyes were a stunning shade of violet; even her movements were so perfect that he couldn't take his eyes from her. Seven...

"You must be the dragon," she said with a curious voice as she walked, looking him over from head to heel. "You're younger and less muscular than I thought you would be. And no, don't worry, I'm not going to tell the king and the others where you are, since you're rather clearly trying to stay unnoticed."

"...thanks?" he said in confusion. "How do you know who I am?"

"Your eyes giveaway you away," she said. "They're the same color as they are when you are a dragon, or so it seems." She smiled. "That, and my brother told me what you could do and that you had golden hair and golden eyes. I'm Ashara Dayne, Arthur's sister."

"Did Elia send you?"

"No," she said, standing closeby. "In truth, I'm simply trying to hide from my suitors."

Ashara sighed. "They must think that using poems and singing romantic songs will make me love them...and it seems they all know the same damned songs and poems. I must have heard the story of Jonquil and Florian the Fool a dozen times this morning already, as a song and as a poem.

*She doesn't like romantic things? I guess someone could get bored of them if that's all they're hearing.*

"So..." he started, "I made you laugh?"

"Yes, you did," she smiled, looking as if she was about to laugh again. "Was that really your best?"

"My best...what?" he asked.

"Flirting." She looked at his face closely...and laughed. "It was, wasn't it?"

"Why?" he asked. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Almost everything," she answered with a teasing look. "To be honest, that was the worst flirting I have ever seen in my life."

*It couldn't have been that bad...could it?*

"I...don't have much experience with girls," he admitted, cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

"It shows, it truly does," she said with amusement. "Fortunately, you have me. I need to hide from a dozen lovestruck men, and, if I had to guess, you were on your way to the marketplace. If we walk together, they might very well think you've won me over and stay away for awhile."

"And in return you'll teach me how to talk to women?"

"I will," she smiled sweetly. "Well? Shall we walk?"
Carik offered her his arm without thinking about it for even a second. Ashara laughed again, and the two started walking towards the second courtyard together, arm in arm.

"Firstly, you should say "my lady" after you offer your greeting," she said. "And saying "hi" isn't a good choice to start with either. "Greetings" would be better."

"Wouldn't that be too formal?" he asked.

"Not at all. You were speaking to a highborn maiden, not a whore around the back of a tavern," she answered. "There isn't such a thing as too formal."

_Huh...well, that does make sense. Maxos always told me that I shouldn't speak too formal with people, since it makes me seem isolated from them, as if I don't know how they live their lives. But that's not really a problem when talking to noble ladies, is it?_

"Then you should have attached your title to your name and said less about your father," she continued. "Otherwise, it makes you seem dependent on him, as if there is nothing important about yourself. Remember, you are the one trying to win her attentions, not your father. But you do need to mention your titles so they know who you are."

"So I need to be more subtle about it?" he asked.

"You do, and lastly..." she laughed. "What in Seven's name made you think asking her to ride you was a good idea? That was the **worst** thing you could have possibly said."

"But most people seem to like riding me?"

"And if you were a dragon when you said it, mayhaps she would have ridden around on your back like Elia and all the others did," Ashara said quickly and precisely. "But you weren't. You were human instead, then you said you were half dragon, then you asked her to ride you."

"Think on that for a moment," she said with a smile. "What kind of riding would she think you meant?"

Carik looked at her blankly for a moment...and then it hit him, and he laughed in embarrassment. _Gods! How did I not realize that?_

"But what does being half dragon have to do with that?" he asked.

"Some men use dragon as another name for their...blade," Ashara said simply. "So if a man is half-dragon, what would that mean?"

Carik turned red as he realized how poor his choice of words had been.

"I'm an idiot," he sighed sadly.

"You're not," Ashara said with a squeeze of his arm. "You're just inexperienced. Now, practice on me."

"What?" he said in surprise. "You want me to...flirt with you?"

"Well, there's only one way you're going to improve," she said firmly, standing still and facing him.
"Better me than someone who will send their brothers after you if you bugger it up. Now come on, introduce yourself."

She's told me what to say...alright, let's give this a try...

Uncomfortable, he swallowed hard, steeled himself and said: "Greetings, my beautiful lady. I am Prince Carik Sigurdsson, heir to the great Empire of Rivellon, and you are?"

"Much better," she smiled widely, taking his arm again as the two continued on their way. "Was that so difficult?"

"No, not really," he smiled at last. "What next?"

"Well, I'm afraid to tell you that was the easiest part," she answered. "The fact I am here with you and not the men trying to charm me should say a lot about the second part."

"Why are you here, anyway?" he asked, curious. "I thought noblewomen liked romance?"

"Most of them do, the young maidens, but not all of them," she uttered with a sullen, quiet voice. "They sound sweet enough, singing about chivalrous heroes and chaste maidens, but...that's just not true. That's just not the way the world truly is."

...I shouldn't have asked that question.

"Still, I suppose I should be grateful for that," Ashara added as she began to cheer up again. "Otherwise I would have to spend my days listening to poems and singing whilst sewing from dawn to dusk, and somehow find it in me to stay as chaste as Jonquil, too. It sounds more like my idea of hell than not, so I would rather keep this world, with all its faults, than live in the "perfect" world of a song for even a day."

"You're not how I expected a noble lady to be like," he laughed.

"That's because I'm a Dornishwoman," she said with a smile. "Women from Dorne have a more equal standing with men than in most parts of the realm, and we Daynes come from Starfall, which is in the Western part of Dorne, so a Dayne woman like myself can live her life however they want to, they can even love men before being married, so long as they use moontea to avoid falling pregnant."

"Still, you should speak to one of the Tyrell women when you get the chance. If you've ever heard of a romantic song before, you could probably guess what they would say before they had a chance to say it."

"Maybe after I've finished looking around the castle," he replied.

"A pity that you upset Alyssa Whent, then," Ashara teased with a laugh. "She could have shown you the whole castle, and she is pretty enough to have been crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty at the last tournament."

"Queen of Love and Beauty?" he asked. "What's that?"

"Well, when a knight rides in a tournament and wins, he gets far more than just gold. He gets the glory of having bested every other knight that entered the lists, and that alone is more valuable than
any sum of gold or silver. Then he gets the ability to crown a woman as his Queen of Love and Beauty and dedicate his victory to her."

"So it's to do with courtly love, then?

"More or less," Ashara agreed. "My brother Arthur could crown me as the Queen of Love and Beauty if he won the tournament, which, because he's my brother, draws everyone's attention to me, and warns them that the greatest knight in the Seven Kingdoms is my brother, in case they break my heart."

*So if I win the tournament, I'll have to crown someone as my Queen...*

The two went round yet another corner, leaving what was the castle's emptiest most area...and entering its busiest, a few hundred feet away from the marketplace. Sprawled open across the great courtyard were hundreds of tents and hundreds of stalls, filled with countless merchants all selling everything that he imagined a medieval kingdom had to offer, from exotic spices more valuable than gold and bolts of cloth made from the softest of silks and velvets and rack after rack of clothing to pieces of jewelry so fine they shone in the light like the afternoon sun. There was even a large group of some two dozen smiths working together under a single roof on the very far side of the courtyard, forging an immense quantity of high quality weapons and armor all done underneath the watching eye of a venerable old man in brightly colored clothing. Everywhere Carik's eyes fell he saw groups of noblemen and noblewomen, a rainbow of colors and a menagerie of animal crests and other sigils, and he couldn't help but smile as much as he could at the sight. *This is what I was looking for.*

"It seems this is the end of our time together, at least for now," Ashara said as she let go of his arm. "But remember what I said, will you?"

"I will," he said with a smile, looking towards the crowds again and all the goods on display. *Gods. To think everything here is made by hand, without machines...I doubt you could find anything like this on Rivellon anymore.*

Ashara started to walk off towards the market, but stopped a few feet away and turned. "One last thing I almost forgot to say, but not every woman likes it when you're like that."

...*bugger.*

"How will I know if they like it or not?"

"That's something you will need to learn on your own." Ashara shrugged. "And you'll need new clothes to better fit in, I think. The colors make you look like a Braavosi."

*She's right...but if there was ever a place to get new clothes, it's here. I could try and trade them for some new ones, but Maxos wouldn't be very happy about that when he gets here, and they're not going to get accept what coins I've got on me either. I'm going to need money. Westerosi money.*

"I don't suppose you could loan me enough to get some new clothes?"

"I wish I could," Ashara sighed. "But Arthur decided to "borrow" most of mine earlier so he could buy a sword cleaning kit meant to have been blessed by the High Septon and a Red Priest of R'hllor and probably bathed in the blood of a maiden, too, for all I know, so I don't have all that much to spend either."
"I'll just have to figure something out, then," he said with a sigh.

"I'm sure you'll find a way," she smiled before walking off into the crowds, leaving him on his own, still smiling. *She's nice...*

He started walking towards the market, wondering what style of clothing he should wear to best fit in...and stopped as soon as he noticed a young woman hiding in the gap between the two buildings on his left, sat upon a stool at the very edge of his vision. *She's trying to hide? Why?* He looked towards her, as curious as he was concerned, and she instantly seemed to shrink down into the stool, but even in the shade he could still see her; she was thin and slender, but she was pretty, too, prettier than Alyssa, and her thick auburn hair was long enough to reach down to her plump bosom and past the crest of a white trout that was the only true decor on her great blue dress.

*I need to get new clothes, but I should ask if she's alright, first.*

"Are you alright?" he asked, stepping into the alleyway.

"I...I am," she said, her voice quiet and weak. "I'm just waiting for my sister and my uncle to come back. They've been gone awhile now."

"I'm sure they'll be here soon," he said with a reassuring voice that drew her attention to him. "But we can try and find them, if you want."

"...alright," she said quietly, meeting his eyes with her own blue ones.

*She's shy...No wonder she's hiding from the crowds.*

He offered her his hand with a smile, watching as she slowly reached out to take it. "My name is Carik Sigurdsson, Prince of Rivellon. And you, my lady?"

"My name is Lysa Tully," she said with a shy and sweet smile and a soft giggle as she took his hand. "I've never heard of Rivellon before. Is it near Braavos?"

*Ashara did say I look like a "Braavosi" in these clothes, so it's definitely a good idea for me to change them before people start getting the wrong idea or something.*

"It is much further away than that, my lady," he said as he helped her to her feet. "You could show me a map, and I wouldn't even be able to point to it, so remote is it."

*Maxos always said using this voice would be great for speaking formally, but he must've meant for speeches now that I know who my father is...still, if it stops me from getting slapped again...*

"Then...you're the first person from Rivellon to have come here?"

"I think so," he said warmly as he led her out onto the courtyard again, Lysa paying no attention to the crowds nearby. "Everyone I have spoken to here has never even heard of my homeland before, and neither has anyone in Rivellon ever heard of Westeros."

"What is your home like?"

"It's a different place than yours seems to be, that's for certain!" he said with a smile, Lysa returning it
almost instantly with blushing cheeks. "In Rivellon, we have running water in every home, and our rooms and streets are lit by lights that give off no smoke. Steel whales float through the skies amongst the clouds, and iron horses run on tracks a hu-"

"Gods! Lysa!" laughed an aging man with a few grey hairs in his own red hair. He was tall yet lean, but he had the look of a knight about him, an experienced strength in the way he walked and in the way he moved, and he wore colors of blue and red just like Lysa did, though the trout on his doublet was black, not white. "I have been looking all over this damned castle to find you."

"Sorry..." Lysa apologised, looking to the ground sadly as she let go of Carik's hand.

"Oh, don't be sad, girl," her uncle smiled as he gave her a calming hug. "You're not in trouble, your sister was just worried, that's all. She said you had gone to the market with her and had stayed by her side till you started getting scared of all the crowds, and then disappeared without telling her anything about where you went."

"I...I don't like crowds, so I found a stool and hid in an alley," Lysa explained. "I was going to stay there till the crowds went or till you and Catelyn found me, but..." she smiled, wide and happy as she looked at Carik. "He found me first."

"Did he now?" Lysa's uncle looked at him questioningly.

"I saw her in the alley and thought that there was something wrong," he answered honestly. "She said she was waiting for you to come back, so I thought to take her with me and to try and look for you, ser."

"It's true," Lysa smiled, her uncle's expression softening as she did.

"If Lysa says that is what happened, then I believe her," the aging knight said warmly. "I am Ser Brynden Tully, not that my brother likes me to have that name, and you are?"

_Footnote: Not that his brother likes him to have that name? Add that to the black fish and I guess they aren't very fond of each other for some reason. I wonder why?_}

"Carik Sigurdsson, ser," he said with a friendly smile.

Brynden nodded, before turning his attentions to his niece. "We best go find your sister again, before she starts to think that I went missing, too."

Lysa took her uncle's arm and walked with him, away from the marketplace and from Carik...but she looked back and gave him a smile and a wave before continuing on her way. _It wouldn't have been right to leave her in that alley on her own. Now she's with her uncle again, safe and sound._

Lysa took her uncle's arm and walked with him, away from the marketplace and away from Carik, but after a few steps she looked back and gave him a smile and a wave before continuing on her way. _It wouldn't have been right to leave her in that alley on her own. It wouldn't have been proper to leave her in an alley on her own, but now she's with her uncle again and happy, too._ He smiled to himself, then continued his own walk into the market square, into the thick crowds who came from all over the Seven Kingdoms. Everywhere he looked there were noblemen and women dressed in the newest fashions and all wearing bright colors, like birds showing off their plumage to one another, making it easier for Carik and his stark black-and-white clothes to blend in, even if some would occasionally give him a curious look and examine his wear before determining he wasn't of
any importance and leaving him be...and after a few moments, it became clear that the marketplace
wasn't as busy as it first seemed to be. Everyone else must be busy bathing and getting ready, so the
market will probably fill in as the day goes on. But this makes it easier for me to go unnoticed
anyway. Sure, it's easier to blend into a large crowd, but less eyes here make it harder to be seen in
the first place.

He looked around again and found the stall of a tailor, a square tent bigger than the king's had been,
with the front rolled up to show racks and shelves filled with well-made clothing and great round
bolts of exotic cloth, but to the merchant's obvious dismay, the tent was placed not far away from a
spice merchant who was drawing the attentions of the crowd, leaving what should have been one of
the busiest places in the market almost empty. Perfect.

He walked over and looked at the shelves from afar, careful not to touch anything lest he be forced to
buy it, trying to imagine what colors would look best on him. I've got gold hair and gold eyes, so
maybe...gold colors? But my dragon form is black and red, like the Targaryens, so...hmm. Choices,
choices...

"A Braavosi!" the merchant smiled widely as he walked over, dressed in green from head to heel -
even his shortly cut hair and beard were both a bright grassy green - and a dark cloak fastened by a
golden clasp. "Your people have always had a good taste in clothing and none, none make better
clothing than the tailors of Tyrosh."

Not again. Best to just go with it.

"Tell me, what are you looking for?" the merchant asked, gesturing towards the greatest of the
shelves. "A cloak, made of the finest Lorathi velvet, perhaps? Gloves, from doeskin?"

The merchant smiled again, looking at the thin sword at Carik's side. "Ah! You must be a bravo! I
have a doublet so brightly colored you would think it was spun from a rainbow - not even the
courtesans would be able to resist your charm if you had it."

I'll have to visit Braavos sometime, just to see why everyone keeps asking if I come from there.

"Thank you for the offer," Carik said politely. "But I'm looking for some clothes that will help me fit
in with everyone else at the tournament."

The merchant hummed, rubbing a hand through his beard. "I have exactly what you need, and if not
I have tailors who can make it for you. What color do you want? Red? Blue? Grey?"

"Let's go with..." Why not. "Black and red."

"You're in luck!" the merchant laughed. "I just so happen to have that already in stock. You want a
full set of clothes, yes? Gloves, boots, cloak, the rest?"

Carik smiled. "I do."

"Good, good, now...I use only the best materials available, things you cannot get in Westeros, and
everything is made by skilled artisans," the merchant started. "You can have it all for the reasonable
price of...thirty gold dragons. A better offer you cannot find anywhere else."

Thirty gold dragons? Is that expensive, or pocket change? I don't even know what a gold dragon is
yet.
"I will buy it, but I will need some time to get the money," he said, adding quickly before the merchant could respond. "I left my coin purse in my room for safekeeping."

The merchant looked at him carefully before nodding. "Very well. I will keep it on hold for you, from now till the sun rises again."

"Then I'll be back soon," Carik said at last before turning and walking back out into the crowds.

So now I know where I can get my clothes and have a price for them. Now, all I need is some money to buy them with, and I've got just the idea, and all I need is a stall in some place with a lot of people nearby. Good thing I'm at a market. He smiled, looking around for an empty stall...and instead, he saw the fluttering white cloak of the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, searching the crowds for him.

"Damn it," he muttered quietly, turning away and walking. He was bound to find me eventually. But I don't think he's noticed me just yet.

He turned, looping around the back of the clothier's store and down the courtyard, quickly losing track of the white knight amongst the tents and crowds, but it was obvious now that he wouldn't be able to try and get the money he needed whilst in the marketplace. Not unless I want to give an explanation of where I've gone, anyway. He sighed as he worked his way out of the exposed and open courtyard, walking at a calm and normal pace so as to avoid drawing any unwanted attention to himself, going around a corner...and seeing a dozen more tents, every single one of them larger than the ones that had been in the market, each of them with a stage, though there were four or five more stages than there were tents, with empty plots next to them for whatever group of travellers decided to set up, and though not all of the events were set up yet, there was still a large crowd gathered round the few that were. Oh, this is where the entertainers are! Of course it'd be next to the market!

He laughed. This is perfect!

Still smiling, he walked along, reading the little signs that had been placed in front of each of the stages; first there was a troupe of gymnasts called the "Leaping Lions of Lannisport", who dazzled a small crowd and even drew Carik's attention by jumping up one another into a pyramid of red and gold. Then there was an act under a Pentoshi playmaster, a comedy about something called the "Dance of the Dragons" where the actors were running around in dragon costumes with dwarfs riding on their backs. I'm half tempted to help them out with that. Then there was a singer with a harp, a juggler and...an empty stage with a sign that said exactly what he hoped it would say.

Marvellous Maelario, the Majestic Myrish Magician.

He laughed quietly as he looked at the stage, walking past a bucket placed on the corner for coins to be thrown into, empty but for a few old pennies, and peeked into the tent...where the "wizard" was half undressed and slumped over at his table, his fingers still gripping the handle of a half empty cup of red wine as he snored and slept the day away. Looks like he found out the magical power of wine... Carik laughed quietly, stepping inside and closing the flap behind him before taking a long look around the drunken magician's tent; there were a few coins on the table besides a half empty bottle of wine, mostly silver aside from a single golden coin, but he didn't have any plans to steal a passed out man's money, so he left them alone...though he took a long look, so he knew what Westerosi coins looked like. A three headed "dragon" on one side, and the king's head on the other. I'm not sure what I was expecting when the merchant asked for gold dragons...
Tossed atop a chest filled with all the props and tricks of a normal magician's trade was a great robe,

On the other side of the room, however, and tossed atop a chest filled with props and bottles of various liquids (of which only a few looked like wine) was a robe of nightblue cloth covered in dozens of golden stars, with a matching hat. *Seven, even Maxos doesn't wear stars like this and he is a wizard!* He chuckled quietly, careful to avoid waking the sleeping entertainer, as he picked up the robe and put it on above his normal clothes before starting to rummage through the chest in search of anything that could complete his outfit...and quickly found a fake beard of bushy white hair, some fourteen inches long at its lengthiest point, a hat to match the robe and a wand of gnarled driftwood to finish the look. *He might not have gotten everything right, but he got pretty close for someone who's never seen a real wizard before. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a wizard on Rivellon who wore stars on his robe and hat, too.*

Putting on the fake beard and the hat before looking at himself in a small mirror to make sure nothing gave him away, wand still in hand, he smiled once more as he walked out and onto the stage, passing a bucket placed on the corner for coins to be thrown into. *They want to see a magic show? I'll give them one.*

"You there!" he said with a voice of a higher pitch than his usual, pointing at a random passerby, a tall and powerful man with broad shoulders and a full head of long, brown curls and a beard cut into a triangular shape, dressed in green and gold with a rose on his heart. "Do you want to see a magic trick?"

"I see no reason why not," the rose lord answered.

*So I look like the wizard, good...now, for the love of the Seven, magic, please don't fail me now.*

Holding the wand in his right hand and placing his left on its wood, he focused as hard as he could, as hard as he had on the any of the times that Maxos had tried to teach him spells, and as hard as he had not long before in the king's tent, willing his ability not to do anything in particular, but to simply do something that would be an impressive sight to see.

Then he threw his hand forward with the wand...

...and from the end of its length shot a smiley face made from rainbow smoke, five feet around, trailing through the air with the sound of laughter and happy music.

Carik sighed, the movements of his mouth hidden by the beard. *If I knew I was this bad with magic, I would never have used it in the first -*

"Seven hells!" the rose lord laughed as it passed overhead. "How did you do that?"

*It...it actually impressed him? Gods be praised!*

"I wouldn't be a magician if I couldn't do magic," he laughed in his wizard's voice. "See?"

He waved the wand around in a circle and then thrust it up towards the sky, and from its tip shot an arc of lighting that branched out into a bush of daisies, their petals raining back down on him. The crowd swelled at the sight, speaking amongst themselves with hushed voices as even the other entertainers gathered in front of his stage to see real magic. He threw the flowers into the crowd, and then turned sideways, smiling as he pointed the wand at the stage.
"For my next trick, I shall create..."

He waved the wand around again, focusing...and a block of solid fire appeared, constrained into the shape of a perfect cube, the tails of flame bending and warping themselves to stay within the confines of the shape. The crowd gasped at the sight, stunned, and then Carik heard the sound of coins pouring into the bucket and smiled. Alright, magic, we're off to a good start. Let's keep this up...

He poked the fire-cube with the wand and it turned into a great armchair, padded and soft. An armchair made from fire, but an armchair all the same, and one that gave off no heat or smoke. This'll surprise them... He sat down on the chair, as if it were any normal piece of furniture, then pointed down at the stage with his wand.

"Behold the power of my magic!" he said loudly, growing more confident in his ability. I'll make a whole set of burning tables and chairs for them to see! That'll get me the money I need!

He raised the wand over his shoulder, like a swordsman preparing for a swing, and threw it forth again, zapping the stage a few feet away, a bolt of arcane energy striking one of the planks...and caused a twig to rise up from its surface, a little green leaf popping out to take in the warmth of the sun as the crowd gasped at it. Well, I tried. I best cut this short, in case I do something and it causes someone to get hurt.

He rose from the seat as even the disintegration of the armchair into a thin grey dust caught the eyes and imagination of the crowd, and said with a smile and with his wizardly voice: "Everyone who puts a gold coin into this bucket will have the protection of the great Maelario!"

He threw his left palm forward...and nothing happened. Carik blinked, looking at his hand in confusion. ...but no matter how bad I am with magic, I've never had nothing happen before. Hmmm...

Regardless of the failure of that last spell, the others had enough of an effect that a dozen or so people came forth to put gold into the bucket, filling it to half way with a mix of copper pennies, silver stags and golden dragons. Oh...that's not enough money to -

Then suddenly, the sky went dark with stormclouds...but only above the crowd, and only over the members of the crowd who hadn't put a coin into the bucket, menacing and dark. I've got a bad feeling about this. Carik winced at the sight, waiting for the inevitable shouts of anger, for the crowd to storm the stage...or even for the cry of someone being hurt...but nothing of the sort happened. Instead, the black clouds merely followed the people who hadn't paid for the magic show and did nothing more, acting more to fill them with guilt and to remind them to pay than to force them to do so, or to harm those who didn't. This...this is better than anything I could have asked for. They disappear whenever someone drops a coin into the bucket - a gold dragon for the nobles, a silver one for the other entertainers and a copper for the peasantry - but if they try and walk off without paying for the show they start thundering...and that means everyone sees that they're being cheap! It's brilliant!

As the last stormcloud disappeared, Carik smiled as he bowed deeply before the dispersing crowd, before taking the full bucket and calmly walking into the tent. I bet it couldn't have gone better than that.

He put the wand down on the table, not far away from the real, sleeping Maelario, then took off the hat and put it atop of the wizard's head before putting the beard back into the chest and the robe atop of it, as before, then started to count his coins, taking out five gold dragons at a time and arranging
them into neat stacks before adding the stacks together. *Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty five, thirty, thirty five, forty, forty five gold dragons...and a lot of spare change.*

With the coins too big and irregularly shaped for his wallet to be able to hold them properly, he took thirty five of the gold dragons and put them into his pockets, leaving the sleeping wizard with the rest and all of the change, silver and copper. *It's the least I can do after borrowing his stuff...and besides, he might not make that much money over the rest of the tournament if people think he's got magic powers and end up disappointed when they don't see them...as for me, I've got all the money I needed and then some.*

Carik smiled widely and walked back out of the tent, striding towards the marketplace, looking around every now and then for any sign of the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard or if anyone recognized him from the magic show. *He might've walked past without me noticing when I was on the stage...which means he wouldn't be looking for me at the marketplace anymore, since he would have already checked it, so he shouldn't be here.*

He let himself relax a little, confident that he wouldn't be discovered by the white cloaked knight any time soon, and started to whistle to himself as he walked into the marketplace, the crowds larger and more spread out than they were earlier, drawn towards some new stalls that had started to open, the greatest of them all being a scent merchant who had managed to draw the interests of the noblemen and women from the spice merchant with jars filled with soft soaps of mutton fat and lavender oil and pale white blocks almost the same as the ones on Rivellon, only made with olive oil and rose petals in them, alongside bottles of perfume and flower oils and a few glass bottles that looked like they contained something akin to a potion. *Herbal remedies, I guess. There are potions on Rivellon that can make you stronger and more agile, so I wonder of these work and can do the same, too?*

He continued past, into the tent of the green haired clothier...and as soon as he stepped inside, the merchant grinned widely at the sound of the golden coins clattering within Carik's pockets.

"I know the sound of gold dragons when I hear them," the merchant laughed as he walked over, gesturing to a neatly packed bundle of clothes on the far side of the room, wrapped up in a belt and with new boots atop, placed on a nearby table. "Everything is here for you, as I said it would be."

Carik took the coins from his pockets, counting as he did to make sure the payment was exact. "And here is the gold, as promised. Is there a place for me to change?"

The merchant pointed to a folding screen in the corner of the tent away from everything else, a curtain of thick black wool affixed to a thin rope and to the screen's closest corner, then he took the coins with an almost-hungry look in his eyes, carrying them over to his lockbox as Carik took his clothes and stepped behind the curtain, placed the bundle of clothes on the small table inside, unfastened the belt holding them together and set everything out, examining it all together at once. *So I've got a shirt, a pair of gloves, a pair of boots, socks, leggings, a great big cloak and a...doublet? Is that the word?*

He reached out and ran the tips of his fingers across the black cloth - it was much softer than he had expected it to be, the inside even softer and the seam between the black and the red was barely noticeable even to one who had spent his entire life wearing factory made clothes, whilst the inside of his boots were suede and the outside hard leather and their soles felt as though they could last for a thousand miles. *I thought I might have been getting scammed or ripped off for a while, but now...I think this is definitely worth the price I paid. Especially with how fast I got the gold.*

He smiled again, closely inspecting all his new clothes, then he started to change between them,
removing his original belt and setting it aside to use as a way to fasten his Rivellonian clothes in a bundle just like the his new Westerosi ones had been, making sure to wear everything that he had bought, even the gloves and shirt. That way, I blend in perfectly. Well, except my eyes, anyway, but people have to get up close to see that they're gold. From a distance, I bet they look like a bright hazel, and no one would bother someone for that.

He fastened his sword belt around his waist, making sure it could be easily reached in the event it was needed, then he emptied the pockets of his waistcoat and put everything into the smaller pockets that were inside his doublet, even his pocketwatch...and with the gentlest touch he did the same to the photographs that had come with him, thoughtlessly looking at the image of his mother and father, the family he had never known, with sad eyes before putting them in the pocket closest to his heart, safe and sound. ...now, where to go? I could walk around the castle, but people will think it's odd for a nobleman to be walking around with a spare change of clothes, but putting them away means I need a room...and getting a room means revealing myself again...but now that I'm in human form with Westerosi style clothing, people won't really be able to tell that I'm a dragon, and besides, no one but the Targaryens and their men have seen that I'm a dragon in the first place. That means I can just...walk right up to them, say hi, and no one in the castle will know who I am!

He smiled, taking the bundle under his arms, and then he moved the curtain back and walked through the tent and out onto the marketplace, more confident than he had been before. Though he wore Targaryen colors and looked like the crown prince, the differences between him and Rhaegar were obvious enough that they didn't make way for him the way they did for the heir to the throne, but it wasn't too hard for Carik to make his way through...and the servants - those people who had never seen their king or his children before - made the effort to stay well out of his way, not sure if he was of royal blood or not. They must be just like the guard. They know who the king is, but they have never seen him on anything other than a coin before, but the lords and ladies have probably seen him at court or at another tournament.

He looked around through the crowds...and unsurprisingly, he saw Elia and Ashara together in the marketplace, escorted by Prince Lewyn Martell and Ser Jonothor Darry, the two knights standing on the flanks of the two women, Jonothor facing the crowd as Lewyn faced the merchant the two ladies had stopped in front of, watching his hands carefully and making sure he had no weapons or anything of the sort hidden up his sleeves. I should talk to them and ask them to take me to Rhaegar. That way, I'll have somewhere safe to keep my clothes and somewhere to sleep if Maxos takes a little longer to get here.

Carik looked up at the greatest of the ruined towers, wondering for a moment what it might be like to have a room inside of it, then he walked over to the stall Princess Elia and Ashara were standing at, smiling...and for just a few seconds, Elia looked at him as if she didn't know who he was, unable to recognize him without his Rivellonian clothes.

Then she laughed. "You do know that my husband has the Lord Commander searching the entire castle for you?"

"He needed to get some new clothes before the rest of the ladies saw him," Ashara teased with a smile. "How did you manage to get the gold so quickly, anyway?"

"It didn't take me too long to get, I just had to do a few tricks," he answered with a smile. "I've even got a little change left over."

"You know this man, your grace?" Ser Jonothor Darry asked, looking at Carik long and hard, trying to remember if he had seen him anytime before. He hasn't seen me in my human form before.
"I have met him before," Prince Lewyn answered, reassuring his sworn brother. "He means the princess no harm, I am sure of it."

"My uncle has the right of it," Elia smiled. "You have nothing to worry about, Ser Darry."

"As you command, your grace," the knight said with a bow.

"Now then," Elia started as she turned to Carik once more. "This castle was made to hold an army, so it shouldn't be too hard for Lord Whent to be able to find you a room in one of the towers, but I can't say how nice they might be to stay in."

"Anything's better than sleeping outside," he answered. "I'll be fine, so long as the roof isn't leaking. But looking at some of these towers...that might actually be a problem."

"Then we'll go find my husband and get him to make the arrangements with Lord Whent," She smiled again. "But you'll need to wait for a little while, I'm having something made for Rhaenys."

Carik nodded, smiling again as he usually did. "Thank you. I'll just wait here till then."

Elia nodded understandingly, and Ashara turned to face her and asked, "How is the king?"

"I didn't see him for myself - you know how he is - but Rhaella told me that he's awake now, at least. Maester Willum says no lasting harm was done, but he'll need a few weeks to recover," came Elia's reply. "He's given him a cane to lean on till then."

Carik quietly sighed in relief at the news. Thank the Seven for that. I never wanted him or anyone else riding on my back to end up getting hurt.

"Then let's hope he's up and walking again by the time the tournament is meant to start," Ashara replied. "Otherwise, why, we'll have to spend weeks doing nothing whilst waiting for the tournament to start."

Carik laughed. "Wouldn't it be Rhaegar's job to open it if his father couldn't?"

"The king has made it known that it is to be him and no other to open this tourney," Ser Jonothor explained. "It is so he can be there to find a man worthy enough to wear the seventh cloak of the Kingsguard."

"...and because you would have a hard time getting Rhaegar away from his books long enough to do it," Elia added, getting a smile from her uncle as she did. "He hasn't been away from the libraries for even a minute since we arrived here."

"He probably would have done that even if the king didn't fall," Ashara said briefly as the merchant walked over, drawing Carik's attention to what his stall sold - dolls.

There were dozens of them, from knights wearing real suits of armor to ladies in colorful dresses much like the ones that Elia and Ashara herself were wearing, both the little men and women having little holes in their hands for things to be pushed through so that they could hold little tiny cups and swords of their own and able to stand on their own two feet due to a wooden frame sewn inside just as the horses besides them did...and all of them watched with beady black eyes of polished stone. Creepy.
"I beg your apologies for taking so long, your grace, but it took a while longer than I thought it would to finish your request," the merchant said apologetically as he gave her a wooden box. "But I must admit, this is my proudest work."

Elia nodded as she opened the box...and inside were two identical queens with the same olive skin, dark eyes and dark hair as Elia, but the two wore different dresses than her and both had a little bright red sun on their chests, lacking only the spear that Elia had. She smiled, closing the lid and giving it to her uncle to hold.

She smiled, closing the lid and passing the box over to her uncle to hold. "Thank you."

The dollmaker smiled and nodded and turned back towards the rest of his store, working on a horse big enough for one of the knights to ride as Elia and Ashara started towards the greatest of the towers, the one Carik had heard Oswell call the Kingspyre Tower. If ever there was a place in this ruin that was haunted, it's probably that tower.

"Arianne and Tyene are going to love them," Lewyn said with a smile as he carried the box carefully, trying to avoid the risk of damaging the dolls inside. "But what will Doran say when he finds out you're spoiling his daughter?"

"To be fair, he's doing that himself," Elia answered happily and with a small smile.

"He is, he is," her uncle laughed. "Now all you have to do is find something for Oberyn's other three."

"I think a spear for Obara, some tough clothes for Nymeria and some sweets for Sarella," Elia answered. "But there is no rush, uncle, I can get those over the next few days. That way I will have something to do whilst Rhaegar does his reading other than sitting around."

They make it sound like he does nothing but read history books all day...

"What about Rhaenys?" Ashara asked curiously. "Is Oberyn bringing her something from the Free Cities?"

"He is," Elia said happily. "The last city he went to before he sent me his message was Myr, and no one are better craftsmen than the Myrish. Doran has something up his sleeve, too, he always does, but he's probably waiting to see what I send Arianne so he knows what he should send back."

"Your brother is an adventurer?" Carik asked, curious...and desperate to try and keep his mind off of the rest of the conversation, away from the discussion of family and the one he had never had a chance to know.

"I suppose you could call him that," Elia answered. "He's more of a...wanderer, really. He has never been happy doing only one thing, or staying in one place for too long. He would have probably left Dorne when he was five and ten if he could, but he was the youngest and our mother had lost two sons before him in the cradle, so she was fiercely protective of him and didn't want him to go."

"And that led to the death of Lord Edgar Yronwood," Prince Lewyn sighed. "My sister had sent him there thinking it would do him good, but Oberyn was always too hot blooded for his own good. He knows what he likes, and he isn't afraid to follow it, and when he was found in bed with Lord Edgar's paramour, so the two fought a duel to first blood, but both of them were cut...and Lord Edgar
died of his wound."

"That's not much of a duel to first blood if someone died in the fight," Carik responded.

"It wasn't done deliberately," Lewyn said, Elia nodding in agreement. "It was by accident. Oberyn's spear struck him in the side of the arm; though the wound was shallow and not deep, it was long, too long for even the best maester to be able to clean it properly."

"It got infected, then?"

"It did," the knight said with a grim nod. "To keep peace with the Yronwoods, he had no choice but to leave Dorne in exile, for as long as it might take for Doran to make amends with the Yronwoods. For a time, he travelled the Seven Kingdoms, and then he went across the Narrow Sea to tour the Free Cities for himself."

"I doubt anything could have made him happier," Elia said, smiling. "He has sent me messages whenever he could, and has told me about all the places he visits, but this will be the first time I have seen him in person since before Rhaenys was born. He's been to the Wall, the Vale, the Free Cities...he's even been to the Summer Isles."

"Wow," Carik said with wonder. "I'll have to speak to him when I get the chance. I've always wanted to do that kind of thing myself, but I never had the chance. Where I come from, there's still a lot of unexplored lands. Dark jungles and forests, deep caves and chasms, forgotten dungeons and lost cities, that kind of thing."

"Oh, would you love Valyria," Ashara said with a wide smile.

Carik looked at her in confusion, and asked: "Who's Valyria?"

Elia, Ashara and Prince Lewyn burst into laughter, whilst Ser Jonothor Darry simply looked at him with surprise and disbelief. "You...you don't know of Valyria? Just where do you come from that you do not know what the Valyrian Freehold was?"

Well, so much for passing as someone from Westeros...

"Now, now, Ser Jonothor," Ashara smiled, "I'm sure he's simply joking. Aren't you?"

Phew.

"I've always been well known for my jokes," he added, smiling with the hope it would stop the knight from being so suspicious.

"But you'll find that my sworn brother is better known for his skill at arms than for his sense of humor," Lewyn smiled as the other knight walked along with solemn, dutiful determination.

"And that's all for the better," Ashara said. "We already have one or two witty white cloaks, we hardly need another."

"Let's hope King Aerys doesn't pick one, then," Elia replied as they finally neared the entrance of the massive Kingspyre Tower; the greatest of all of the castle towers, so tall that it looked as though its highest floor reached into the sky and touched the high afternoon sun...but then he noticed something that he had never noticed about it before, something completely imperceptible from a distance.
The tower was crooked, ever so slightly leaning away from the smaller tower it was connected to because of the sheer weight of what looked like two stories of broken stone rubble at the highest level of the grey monolith, a problem that was worsened by three floors that were little more than ruins, but the simple fact that the tower still stood tall and proud after such terrible damage spoke volumes about the skill and care that had gone into its construction.

*These Westerosi know how to build very, very good castles. But how the hell did they get it to hold up so much weight? If they used wood when building it, wouldn't the bottom floors have collapsed under the weight of so much stone?*

"Go in there," Elia said as she gestured to the tower's entrance, a great door nestled beneath a stone archway that more in common with a gatehouse than not. "Just keep going up the stairs till you find Rhaegar's chamber. You'll know which it is."

"Thanks for helping me again," he said with a grateful smile. "What will you do now?"

"I suppose I'll go to the market again and try and find someone who sells the other things," Elia answered after a moment's thought. "Or maybe just watch the mummers do a show to pass the time...unless Ashara has anything she wants to do?"

"Unfortunately, I had to loan Arthur all my money and have none left," the Dayne woman said with a sigh. "I suppose I will just need to wander the castle aimlessly till the tournament starts, whilst trying to avoid the temptation to throw myself out of a tower out of boredom, but even being dead might not keep my suitors away."

"Thanks again," Carik said as he looked towards the tower again, Elia and her two sworn protectors starting back towards the marketplace again...and the beautiful Ashara turned to follow.

"Ashara," he said, stopping her in her tracks, "I have some gold left over...that is, if you want it?"

"Really?" she asked, surprised by his offer. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I want to, even if I don't have much," he said, reaching into his pockets and taking out three of his gold dragons, the bulk of his remaining money. "You've helped me a lot today, and it's the least I can do."

She laughed as she took the coins from him. "Thank you."

Carik smiled...going back to Elia's side, leaving him stood on his own outside the Kingspyre tower, blushing a bright red. *Seven. She is really, really nice.* He laughed, then walked into the tower to start his search for Rhaegar's room...and he never lost his smile for even a second.

*I think I'm starting to like it here...*

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**Earth #23**

Maxos peeked through his third portal of the day as quickly as it opened and stabilized, wondering what land he might to next. *I wonder if it will be another Rivellon, like the one before? Or perhaps it*
will be something...different, a world that we have never seen before. It would be fascinating, were it not for the fact that I am only seeing these lands because I lost Carik...

He sighed, then looked through the portal proper, to see what land was on the other side...and rather than the dim confines of another room like in the previous world there were the familiar green and brown colors and shapes of another lush forest, one that was even thicker and more verdant than the first, primeval and dark. Another forest. A thought came to mind at the sight, and Maxos brushed a hand through his beard as he thought before he shook it away and stepped through into another world, as before. The cool air carried the smell of freshly watered soil and the leaves of a nearby tree, a tall pine some fifty feet tall with brownish-red bark, glistened with droplets of rainwater as clear as glass, but even that towering tree was dwarfed by others of the same breed, looking as if they had reached a hundred feet in height. This land must be truly ancient for the trees to have grown so tall and so thick.

He looked around, for any sign of the prince...and instead saw that he was inside a great valley with ten peaks, a great turquoise blue lake in its midst and surrounded by rolling forests that stretched from halfway up the mountains to the very lakeshore, pines and firs and spruces all of them. Incredible.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" asked a familiar voice.

"Indeed it is," Maxos smiled as he turned to face Carik...

...only to see and know instantly that he wasn't the prince he was looking for. He was older, in his mid-twenties at most, grizzled with a thick golden beard and with an axe held over his left shoulder and a scoped hunting rifle strapped over his right, dressed in a red and black flannel shirt and tough blue jeans. Maxos blinked in silent surprise at the unexpected sight, and Carik laughed instantly in reply, stepping over a fallen tree.

"I know, I know, what would my wife say if she saw me dressed like this?" the prince smiled, "But in my own defence, these are the best clothes the locals have to offer...and they're pretty comfortable, too. How's Rivellon? I trust it hasn't burnt down while I've been away, has it?"

"I am sorry, my friend, but I do not believe I am the wizard of your world," he said with an apologetic voice.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," Carik nodded understandingly, though with a little sadness all the same. "I assume doing the same and looking for your world's version of myself?"

"That is correct," Maxos answered. "He is much like you, but only sixteen years -"

There was the sudden sound of snapping twigs and a deep growl from a few feet behind Carik...and creeping through the undergrowth towards the two was a wall of brown fur, a huge grizzly bear, with paws as big and round as footstools and claws like knives. Maxos readied himself to cast a spell, to put a shield around the bear till the two men had the chance to leave without any harm being done, but Carik simply looked over his shoulder to take a look at the bear before looking back towards the wizard.

"Oh, him?" Carik said, gesturing to Maxos and not the bear. "This is Maxos. You know, the wizard I've always been telling you about?"

He is...is he talking to the bear?
The bear uttered a curious growl, then plopped down on the ground next to Carik, who said. "Maxos, meet Ivan. He's a friend of mine."

Maxos looked at the bear for a moment, then looked towards Carik, and asked with a careful, soft and non-threatening voice, "My young friend... how long have you been here?"

"Oh, only a year and a few months," Carik answered.

"A year...?" Maxos echoed with silent unease, the dreaded realization slowly sinking in. "He has been here for a year, yet his own world's wizard still hasn't arrived for him... an infinite number of worlds and an infinite number of Cariks means that one could spend an infinite amount of time searching for their specific one... but surely the spell is more precise than that? Surely it won't send me to a world and then to its exact same copy, over and over?

He sighed. No matter. I will improve the spell if I must, but I will bring him home.

Maxos focused his attentions back on the woodsman version of the young man he was familiar with and asked a question, as much to take his mind off of the immense scale of his task as it was to better prepare himself for it. "Have you had any contact with the locals of this place in that time?"

"Where else would I have gotten these clothes?" Carik laughed. "You think I've gone mad, don't you?"

Before Maxos could reply, Carik turned to the bear. "Ivan, would you mind showing him that you can understand what I'm saying and that I'm not just babbling to myself here?"

The bear uttered a number of soft growls to Maxos.

"Did you catch that?" Carik asked the wizard, smiling.

"I must admit I'm more familiar with Rivellonian languages such as Elven and Dwarf, perhaps even a little Troll," Maxos answered. "But I have never even heard of one being able to talk to bears before."

Carik paused... then said, to the bear at his side, "Mind juggling for me? I know you don't like doing it, but it'll prove to him that I'm not mad if he sees you doing something I said."

I am beginning to wonder if that might be an exercise in futility... let us hope that the other princes haven't gone as mad as this one seems to -

With a sigh, the bear grabbed a handful of rocks from the forest floor and started to juggle, obviously uncomfortable having to do so, but after a few rotations to prove that the bear could understand what Carik was saying, he caught the rocks and tossed them as far into the forest as he could, one by one.

As a wizard, I am open to considering many things that most would consider impossible... but this seems a stretch. Perhaps he simply trained it, or perhaps the bear was simply trained into carrying out tricks before Carik first found it?

"The bear... understands you?" Maxos said with surprise. "How?"

"I wish I knew, but I just... figured it out one day, like how I learnt to switch into my dragon form," Carik answered with a genuinely puzzled shrug. "One day, I was walking through the woods..."
A few months before...

Carik whistled cheerfully as he sat outside his log cabin and inspected the head of his axe before raising it against the light, letting the sun run across its surface and show its contours before finally running the tip of his thumb across the blade's edge, feeling for any nicks or chips...and smiling as he found none. *It might not be enchanted steel, but it's still steel. It just needs a little care every now and then to keep its edge.* Still whistling, he raised the axe up onto his shoulder as he stood and brushed off his trousers before heading off towards the forest, the untamed wilderness that surrounded his home all the way to the horizon, broken only by mountain ranges and a newly founded town called Banff, a place that was as much a leisure resort as it was a place for foresters and trappers to bring in furs...and it had a train station. *It's tempting to go see the rest of this world, but if I stay here, it should be easier for Maxos to find me and get me back to Rivellon more quickly. Besides, things are nice here. Sure, it was hard to get started at first, but all I had to do was hunt a few game animals with my revolver and sell the pelts to the furriers.*

It had been hard to get started at first, when Carik had nothing more than the clothes on his back and the revolver he had arrived with and not even the most basic idea of where he was, but once he found the town things had become much easier. He had hunted down beavers and other such wild animals and sold the pelts to furriers before swapping his own gun for one in their calibres that had a steady supply of ammunition available - from there, it was a simple matter of getting more money, and though the shopkeepers were seemingly trying to keep the hunter's profit margins tight, to keep them in the business of hunting, Carik could aim well enough (or rather, cheat with magic to correct the course of his shots so they always hit the head, but no one in the town knew that) to only ever need one shot, saving on the cost of buying more bullets...and from there, it had been easy to get the tools he needed to build his own cabin rather than pay for bed and board, till at last he had no expenses other than for things he felt like buying for himself, little luxuries of canned fruit and bread and good clothes.

He smiled as he continued walking, looking around the treeline. The birds were singing, and the air carried the sweet scent of blooming wildflowers and the echo of flowing water from the creek and the sound of the pine branches waving in the gentle winds.

"Hello, comrade!" came a voice from not far off, thick and heavily accented.

"Hello, friend," Carik answered cheerfully and without looking.

"Is very bright and warm today, da?" it asked, getting closer. "Is good weather for walk."

"I know!" he answered. "You would think a place so far north would have more snow and rain, even in summer, but all there has been for the last few days is sun."

There was a laugh from a few feet behind him. "Can I eat you?"

"Well, it wouldn't be very polite of you," Carik laughed as he turned around to see the source of the voice...and then he paused as he saw an underweight brown bear a few feet away, his coat scratched and bloody in some places and thin others.

"No?" the bear asked sadly. "Or...a little?"
"You're a talking bear?" Carik said in surprise before pinching his left arm to see if he was dreaming. Have I gone insane? I think I have...?

"Carnival bear," came the quick answer. "I am Misha, do dance for food. Got food?"

Seven, he's a dancing bear. There aren't many of them on Rivellon because the Elves have been buying them and setting them free for years, but if he's a circus bear, then that means...they took him from his mother when he was little, so he never learned how to be a bear.

"You don't know how to hunt?" Carik asked.

"Hunt?" the bear paused, considering the word for a moment, clearly struggling to understand what he meant. "You mean...hunt...animal?"

Carik thought for a moment, then suggested, "Take a sniff, see if you can't smell anything delicious."

The bear sniffed. "You smell tasty."

"Not me," Carik sighed. "Look for something that isn't a person like me."

Misha sniffed the air again...then turned towards his left, towards the creek. "Is beaver...smells good...is many beaver!"

"Let me get my gun, and we'll hunt them together," Carik smiled.

"Da, comrade!" Misha said excitedly, rushing over to his side and following him back to the cabin along. "What is your name?"

"I'm called Carik," he said honestly.

"Is nice to meet you, Carik!"

This is going to be an experience...but if he's a friendly bear, we might as well work together...

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"And we've been together ever since," Carik said with a smile as the bear straightened himself in pride. "Misha doesn't know much about hunting or fighting, but he has a very powerful nose, so he can sniff out a beaver or a deer twenty miles away with ease, even if he can't make the kill for himself."

"When we get there," the prince continued, "I take the shot and get the pelt whilst Misha gets the meat."

"It seems you have a very productive arrangement together," Maxos said, looking at the bear again. The bear waved. "Can you speak to all bears?"

"I can't talk to all of them, only to a very small few," Carik said, pointing towards the north. "There is another bear over there called Ivan. We have a little trouble understanding each other, but we can get the point across, and to the southeast is Theodore. He's an American grizzly bear, and I can understand him normally, but for the rest I need Misha to act as an interpreter."
"Perhaps it is because Misha and the others are more familiar with people?"

"That's what I think," Carik agreed, stretching. "Theodore seems to get seen by hunters and the others a lot, but he just wanders around and doesn't pick any fights and they think its good luck to see him, so they leave him alone. Ivan...I don't even know how Ivan knows how to talk."

"I think he might have crossed over from the Bering Sea, but I don't know for sure," Carik said as Maxos saw something, a red gemstone on a golden chain, glean through the opening of the top two buttons of his shirt. "Or maybe he wandered down from Alaska. The Russian Empire owns it and thought about selling to the Americans a few months ago, but the Tsar changed his mind and...oh, this?"

Maxos stepped over as the dragon prince reached into his shirt and pulled out a necklace, an incredibly fine and golden chain that completely lacked even a single mark of any tool usage whatsoever, as if it had simply formed from nothing, and dangling from it was a single red ruby shaped like a dragon's eye, a faint scarlet light shining out from within, pulsing like a heartbeat...and yet, for a reason Maxos couldn't place, he felt no magic coming from it, not even the background magics that might sometimes interact with children to create new wizards or the residual energies of past battles. Impossible. He felt...nothing coming from it, or near as much to instantly know that something was masking its power, something powerful. This must be some kind of magical amulet...but what does it do?

"May I?" Maxos asked, putting his hand near it, but careful to avoid touching.

"If it helps you get your Carik back, gladly," the prince answered.

Maxos took the small pulsating gemstone in his hand, examining it more closely. The light shone at regular intervals, a dim glow a second and a half apart so dark it would be difficult to notice at more than an inch away, but even despite the faint shine it had a strange quality about it, something that made it seemingly easy to overlook. In his hand, it felt as though it was nothing more than a simple gemstone, yet he couldn't help but feel as though there was something...off about it all the same, as if the gemstone itself was trying to be inconspicuous.

"It was with me when I first woke up here," Carik explained as Maxos examined the gemstone. "I don't know why, but..."

"But what?" Maxos asked, the bear looking to Carik with concern.

"It needs to stay by me. I don't know why. When it's away from me, it feels like...an itch, almost," the prince explained. "A burning itch. But the moment I put it on, it just...vanishes and I start to feel fine again."

Maxos brushed a hand through his beard...and an theory began to form as he considered what he knew. This gemstone seems to be doing two things, then; it is trying to hide its own presence, and it is trying to make sure it stays by the prince. He paused, thinking...did the other prince, the one in Ferelden, have a chain and a gemstone, too? Did the emperor on his ship have one?

He couldn't remember...and the realization sent his hands fumbling through his robe in search of his notebook. No, it is...it is trying to make me forget!

"Maxos?" the bearded Carik said with obvious concern and fear. "Is everything alright?"
Without saying anything in reply, with all his concentration focused on one thing and one thing alone, Maxos put his finger to the paper, and magically drew a single word, the only word he could think of, protecting it with a veil of his own energy.

Then there was a flash.

He blinked.

Then he looked around to see himself inside his office at the palace, the portal closing by itself now that he had been to yet another world and back, and he laughed at the memory of the woodsman prince and his talking bear. *I'm not entirely sure he is as sane as he claims to be, but he is certainly doing well enough on his own over there...and I do wonder what the Elves might say if they found out their prince could talk to animals?*

He stepped forward to set the stones up for another portal...only to find his notepad in his hand. *How odd. I cannot recall taking it out of its pocket...perhaps I took a note of some kind?*

Confused, he curiously looked at the page his left hand had held the book open on.

On the page was a single word, burnt into the paper in his own writing.

*Gemstone.*

Chapter End Notes

*Oh, is the story starting to move now! :D Again, I would like to apologize for how long this part took to write, but it was all because of how many tries it took me to get this part right; I must have overhauled it nearly a dozen times before I finally looked at it and thought it was good enough to post, but now, I'm finally happy enough to say it is one of mine :)*

Anyway, onto the summary, and it's going to be a long one because there is a lot of stuff to cover! I'll post this part without the summary for the time being, and edit it in as its done :)

In this part, Carik and the others finally arrive at Harrenhal, but on the way he learns about quite a few important things in the history of the Seven Kingdoms, and none more so than that of Aegon's Conquest. Before Aegon conquered the Seven Kingdoms and unified them into a single realm, they were frequently at war with one another, a place where the strong kingdoms conquered the weaker ones, constantly vying against one another for power - the constant changing hands of the Riverlands, for example, from being an independent realm to being a vassal of the Storm Kings to being conquered by the Hoares. Aegon's Conquest put an end to all of that, and is something Carik is happy to see, because it's just like what his own father did on Rivellon - by conquering all the regions of Westeros, Aegon brought peace to the the entire continent, and even if war might still break out every once in awhile, it is far less common than it used to be, and a step towards the planet being united into a single empire just like the one on Rivellon.

And he also finds about about some of the wonders of the known world! The Wall,
Harrenhal, Casterly Rock, all of them are massive fortresses that have no equal even on our own world...and for someone like Carik, who wants to see all the interesting things that Westeros has to offer, they're something he is dying to get a chance to see, even the ones across the Narrow Sea such as the Black Walls of Volantis and the Titan of Braavos...though he's also smart enough to understand that having Rhaegar go with him is best if he wants to tour the Seven Kingdoms :p

And when he sees Harrenhal...boy oh boy, is he stunned by the size of the castle. Harrenhal is the biggest castle ever raised in Westeros, and Westeros is a land full of massive castles, and that means that Harrenhal is very big indeed...so big that Carik couldn't help but want to tour it for himself in human form, so, with the help of a certain Dornish princess, he switched into his human form and snuck inside the castle inside the royal carriage itself...and after a close call with Prince Lewyn Martell fetching the king and a guardsman who saw him exit the carriage, he escaped homefree into the castle, completely undetected.

Eager to start his tour of the castle, he set off towards the marketplace...and ran into someone he had nowhere near enough experience to deal with, and I probably don't need to say more than that he has very little experience with girls. Maxos tried to keep him away from them for reasons mentioned in other parts - to keep him from falling in love with them (which would make a royal marriage for him harder) and to avoid the risk of him accidentally knocked them up or anything of the sort, so he sent anyone he started getting too close to away to the capital...but that also means he has very little experience with charming the ladies, as he quickly demonstrated to Alyssa Whent :p

Fortunately for him, however, the beautiful Ashara Dayne - on the run from her own suitors - saw the disaster scene unfolding before her eyes...and burst into laughter before coming to his aid. I probably don't need to mention much about her personality, since I posted about her before in the Arthur Dayne section, but one thing to remember is that, though she is a highborn lady, she's sort of the same and opposite of Sansa - you won't see her running around with swords the way Arya or Lyanna might, but she doesn't really believe in the fairytale, romantic interpretation of the world that Sansa might but rather a realistic expectation of the way the world actually works, and can best be thought of as cross between Arianne and Margaery Tyrell. She helps him to find his bearings in the romantic world of Westeros, before leaving him at the marketplace, where he prices up some new clothes after a brief encounter with Lysa Tully (who is still completely sane at this point in time, if shy. She could be thought of as an opposite of Ashara Dayne) and from there, sets off on a quest to make some money.

And as usual, the summary is so big the rest of it is in the comments below!
Maxos brushed a hand through his beard and leaned on his staff as he looked at the sole word on the page, trying to remember the reason why he had written it at all. Gemstone...? He started thinking backwards, trying to retrace his steps and actions to the time when he had written the note a few minutes before; he remembered talking to the woodsman Carik with his bear besides him, who told him the story of how they had first met and how he had first learned to speak to animals, and how that had made it easy for him to survive on his own...but even though the thought gnawed at him, Maxos couldn't remember anything to do with any gemstones, or any note taking at all. How strange.

Perhaps I simply wrote this down before for one of my past experiments, and somehow the portal caused the book to appear in my hand?

He glanced at the page, examining the text itself...only to see that it was freshly burnt into the page, and had been written no more than a few moments before. No, this was certainly written only just now, but why can I not remember doing so? Aurora never mentioned the spell causing memory loss, and this has never happened before on any of the other times I visited other worlds.

He sighed, setting the crystals up for yet another portal. But...perhaps I could go back to the world I just came from...if Carik was there to see me take the note, then perhaps he would know what happened?

Tapping the gemstones in order again whilst thinking of the lumberjack prince, he opened the portal, and in but a few seconds he once more saw the thick lush forest stretching out before him on the other side...but this time, he couldn't see Carik nor his bear. He must have moved on since I returned to Rivellon...I could return to that world to search for him and hope he has answers... however if, perhaps, the two mysteries are related, then continuing my search for Carik is perhaps the best way to solve them both together.

He sighed again, and with a shake of his head he tapped his staff against the center crystal, closing the rift before taking one last, inquisitive look at this notebook before closing it and placing it inside of his closest pocket, safe and sound...and ready to be drawn again in a hurry, should he need to take another note. Now, let us see where we go next. He thought of Carik as he tipped his staff around and tapped it against each of the crystals in turn, as he had done each and every time before, and a new portal opened, a swirling multitude of grassy greens and sky blues and bright yellows and
oranges that melted away into an image of crystal clarity.

On the other side of the portal was a house whose path led directly to the portal, a mansion with two floors and a tiled roof, surrounded by healthy green grass and flowerbeds of hundreds of blooming daffodils and tulips, and on its door was a golden doorknocker in the shape of a dragon, wings spread to take flight. It seems this Carik is doing very well for himself, even if he isn't on Rivellon...but there is only one way to find out if he is the one I am looking for.

He looked through the portal to see if Carik was outside or in any of the windows, then walked through the portal...

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Earth #1937

...and emerged onto the path, stood before the mansion and beneath the bright and shining afternoon sun, with not a single cloud in the sky to block its potent heat. The Lizards would like it here... Using his free hand to shield his eyes so that he might better see his surroundings, he saw some tall and dry hills watching over the city below, and on its slopes he saw great white letters that spelled out a word, the name of the place he had arrived at. Hollywood? A rather strange name for a place that seems to have only palm trees. He shook his head in amusement, then continued on the path towards the door whilst looking to the driveway to see, parked beneath an archway of bright brick, was the sleakest autocar that Maxos had ever seen, with black and red paint, black and red rims and a black and red leather interior on the seats. Very impressive. I wonder how fast it is?

Then he passed beneath the overhang that shielded the door and the entryway from the worst of the sun's heat, taking the dragon claws that doubled as the handgrip before knocking twice. It shouldn't take too long for him to open the door.

Maxos waited patiently...and after a few moments, the door opened, and there stood Carik, albeit one who was nearly as old as the one who had been in the forest, looking at him in surprise before laughing and throwing an arm around his shoulder.

"Seven! It really is you!" Carik grinned widely, "Come in, come in!"

Maxos smiled and followed him into the cool interior of the mansion, the temperature much more to his liking and the air more comfortable to breath than it was on the sunbaked path, but even still it was much hotter than Orcha, even in summertime, but the heat didn't seem to bother the dragon prince in the slightest. He is a dragon, after all. Warmth is to him what a soft pillow is to a dog. Inside the walls the building was as well constructed and decorated as it was outside - three archways as white as marble separated the hall from the other rooms whilst waist height columns stood in the corners, topped with lamps and plant pots and a few tasteful sculptures stood at the base of the staircase. Through the opening to his left he saw a living room with two large white couches...and something that looked vaguely similar to a device that he had seen the Architect working on one time, a sort of display for moving images, but this was far bigger, some fifty inches across and a mere eight inches thick. The dimensions of the Architect's version were the other way around...

"Oh, that?" Carik asked as he noticed what Maxos was looking at. "That's my rear projection television, but most people here simply call it a TV. Fifty five inches across, and every channel that they broadcast in this area."
"Impressive," Maxos said with an approving nod.

"I swear, these people are actually more developed than we are, Maxos," Carik said with a smile as he walked over and sat down on the sofa. "Computers, refrigerators, mobile phones...they are nearly as different from us as we are from the people of Rivellon from the time before the Empire. I'll miss a few of the things they have here, some of their little luxuries, but I suppose I could have them brought through to Rivellon."

"Indeed you could, but before we continue, may I ask you a question?" Maxos asked with a reassuring and friendly smile, sitting down opposite the older Carik. "How old are you now, and how old were you when you first arrived in this world?"

"Making sure I'm the one you are looking for?" Carik asked precisely before answering. "I'm twenty two, and got here eight months ago about two months before my birthday."

"Then I am afraid I have bad news, my young friend," Maxos sighed. "I am looking for a Carik who arrived in another world at sixteen years old. I do not believe we are from the same Rivellon as one another."

"Oh," Carik sighed. "That's...unfortunate." As all the other Cariks so far had done, his spirits rose again after the moment's disappointment, and he smiled once more. "Still, it is nice to have a familiar face around here. I miss Rivellon, but I'm doing pretty well for myself here, and have been doing so right from the start."

Maxos returned the smile, and with a glance at a number of golden trophies mounted on a display case, he asked, "What is it that you do?"

"I'm an actor, for the most part, and one of the most famous celebrities here in Hollywood," Carik smiled. "See, these people don't have magic, so anyone that can actually do real magic is completely unique, and that's made things pretty easy...but I had a lot of luck to help me get my start."

"Oh?" Maxos asked, intrigued. "How so?"

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**Eight months before...**

The director sighed as he leaned back into his office chair, reading the latest report about what was quickly becoming known as the most cursed project in all of Hollywood: Dragonheart. It was originally started some four years before in 1994 with the expectation of being released two years later, but the entire project had been plagued with unending problems from the very moment of its inception - the first producer, who had reviewed the premise behind the film had accepted it, but it then languished for months on end as they tried and failed over and over to find a scriptwriter. Then, once the script had finally been finished, the original producer examined the material and trashed it for being too different from the original premise and went on to find another writer, who managed to find another writer and get a high quality script out of them and went to a director who couldn't find a feel for the film before finding one who did and starting production, but the mounting costs of the film's visual effects killed the studio barely half an hour into a film slated for over a hundred minutes of runtime...after which the studio he was part of, Paramount Pictures, picked over the remains to find anything that could be worth buying, any diamonds in the rough that had yet to be finished, and bought a dozen scripts in total.
Then Dragonheart got a new lease on life and was ready to go into production again, but the first director given the task was killed in a freak accident involving a scissor lift whilst finishing up his previous project, by which time the main cast of the first version of the film had gone onto other projects meaning all the film already shot could no longer be used and had to be discarded. After so many failures with the film, the management had started to realize that there was a good chance that the movie might never see the light of day, and were growing increasingly frustrated by the lack of results...and had made it very clear that if the film did not come out by the turn of the millennium, his career would likely go down with it. *They should have tossed this damned film out, not given it to me.*

The door opened as the art director stepped in, and he sighed before throwing the report onto his table.

"...something wrong?" the art director asked, glancing at the papers as the director reached into his desk drawer and took out a bottle of scotch and a glass.

"Sean Connery's dropped out," the director said quietly as he poured himself a drink. "Probably got fed up with the lack of progress."

"Then that means -"

The director stood, raising his glass. "Here's one for Draco. May he rest in peace."

He downed the shot in one, then tossed the glass and the bottle both straight into the bin before slumping back into his seat. "This entire film is a trainwreck, from start to finish."

"Well..." the art director said nervously. "The lot manager says the effects team finally brought the finished model around in the middle of the night or something. They told me it fills the whole storage shed, and looks so realistic you'd think it was an actual dragon."

"Model?" the director asked in confusion. "What model? Every scene in this fucking film with the dragon in it is CGI. Maybe the head and one of the claws aren't, but that's about it."

The art director looked back at him in surprise. "But they've got a whole dragon down there. Head, wings, body...you name it, they've got it."

The director rose from his seat. "The hell do you mean they've got a whole dragon?"

"I'm not kidding," the art director said seriously, standing up straight. "They've got a whole dragon, as big as a private jet."

The director sighed again. "We never paid for a full dragon."

"Doesn't matter, we got a full dragon."

An assistant peeked in through the door, then entered. "Uhm...sirs? The, uh, Jim Henson Creature Shop phoned...they're having trouble getting the paint to stick...so it'll take them a little while longer to finish the model..."

The art director and the film director looked at each other in confusion before the film director sighed once more.
"Look, I'm going down to the storage lot to find out what the hell's happening," he said at last. "Come with me. If there's been some sort of mixup, I want to know who's ordered a massive dragon while Jim Henson's working on ours and blew off god knows how much of our budget."

"Alright," the art director answered trailing behind as the director stepped through the door and out onto the hallway before exiting out onto the studio lot in the bright sun. "But don't blame me if you see something you don't want to see."

*I swear, I will have someone's head if they've ordered a full sized dragon without my permission...I mean, what the hell are we supposed to do with a full sized dragon? It's not like we can just...make it take off and fly!*

He sighed again, under his breath this time, and crossed the grounds to the massive, hanger-esque building that would normally be used as the set for most smaller projects, but because of the expensive necessity for Dragonheart to be filmed on location - typically in Slovakia on the other side of the Atlantic - they had instead managed to cut a little expenditure on storage by making use of an empty studio lot that had sat empty since *the Hunt for Red October* finished production years before as a dump for all the collected bits and pieces that had been amassed for the film over the years; old costumes that no longer fitted the new actors but could be used as inspiration, heaps of planning documents and three different scripts that were all being cannibalized to create a single film, and various bits and pieces of sets alongside an old proof of concept dragon cobbled together from the scraps of an even older, canceled Godzilla costume from a film of the same name. *It's our last resort if this film screws up again. Just have someone put on the costume and act out the motions, then use some camera tricks to make them look bigger then they really are. It'll look cheap, but it'll be cheap, too.*

But, to his surprise...there was a crowd gathered outside the storage lot, the assistants and production staff hurriedly talking amongst themselves with fear and awe as he approached the slightly open door.

"Boss, you might not want to go in there," warned the lot manager. "The dragon in there...I think it's real."

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The director sighed again, then walked past him. Then he blinked.

Inside the studio lot and stretching almost entirely from the left wall to the right was a dragon of black and red, curled up and sleeping as its bladed tail slowly waved back and forth over the bare concrete floor. In the little lighting of the dim studio lamps, he could make out a wall of armor plating on the dragon's front and long red streaks running down it sides, the same shade of crimson as the patches that decorated the great wings that hugged againsts its bulky, muscular body.

Then, to his horror, its eyes began to flutter open, revealing orbs of bright gold...and the dragon rose up off the ground, stretching out with a loud yawn before turning its attention to the gathered film crew.

"Huh...?" the dragon yawned loudly as it stretched out "This isn't Rivellon...Maxos?" the dragon asked with a deep and powerful voice as it looked around before finally turning its attentions to the director. "Who are you, and where am I?"

"Holy crap, you can talk?" the director gasped before regaining his composure. "This...this is Hollywood."
"Holly...wood?" The dragon asked, peeking out the door to see the hot hills that watched over all of Los Angeles. "I've never heard of Hollywood before...and I don't see a forest out there, either. Or any holly, for that matter. Do you know where Orcha is?"

"Orcha? No, I've never heard of it," the director replied honestly and anxiously as the dragon turned to face him, so big that it could eat him whole. "As for me, well, I...uh, am a director. We make movies -"

"Movies?" the dragon asked before laughing. "Oh, you must mean motion pictures!"

"Yes. This is a film studio..."

"Great!" the dragon smiled widely, baring his sword-like teeth. "I was always interested in the movie industry. It's very, very new on Rivellon. Most of our productions are...well, a dozen pictures with piano music in the background and a narrator explaining what's happening."

A...a dragon with an interest in the movie industry?

Then...the director smiled. "You like movies? How would you like to be in one?"

The dragon looked back...and in his eyes the director saw that very same thing there was in the eyes of countless young actors and actresses, all working for their chance to make it big. It was something he knew well, and something he knew how to use.

"I can make you a star. All I need is you to take part in this film I'm working on - we've been having a few...problems. Nothing bad, but issues that have been stopping us from going forward. But you...you fix almost everything."

"What about food?"

"I'll have it delivered here by the truckload," the director answered. *It's cheaper to get a million hamburgers than it is to get the effects we need anyway...* "In return...you act in my movie. You'll get paid a fair wage, and you can stay here in the meantime. So what do you say? Are you in?"

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"So you took on the role of a dragon in a film...about dragons?" Maxos laughed. "I must admit, I was not expecting you to have become an actor when I first arrived here."

"Neither did I," Carik answered with a smile. "It took awhile to get things going again for the film crew, but once they did, it was easy to get things finished. They didn't have to wait for the visual effects to be finished - they could just go straight to post-production once the filming was done, and that's exactly what happened.

"We made four times the film's production budget and had the largest opening night ever," Carik said proudly. "People poured into the cinemas just to see a real live dragon on the screen, and everyone involved in the film made an absolute fortune. Since then, I've been swinging from one success to the next. I even got to put a claw print outside this one theatre in the cement. I'm not entirely sure of the symbolism behind it, but I know "

"Come on, I'll show you," he said with another smile as he took a small, black object covered in
buttons from the armrest, then pointed it at the screen and pressed on of the buttons...and instantly, the screen flickered to life, creating a brilliant and clear display that even had sound. "I could probably find one of my films being ran on one of these channels, if you want to see it?"

"One of them?" Maxos asked. "You have been in multiple productions already?"

"It's fun to do," Carik answered. "When you've got real magical powers and the ability to become a dragon at will, it's pretty easy to get a job in this town. My second film was probably the one I've had the most fun in. It was a disaster movie, and I was the monster. They built a miniature city big enough for me to walk around in, then filmed me smashing it up and pieced the footage together with shots of normal human actors in the real streets."

"It didn't do as well as my first film," Carik admitted "But it was definitely the most fun to make, and it didn't take all that long to do, either."

Maxos nodded understandingly. "The only thing that matters is that you are enjoying your work."

"I think, when my Maxos arrives, I'm going to collect as much of my films and the like to take back to Rivellon," Carik said with another smile. "The longer he takes, the more films I get to make and the more I get to take back to Rivellon with me."

_A very healthy way for him to view his current situation. I hope that the other Cariks manage to find some enjoyment in whatever worlds they have gone to whilst they await for their world's version of myself to arrive._

"I wish I could stay longer, my young friend," Maxos said as he rose from his seat, "But I must return to my search, in case something bad happens to my world's Carik whilst he is missing."

Carik nodded sadly as he stood, turning off the television with the push of a button. "I was hoping you would stay for longer, but alright. It was nice seeing you again, Maxos."

"And it was nice seeing you, too," he answered with a soft and reassuring voice, seeing the man who was so familiar to the young prince he had raised as a son smile once more.

"Thanks," Carik said with a grateful voice as he led him through the house and to the front door.

Carik answered without a word, with only a single grateful nod, as he led him through the house and to the front door. The walk back to the portal from the door felt twice as long as it had been the first time.

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**Harrenhal**

Rhaegar sighed as he turned over to the next page and reached for his wine cup, glancing at the texts for but a moment before he took a small sip and set the goblet down again in the far corner of the desk, safely away from the towering pile of old and dusty tomes that dominated its other half and the small and bright bronze oil lamp that illuminated the often faint writing clearly enough for him to read...an advantage that he sorely needed, as the book itself, a hefty thing that was supposed to describe in detail the Valyrian understanding of the bodily traits of the dragons native to the Land of the Long Summer, was translated directly into the common tongue from even older scrolls of the
Valyrian Freehold, almost certainly now lost...with all the flaws that might entail. The maester who
had handled the task of translation had a clear grasp of the verbal Valyrian tongue, as they had
managed to account for the way the language had "gendered" words and its dependence upon the
tone of one's voice, they had even clearly known of a large number of Valyrian words and how best
to convert them to common Westerosi terms...but where the translation was weak was in how those
individual words and the sentences they were apart of were assembled into the greater whole, just as
how perfectly cut blocks of stone could be used to build a haphazard wall.

*Everywhere I look there are errors. High Valyrian is a fluid and flowing language when spoken and
when written, but all I see here is it flows from one sentence into the next without bothering to
account for the change. Fact and fiction is simply...merged together, with nothing to separate the
two, and it is nigh impossible to tell the two apart.*

He sighed again. He had been taught how to speak in High Valyrian since nearly before he could
walk, just as every other Targaryen had been since their arrival on Dragonstone long before before
the days of the Aegon's Conquest, and just like all the Targaryens who came before him, that
extended to a well practiced understanding of the old Valyrian alphabet and its written word. *If only I
had the original scrolls instead...I would be able to read them for myself and I wouldn't need to
bother with these damned, Seven-forsaken books.*

He turned his attentions to the book once again. *As confusing as they might be, they're still my best
chance of finding an answer...now, let's see...* Rhaegar, who had read dozens of books in his lifetime,
had grown skilled at going through them at a quicker pace than most, something that not even the
poor structure of the pages in front of him could stop - apparently, not only did the ancient Valyrians
believe that dragons could switch between genders at will, but that every single kind of dragon could
be put into one of four different types, each of which had a different place in the "hierarchy" of .

There were the great females who not only grew the fastest, but to the vastest extent by the end of
their natural lifespan, which itself was the longest of any of the different kinds of dragon, but
alongside their greater size and strength was a much more unpredictable temper - they would be calm
and predictable around the dragons that were clearly weaker than them or showing submission, and
to caring riders who they were familiar with they could even be friendly and playful, but a meeting
between two dragons of equal strength would rouse a fierce temper that would only subside when
one proved its dominance over the other, typically by showing that it was truly the greater one...and
the way they did that was by showing off their might through aggressive challenges of claw, fire and
tooth, all of which made them highly desired as battlemounts by the dragonlords of the old Freehold.

However, once a victor in the display had emerged - or if the display had turned to outright combat
and the one had defeated the other - then they would return to being their calm selves and be at worst
dismissive to the other dragon who move down the hierarchy of dragonkind that had the strongest
and most powerful at the top and the weakest at the bottom. *Like wolves...that makes sense, many of
my other books about the victories of the Freehold on the battlefield say how they used their dragons
as if they were packs. The weaker and younger dragons always followed those that were stronger
and older than them, and destroyed whatever it was that their elders hadn't.*

Then came the great males, who although being more or less physically identical to the great females,
had a radically different temperament; whereas their sisters were typically calm and predictable most
of the time and became furious and raging only when their dominance was being questioned, the
males were opposite. They were *always* aggressive and challenging one another, and only ever
became calm in one of two situations - when they had recently bred, or when they were in a group of
only males or were the only male amongst a whole group of females. The cause was simple - as the
old Valyrians had observed, the great females much preferred the strongest and most dominant of the
great males, and so the great males would fight amongst themselves constantly whenever a female was near so that she could see who was the strongest of them all. The Cannibal was surely a dragon like this, and Balerion too, perhaps, though would that make Vhagar a great female?

He read on...and found a line that quickly caught his interest. *Though the genders of dragons are as changeable as flame, all dragons have a preference for the sex of their birth, and as such prefer to avoid changing as much as possible - they will only do so in the complete absence of the other gender's presence, and it is always the lowest and weakest dragon that will do so; an exception, however, is when the only members of the one gender are weak, maimed or sickly, in which case a dragon of the opposite gender more powerful than all of them will be the one to do so instead and will only stay as such till a healthy and strong member of the new gender arrives.*

Rhaegar considered it for a moment, and smiled. *It might not be useful in helping me understand Carik, but it is interesting nevertheless.* He continued on, and...found a rather graphic description of the process by which the two genders converted themselves to the opposite, and skipped over it and another description of their "encounters" with one another. *Let's see...ah, lesser dragons! This seems like it could be more useful than...that.*

He had another sip of his wine, then continued his reading: the other two types of dragon were far more numerous and the lesser versions of their greater brethren, and grew more slowly and tended to not live as long, tending towards agility and speed instead of pure strength and endurance, like wolves compared to direwolves, but they made up for this weakness with added cunning and intelligence, knowing that they couldn't defeat their greater siblings and their armor or withstand the intensity of their flame and that they should avoid battle if at all possible...or if forced to fight them, to dance around their larger opponents through quicker movements and aiming their own attacks against their opponents weakest spot, the wings. Some particularly daring females would even sneak into the nests of a greater female whilst she is busy and lay her own eggs amongst the clutch already present, knowing that no harm would befall them due to the great female's inability to tell them from her own, but that was rare, and even rarer were the times when a lesser female would be clever enough to realize that a greater female would not consider her a threat due to her small stature, and use that knowledge to get into the great dragon's good graces and enjoy their protection, in return for standing guard over their nests and protecting their eggs and hatchlings from scavengers.

But nothing was more surprising, even to one already familiar with many pieces of dragon lore such as Rhaegar, than how they would deliberately act submissive and friendly when around a Valyrian dragonlord, knowing that those were the traits that a dragonrider would like in their mount. *They are clever enough to know that being the war mount of even a poor dragonlord means that they will always have a ready source of food and shelter for them and their young, without needing to serve another dragon to get it.*

Finally, there were the lesser males, who were physically indistinguishable from the dragonesses who who shared their stature, but had the same personality as the large males...but only when other males were around and only when there was a female around. Otherwise, they were shy and reluctant to meet with not only their own kind, but humans, too, preferring to feed on smaller, less threatening game, trying to avoid the risks of battle as much as possible due to their knowledge that they were no match for a great dragon. *The Grey Ghost was one of these, without doubt, and it is no wonder he was no match for the greater Sunfyre.*

He let himself smile. Though he had heard of some of it before, it was a true pleasure to be able to see it in written form, for what he had learnt before to be confirmed, to be *right* and to learn even more in the process. It was one of the things he enjoyed most in life, even when he was young, and his love of learning had never once left him, not even after he learnt that he would need to be as
much a warrior as a scholar if he was to...deal with the matters ahead. But now is not the time for that. I can't let myself get distracted, not now, and...it must be in this book somewhere...

He leaned in, bringing the lamp close so that the text was clearer to understand. There were notes about the feeding habits of dragons, what their preferred prey was and what a change in their diet might mean for their health, and notes about their sleeping patterns and how best to keep their hatchlings comfortable and safe should they hatch before or during a harsh winter, so he turned the page over and skipped across the lines and pages till, at last, he found what it was that he was looking for.

How the Valyrians made their dragons loyal.

When they had first came to Harrenhal, he had been more interested in learning if the ancient Valyrians had any experience with dragons or other such creatures that could change from one form to another as easily as he might change clothes, or dragons that had true claws rather than the small ones upon their wings, but when Carik had disappeared as they had passed beneath the gatehouse, it made him realize that Carik did not seem to be bound to the Targaryens the way that the old dragons were, who were always known to form a strong and unbreakable bond with their riders that meant they were forever loyal to them and them alone, never questioning their will...and most importantly of all, never seeking to do them harm. Mayhaps it is because he is only half a dragon...but if there is anything in here that could tell me how to keep him loyal and committed to me, then I need to find it, no matter how long it might take. Dragons are the symbol of my family, and they were what held the realm together before the Dance, but if a dragon was to question my father now, in front of all the lords of Westeros, the rest of the realm would do the same. It would be the death of us all.

Looking down at the pages carefully and placing a finger beneath the words so that he might focus all his attentions on one word at a time, he read as slowly as he did carefully. The first part was something he knew already, and the technique that his own ancestors used all the way up to the death of the last dragon; they imprinted on the creature whilst it was still a hatchling, giving the dragon plenty of time to become familiar to their rider's scent and voice, but more importantly, it meant that the dragon whelp would see the human at a time when the man or woman was much larger and stronger than themselves, which would cause them to become so accustomed to the idea of being the inferior one that they would never grow out of it, always thinking of their rider as being too strong for them be able to defeat. Combined with the rider giving their hatchling fair treatment and a regular supply of food, enough that the young dragon would grow content with what their rider's dominance was bringing them, and the dragon would carry into adulthood a loyalty much like that a son might have for their mother or father. But that helps me little. Carik is too old for that to have any effect, and I doubt it is possible for any of us to imprint on him anyway.

Next there was a section about putting the egg in the cradle of a newborn baby or a toddler, another thing his forebears had done, which resulted in an incredibly strong bond that even the Valyrians had trouble explaining the cause behind other than assuming it had something to do with the dragon perhaps assuming that the child was a sibling and a parent, but apparently that was a theory that was not widespread amongst the dragonlords of the Freehold, who had simply not the first idea what caused it, leading most to simply assume that magic did it. Carik definitely isn't a hatchling, though, so this doesn't help me either...but...hmmm. He skipped over the sections that seemed to deal with young dragons that had either still been in the egg when they had been found or for hatchlings, and did nothing more but glance at the sections that dealt with how dragons of a rider who died of old age might bound themselves to one of their children before carrying onto a small section that described how to tame dragons that had grown up in the wild, either with a flight or without one. This should be more accurate.
The first thing to do in that situation, the Valyrians had found, is to identify what kind of dragon one was looking at, something that could only be determined by their behavior because of the simple fact that male and female dragons were physically identical to one another on the outside, and the only real differences between the great and lesser variants were how fast they grew. *Well, his human form makes that easier at least.* He read on...and the page before him was even more a confusing mixture of fact and fantasy than before, a story about how the ancient Valyrians, in a time long before the dawn of the Freehold, found the first dragons near the Fourteen Flames, the great ring of volcanoes that stood at the heart of the Land of the Long Summer, and tamed them through through the use of a secret sorcery that allowed one to speak the secret tongue of dragonkind, which they used to speak directly to the dragons themselves and get them to join their side. *...that can't be true. Dragons cannot speak, or at least they didn't till Carik arrived. Another myth.* He sighed in annoyance, then moved on...and found a few comments about other wild groups of dragons that had wandered the Land of Always Summer, and this time, the writing seemed to be fact.

*In the case of the wandering dragon, it is never the lesser kind that travels alone due to their tendency to seek out a powerful dragoness for them to serve, but always the greater kind; the dragoness travels alone if she has been humiliated and driven away from her former nesting ground by another, more powerful dragoness, but they were loath to travel far from sources of great heat, such as volcanoes or hot springs. Great males, however, are far more willing to travel great distances in the search of a mate, and are as such the ones that are more often found outside of the Free Cities and the Land of the Long Summer.*

He paused to think. Though he had no idea what dragons were like where Carik came from, he seemed to be most like a great -

Then there was a knock on his door, and he sighed.

"Come in," he said loudly. "It isn't locked."

The door opened...and in stepped none other than the half-dragon himself, and to Rhaegar's surprise, he was dressed in the very same colors that Rhaegar himself was wearing, though arranged in a different pattern. For a moment, Rhaegar could do nothing but stare at him, stunned into silence by the change in his appearance, and all thought that Carik might not have been loyal to the Targaryen family vanished. *Gods...he must look exactly the same as I do, now..."

"Like my new clothes?" Carik asked with a smile as he noticed where Rhaegar was looking, closing the door behind him. "I got them from the market."

"You're wearing the same colors that I am," Rhaegar answered before asking. "Why?"

"They're the colors of my dragon form," Carik said. "The red is the same color as the patches on my wings and the streak down my sides, and the black is nearly the same as the color of my scales, so it seemed a perfect choice."

*That's fair, but I wonder if...I suppose it could be a sign that he is a friend of my family after all..."

"How did you get the money for them, anyway?"

"I got the money by doing a few tricks as part of a show," Carik said with a smile. "The real wizard was asleep, so I borrowed his costume and went out onto the stage and started using my magic to entertain people. I managed to get enough gold to pay for these clothes, and a little extra left over."
"Is that the entire reason you disappeared when we entered the castle?" Rhaegar asked with a growing amusement. "To get new clothes?"

"More or less," Carik said as he walked over. "I just wanted to make sure that I could properly fit in with everyone around, without having to worry about them just...staring at me in surprise or anything like that. It's tiring."

Is...no, it can't be that simple...can it?

Then Rhaegar sighed, resting his head in his right hand as he rubbed at his temples. "Is that the only reason why?"

"Pretty much," Carik shrugged. "I just wanted to be able to blend in with everyone else."

Seven have mercy, it really is that simple. He's half human and half dragon, yes, but that means he has the nature of both. That means the only thing I need to understand now is where the dragon ends and the human begins.

"What are you reading, anyway?" Carik asked, curious.

"Oh, these?" Rhaegar said as he looked back at him. "They're the best tomes about dragons I could find here, though most of them seem to be more about dragon legends than dragon facts," he flipped through the pages to earlier in the book, then pointed to a line. "It says here that drinking the blood of a dragon can heal all wounds, whilst this line below mentions a giant blue dragon who holds the sun between his teeth or something like that."

"Gods," Carik laughed. "I hope all your books aren't like that."

"They aren't, fortunately," Rhaegar said as he went back to the page he was on before the half-dragon had entered the room. "This one is a translation of half a dozen Valyrian scrolls put together, and a poor translation at that."

"Still, it's the best they have here, so I have no choice but to read them and hope they have what I am looking for." Rhaegar sighed again. "Once the tournament is over, I will be going back to Dragonstone to check its libraries. With any luck, the original scrolls will be there, and they should be much easier to understand than these."

Carik smiled once again, but there was something different this time, something that had been in every smile since he had entered the room, even. He smiles a lot, even in his dragon's body, but now...he hasn't stopped smiling since he entered the room, and this smile is even happier than his usual...what could possibly make him so utterly delighted?

"Has something happened?" Rhaegar asked, intrigued.

"Oh, nothing," Carik said, still smiling.

Perhaps...perhaps this is what I have been looking for all along? If something is making him so happy as to be utterly content, then maybe he will stand by those who can provide it most?

He smiled to himself, thinking of what a dragon that was truly loyal to the Targaryens could do - ever since the last dragon had died, their grip upon the realm and their ability to hold it together had been slipping, that he knew, but having dragons again would change everything for the better; the
Crownlands had always been weak, Aegon the Conqueror and his successors never thinking that there might be a time when the Targaryens were dependent on a great number of troops rather than the strength of their dragon mounts, something that had left them unable to truly control the greater powers of the realm and allowed them to grow more and more distant, able to plot amongst themselves and able to disagree with the crown or even openly defy its will...but to have dragons would once more would allow the Iron Throne to stare its adversaries down. But if the unthinkable occurred, if the dragon sided against the Targaryens, if the creature that was the very symbol of Targaryen might turned its back on them, it would be the end of the dragon kings, and that possibility alone was what had made him so desperate to find a way to keep Carik's loyalty.

"Come now," he said. "You can tell me."

"Well...alright," Carik said, smiling even more widely as he thought about whatever it was that had made him so utterly content. "Ashara gave me a kiss on the cheek."

Rhaegar blinked, his jaw open. Wh...what? That's...that's it? A kiss? A single kiss is what made him so happy? Ashara is beautiful, yes, but a single -

Then everything finally fell into place.

*He is six and ten.*

Then Rhaegar sighed.

"Is something wrong?" Carik asked.

"No, nothing," Rhaegar answered quietly. "Just the realization that something is far simpler than I had thought it was."

*Of course he would be delighted by being kissed by a beautiful woman at his age. That's all that a six and ten year old cares about. There is no magical means to control to control him, or anything of the sort. He's just...a man.*

Rhaegar sighed once again as he closed the book in front of him, turning his attentions entirely towards Carik. "It seems I might not need to do much reading after all. Anyway, what brings you here?"

"I was hoping you would ask Lord Whent if I could have a room to stay in," Carik said politely, still wearing the same smile he had before. "He wouldn't say no if you were the one to ask."

"The only way that I can ever have his loyalty is to treat him as a friend, and to hope that is enough. No doubt the other families of the realm will try and do the same to bring him towards their side as well, but there is little that can be done about that. It is hardly treason to try and make friends, and Seven only know what a six and ten year old half dragon would do if anyone tried to stop him."

"I will make the arrangements for you," Rhaegar said, taking another sip of wine as he moved the oil lamp further away from the books, ready to be extinguished. "But I am curious about something that you can answer. What are dragons like where you come from?"

"They are...a little different than yours, at least from what I've heard so far," Carik answered. "More than a little, actually."
"How so?" Rhaegar asked, his curiosity roused.

"Well...this is kind of hard to explain, but they are older than our civilization," Carik started. "Much older. Maxos once told me that the dragons were ancient when all the other races of my homeland were still new, and some people think that's because they created Rivellon. But no one really knows for sure since most dragons like to be on their own. Even my mother didn't talk to Maxos about it, and he never wanted to ask, either."

_Dragons...created a land? A realm?_

"What do you mean they created Rivellon?"

"As I said, no one really knows if they did, but if they did, then they made the mountains, the forests, the lakes...everything. But that's just a legend," Carik said with a small shrug of his shoulders. "But dragons are actually known to make magical artifacts, though. There's a story about a knight who stumbled upon a dragon while on a quest, and the dragon asked the knight if he would mind loaning his sword for a moment."

"What happened?"

"The dragon used it as a toothpick," Carik answered. "When he gave it back, it was imbued with powerful enchantments that let it go through steel like butter. Our dragons are very, very magical, so much so it rubs off on the things around them."

"What about you?" Rhaegar asked. "You are part dragon, after all. Can you make things magical merely by touching them?"

"Well, you've seen how good my magics are," he laughed. "I try to do one thing and cause another. I'm really bad with magic, so I probably couldn't even if I tried to."

_The ancient Valyrians of the Freehold were always said to be strong in sorcery, stronger than anyone else in the world, and they were the only ones with dragons...perhaps the two are related somehow?_

Rhaegar reached out to the oil lamp and brought it back to where it had been before, opening the book to the first page as Carik watched in silence before the prince spoke. "Ser Oswell Whent is the guard standing outside the door. If there is anyone here who knows where an empty bedchamber is, it is him."

"Thanks," Carik smiled, walking towards the door as Rhaegar watched before turning his attentions back to the book. Then he shook his head, sipped his wine again and went back to his reading...and this time, he was much more interested in the mythology over the facts of his first reading.

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**End of Part 8!**
First off, Maxos goes to an Earth that is very, very much like our own, albeit a decade or so earlier...and finds a Carik that fell straight into Hollywood. In their world, things went a little bit differently

In their world, things are going a little bit differently to our own history, especially in a media standpoint, and it has all to do with one film: Dragonheart. In our world, Dragonheart came out in 1996 to a mediocre reception, with Rotten Tomatoes giving the film a 50% score and a rating of 5.7; the film, despite having an interesting premise, had quite a number of flaws that stopped it from doing particularly well, being more remembered for its visual effects than for the quality of its storytelling. In the end, it was just another part of a grim trend - the decline of the fantasy genre from the glory days of the eighties. The eighties were a strong era for fantasy films, having such greats as the Princess Bride and the NeverEnding Story, but the nineties were much worse off, with far less quality releases and more poor and mediocre ones that were shadows of what came before, and it was up to the Lord of the Rings movies to revive the fantasy genre in the early noughties, but in this world, things went rather differently. Dragonheart had a large number of production difficulties that it didn't have in our world, resulting in the film being tossed around from one studio to the next, which whilst normally bad for any film, let the film's story be reviewed and inspected multiple times by different writers, and as the director mentions, the final script itself is more-or-less a kitbash of all the good parts from the previous versions of the film, but the film still had trouble emerging to the light of day because of its prior issues.

Then Carik arrived...and things got interesting, because a film about a talking dragon now had a real talking dragon willing to take part in it. It was significantly cheaper to pay for him than it was to make the visual effects for Draco, meaning that budget went to other parts of the film and further shored up the weak parts of the film...and when the film came out, the news that it had a real, breathing dragon in it caused the interest in the movie to skyrocket, resulting in a smash hit that is widely remembered in their world for being the fantasy film of the nineties, but the greatest effect of all is that it caused a resurgence of interest in the fantasy genre, lifting it from the slump caused by repeated failures and poor movies, right in time for Fellowship of the Ring to enter production. In our world, even with the dismal state of the genre, the LOTR films were so successful they practically resuscitated the genre, but here, they're going to be even more successful than they were in our world, whilst the consecutive release of two fantasy smash hits and the rise of Harry Potter have shown that the fantasy genre is not only strong and healthy, but thriving.

With fantasy films of a wide variety managing to capture the public imagination, the entire course that Hollywood takes at the start of the millennium is changed, with the domino effect striking TV production, video games and literature - the upsurge in interest could result in things like Warhammer Fantasy being larger than it's 40k counterpart, and even makes it possible for Wheel of Time to have a series, or even for Game of Thrones itself to go into production earlier, due to this boom taking place not long after the release of a Storm of Swords, allowing it to ride the wave.

Meanwhile, in Harrenhal, Rhaegar, fearful of Carik not being truly loyal to the Targaryen family, does some reading about dragons, a lot of reading even, all with the aim of trying to find out how the people of the Valyrian Freehold managed to control their dragons. The first half of this section is primarily some lore, and a bit of something caused by one of my own theories about the nature of Valyrian dragons - that there are
different "types" of dragon. I don't mean anything like some of them having four limbs or anything, but that even with the ability to switch genders there is still a preference amongst them for maintaining the one they were born with, and more notably, that some dragons grow faster than others. These are dragons like Drogon, Balerion and the Cannibal, the former of which is noted to be larger than his siblings and the later two of which were noted to be famously large and dangerous even at a time when there were other dangerous dragons...and Meraxes, who hatched after the arrival of the Targaryens upon Dragonstone and yet was still quite a bit larger than Vhagar, who hatched at around the same time. But other than their growth rates and a few, minor traits that most would not ever really notice, there isn't a real difference :p

There's a tiny bit more summary, so like usual, that'll be in the comments below!
The Kingspyre Tower, Harrenhal.

Carik closed the door behind him quietly as he let the crown prince get back to his reading, and just as they had been before he had gone inside a few moments before, two knights of the Kingsguard were on either side of it. On the left was Ser Arthur Dayne, sat atop an oaken stool as he slowly continued to clean his greatsword, a weapon made from a steel as pale as ivory, wiping down the blade with the gentle touch of a square piece of satin silk trimmed with cloth of gold, and occasionally holding it up to the light of a nearby torch for any sign of even the slightest of marks or stains to be removed, never once taking his mind off of his task for even a moment. Ashara wasn't kidding when she said he had spent all her money on a cleaning cloth...

In stark contrast to the focused and highly disciplined knight was Ser Oswell Whent leaning against the wall on the right side of the door, relaxed and at ease in his old home, but he still stood in his shining white armor and with his sword at his waist and his shield on his back, ready for a fight should his confidence prove to be mistaken. The Kingsguard really are dedicated to their task. I doubt they'd ever be distracted by anything.

"Rhaegar said you're the one I should speak to about finding a place to stay for the night," Carik said politely.

"Aye, I heard," the knight answered, stepping away from the wall. "These walls are thick, but the doors are thin enough."

Well, that makes things easy, I guess. The knights probably even help to keep people away from listening in and finding out about my two bodies, too.

Oswell looked to Arthur and was about to speak before the knight smiled back at his sworn brother, sliding the silken cloth down to the blade's point as he did. "Don't worry, I won't be going anywhere."

"I know, but I was more about to ask if it was clean enough yet," the knight japed. "You have done nothing since we arrived but spend a few minutes to buy that cleaning kit and every hour since using it on your sword."

"Is there ever such a thing as cleaning a sword too much?" Arthur asked.

"Were it made of steel, you would have stripped off so much of it that you would not have a sword left."

"A good thing it isn't steel, then."

"What's made you start cleaning it, anyway?" Carik asked, curious.
"A good question," the bat knight added. "You've been cleaning that now for longer than you did after you felled the Smiling Knight, and you had put it through his guts and out the other side, soaked in blood."

"I simply felt the need to clean it, that is all," the white cloaked knight answered. "Besides, I have little else to do whilst guarding the crown prince...and shouldn't you be taking him to find a bedchamber?"

Ser Oswell Whent laughed quietly, before turning to Carik with a wave of his hand. "This way."

Carik smiled at last, turning around to follow as the knight walked away from the prince's door, towards the staircase that was found in the very core of the tower's structure, rising up its height like the hollow space within a chimney. Despite the grievous damage to the uppermost levels of the tower, the lower floors were more or less intact, but besieged by an entirely different enemy than dragonfire - years of slow decay and a lack of maintenance. They had taken their toll on its looks and tidiness, even with the best attempts of generations of servants and masons to keep the colossal structure clean and well maintained, and it grew all the more apparent, little by little, as one went higher in the tower and further away from the pristine ground floor. On all sides, the stairwell stood separated from the walls of rooms by enough space for five men to walk side by side, and almost each and every door (of which there were many, over a dozen on each side, each of which led to rooms that must have been huge to make up such an amount of space as that between the tower's outside walls and the stairwell itself) had a different crest above it along with the name of the person who it was meant for. This actually makes it pretty simple to see which crest goes with which family...that one over there has two griffins on it, one white and one red, and is for a "Jon Connington". So that means that crest is either his personal one, or that of the Conningtons. Simple.

They went up a floor, and the differences between it and the one before were subtle; almost everything was the same, but the metalwork holding the torches in place had been changed to a simpler, easier to make design, just as the door fittings had. The old ones must've been lost or rusted away, and they ended up replacing them with cheaper ones. There, in the corner, there was a room that had a blank sign above and its keys still in the door, and Ser Oswell Whent led him towards it.

"The best rooms were saved for the noblemen and the most famous knights, but there were a few left over my brother had readied anyway, in case of unexpected guests," the knight said. "This room might've been passed over for some reason, but it should be better than sleeping in a cave."

*Should* be better than sleeping in a cave? Now that's what I call confidence.

Turning the key and pushing the door open, the hinges complied, but only after he used a little more force than he had needed to on the floor below, the different pieces of ironwork not fitting together as neatly as they were meant to, but once the door had opened, he saw a room that was seemingly as well decorated as any other in the castle, and just as big. *Seven! Is everything huge in here? Like Rhaegar's room, there was a large table that looked more or less the same as his did, lacking only books and the like to cover its surface, accompanied by a great hearth and all the other furnishing that one might expect to find in their sitting room, and from the main room itself branched two others, one on the left and one on the right. The rightwards one looked like a bathroom of sorts, whilst the leftward one was a bedchamber, and a bedchamber that had a bed whose size could only be described as fit for an emperor, big enough for three to sleep in comfort, with three pillows of seven sides each at its head and with a larger, less evenly shaped one a little further down atop the blankets, more like an old piece of fur that was falling apart than not, the only truly flawed thing amongst an almost perfect room.*
He smiled. *This is better than what I had back home. All I need to do is throw that old fur out.*

"Is there a bin in here?" he asked as he walked into the bedroom.

"If there is something you need to be rid of, just throw it out the window," the knight said simply. "The servants will take care of it from there. Is that not how you deal with rubbish in Rivellon?"

"Not quite," Carik answered. "Most places have metal bins that we can just put out on the streets for petty criminals to collect. It's a way to make them useful to society, but most families just burn the rest and bury the ash."

He looked back to the bed...and oddly and to his surprise, the black fur had moved some quarter of an inch to the right side of the bed, towards the warm sunlight slipping through the cracks of the closed shutters. *Huh?*

Curious, he walked around to the side of the bed, watching to see if the fur would react to his movement, only for nothing to happen. *...must've been my imagination. He put his hand down on the fur...*

...only to quickly realize with wide eyes as his hand sank through the mass that it wasn't fur.

Instead, it was tens of thousands of spiders clumped together.

Immediately they began to disperse, scrambling across the blankets in all directions as quickly as they could run, over the pillows and under the covers, all fleeing from his hand except for the small few that ran past it on their journey under the bed.

"Well then," Carik said with a blink as he took his hand up from the blankets, walking back over to his pile of clothes before taking them under his arm again. "Forget this room."

"Aye," Ser Oswell said, utterly unphased by the sight. "But they might get worse from here."

Carik looked at the batknight for a moment. "I don't believe you."

Oswell laughed before turning towards the door, and with one final glance to the bed that showed that the army of spiders had completely hidden themselves, Carik quickly followed, walking back out onto the landing and onto the stairs to go up another floor.

"So...who was the Smiling Knight?" Carik asked, trying to pass the time as they ascended the steps.

"He was the most dangerous brigand who has ever lived," Ser Oswell Whent answered grimly. "No one knows what his real name was, but they say he fought for the crown on the Stepstones against the Ninepenny Kings, but what he saw there made him lose his mind and twisted his sense of right and wrong. He turned bandit a few years after coming back to Westeros, joining up with Simon Toyne's band of renegades and robbers, the Kingswood Brotherhood they were called, Seven only know why, and there was not a man among their group more dangerous. He killed every man sent after him, till Arthur put Dawn through his belly, yet even their duel was closer than not."

"As to why they called him the Smiling Knight," he continued quietly. "The damned lunatic had filed his teeth down to fangs and he never, *ever* stopped smiling. He was a rabid dog and the whole realm cheered when Arthur put him down, but he still had a grin on his face all the same."
"He sounds like a demon," Carik muttered before asking, "What happened to the rest?"

"We had managed to track them down to their hideout in the Kingswood, so there was little place for them to run. Simon Toyne was felled by my sworn brother, Ser Barristan Selmy, and most of the others died with him. Wenda the White Fawn had Simon's son inside her, however, so she threw down her bow and Aerys gave her mercy and allowed her to live on the promise that she would take a septa's vows, and a few of the other survivors were sent to take the black."

"Take the black?" Carik asked. "What does that mean?"

"It means they become a sworn brother of the Night's Watch and man the Wall till the day they die," Ser Oswell answered. "The Wall was built for a reason, and it was to keep the Others from ravaging the realms of men as they had done before, eight thousand years ago, with ice spiders as big as wolves at their sides and other horrors."

"They sound like demons."

"Aye, they are. Demons of frost and snow," Oswell replied with unease. "Now, though, the Others are long gone, but men still take the black to defend the realm should they come again, though they need to fight against the Freefolk more often, those men who were on the other side of the Wall when it was raised and turned into savage raiders."

Oswell sighed, and changed the topic back to that of the Kingswood Brotherhood. "Still, there was one man we had never found, neither dead or alive. The Smiling Knight's squire. He was a young man of five and ten, but he was a black hearted rogue if there ever was one, and his mad master had taught him how to fight. Brunn was his name, I think. Or was it Bronn? It was something like that."

At last, three floors up from the one that had been the home of the spider infested room, they found another empty room, this one in the middle of its row and lacking any sign above it at all. Let's hope this one is better than the last...Here, the doors were differently made than the ones on the lower floors, older and with an eye weighted more towards a quick construction rather than aesthetics, a definitive sign that even a master carpenter had grown tired of the task given to them and wanted it done as quickly as possible, but despite that, it still looked an impressive sight. But the moment he opened the door, he saw light shining out through a fist sized hole in the shutters, and a strange and awful smell that had been contained by a large fur stuffed beneath the door began to waft out into the hall.

Then there was the flutter of wings and half a dozen shadows as a flock of bats flew out and into the rest of the tower.

Carik closed the door.

"How hard could it be to find an empty room that isn't a hell hole?" he asked with an annoyed sigh.

"As I said," Ser Oswell answered calmly, pulling on the door handle and making sure it was a tight fit. "Many of these rooms were passed over. My brother would not have done so without a reason, and you are seeing those reasons first hand."

"But...a room full of spiders?"

"It's still early in spring," Oswell said. "The nights and mornings are cold, so naturally they huddle together in whatever shelter they can find till the sunrises and makes it warm enough for them to
disperse. In a few months, when summer starts proper, they'll spread out once more and you could probably spend an hour without finding a single one."

"And another room with bats in it?"

Oswell laughed. "Why else would my family have the bat as its sigil, if not for them being common here? They like the high spaces and shelter the towers give them, and they eat the moths and spiders that would otherwise be a nuisance. They're harmless, more like flying puppies than not."

I guess he has a point. So long as they aren't hurting people or getting in the way, there's no real problem with them being here...but that doesn't make it clever to sleep in their nesting ground...Seven, what a mess. The rest of the castle is perfectly fine, but look past the surface and you see all the problems underneath, or so it seems.

"Let's just hope the next one is better than those two were," he said with another sigh.

"If spiders were in the first room and the bats in the second, there is not much that can be in the third," Oswell answered plainly and with a smile as the two headed back to the staircase. "It might not be as fine as the first, but still, that is better than eating an army of spiders at night."

"Or waking up covered in bats," Oswell echoed. "Still, there is always the chance you might have the company of the ghosts of Harrenhal instead of either."

"...ghosts?" Carik asked. "What ghosts?"

"Some say this castle is cursed, and this tower in particular," Oswell Whent replied. "Black Harren and the last of his sons were burnt at the very top of this tower by Balerion's fire, but there is more to it than that. The smoke flooded the cellars and vaults, you see. Suffocated nearly every last man, woman and child within the walls, all three thousand but those few who had managed to make it into the towers and hadn't been burnt to death with Harren."

"Gods," Carik muttered. "I can tell why you call it cursed."

"Aye," Oswell answered. "Since then, five houses have been given Harrenhal as their seat, and all five have gone extinct. Their children died young in the cradle, aye, and their men in accidents and the women in childbed, too."

"Aren't you worried about falling victim to it as they did?"

"Never." Oswell said with another smile, confident in the future of his family. "We're the seventh family to hold this castle, counting Harren and his lot. The same number as there are gods and the most blessed number of all. There might be ghosts in these halls still, but they do not haunt me or my kin, as my brother's four sons and Alyssa show."

Alyssa...oh boy. Let's hope she hasn't said anything about earlier...

"How is Alyssa, anyway?" he asked casually...and innocently.

"Well enough," Oswell answered. "She was bothered about something earlier, though she didn't say what. I think it is more a someone than a something, mayhaps someone who tried to charm her and insulted her instead. Why? Have you seen something?"
"No, not at all, I only introduced myself when I was walking around the castle earlier," Carik answered. *It's not a lie, after all, I did introduce myself...and accidentally asked her to "ride" me...

"Well, whoever it was, it won't take long to find out," Oswell said quietly, "It is only a few hours from dinner, and everyone there will be sat in the Hall of the Hundred Hearths. She can point them out to her brothers then and have them right the wrong for her."

*I'm going to get stabbed by bedtime.*

Carik breathed a silent sigh of relief as they came out on a floor that had another empty bedchamber, one that had a blank sign over the door just as the first had, but here the door was already open, and besides the open doorway stood a stout wooden crate filled with candles, cups and all the other little things that made a room comfortable to stay in. *That means they think this room is good enough to be worth furnishing. That's a good sign, at least.*

Carik walked inside as Oswell stayed by the door, looking high and low for any sign of clumped together spiders or sleeping bats...only to smile widely as he found nothing. *Third time's the charm it seems.* He looked around, and found a serving girl, a pretty young woman who was maybe a year older than him and with long blackish-brown hair, carefully placing candles upon the bedside table and arranging them till they were positioned the exact way they had been in the first room. Then she rose and turned to face the entrance, and flinched in surprise at the sight of him and Ser Oswell Whent.

"Your...your grace!" she said hurriedly. "I'm sorry, I hadn't noticed your entrance."

"He's not the prince," Oswell explained with mild amusement to her clear relief. "But he's a friend of his. Serve him well, as if he were the prince himself."

*I get a serving girl? I guess it'll save me some time in the morning.*

She nodded quickly and in understanding, and Oswell turned to Carik. "She isn't that kind of serving girl, aye, but she'll fetch you anything you need."

*Not that kind of serving girl? What in Seven's name does that mean - oh, for godsake.*

"I didn't think she was that kind of serving girl, either," Carik said...again to the serving girl's relief. "I'm just surprised to have a servant at all."

Oswell laughed. "If there is anything else you need, find my brother or I."

Carik nodded in understanding, so the white knight turned and left, leaving the two alone as Carik looked around to see how complete the room was - all the major pieces of furniture were already there, thankfully, but it was the small things that were missing from his new bedroom, leaving his table bare where there should have been an inkwell, paper and candles to read and write by. *I can get anything I need later...but this place is huge! I could fit all my stuff on Rivellon in here and still have enough room leftover to do it all again!*

He smiled, then walked over to a stout dresser and pulled out the drawers, happy to find neither spiders nor bats waiting for him within, and started undoing the belt on the pile so as to put them away.

"My...lord?" the serving girl asked with confusion. "Shall I do that for you?"
"Sure," he answered with a smile, standing aside and letting her do her task. "Do you know how long it is till dinner?"

"Not long, my lord," she quickly answered, becoming more at ease. "Lord Walter is only holding a small feast today, since some of the greatest guests aren't here yet and because the king is still resting."

"Who's missing?" Carik asked, curious.

"Most of the Starks are still missing, I think," she started. "Eddard Stark is here, but the others should be here tomorrow, if the roads are good. The Manderlys too. Other than that, I think only the Dondarrions and the Hightowers are missing, but they should be here today or tomorrow anyway."

Starks, Dondarrions, Hightowers...I have no idea who any of these people are. I'll need to find a book about them all when I get the chance. That way, I won't have to meet any of these lords without having to worry about them being upset because I don't know who they are, but first...

"Is there a bathtub around here?" he asked, looking back through the doorway as he looked towards the small third room.

"No," came her answer as she neatly placed his Rivellonian clothes into the drawers, separated by what kind of garment they were. "Most people do their bathing in the bathhouse. It's the biggest in Westeros, with hot water, too."

"And...its public?" Carik asked.

She nodded.

"And...girls?"

She nodded again.

Carik paused. Well...maybe...I mean, it wouldn't be that bad...but...no, it definitely isn't a good idea. I'd see someone's bride-to-be naked and end up being stabbed by her groom whilst using a towel.

"Back in a moment."

He went into the main room of the three that were his for the tourney, looking around for anything he could use to bathe in its stead. There were a few pots full of various things to clean with, cloths and rags and something like a sponge, with water to go with them, but they were much too small to use...but then he saw a large cauldron in the hearth, a pile of wood beneath ready to be burnt. It was filled almost to the brim with a water that had a mix of apple slices, pinecones and even a few sprigs of cinnamon floating in it, with four small legs to stand on. It must be a simmer to make the next half a dozen floors smell nice.

Dipping a finger into the water to check the temperature and finding it as cold as stone, he smiled to himself. If there is anything a dragon is good at, it's making something very hot very, very quickly. But first, I need her gone. I can't just change into dragon form whilst she's watching.
"Are you done?" he asked, careful to avoid letting her think he wanted her gone. *Maxos would be subtle about it.*

"Yes, my lord," she said, coming into the main room and seeing him stood next to the cauldron, an incredulous look held back only by her being a servant and believing that he was nobility. *She knows what I'm planning.* "Do you want me to remove it for you?"

"No, leave it, I'll be burning it myself in a little," he said. *I could ask her to find me a book about Westerosi families, but she's a serving girl. She won't know how to read. Not to mention how suspicious it'd be. You can go now, but come back when it is time for dinner."

She nodded in understanding, and headed for the door.

"Oh, one last thing," he said with a friendly smile. "My name's Carik."

"Alys," she answered quietly before heading out into the hall before closing the door behind her.

*I don't think she's interested. But Ashara...* He smiled again, remembering the little kiss the beautiful Dayne had given him, till finally he couldn't hear any footsteps outside his chambers anymore. *This tower is pretty sturdy, so this should work perfectly fine.*

Closing the shutters to avoid the risk of accidentally being discovered by anyone who could see into his room from the other towers, he carefully and quietly moved the table and chairs out of the way to give himself enough room...and after one final glance towards the ceiling to get an idea as to its full height, he switched into his dragon form, mindful of the chance that the floor could buckle and groan and give way underneath him...

...but to his relief, nothing happened, and with his head bent down towards the fireplace and his body lowered, his horns had no risk of hitting the ceiling, either. *Maxos wouldn't like me using my dragon's breath to warm my bath, but he wouldn't even think of saying that it isn't clever.*

He took a deep breath.

Then he breathed out again and the air screamed.

An immense heat rushed past his sides and under the door as the entire room was flooded by the blinding brilliant orange hues of the flame made all the more potent by its confinement within such a small room, all whilst he counted down the seconds mentally. ...two...one...zero! *That should be enough!*

Closing his burning maw and putting an end to the torrent of fire, the last of the blaze burnt out and dissipated through a thin plume of smoke rising from his nostrils as he examined his handiwork...and found that the masonry of the hearth had been charred by the dragonfire...and that the firewood beneath the cauldron was burning bright and hot, a raging inferno that quickly lowered to a normal level...and as the smell of smoke dissipated, he smelled something just like fresh apple pie.

*Perfect.*

He switched back to his human form and took a glance towards the shutters, to make sure they were not burning, then opened them as wide as he could to release any heat that might've been trapped within the room. *The last thing I need is for the heat to get trapped inside. It could burn anyone who comes inside, or attract armies of spiders when I'm asleep.*
He reached into his pockets and set the photographs of his family down near the windowsill, safe from the risk of distorting heat and naked flame, and weighed them down with his watch and sword to protect them from any stray breeze that could carry them out of the window. Then he got undressed and set his clothes down on the table, grabbed the cleanest of the cleaning cloths and climbed in, as if the cauldron were a normal bath. The water was hot, very hot, but the temperature didn't faze him in the slightest, not even with the fire still burning underneath. *Hurray for being half-dragon! I might not have any soap to use, but the heat and the apple slices should do.*

*I just hope I smell like something nice and not like cider and smoke.*

Soaking in the improvised bathtub amidst apples bobbing up and down, he began to wonder about the coming feast. Alys had said it would be a small one, but everything he had seen about the castle so far promised that even a "small" feast would be anything but. *Feasts on Rivellon were probably the same way they have them here, just with less magic. So that means no self cleaning plates or knives and forks...but what about drinks? There won't be any water to drink, since people on Rivellon knew how to use magic to clean water centuries ago, but they don't have much magic here.*

*So that means...wine. Lots and lots and lots of wine.*

He paused for a moment, trying to guess how many glasses of wine he could have before getting drunk. *I'm part dragon, so it should be a high number. Twenty? Thirty?* He sighed. Maxos allowed him wine at dinner, but not much, probably to avoid the risk of Carik getting an appetite for it, but that meant that Carik had not even the first clue where his limits were. He only knew that his other half, his dragon form, would take in the excess once he was over his limit...but just how well would it do, when all he would have to drink would be wine, ale and cider? When even more beer was baked into the food itself?

He hadn't the first clue. *And the last thing I want is for everyone to think I'm a drunkard. Nobody likes drunkards except other drunkards, but I should be fine if I only drink when I need it, and that shouldn't be too bad if that's, say, half a cup every two courses. So, four courses, a starter, a main, a dessert and something to settle down with would be two cups.*

*That'll work!* He smiled widely. *I mean, how hard could it be? It's not like I'll need Maxos to watch over me at a dinner table and make sure I don't make a stupid mistake or something.*

*But how do I introduce myself to a hall packed full of lords?*

*They'll probably think less of me if they find out I'm a bastard, but I didn't even know who my father was barely a week ago, and the Westerosi have no idea who he is. They don't even know what the Empire is, so I can't mention that, either.*

Even alone and taking a long bath to pass the time, he still shrugged and sighed.

*For all I know, they might all be so proud and stiff that they won't want to go anywhere near me, or they could be relaxed and friendly...I guess the only time I'll find out is when I get there, and I'll have to figure out how to act from there. Since the king's here, though, I bet it's going to be formal.*

*Which should stop me from getting stabbed by Alyssa's brothers, at least for a little while.*

He laughed to himself, leaning out of the vast cauldron to glance towards his sword, sitting as it was in the sunlight. Though he didn't actually believe that Alyssa's brothers would attack him - neither the
prince nor the king would ever allow it, whilst an apology and explanation would probably settle the matter enough for them to be content - he wouldn't ever go anywhere in Westeros without it. It was a birthday gift from his foster father, a sword that Maxos had personally enchanted for him and it was the first gift that Maxos had given that was not meant for a child. Though its magics were more towards ensuring that it would never need to clean it or worry about it rusting or losing its edge, it's thin blade was still very much a capable weapon in the right hands...and to make sure that Carik knew how to use it, Maxos had made him practice with it against illusionary enemies, even though Carik had his dragon form and its fiery breath and long claws, making him accustomed to the fast movements and precise strikes it needed...but none of his illusionary opponents had ever worn armor before, being fast fencers just like him.

But it's not like the king or the prince would ever let them try to start a fight in the first place.

With his skin finally starting to shrivel up in the water, he climbed out and dried himself down with the clean cloth, letting the heat of the fire take away the last of the moisture, then dressed himself again, leaving the fire to burn so that it could continue to fill the tower with the smell of apples. Though it might have some people wondering what I'm doing in - oh! I almost forgot!

He drew his sword with his right hand and picked up the strongest looking of all the chairs in his left, then pushed the door open with his elbow before walking out and onto the hall, where he placed it in front of the immense doorway to use as a step up to the small wooden sign at the top. It won't look pretty, but if they can read it, then it's good enough for me. Using both hands to help guide the blade, he pressed the sharp tip against the wood and etches his name into its surface, writing Carik Sigurdson in a crude but readable font...and then, to finish the sign, he drew a rough image of a dragon besides it, its wings outstretched, and put the shape of a shield around it for completeness. There, that'll do. Now I won't have to worry about anyone claiming my room while I'm away.

He smiled to himself, then stepped down and took his chair back inside, putting all the furnishings back to where they had been before he had moved them...and then looked around, with nothing else left to do. Now what...?

He looked out the window, looking for anything that could be of interest, and saw a thin trickle of lords going to the marketplace and people touring the castle, as they were doing earlier, with most crowds congregating around the entertainers. He was half tempted to leap out the window and take flight again, to see the castle from above as only dragons and birds could, but instead he remembered the last thing he had to deal with before dinner: setting his pocketwatch. Can't forget that...Seven, I never thought being in another world would be so boring...

Slumping down into a seat that had a good and clear view of the sun above, using the position of it in the sky to get an estimate as to what time it was in Westeros, he took his pocketwatch and glanced at the clock face...and saw that the clock was ticking at a very slow but regular pace, with barely any hours at all having passed since he first checked it upon his arrival. It's meant to be a magical watch that never slows down because it uses ambient magic, but I guess coming here in the first place must've caused it to lose track of time and need to be reset.

He sighed, then started the painstaking task of setting the time, the clock going silent from the very moment his nail touched the tiny protected button that was nestled within a small metallic curtain next to the dial, holding it down and keeping the tiny machine’s clutch fixed in place. Now...all I have to do is slowly turn the dial...eas-

There was a knock at his door as he adjusted the time...and he sighed, and asked. "Dinnertime?"
"Yes, my lord," came Alys's reply.

"I'll be there in a moment," Carik answered, hearing the sound of the serving girl's footsteps as she walked off. *There won't be any sun later, and it'll be a lot harder to do in the morning if I'm not awake at sunrise.*

Finishing up the correction to the time, he slipped the watch back into his pocket before fastening his sword around his waist, and most importantly of all, returning the photographs to their place next to his heart, in the safest and most secure of all his pockets. Then finally he walked out the door and closed it behind him, locking it shut before heading down the steps, a trickle of noble men and women emerging from their own chambers, speaking amongst themselves with friends and family, all eager and excited. *I can't blame them, either. I wonder what kind of food they eat here...well, other than what they have for breakfast anyway.*

Going with the crowds down the staircase and onto the floor below, the same floor that had the room full of bats, he heard a powerful laugh echoing from the other side of the hall, coming from a black haired giant of a man who was as strong as he was tall, a walking colossus dressed in gold and black and with a stag on his breast, so striking a sight that more than a few of the noble ladies heading down the stepped looked towards him and blushed brightly at the sight. *Seven...if there was anyone in this castle big enough for the furniture, it must be him.*

"Seven hells, Ned," laughed the giant stag as he stood in front of a door that had a little wolf on its sign. "What's taking you so long? Jon's already at the Hall of the Hundred Hearths, and he won't be happy if we aren't there soon."

There was a murmur from the other side of the door...then it opened, and out stepped a younger and smaller man with long brown hair and dark grey eyes, dressed in grey and white, more plain and more grim looking than the jovial stag stood in front of him.

"Let's get going, before they run out of wine," the black haired one grinned with excitement. "They've got casks from every corner of the realm. Dorne, the Arbor, Old Oak...aye, even the Westerlands, and I didn't even know they make wine!"

"They can't run out yet, Robert," Ned answered, his. "You haven't had any cups yet."

Robert laughed and lead the smaller man out into the crowds, the two ending up walking besides Carik as they headed down the steps to the next floor...and up close, it became all too obvious just how tall Robert was, the completely human man towering over the half-dragon Carik by more than half a foot. *To be fair, I am still growing...but Seven, he's huge! I've seen elves who are smaller than he is!*

"Never seen someone so tall?" Robert asked, smiling, as he noticed Carik's admiring glance.

*People would think I was mad if I said elves, so that means...*

"I've seen some people as tall as you, but they were never so strong," Carik answered honestly.

Robert laughed and his friend smiled before saying. "Robert's the biggest man in the realm."

"I can tell," Carik answered, to the giant stag's amusement.

"I am Robert Baratheon, and this is Eddard. He's a Stark of Winterfell," Robert said with a warm
"You?"

"I'm Carik Sigurdson," Carik said with a smile. "I'm a visitor from Rivellon. It's a kingdom from very far away."

"I've never heard of it," Robert said with interest as Eddard looked on, the wolf curious but silent. "What's it like?"

"I can't say much, because you wouldn't believe me," he said.

"Really, now?" Robert asked. "Are all the women running around naked and the rivers wine instead of water?"

"They are," Carik answered, smiling.

Robert laughed again and threw an arm around his shoulder, as Eddard tried to hide his own smile. "If only...Gods!"

Robert smiled widely, and Eddard asked, "What brings you to Westeros, anyway? The tourney?"

"We don't have many where I come from," Carik said. "I just happened to find myself nearby, so I figured I'd come along and see what they're like."

"It's not like I'm lying. It's the truth. Sort of."

"As good a reason as any to be here, I suppose," Eddard said quietly. "We're here with Jon Arryn. He would never be able to ignore a tournament like this, even if he doesn't ride in the lists anymore."

"Aye, and I would have damn well climbed down the mountain by myself if I had to to get here," Robert said with an eager grin. "The melee! Gods, what a fight it'll be."

"Robert's won every melee he's ever been in," Eddard explained with a nod and a small smile. "He was beating knights when he was still three and ten."

"Well, it's a good thing I'm staying out the melee then," Carik laughed.

"Did you know that they're going to put twenty men in the melee at the same time?" Robert asked with obvious excitement. "There'll be thousands of us in it, but they can't stuff us all in the arena at once. Not enough time in the day for it, or room...but if there was..." He grinned. "I wouldn't stop."

"Wait, did you say thousands?" Carik asked with amazement. "How many are going to be in the jousting?"

"Near as many, I imagine," Robert said. "Every knight and freerider in the realm has come for a chance to win the prize, aye, even riders from the Free Cities are here."

"Oh boy."

"Why?" Robert asked as they stepped onto the ground floor of the massive Kingspyre Tower, curious. "Are you planning to ride in the lists?"
"I hope so."

...if I hold the lance between my teeth and run at people in dragon form...no, that's just insane. But if I'm lucky...then maybe I can still pull off a win. It'll take a miracle, but you never know.

"I won't be riding in the lists for myself," Robert said as they walked through the tower door and out into the fading sun, Carik following his lead and the trail of lords and ladies. "Jousting isn't as fun as fighting in the melee, and I'll need to save my strength for the fights to come."

"If it keeps me from having to fight you, then I'd rather joust," Carik joked with a smile. *It's not much of a joke, either...*

Robert laughed again...and then Carik saw another of the immense buildings that filled the space within Harrenhal's clifflike walls - the Hall of the Hundred Hearths. It was an immense building, wider than a football pitch and much longer, some three floors in height and with a fourth that looked as though it had once been a rooftop dining hall, where one could take their meal in the fresh air with the monstrous castle for them to admire, in all its majesty, but the building's true wooden roof had long since collapsed...and the blackened and charred timbers told the story of how and why they had turned to ruin. *Dragonfire.* The building's entrance, a gaping maw whose jaws were doors, was wide enough for six men to walk side by side with room left over...and inside was an even grander sight than the outside, in the form of three lines of dining tables, five feet wide and over a hundred feet wall, with at least a thousand chairs for the trio, with even more room for guests on the two great galleys above, each of which looked as if it could hold more guests than even the greatest of Rivellon's castles. *Seven have mercy...*

Though there were not a hundred hearths, only some thirty of them, each was twice or thrice the size of the fireplace that was in the tower of his wizard mentor, given only a little wood to burn to warm the massive hall, and the warm air carried the mouthwatering scent of beef, pork, lamb and venison, mingling with the sweet scent of apples and pears and everything else he could imagine ever being on a medieval lord's dining table.

He had never felt so hungry before. *This is going to be a night to remember, but first, I just need to find a seat -*

"Carik!" exclaimed Ashara Dayne as she finally saw him amidst the crowd, walking towards him in a beautiful white dress with her back turned towards the raised dais and its eight seats, her voice more formal than before. "Lady Elia has had me watching the door for you."

"Is something wrong?" he asked, looking around and noticing some ten barrels of wine resting against the walls, their lids removed so that anyone could walk up and dunk their cup inside to refill it.

"Only that there aren't enough seats on the dais," she answered softly, ignoring Robert's glances. "Lord Whent hadn't expected you."

"He can sit with us, then," Robert said with a small shrug. "The Estermonts aren't here since Lord Lyonel's taken ill and might die, so he can sit in their place," then he turned to Eddard, and smiled. "And you, Ned. Damn you if you think I'll have you sat at an empty table by yourself."

*Well, that sorts that then.*
"Thanks," Carik said as Eddard nodded thankfully. *He really doesn't talk much, does he? He's barely said a word since we've met.*

He turned back to the front, smiling for Ashara, only to see her already heading back to the dais, her white dress marking out her outline perfectly...and giving him quite the view. *Thank the Seven that Maxos isn't here now.*

"She'll still be here after dinner," Robert laughed as he clipped him around the shoulder. "Come on, before all the good wines are gone."

"Alright," Carik said with a happy smile, looking at one of the tables to see what could only be the first course - a thick and hearty broth served in large round loaves of bread. "Just how many courses is this feast, anyway?"

"Forty nine," was his quick reply.

"Forty...nine?" Carik asked, blinking. "You must be joking."

"Seven sevens are forty nine," Robert said instantly. "Its the holiest number for the gods, so that's how many courses there are today. Tomorrow will be seventy seven, or so Lord Whent says."

*Seventy seven courses...seventy seven courses? That's insanity! That means at least twenty four cups of wine in one sitting! I don't even know if my dragon form can deal with drinking that much wine or not!*

He sighed under his breath.

*I guess we're going to find out...*

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**Planetos #122**

Maxos looked at the portal curiously as the swirling slurry of stormcloud greys, slate blacks and dull blue seas swirled and rippled and warped before finally resolving themselves into a clear image. *This place is certainly different than the others. I doubt I will find a single tree here, yet alone a forest of them.*

He peeked through, at the land beyond, and saw a great castle of black stone sat upon the stony grey side of a tall and smoking mountain, a volcanic island amidst a dark ocean. But far more eye catching than any part of the region was the castle's own architecture, completely draconic in style and fashion. The gatehouse was shaped and sculpted like the mouth of a dragon, yearning to break free of its stony prison, and its jaws were open wide, as if it were about to fill the rocky path leading up to it with flame, but nowhere did he look did he not see a place lacking a dragon's looks. The walls were like great wings, with the towers that rose from them their bones and spurs, and even the few arrow slits he could see were sculpted like that of a dragon's maw. *Well...if they revere dragons that much, Carik shouldn't have had much trouble at all.*

Smiling, he stepped through to yet another world...and immediately the wetness of the ocean's spray and the warmth of the sleeping volcano on his bearded cheeks, carried to him by winds that brought with them the smell of smoke and salt. *I doubt any race from Rivellon would like it here, except*
perhaps for the Imps and the Undead, or the Orcs, perhaps. He shook his head with a sigh, tapping his staff against the ground and creating a small barrier to protect himself from the damp mists, before taking a long look at the castle itself.

If Carik is here, and if the portal brought me here, he is more like than not to be inside those walls.

He put his free and empty hand forward, and as he had done in the very first world he had visited in his search, he created a small orb of magical power...and let it go, allowing it to choose its own course and to be influenced by whatever other magical things there were nearby.

As he had expected, it began to drift towards the castle.

I thought as much, but this makes it certain.

With a prod of his staff against the rocky and hard soil, he started his journey towards the great black castle, following the tiny orb of energy towards the gatehouse, the white speck gradually picking up momentum like a ball rolling downhill.

"Who goes there?" shouted a man on the battlements, a human guardsman with a halberd in hand and with covered in mail, with a kettle helm on his head and a black tabard bearing a red three headed dragon on his chest.

"I am the wizard Maxos, of Rivellon," he answered, watching as the tiny orb passed through the tiny opening between the two halves of the wooden gate. "May I please come inside? I am searching for someone calle-

"Queen Rhaenyra is holding council and is not accepting visitors," the guard interrupted. "Begone."

That was not a very polite way to treat one's guests.

"I am afraid it is urgent," Maxos said firmly.

"You're not coming in, now bugger off already," the guard snapped.

"Then I shall need to make my own entrance," Maxos replied.

The guard laughed. "Try it."

"Very well."

Maxos walked over to the walls, examining them for a moment...and to his interest, the walls were not made of blocks, but were seemingly constructed with a magic that had made the rock itself flow almost like water, allowing the walls to be shaped and casted the way a potter might work clay. Very interesting, but I have more important matters to attend to than studying these walls.

He looked around again...and found a large boulder some twenty feet away, placed to interrupt the best path for a siege tower to take towards the walls, and reached out with it with his open hand, as if to grip it within his palm.

Then he easily lifted it up into the air and floated it over to the wall, placing it an inch away from the stone before climbing atop and raising it up to match the height of the battlements. Then he stepped off, onto the walls, and allowed the rock to fall back down before turning to face the guard once
"You...you...how?" the guard gasped, stunned. "How did you do that?"

"Magic," he answered, looking down into the castle's courtyard to see the speck of white light entering the castle's keep before turning his attentions back to the guard. "You look quite tired."

He snapped his fingers and the guard fell against the crenellations, fast asleep with the halberd on his lap. Then Maxos stepped over him and hurriedly moved down the stairs, into the courtyard. 

Regardless of whether these people are holding the prince as a guest or as a prisoner, I best hurry. Who knows what tortures he could be enduring at the hands of this...Rhaenyra?

Walking towards the castle's keep, the tower itself being the least draconic of all the buildings within the castle, with only a small influence of them in its construction, instead being more or less a normal structure, if perhaps surprisingly large for a medieval construction...but just like the walls, it was sculpted, not built. Whatever magic they had used to build this castle must be how they managed to build so large...perhaps I should investigate, once Carik is safe and sound and at home again.

But before he could enter the keep and continue his search, he heard a low and soft rumble, a breath, coming from a large building to his right, its wide wooden doors creaking open a single inch from the force of the gentle gust. He looked over, staff in hand and ready to defend himself in need be.

Cuddled atop a large and layered mat of cloth, hay and fur was a sleeping dragon of blue and green, happily asleep beneath the thick roof that protected it from the damp sea air. The dragon began to fidget as light shone onto its scaled face, turning in its sleep and trying to cover its eyes with its wings as it started to whine.

In response, Maxos pushed the door closed again with the tip of his staff. Better to allow sleeping dragons to lie than to -

"Halt!" commanded a knight armored all in white and with a thick, white cloak fluttering in the winds, his face concealed behind a visor, a company of guards behind him, all armed with a mix of pikes and swords and crossbows. "I know not who you are, but your intrusion ends here!"

He is a knight. If I treat him as such, there should be no harm.

"I mean you all no harm," he said carefully. "I am only here for the prince, Carik Sigurdson, and nothing more. Have you seen him? Gold hair, golden eyes?"

The white knight's eyes narrowed. "I know a man who matches that description and has that name. But who are you to seek them?"

"I am the wizard Maxos, his foster father," Maxos said softly. "I swear it now by all Seven gods, I will do you no harm if none has been done to him, and his father would be more than willing to pay a ransom for his safe return."

The white knight looked him over, and said with a firm and stalwart voice. "Come with me. I will take you to the queen."

"Thank you," Maxos smiled and nodded, following the knight as the men-at-arms formed up around the wizard, watching him with suspicion. "May I have your name, sir?"
"I am Ser Steffon Darklyn, Lord Commander of Rhaenyra's Queensguard," came the brusque reply.

"A pleasure to meet you," Maxos said, only to receive utter silence in reply.

Then they came to a stairwell...and up, past every floor and every door till they finally reached the castle's summit, where two more white cloaked knights stood guard besides a wooden door, the sound of voices and an argument slipping through its cracks.

The Lord Commander led the way as the men-at-arms began to disperse, giving the two other knights a nod before opening the door and escorting Maxos inside...and as soon as it opened, the wizard saw the massive wooden table that dominated the entirety of the chamber, a great map that had every part of what could only be the entirety of a massive kingdom painted on its surface. Armies of wooden horsemen carrying banners of every color and every crest imaginable littered its surface, with wooden castles ranging from the size of the nail of his smallest finger to that of his whole thumb, every model unique and every castle having a small wooden sign that rose from the top of its greatest tower, carrying the name of the fortress below.

Around the table's sides were gathered over a dozen lords and knights and other young men, some in armor and some in cloth, with almost all of them in black and red or silver and sea green, but at the table's head was a woman, young but stout from childbirth, with a long braid of silver-gold hair and amethyst eyes...but they were eyes filled with cold, burning anger, channeled at an old man not from the entryway, who himself was dressed in a humble brown with a long chain around his neck.

On the opposite side of the table was Carik, tall and strong and handsome and not a day older than twenty five, or so he looked to his foster father's eyes. He was armored in black and red plate, with a single dragon whose wings were unfurled upon its breastplate, completely different in look to that of the others and their three headed crest. Across his back was a two handed greatsword, with only its plain pommel showing from over his shoulder, whilst at his waist was a sword almost exactly the same as the one that Maxos had given to Carik long before, matched on the opposite side by a parrying dagger, both within quick reach. His eyes were focused on the map in front of him, taking in its intricacies and details, but before Maxos could speak, to ask and learn if he was the Carik he was looking for, the argument between the queen and the chained man resumed.

"My lady, I must beg you to reconsider!" the chained main said, pleading. "King Aegon is the -"  

"If you say my half-brother's name with that title again, I will have your tongue out and fed to a dragon," came the queen's cold reply. "Our father made it clear on a dozen occasions that I was to be his heir, and the lords of the realm swore fealty to me. Not to Aegon. The mere act of him laying claim to my throne makes him a usurper and a traitor, nothing more."

"But by all the laws of the realm, the first born son comes first in the line of inheritance," the chained man objected. "That is how it has been for thousands of years! You go against a tradition that has stood since ancient times!"

"Times change," was Rhaenyra's answer. Then she spoke before the chained man could answer again, her voice powerful and commanding. "You will return to the Red Keep and to the Iron Throne and the traitor that sits upon it, and you will tell him the following: I decline his so called "offer" and instead give him one of my own. For the love of the man who fathered us both, he has one month to publicly renounce his claims upon the throne, to surrender his crown and to throw open the gates of King's Landing and await my arrival with no swords drawn or bows notched."

"If he does so, I give my word I will not harm him, his wife or any of his brothers or children. Upon
my coronation I will even allow him to keep Summerhall as his own seat, to be passed down his
line," she said, "If not, for his crime of usurping the throne in defiance of our late father's wishes, I
will give him no mercy. I will have his broken body paraded around the entire realm and thrown into
the sea, never to rest in our family's crypts. I will have his daughter put into a motherhouse and his
sons put to the knife and stripped of that which makes them men, so that his seed and the traitor's
taint it carries can never pass to another generation. His brothers and their children will get a swifter
end upon the block."

"When all is done," she finished, "I will have him and all his full-blooded kin removed from all the
books and chronicles of our family's history, from every tome in the realm, so final will I make his
death that, two hundred years from now, maesters and men alike will speak of how Queen Alicent
Hightower bore King Aegon no children."

The chained man stared at Rhaenyra with fear in his eyes...and nodded slowly. Then frantically.
"As...as you wish...I...I beg my leave of you."

"You may go," she said more softly, turning her attentions back to the table in front of her. The old
man walked towards the door, but before he could leave, she spoke again. "And Grand Maester?"

The old man looked towards her.

"If you ever forget my title again," the queen said quietly, "I will have you hung with your chain as
the cord. Is that clear?"

"Ye-yes, your grace," the maester stuttered before hurriedly departing, as quickly as he could and
was polite.

"Forgive me for interrupting you, your grace," the Lord Commander said with a voice full of
deference and fealty. "This man managed to make his way inside the courtyard. His name is -"

"Maxos?" Carik asked, looking at the wizard in surprise. "Seven hells, it really is you."

"You know this man?" Rhaenyra asked curiously, her voice soft. "Can we trust him?"

"I do, and we can. He was the man who raised me." Carik said with a tiny smile. "It has been a long
time, Maxos. I would love to talk with you again after so long, but time is precious. We can speak
after the meeting."

How long could he have been here?

"Very well," Maxos said with an understanding nod, walking around the table to Carik's side.

"Now that the distractions are over, we shall continue, as before," Rhaenyra said at last. "Daemon,
please continue."

"As I was saying before the Grand Maester's "timely" arrival," the man called Daemon said, a
dashing and handsome man with long silver hair who leaned onto the map, "The Reach will be split
in half by this. The Hightowers would never not declare for Aegon, but the other houses and the
Tyrells won't follow their lead, not if it means that the Hightowers become more powerful than they
already are."

"You think the Tyrells will not declare for Aegon?" another woman asked, even older than the
queen and more fierce, in her fifties at the least, her silver locks streaked with white and grey. "Why not?"

"Because they would be caught in the center of the war," Daemon answered swiftly. "Highgarden is at the heart of the Reach, and whoever controls Highgarden controls the junction of the Roseroad and the Ocean Road. If it declared for Aegon, the Florents would have the excuse they have been needing to take Highgarden and the Reach for themselves, but if they were to declare for our beloved queen, it would place Oldtown and the Hightower itself at risk of an assault."

"And so the Usurper will be counseled to send his armies and dragons there to destroy that threat," another lightly haired man said, this one dressed in sea green and silver and with a small seahorse shaped clasp fastening his cloak. "Lord Lyonel Tyrell is an infant still at his nurse's teat. His mother would never risk her son's inheritance in the war. No, she'll stay quiet and keep Highgarden out of the fighting as long as she could."

"The Tyrells were always opportunistic," Rhaenyra sighed. "We will be able to make do without them. Whose loyalty can we depend upon?"

"The Baratheons were one of my strongest supporters a lifetime ago," the other woman said with a sad smile. "They will declare for you, I'm sure of it."

"And the Starks too, perhaps," Daemon suggested to the queen. "They were another of Rhaenys' supporters. Mayhaps they'll be one of yours, too."

"But that was a different Lord of Winterfell," the hand crested man answered. "Lord Cregan is...different."

"How so?" Rhaenyra asked. "Will he not support my claim?"

"My sources tell me that he is not the man his father was," came the reply. "He would be willing to take up your cause, but for a price."

"In gold?"

"In blood," was the instant answer. "Rumor has it that he wants nothing other than a royal marriage. A Targaryen princess, not for himself, but for his descendents."

The queen considered the information she had been given for a short time, the room silent, and then said a single word, her voice little higher than a whisper. "Jacaerys."

"Yes, mother?" asked a young man of some fifteen years...and Maxos blinked in realization as he looked at his familiar face, his locks of golden-silver hair and violet eyes specked with gold.

"Carik," he said quietly, his voice too quiet to be overheard by anyone other than the one standing alongside him. "Is that young man...?"

The prince fidgeted uncomfortably, saying nothing, but that silence was all that Maxos needed to know the truth.

Jacaerys was his son.

Then Maxos saw two other young men wearing the same blue and silver as their elder brother, one
fourteen and the other twelve...and just like with Jacaerys, Maxos could see the similarities between father and child in their eyes and hair, obvious to him even in the way they moved and the way they smiled.

*Seven! This Carik must have been here for a long time indeed, to have fathered three sons of his own! If the eldest truly is fifteen...then that means...gods have mercy, he would have been here for fifteen years...*

Maxos hid his anxious horror, his fear of how long the search might take, of how long the prince might have to spend in an unknown and uncharted world without any help from Maxos or Rivellon. What if someone found him and learnt of his abilities and made him do dark deeds? What if they hurt him, or worse? What if he spent more time there than he had on Rivellon? What if he had formed a new life? What if he didn't want to come back to Rivellon with him?

Maxos, the wisest wizard in all of Rivellon, didn't have an answer, and he begged the Seven for the chance to make sure he never did.

"Jacaerys, my son," Rhaenyra said with a soft, motherly voice, brushing a golden hair from the cheek of her firstborn son. "You've always been brave, but this...this will be more dangerous than anything you have ever done before. You don't -"

"I'll ride to Winterfell," Jacaerys said with an eager voice and a familiar smile. "And I can stop at the Eyrie along the way. They will declare for you if they see me there, mother."

Rhaenyra hesitated, before Daemon smiled at the young man before looking back to the queen. "I agree with him. Let him ride to the Eyrie. The Arryns will likely declare for you, but Jace's visit makes it certain."

"And Lucerys should visit Storm's End," said the elder woman. "The Baratheons are the most at risk of being burnt by Aegon's dragons, but if Lucerys flies over their skies then they will know for sure that our dragons can reach them and keep the Usurper's mounts at bay."

"Please, mother, let me ride there," said the second eldest of the boys, beaming with pride at the chance to prove himself.

"If the usurper sends his dogs to try and win the loyalty of Storm's End, they won't hesitate to hurt you, Luke. I won't risk so many of my children, even if it makes the lords of Westeros more eager to come to the side of their true queen."

"Then let me go with him," Carik said softly. "If either Aegon or Aemond wish to die in the skies over Storm's End, then I will happily oblige them."

...oh my...that is different.

Rhaenyra looked at Carik for a long time, the two saying nothing...and then she relented, with a sigh. "Very well. But if anything happens to him..."

"Nothing will happen," Carik answered with a reassuring smile. "I will make sure of it."

For a moment there was silence, the conversation struggling to find its course once more.

"Still, to distract Aegon and the others, I will take Harrenhal, so we might be able to use it as a
staging grounds, as it would allow the loyalist Riverlords and the knights of the Vale to rally

"Once Lucerys has the loyalty of the Baratheon host, I will feint southwest with half of our forces, towards Highgarden," he continued, placing his hand atop the wooden table and tracing the path of his army's advance with his fingertips. "This will threaten the Hightowers in their homeland, and Alicent will beg her sons to relieve Oldtown as quickly as possible. Aegon, weak willed as ever, will heed her request, and send his armies and mounts to chase me down, but I shall not give either him or Aemond the pleasure of open battle. I will merely keep the pair...occupied."

Then Daemon smiled, and tapped his fingers on the greatest marker of all.

King's Landing.

"And so, the city will be open."

Without even needing to know where either side was in the war, or whose armies were whose, Maxos could see his plan laid out clear upon the painted table's surface. It was not only ambitious and bold, it was so daring as to border on pure recklessness...but if what Maxos saw was right and Daemon's plan was a success, then it would be so decisive as to be utterly backbreaking, a blow from which their opponents could never recover from. If this is a war of succession as it seems to be, then nothing is more important for either side than their image, their appearance of strength. If this "Aegon" was to lose the capital of the realm so swiftly after the fighting started, the war itself would soon follow. Too many vassals would abandon his cause for Rhaenyra's, and too many men would call it a doomed cause to risk joining it at all.

Intrigued, Maxos spoke for the first time in the meeting. "If what I see is true, then the army at...Harrenhal...will be able to march south, whilst Lucerys and Carik can push northwards from Storm's End and catch the defenders of King's Landing in a pincer. You would decapitate your opponent on the first strike, should you succeed."

"There is no "should" about it," Daemon laughed, to the amusement of the others. "I have been in more battles than my nephew has had tourneys. Once King's Landing falls, the war is over and done, even if Aegon would will it otherwise."

"Then the matter is settled," Rhaenyra said, standing up straight and with a smile. "Rhaenys will go with my husband to Harrenhal, and await word from Storm's End before marching on the capital. Lord Corlys, once your fleet has carried our forces to the Crownlands, I would have you blockade King's Landing so as to ensure that none of Alicent's kin can make it out of the capital before it falls."

"As for myself, I will join the battle as soon as it begins," the queen said firmly. "I won't have the usurper and the others think I am not willing to fight for the throne personally."

"Then it will be as you command," Lord Corlys answered. "It will take some time, a day or two, but the fleet will sail as you asked as soon as as the men are onboard."

"Then we best waste no time," Rhaenyra said at last. "Make your preparations to depart. I want everyone to be ready to leave as soon as possible."

There was a flurry of acknowledgements from around the table, and the Lord Commander of the Queensguard opened the door and stood besides as everyone of them passed through, one by one,
starting with the Queen herself and then the men who had been closest to her at the table, leaving Maxos and Carik to go last...other than for the young Lucerys, who trailed behind them, following with eager strides and determined to do his part.

There was a flurry of acknowledgements from all around the table, then the Lord Commander of the Queensguard opened the door and stood besides as everyone passed through, one by one, starting with the Queen herself and the men who had been closest to her at the table, with Maxos and Carik being the last to leave...other than for the young Lucerys who had waited for them to go, trailing behind Carik with eager strides.

Carik turned to him with a smile as soon as they were on the steps. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up."

"Don't take too long," Lucerys said with excitement, hurrying down the steps...and out of sight, leaving the two of them alone at the top of the stairwell in silence, Maxos at first unsure of what to say.

"I must admit," he started, struggling to find the words. "I...did not expect to see what I saw in there."

"You mean...?" Carik asked, before sighing and smiling, Maxos knowing the words left unsaid. "I didn't expect it to happen here, either."

Then he laughed and the barrier between the two finally fell. "Seven, look at us both. Struggling to say the obvious after so long. How have you been, Maxos?"

"I am more curious about you," the wizard answered with a warm smile. "How long has it been, my young friend?"

"Sixteen years, by my reckoning," Carik answered. "Sixteen long years. Gods, how time has flown whilst I've been away from Rivellon."

"Sixteen years?" Maxos echoed in surprise. "How old were you when you came here?"

"It was not long after my eighteenth nameday," was the response, and Maxos let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding in reply. "Birthdays, not namedays. The Westerosi count namedays instead."

Surprised, Maxos looked towards Carik, looking for any sign of his age before smiling. "You haven't aged a day past twenty five."

_Aurora was truly ancient when she passed, and she looked not much older than Carik does now...and that may have been because she wanted to look older, for whatever reason was her own._

"I'm aging well," Carik replied with a playing smile.

"Indeed you are," Maxos smiled. "I am sure your wife finds it rather pleasing, too."

"My..." Carik looked at Maxos. "I'm not married, Maxos."

Maxos looked at him in confusion. "But surely those three were your childr-"

"If you're going to finish that sentence," Carik said with a whisper, "You best be quiet about it."
"Very well," Maxos answered, standing closer by. "Lucerys and Jacaerys...I thought they were your sons?"

"They are my sons," Carik answered with a voice so quiet it was hard for Maxos to hear him, even standing by his side. "But no one but me and Rhaenyra know that. No one."

But Rhaenyra mentioned her husba-

"You mean you..." The wizard's eyes went wide in realization. "You did what?"

"Quiet down, Maxos," Carik said quickly.

"I raised you better than that, Carik. You are better than that," Maxos scolded angrily. "To sleep with another man's -"

"For godsake, Maxos, he didn't even like women!" Carik snapped in reply. "He was more interested in me than her!"

"What?" Maxos asked, stunned.

"He was gay!" Carik said with a voice straining to keep quiet.

"...oh," Maxos murmured in understanding, with silence falling again before he asked, "...did he at least...know? About you two?"

"He did," Carik answered. "He didn't care even a little, in fact, he was glad that Rhaenyra was happy. Neither of them had wanted the marriage in the first place, Maxos, his lover died because of the tourney meant to honor his wedding, for Seven's sake."

"Laenor spent six days at his side, and it made Rhaenyra realize that, no matter what she did, her new husband wouldn't ever be interested in her. We met during the wedding, she was gorgeous and we took a liked to one another, had a dance, a few cups of wine, the sun was setting, the guests were leaving, the bed was covered in rose petals and...it just...happened," Carik explained quickly and quietly.

"After that I felt...terrible," Carik said with a sigh, venting his feelings. "I loved her and she loved me, but she was married to someone else, so I felt we couldn't be together...but a few weeks passed...and I just...couldn't resist her."

"Two months later I found out she was pregnant, and that was that."

"Seven...I am not quite sure what to say," Maxos said at last. "You two loved one another, and her husband had no interest in her and gave you both his blessing, that may be so, but it was still whilst she was married to another man...I doubt there is any "right" thing to do."

"I spent a lot of time thinking about it afterwards, Maxos, and I came to realize that just because the two are married together doesn't mean they are a couple," Carik reasoned. "Westeros is a medieval realm, with all that entails. A marriage between a lord and a lady is as much politics and diplomacy as it is a family matter. So when Laenor gave us his blessing and said he didn't care for her...well, I made my choice, and I have three happy sons because of it."
"I suppose you have had to stay distant from them because of the secret, then?" Maxos asked, understanding at last.

"Unfortunately, yes," Carik said with genuine regret. "But I love them all the same, even if I have to do it from afar. They're my sons, even if they might not know it, and I'll be damned and in hell before I let anything happen to any of them."

"Then that is the reason you are so eager to fight for her, then."

Carik nodded. "Rhaenyra and I split up not long after Joff, our youngest, was born, but we're still friends. She's got a mean temper when she's angry, but she can be nice, too, and she's found someone else anyway. But Aegon..."

Carik's friendliness and warmth melted away to cold fury. "He would kill her and every last one of her children if it meant no one could challenge his grip on the throne. I won't give him that chance."

"The Undead say there is no more noble a deed than protecting the innocent from harm," Maxos said solemnly. "From what I have seen of the three young men so far, they are exactly that."

"Thank you," Carik smiled. "I knew you would understand."

"There is one thing, my young friend," Maxos said, placing a hand on Carik's shoulder as they stepped into the hall at last, walking towards the courtyard door. "I do not believe I am the Maxos of your world. I am looking for a sixteen year old version of yourself."

"Ah, alright then," Carik answered, completely unphased.

"You...aren't upset?" Maxos asked with surprise. "You do not mind that it might still be a while before you return to Rivellon?"

"Not truly, no," Carik replied. "I miss Rivellon, I couldn't ever not miss my homeland, but there are people here I care about. You know that. Even if you were my Maxos, I wouldn't be able to go back with you, not yet anyway. I can't leave when they need me most, not till they're safe and not till they are prepared for what comes later."

"You mean their...dragon forms?" Maxos asked as the two men stepped out into the courtyard, where the winds were picking up and able to hide their voices from the risk of being overheard.

"Barely a dozen people in the entire realm outside of Dragonstone know I have one, and no one knows that they do," Carik replied, looking at his three sons laughing and joking with one another, three small dragons near them. "I've made sure to teach them everything I could about Rivellon, in case they choose to come with me when the time comes, but"

Carik looked at his three sons on the far side of the courtyard, watching them laughing and joking with one another, three small dragons gathered around them. "I've taught them everything I could about Rivellon, in case they might want to come with me when the time comes, but they don't know about the rest of their heritage, Maxos. They don't know what is it to be a dragon."

"But when that time comes, I will be there to guide them the rest of the way."

Maxos nodded. "I believe they will be in good hands."
"I hope so," Carik laughed. "It was nice talking to you again."

Then he offered a open hand to Maxos, a hand the wizard took and shook with a warm smile. "Likewise."

Then, when Carik let go and went over to the sons he barely knew, Maxos turned and tapped his staff into the ground, bringing the portal to Rivellon to the courtyard...and smiled, as an idea came to mind.

I do think they would love it.

"You three!" he said, turning towards Carik's sons. "Would you like to see a wizard's magic at work?"

They looked at him with interest...and Maxos stepped forward, into the portal, vanishing completely from their world only to reappear in Rivellon.

There he tipped over the center crystal, closing the portal...and let out a sigh of relief.

I can only hope that so much time doesn't pass before I find my world's Carik...

****

End of Part 9!

Chapter End Notes

It took a little while longer than most, but I am very, very happy with how this part turned out! :D

It was originally mostly going to be a filler part, something to plug the gap between parts eight and ten, both of which are important parts with a lot of content, but as I wrote this part it evolved more and more and became a full fledged part of the story in its own right.

I'm a bit worn out by the final stretch of writing this part, however, so there won't be much of a summary, but to summarize everything quickly:

Carik found his room within the Kingspyre Tower after some initial troubles, and got himself ready for the feast...and ran into Robert Baratheon along the way. Robert's in his absolute prime, more like a god of war than not, and he's extremely charismatic and good at making friends, as should be shown in his interactions with Carik, interactions that aren't going unnoticed by the Targaryens sat upon the dais in the Hall of the Hundred Hearths.

We also hear Oswell Whent talk about the Kingswood Brotherhood, and the origins of a certain sellsword...but that's just for fun :p

But the real fun takes place in the second half of this part, where Maxos goes to an
version of Westeros in a very pivotal part of its history: the Dance of the Dragons, where the stage is set for a different path than the original, true history.

Carik has not only met Rhaenyra Targaryen, he's fathered her first three children - which rather amusingly, has drastically weakened people's suspicion of them being bastards, since silver-gold hair is fairly common amongst Targaryens, in contrast to the pugnoses and brown hair they'd have if Harwin Strong was the father, as in canon, - and is completely unwilling to allow any harm to fall to any them...and as such, he's one hundred percent committed to her cause...and is flying to Storm's End alongside Jacaerys, to ensure that any of the riders loyal to Aegon who try to intercept him get a very nasty surprise.

If there's interest, however, I'll do a few more parts set in this alternate version of the Dance, and to be honest, I'll probably do it even if there isn't much interest anyway :p

The next part will be an Elia PoV and instead of a Maxos PoV, we'll have something rather different... :evilsmile:
Feasting, feasting and more feasting!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Hall of the Hundred Hearths

Elia looked around with a false smile as she watched the hundreds of lords and ladies - the bulk of Westerosi nobility, with houses from all four corners of the realm in attendance - feasting at the tables that stretched out across the entirety of the massive hall, laughing and japing and drinking up their wine and getting their cups refilled and listening to the songs played by the army of bards and musicians stood and sat in the galleries above...but not for a single moment did it feel as though she could enjoy it even a little. Rhaenys was smiling and happily devouring the tiny portions of each course that were given to her, learning what she liked and loved and what she didn't, with Lord Whent's cooks even going so far as to make something special only for her - tiny little lords and ladies, no bigger than Elia's thumbs, who she had eaten as if pretending to be a dragon.

Then past Elia's daughter was Ashara, rationing her cups of wine so as to avoid needing to descend to the massive casks full of wines from across the realm to refill her cup, allowing her to avoid the crowds of young men that would flock to her side and try to tempt her with their charms and poetry, something the Dayne woman was not particularly interested in. Even Queen Rhaella was there in the place of honor that was her own, finally able to relax and to smile without her husband nearby, the king's seat empty as Aerys was kept bedridden by his injury, or so they all hoped and prayed.

But despite having her friends and family so close and the king's madness so far away, despite all the exquisite dishes being placed on the tables or the fine wines on offering or the splendid songs of the singers, she could barely bring herself to sit upon the dais in the first place...and it was all due to the crown prince sat besides her, reading a book he had brought into the hall and placed upon the dais, only occasionally picking at the plates put before him as he read and made notes of his own in a second, smaller book on his lap, its parchment pages blank and with its quill and inkpot in the place that other men would have their wine cup.

*Rhaegar spent months arranging this feast. He had seven hundred and fifty thousand gold dragons brought to Harrenhal by river barges that brought messages back and forth in such secrecy that not even Varys knew what he was doing, and all so he could have the time and opportunity to build allies...*

Elia sighed.

*And there he is, spending it all with a book in hand.*

"I know what you are thinking, Elia," Rhaegar said quietly as he noticed her gaze and turned a page.

"Oh really?" she asked. "Is that a technique you learned from that book?"

"There are other feasts, Elia, but there is only one dragon," was the prince's quiet reply, dipping his quill into the inkpot before scribbling something down. "Dragons are more important to my family than allies ever were."

"Really? Then how were five dragons slain by a mob of peasants who had never once held a sword..."
"If you are referring to the Storming of the Dragonpit," Rhaegar answered without looking at her,
still writing, "It was because they were all chained down and three of them were still young, with
only two of them anywhere near a proper fighting age."

Then he looked at her, and met her eyes with his own. "But I am not on about armies. Dragons are
more useful because of being dragons. The prestige -"

"I already understand what the prestige and the image of having dragons again means, husband,"
Elia countered. "But look down there. Next to Lord Baratheon. Do you see him?"

Rhaegar looked across the room, to the table that was reserved for the Stormlands...and saw Carik,
laughing and joking with Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark, the three men drinking together.

"I do," the prince answered quietly. "And what is that you would have me do? Have him dragged to
the dais and made to eat with us? He is six and ten years old, Elia. No one can control him like that."

"No, but they can make friends with him," Elia countered. "If someone else makes friends with him
and Carik is drawn to them instead of to you, then -"

"I have already thought about this," Rhaegar sighed, returning to his book. "If that happens, then my
family is doomed. Dragons were the source of our strength and the very symbol of royal power...to
have that turn against us is unthinkable, to have it abandon us for another family is even more so."

"So why in the seven hells are you here?" Elia blinked in disbelief. "You should be down there,
making friends! Not just with him, but with every lord who will give you an ear!"

"I am reading Valyrian mythology is why," Rhaegar answered, unfazed. "Carik said that the dragons
of his land were so magical that they could make other things magical. I am simply trying to find out
if Valyrian dragons had the same power, and if there are any other similarities between the two."

"Considering that his type of dragon can turn into people, I doubt there are many," Elia sighed in
defeat.

"Is there something wrong, my prince and my lady?" Lord Walter Whent asked considerately from
further up the dais, wearing a warm smile.

"Oh, not at all, Lord Whent," Elia answered, wearing a fake smile once again. "My husband and I
were merely discussing an important matter."

"Indeed," Rhaegar agreed, meeting Lord Whent's smile with one of his own. "I thank you again for
your hospitality, Lord Whent. The feast is everything I had hoped it would be and so much more."

"If it weren't for your assistance, your grace, it would never have been possible," Lord Whent said
with a grateful voice, impossible to be heard from anywhere other than the dais thanks to the sheer
number of guests below. "Have you tried the Volantene wines yet? They are so dark and purple that
every drop is like a tiny amethyst."

"He hasn't had the chance to, not yet anyway," Elia said quickly before her husband could reply.
"But he aims to; he might not have much of a taste for wine, but he cannot ever help himself when it
comes to trying new things. Isn't that so, beloved?"
Rhaegar glared at her...and for the first night in the feast, Elia smiled a genuine smile.

"Why yes, it is," the prince said simply, unable to contradict her in public. "My lady wife has told me all about them."

"Come then, my prince," Lord Walter Whent said eagerly, climbing from his seat and patting the crown prince on the shoulder with a wide smile. "There are three different kinds to try, and only so much time to do so before it is all drank!"

Rhaegar then rose from his seat and placed his notebook atop the other, and said with a voice struggling to hide its weariness, "Then let us try some before it is all gone."

"And you can greet all those lords and ladies who are so eager to see their future king," Elia said, smiling warmly. "They have come such a long way for the chance to meet you, husband."

"...indeed they have," Rhaegar sighed under his breath, walking towards the wines with Lord Walter Whent in tow, the Lord of Harrenhal regaling the prince with every last scrap of information and fact he knew about wine.

The very moment they were off of the dais and out of the range of hearing, Elia turned towards Ser Oswell Whent, sat upon the dais with the rest of his family and the only knight of the Kingsguard to be so, the others scattered throughout the hall, never far from the places that were hard to see into or gave a good view of the dais, in case an assassin had managed to sneak into the hall with a crossbow amidst the throngs of lords and ladies, meaning that the sworn brothers of the Kingsguard had to stay sober, even though they were surrounded by a greater variety of wine than they could ever hope to drink. Still, no one is touching the Ghiscari wine. I can't quite blame them, either; if I wanted to taste metal, I could lick the Iron Throne.

"Ser Oswell!" Elia said happily as she took hold of Rhaegar's books and stretched out towards the white knight with them in hand. "Rhaegar is done with his reading for the evening. Would you mind taking these back to his chambers?"

"Of course, my lady," Ser Oswell answered with a smile and an obedient nod, taking the two books and rising from his seat and walked out the door and onto the courtyard.

And that means no more reading for Rhaegar tonight, even if he wanted to.

Then Elia took a triumphant sip of her wine and smiled and waved at Rhaegar from the dais...and the crown prince could only sigh as Lord Whent gestured to three large barrels of wine placed to one another, each of the three either bearing the crest of Lys, Myr or Volantis. Almost as quickly as the prince neared the three did a group of young lordlings and older middle aged men start to gather round, introducing themselves to their future king with warm smiles and careful and clever japes, with Elia's eyes seeing even the young Lord of Griffin's Roost, Jon Connington, amongst the retinue, a man who was a close friend of the prince and one who had spent the entirety of the feast till then sat besides none other than Carik, smiling as if he were a groom sat next to his beautiful and blushing bride-to-be.

Then Ashara burst into laughter. "That was evil, and you know it."

"Well, if it means that Rhaegar won't be reading his damned book for the rest of the feast and will actually try and make some friends for the family..." Elia answered honestly and with a happy smile,
"...then I would gladly do it again and again."

"Speaking of friends," Ashara said as she looked down from the dais just as Rhaegar and Elia had, her eyes falling on Carik, Robert and Eddard and their laughing. "It seems to me that the stag and the wolf have made fast friends with the dragon."

"I know, and it is all the more reason for Rhaegar to make more friends of his own," Elia answered quickly. "Dragons are not invincible, no matter how many songs the singers have that say they are," she said with a flick of her wrist towards a massive troupe of men and women singing the Dance of the Dragons, a different singer for every character and with large wooden dragons affixed to sticks so as to reenact the deadly dances that had taken place in the skies over the battles below. "He's still small."

"You think he won't be very useful till he's older, then?" Ashara asked with a curious look, leaving over as Rhaenys contentedly spooned soup into her mouth, only for the little princess to wince at the taste and push the bowl forward uneaten, a servant hurrying over and taking it away before it was just as quickly replaced by another course that was more to her liking. "How come? Even a small dragon is still dangerous."

"Oh, I think he'll be very helpful, but not as a weapon or anything of the sort," Elia said truthfully. "Rhaegar was right about one thing - dragons are the greatest symbol of the crown's strength. Before they died out every last king on the Iron Throne had a dragon mount of his own. Even Maegor the Cruel had a dragon. It set them apart from the Lords Paramount - in more ways than one - but after the Dance...not one of them had a dragon. Not the most pious, not the most just, the most generous or the most brave and daring, none of them had a dragonmount anymore."

"That is his greatest strength," Elia said briefly before taking a sip of her wine. "He makes my husband and his kin look like the greatest Targaryens since before the last dragon died, as great as men like Aegon the Conqueror and Jaehaerys the Wise."

Almost instantly, the Dayne woman smiled. "So simply having a dragon around makes the crown look stronger than it has been in years, even if he never once steps upon a battlefield."

"But there is one problem, and it is the one I said to Rhaegar," Elia said with a sigh as she lost her smile. "If he is more interested in anyone other than us, then it would to the entire realm as though the first dragon to be alive in centuries has turned its back on the Targaryens. It would be a greater deathknell than if Aerys decided to burn a Lord Paramount or do something just as insane."

Ashara paused for a time in response to Elia's words, placing her elbow upon the table as he violet eyes filled with thought, considering carefully everything that she knew about him before she finally spoke again.

"Well, he can't be any older than six and ten," she said at last. "If you look at him from here, he looks completely human. Normal, I mean. I wouldn't be able to tell the difference between him and any other Valyrian from here, if I didn't know who he was. He's just...a young man."

"A young man who just so happens to be half dragon," Elia said between bites of a soft bread roll soaked in the drippings of a minted lamb cutlet served in its own juices. "That does make things rather more complicated."

"But not as much as you might think," Ashara reasoned. "He might be a young man who just so happens to be half dragon, yes, but he is still a young man all the same. He eats the same as everyone
else, he drinks the same as everyone else, he talks the same as everyone else, so he needs to be
treated the same as everyone else, as if he were a normal man...who has something you need."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it," Ashara answered. "If there was a member of the court at the Red Keep who was a
particularly skilled plotter, a man who could be a danger to you and your family, but was so useful at
other times that you couldn't ever have them harmed, then how would you deal with them?"

"I would try and make sure our interests worked together, so he never has a reason to turn against me
or my family," Elia answered, smiling as she started to realize what her friend meant. "You think we
need to arrange things so this his interests match ours? That we benefit from one another as friends?"

"Exactly that!" Ashara laughed. "By being a dragon he is the exact symbol that your family needs,
but he's also a young man with no money, no place to stay, no allies, no idea where he is and
probably with no idea how to survive here, either. Just asking "who Valyria is" is proof enough of all
that."

"...then the best thing we can do is teach him what he needs to know," Elia said softly and with a
small smile. "We can work together and both benefit from doing so. I'll talk to him about it when I
get the chance."

"...but I think waiting till sometime tomorrow would probably be a good idea," Ashara said with
mild amusement. "I've been counting his drinks."

"Hoping to see the first ever drunken dragon?" Elia asked with a playing smile as she took a sip of
her own wine.

"A little," Ashara laughed. "He's drinking at a...well, prodigious pace. He's already downed one cup
of Dornish red, which he didn't seem to like very much. Too sour for his tastes, I think. Then he had
a cup of Arbor red, a cup of Highgarden spiced wine and then two cups of Arbor gold."

Curious, Elia looked down to see the half dragon prince in action for himself, watching how he
cleared at least half of every plate that was put before him with a methodical nature, somehow having
enough space inside himself to devour course after course without a single word of
complain, when almost everyone else in the hall were simply taking the few bits they liked and going
onto the next course, tasting everything but eating only a little in the only way that they could even
hope to cope with such a massive feast. It was the exact reason why the plates, bowls and trenchers
were so small a meal, but even plate after plate didn't seem to phase him in the slightest, and he
looked to only be mildly affected by a quantity of wine that would have most grown men barely able
to stand up straight or speak properly, yet alone walk with their balance. Seven hells...five cups of
wine and it has only made him talkative.

"His dragon form must be what is keeping all the wine at bay," Elia said. "It's the only reason he
could still be sober after so many cups of wine in so little time."

"That would make sense," Ashara mused. "It would explain where all the food is going, too. I would
need Arthur to stop me from wandering off into some random lord's bed if I had that much wine, and
you would have to be carried out."

"Having children does that to a woman," Elia answered with a shrug.
"Queen Rhaella doesn't seem to mind," Ashara said, pointing towards Rhaella with the tip of her littlest finger as she took another sip of her wine. "Neither does Lady Shella Whent, for that matter."

"Having children does that to most women, then," Elia laughed. "I do wonder how long it will be before Carik succumbs to all the wine, though."

"Well, if it is his...other half that deals with the wine," Ashara said carefully as a servant came up to the dais, replacing Rhaenys's meal with a small chicken breast filled with cheese and bacon. "Then I would guess that he will probably have so much wine that it won't be able to deal with it anymore, and he'll get very drunk very quickly."

A drunken dragon...now that would be a sight to see. I was never that good at holding my drinks even before I had Rhaenys, but my brothers could have a cask of red between the both of them and still be able to sing the Song of the Seven without making a single mistake.

She looked down the dais and around the hall, looking everywhere she could in search of her younger brother, even at the galleries in case he had somehow managed to sneak past her before sighing and turning to Ashara. "Oberyn said he would be here for when the tournament started. Have you seen him anywhere?"

"Not yet, no," Ashara answered quickly. "And seeing that he isn't up here flirting with me, I have to assume he isn't here. But the tournament doesn't stop properly till tomorrow anyway, when the rest of the guests finally arrive. He'll probably get here not long after the Lannisters and the Starks do."

I wonder what he'll say when he finds out about Carik...a half-dragon prince! He's been to all the Free Cities and knowing him he probably left a trail of bastards behind him in the process, but bedding a she dragon? She laughed quietly.

I doubt even Oberyn would try and do that!

Then a groggy and worn out Rhaegar slowly stumbled his way up the dais, slumping into his seat without ever once looking at either Elia or Ashara, groaning wearily as he rubbed his aching temples, completely ignoring the meals in front of him. "...Gods...I want to kill myself..."

"Oh, husband," Elia asked cheerfully, leaning over with a smile. "Is there something wrong?"

"Four cups," was the prince's weary answer. "Four cups of wine one, one right after another."

"But what about all those friends you made?" Elia asked happily as Ashara suppressed a laugh with a bite of bread. "All those lords and ladies who were so eager to meet their future king must have had something interesting to say."

"It was just...compliments," Rhaegar muttered, covering his eyes from the light of the torches and braziers. "Compliment after compliment after compliment...about my clothes, about how they hoped to hear me play my harp, how they were sorry about my father's accident..."

"...then there was Jon...I think he was drunk," he said, meeting Elia's smile with an exhausted look of his own. "He said my eyes were pretty like gemstones."

"You won't believe how many times I have heard someone say that," Ashara said with a laugh.
"But they're not supposed to say it to men," Rhaegar murmured in reply. "But then, if that wasn't enough, Lord Whent just...gods have mercy. He couldn't stop talking about all the wine, not even for a moment. It was all just...Lysene wine this, Pentoshi wine that, Braavosi wine can be sour because of the cold sea air affecting the grapes, but Volantene wines are the closest to the ones that the Freehold used to drink since they use the same kind of grapes."

"He even told me about Summer Island wine," Rhaegar said at last, looking towards his meal. "I didn't even know the Summer Islanders had wine, now I know that they make it with cinnamon and orange juice mixed in, and exactly how they do so."

"My poor husband, I thought you enjoyed learning?" Elia asked, smiling.

"I was perfectly happy doing my learning here," Rhaegar sighed. "I was studying my books and making notes of everything that was useful, in case any of it could help us with him! And you got rid of them!"

"It doesn't matter what you were reading about - you could have been reading how to forge Valyrian steel for all I care. What matters is that you were doing it in the middle of a feast!" She answered, subtly gesturing towards the guests with a flick of her wrist, "It sets a bad example for the rest of the realm, but worse than that is that it makes all the lords and ladies in this hall think you care more about your books than you about them."

"But the dragon is more important than the feast!" Rhaegar snapped in reply.

"And whilst you were down there making friends and allies, or at least that is what I damn well hope you were doing," Elia answered as harshly as Rhaegar had, "Ashara and I spoke about said dragon and -"

"And what exactly did you come up with, then?" Rhaegar asked, turning all his attentions on her. "Go on, then. Explain."

"Where do you want me to start?" she asked sharply. "About how he is six and ten and little more? About how we should talk with him if we don't want him to run off to the Lannisters or anyone else who have things to offer? Or how we should try and make friends with him and ensure that our interests match?"

"I already realized all this, Elia," came the prince's fast answer. "I spoke with him hours ago and realized it then, when I was reading my books!"

Under the guise of brushing a loose hair from her eyes, Elia put her head in her hand and sighed. "For Seven's sake, I swear by the Crone that we are going in circles."

"Wine does that," Ashara muttered quietly from further down the table.

"I understand where you are coming from," Rhaegar said more softly, calming. "But believe me when I say that I have not spent a single moment not thinking about it. It's all I have done since we arrived."

"Then tell me about it," Elia said at last. "You don't need to keep secrets from me, husband. I only want what's best for our family, nothing more."
"I was going to come and speak with you once I had found out as much as I could," he answered. "But I think we've both realized the same thing: Carik might be half dragon, but he's still six and ten years old, and I would say that's the most important thing to remember about him."

*Now we are finally starting to get somewhere...*

"Ashara and I came to the same conclusion," she said truthfully. "We think that since he doesn't know anyone in this land - or anything about it - that the best way for us and him to get along is for us to take him back to the Red Keep. He has nowhere else to stay, and no friends or allies to look after him."

"That seems...reasonable," Rhaegar answered, struggling to stay focused on the matter at hand, swallowing hard and steeling himself. "My father would agree with it, too. I imagine he would agree to anything if it meant having a dragon at the capital."

"So it shouldn't be too hard for us to get him there, then," Elia said with a smile. "But the most important thing we need to do is make sure our interests work together. Is there anything he wants? Anything we can give him?"

"He doesn't want to be found out is one thing he mentioned earlier," Rhaegar answered quickly. "And he was very happy about being kissed by Ashara earlier."

"...when did that happen?" Elia asked, looking towards her Dayne handmaiden. "You kissed him? When?"

"Oh, it was when we took him to the Kingspyre Tower earlier," Ashara said with all the innocence of a young maiden...innocence that Elia didn't believe for even a moment. "He gave me some of his gold dragons since Arthur had borrowed all of mine, so I gave him a kiss on the cheek as thanks."

Elia laughed...but then Rhaegar narrowed his brow and drew her attention once again with quiet, soft words. "...he wants to see the wonders of the world."

"What?"

"When we were on the road here," Rhaegar murmured before speaking more clearly. "He said he wanted to see the Wall and everything else special there is in the kingdom."

Before Elia could reply, Queen Rhaella spoke with mild amusement, talking to the both of them for the first time since the feast began and without once taking her eyes off of the rest of the hall. "You two are like children looking at a dozen towers without realizing they are all part of the same castle."

"What do you mean?" Elia asked as Rhaegar looked on, intrigued by his mother's words.

"What you two have both struggled to say since Rhaegar came back to the table is belonging," the queen answered calmly, before continuing with a tiny smile, a rare thing for her. "Rhaenys is still far too young for either of you to have realized it, but there is nothing someone his age needs more than to belong to something. To have friends. To feel wanted. To feel like a part of something and that they matter, even a little."

"At his age most young men are squires or apprentices, serving under a knight or a craftsman, but no matter whether they are highborn or low they do it with other men near their own age," the queen said, looking to the both of them at last. "Now look at him down there. Look who he is sitting with.
They're both men near his own age - the young Stark cannot be older than nine and ten, and Lord Robert is nine and ten."

"That never happened with me, though," came Rhaegar's skeptical reply.

"Oh yes it did," Rhaella laughed, to Elia's surprise. "I remember it very well. You were never one out to make friends, no, and all the other boys of the court had found their place together on the courtyard practicing against one another, but you found your belonging in the libraries, with the maesters and books and scrolls."

"That is hardly the same as finding a group of friends to be with," Rhaegar answered.

"Is it really?" The queen asked. "You found a group of people who were just like you, even if they were older, which is exactly what I meant by belonging."

Rhaegar opened his mouth and raised his hand as if to answer...and then closed it again without once saying a word, simply unable to disagree with his mother's argument.

"But...wouldn't he try find a group of men who were his own age, then?" Elia asked, intrigued. "Or other bastards?"

"Why would he?" the queen reasoned. "He is doing well enough where he is, and getting along with them well. Why would he move? Would you move, if you were his age and had made friends with other women a few years older than yourself?"

"Besides, being with people older than himself allows him to feel as if he were older," the queen said at last as she raised her cup. "I am sure you yourself did the same at some point, Elia. Even Tywin Lannister did it in the War of the Ninepenny Kings, from what Aerys has told me, of how he mostly kept company with Lord Andros Brax and the other, older lords rather than with men his own age."

"...then...what do we do, if we want him to stay with us?" Elia asked. "Speak with him? Befriend him? Give him gifts?"

"Simple. Make it clear that you both need and want him to stay, and I would bet that he would do so, especially if it meant him coming to a city he has never been to before," the queen answered quickly and clearly.

"Then I will ask him tomorrow, unless he's still sober?"

As if to answer her, there came a wordless and angry shout from below the dais, and she looked to see a furious and soaked Carik bolting up out of his seat, his shoulder drenched in wine...and Jon Connington stared at him in horror, having spilled his drink over the half dragon's shoulder on his way back to the table from the casks of foreign wines.

"Whadda dink yer goin?" Carik snapped, menacing the Lord of Griffin Roost with a clenched fist he tapped into Jon's white and red coat.

Jon, himself drunk, spoke words as quickly as he could in an unintelligible pour of words, "Itwasanaccident-"

"I'll smashya bloody teeth in for it!"
Carik swung his fist around, a drunken throw of his hand...and missed, passing by the side of Jon's head harmlessly. But the Lord Connington stumbled backwards anyway, retreating from the near hit only to fall backwards against Lord Bryce Caron as the lord of Nightsong cut his meat...and to Elia's horror, the knife flew out of his hand and careened through the air, spinning away from the table reserved for the Stormlands...

*Oh for Seven's sake!*

...and straight to the table reserved for the lords of the Reach. There was a pained cry as Lord Arthur Ambrose's hand was nailed to the table by the falling knife, struck as he reached out for a bread roll.

"You fucking Stormland shits!" came a shout from Ser Garth Hightower, Arthur's goodbrother, bulky and strong and sat right next to the Lord Ambrose.

Then Robert Baratheon turned in his seat, still almost entirely sober...and the entire table fell silent, the hot and smoke filled air of the Hall of the Hundred Hearths filling with cold tension as his vassals followed his lead.

"What did you just say?"

For a moment, there was quiet...and Elia put her head in her hands and sighed. "Rhaegar, will you please stop this before it gets -"

"Your mothers were a bunch of whores!" shouted a voice from the table of Reachmen, from some lowly landed knight with nothing to lose.

Then the entire room exploded into a brawl. Furious Stormlords flipped their tables and charged at the Reachmen who rose from their seats to meet them, both sides led by none other than their own Lord Paramounts. The Lord of Storm's End slammed into Mace Tyrell shoulder first, sending him crashing to the ground, but a Redwyne tried to choke the giant Baratheon from behind...only for Eddard Stark to smash a wine glass into the back of his head and knock him out in the process.

Shouts erupted from the upper galleries of the hall as the other kingdoms made bets on which of the two would win, whilst on the ground floor even women were dragged into the fighting, lady against lady and lord against lord, with only the fact that their swords were left on the wall at the other side of the hall stopping the fight from turning to a slaughter.

"Rhaegar! Do something!" she said frantically to her husband.

"I...can't..." the crown prince murmured weakly, even more drunk than before as the wine finally began to affect him, slumping into his seat and sinking further into it.

"It doesn't matter what you do! Just do something!" she urged again before turning to the queen mother. "Rhaella! Where is Lord Whent?"

"He's...passed out in the corner," the queen sighed, gesturing to Lord Walter Whent...

...who was exactly as she said, passed out at the corner of the Reach's table with five empty cups of wine in front of him from a drinking competition he had been in, leaving the guards of the hall uncoordinated and helpless against the sheer mass of drunken nobility beating at one another with fists and chair legs and bones ripped from meat roasts, and Elia could only watch alongside them, powerless at the sight of it all. Robert Baratheon held Randyl Tarly down against the dining table by the throat, beating him into submission with one blow at a time, hammering at his face, but Elia's
eyes raced past them in search of another man, even as the Lord Commander's own brother was struck around the face with a stool.

"Where's Carik?" she asked frantically. "If he turns -"

Then, to her surprise and Rhaella's sadness, King Aerys walked through the hall's great open doors, supported by Ser Oswell Whent on his left and the Lord Commander on his right, the two men escorting him into the hall as he limped along with a wooden cane, smiling...till he noticed the brawl raging in the hall, and his eldest son helplessly drunk on the dais.

"As your king, I command you to stop this madness! Immediately!" he shouted with a deafening roar.

Immediately the most sober of the brawling lords fell to their knee in fealty, and the more drunken ones followed seconds after, as soon as they realized what was happening. Only a scarce few continued to fight...and one brave or drunken man came near the king, whether to speak or to fight, only for Ser Gerold to draw his sword, grip it by the blade and smash both his front teeth out with a single strike of the steel pommel.

"I am in a good mood today," King Aerys said, his voice carried to the highest levels of the Hall of the Hundred Hearths by the deathly silence filling the room. "The lot of you will return to your tables and behave as if the Father himself is sat next to you. I will hear and see nothing of this kind tomorrow or on any other day of this tournament for that matter."

"And if any of you break my peace again," the king said lowly. "You will return to your lands in pieces. Is that clear?"

There was a flurry of acknowledgements from all those who had been fighting, Aerys meeting every man and every woman with a cold, piercing stare. Then he allowed them to return to their tables with no more said as he walked towards the dais, his escorts dealing with the last of the brawlers with gauntletted fists and the strike of the flat sides of their swords, leaving the servants and men-at-arms to drag them out and back to their chambers. He walked past Carik - who was, surprisingly, sat at his table eating with Jon Connington as though nothing had happened - before patting him on the shoulder with an approving smile.

"Ser Gerold, it seems Rhaegar is drunk," the king said, still smiling. "Please, escort him back to his chambers."

"As you command, your grace," the knight replied before marching up the dais and around the table, hoisting Rhaegar from his seat and supporting his steps just as he had done for the king a few moments before, leading him away from the hall.

"I could not allow such a grand feast to go without my attendance," the king said happily as he ascended the steps, Oswell Whent standing ready to catch him if he fell, but far enough for it to be clear that the king could walk on his own. "Even if I might be injured, I am still a king, and a king has duties!"

Walking around the table to his own seat, he mussed his granddaughter's hair - to Rhaenys' pleasant surprise - and gave his wife a smile before sitting in his seat at the highest point of the dais at last, curious examining the foods that were already on the table before helping himself to something appetizing.
Then he smiled again.

"Carik, my young friend," the king said warmly...and Carik immediately looked towards him and straightened his back with as much surprise as Elia did. "Come, sit with me on the dais! Rhaegar's seat might as well not stay empty!"

"Of course!" Carik smiled widely as he rose from his seat, leaving Jon Connington to slowly sink into his seat, a servant coming over to lead him out of the hall at last.

The half dragon took the long way up the dais, walking across the hall in a diagonal to take the steps that were on the opposite side of the hall from himself, far from the Whent side of the table, then looped around and sat down into Rhaegar's empty seat. Even though Jon Connington had spilled wine over his shoulder after Carik himself had drank what could have only been half a dozen cups of wine, he still smelled almost entirely like apples and cinnamon and other sweet autumn scents and even seemed to be more sober now than he had been barely a few minutes before. Seven hells...has he sobered already? Not even Oberyn can do that, and he might as well have wine in his veins instead of blood...

"Enjoying the feast?" King Aerys asked with a curious and happy smile.

"I am...your grace," came Carik's reply, the delay of the proper courtesy making it clear that he was neither sober or otherwise. No, he must be half drunk and half not...but I wonder...

"Are you alright after your scuffle?" she asked, using concern to mask her curiosity. "What started it, anyway?"

It's not uncommon for men to get in fights over a spilled drink, true, but he couldn't have been that drunk if he is this sober now.

"Jon spilt...I mean, spilt his drink over my shoulder," the half-dragon answered. "But it was the wrong shoulder. I wouldn't have cared if it was the other one."

"What do you mean?"

"It was the one with my pocket and my..." Carik hesitated for a moment, his face covered in conflicting feelings before he slowly reached into his breast pocket. "The wine didn't reach them. The cloth absorbed it."

Then, with the lightest possible touch, he took out a small, square piece of paper...and showed it to her, passing it into her own hands as though it were a feather. It was an image of such stunning quality she could scarcely believe what her eyes saw - though the colors were not quite perfect, the only and only flaw in it, the image had such fine detail that it was as clear as if she had looked through an open window. It was of a man and a woman, both dressed in a similar style of clothing to what Carik himself had worn when they had first met him...but far more eye catching than their clothing was the woman, whose golden hair and golden eyes were the exact same as Carik's own.

"That must be his mother," Ashara said as she leaned over, looking at the picture for herself.

"She died not long after I was born, so I never got a chance to know her," Carik said with sadness in his eyes, taking the paper image back and returning it to his pocket for safekeeping. "It's all I have of her, so when Jon spilled his drink on me...I thought he could've damaged it. That's why I hit him."
"And then you made friends with him," Elia said with amusement.

"He's alright," Carik shrugged.

"I could have him killed if you want," Aerys offered with a smile and a warm, friendly voice. "Escorted back to his chambers and tossed out the window. It would look like an accident, you know."

"Your grace," Elia said quickly as Carik choked on his wine in surprise at the king's offer, "Since no real harm was done and since he doesn't seem to be all that bothered by it, I don't think there is a need for Lord Connington to die over a single spilled cup of wine."

"Be quiet, you," Aerys said firmly, the way a father might scold their child. "I am speaking with him, not you."

"That, uh...won't be necessary!" Carik said, nodding quickly.

"Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where I am," the king said as he patted Carik's shoulder again and with a wide smile.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to do such a thing to the men trying to win my hand with poems and song?" Ashara asked curiously and with a playing smile.

"Of course not!" Aerys snapped in offense. "That would be senseless murder and an abuse of my own power, too!"

_Oh, how I missed his self-contradictions..._

"So only half-dragons get to have the crown murder people, then?" Ashara sighed under her breath. "Shame."

Elia looked at her friend.

"It was only a jape," Ashara answered honestly.

"With japes like these, my lady, mayhaps you will make things worse for yourself," the king said as he laughed, his unpredictability making Ashara go quiet rather than risk her luck for a second time with a reply.

"...why didn't they ever visit me..." Carik murmured quietly under his breath as he looked down at a meat course with disinterest, absentmindedly tipping a slice of beef joint over and over with a knife. "...I never did anything that could have upset them..."

_Hmmm...?_

She continued her meal, saying nothing...and focused entirely on everything that Carik said, listening to the words he mumbled under his breath as he started to slide back into drunkenness.

"...I did everything they could have wanted, but they still never visited...Maxos would have said if they did." Then he shifted in his seat, resting his head in his hand. "...she couldn't, but he was the Emperor of Rivellon, so he should have had time, but he never did...why? Why didn't he visit?"
He must be talking about his father...

She looked towards Carik, and considered her words carefully, trying to learn as much as she could without upsetting the drunk and brash half dragon prince. "I heard you talking to yourself, and I was wondering if there was something wrong?"

"I'm just...thinking, is all," Carik sighed sadly.

"About your family?"

Carik nodded, and spoke with quiet, hushed words. "My father...he had all the power in the world, and never even tried to visit me. I just...don't understand...he had the power to make it happen if he wanted it to happen, Maxos could have just teleported him to the tower or something, but...he didn't."

"He didn't do it, even though he had the power. Why?" he echoed. "Why..."

Carik blinked...and then there was grief. It was a torrent, a look of utter heartbreak washing over his face, like that of a father watching his sons being killed one by one before his very eyes.

"...why didn't he ever love me?"

So much for not upsetting him...

She hurriedly turned towards Ashara as tears began to form on Carik's cheeks. "Ashara, will you please hurry him back to his chambers before something bad happens involving a very sad dragon?"

"Why me?" Ashara asked with a wave towards the white cloaked knight who had returned to his seat after escorting the king into the hall. "Why not Oswell?"

"Because he knows who you are and trusts you," Elia answered quickly, glancing back towards Carik and afraid the king might blame her. "He's more likely to follow you out than anyone else."

"Because I'm a woman and will get his attentions quicker, you mean," Ashara sighed as she rose from her seat, brushing a crease from her silky white dress. "Fine. I'll get him out of the hall and try to keep him out of trouble."

"Thank you," Elia said gratefully. "I'll get you something nice from the market tomorrow."

"Please, do," Ashara sighed before tapping Carik's shoulder and drawing his attention.

Then she leaned into his ear and whispered...something. Elia wasn't sure what she had said, only that Carik's response was instantaneous, his eyes going wide and his attentions snapping straight to her. Then she flashed him a teasing smile and turned towards the entrance, walking slowly and with a sway of her hips...and Carik simply rose from his seat and followed her out in silence, receiving jealous glares from some of the men trying to win Ashara's affections as he did.

I must admit, that worked better than I was expecting...seven hells. That's what he needs. Family. He never had one of his own, so when anyone who gives him even the smallest bit of love he goes straight towards them like a moth to fla-

"His father must have been a truly evil man," Aerys sighed. "Were he here now, I would show him
the folly of his ways...and as for you," the king glared coldly before giving her a toothy smile, offering her a flagon full of strong, Stormland wine. "I do believe you need a drink."

_He wants me to get drunk and embarrass myself, the mad devil._

"Your grace," she started quickly and with an apologetic tone. "I never meant for him to be upset, I only asked what was wrong -"

"Drink. Your king commands it," Aerys said more firmly.

"Your grace," Ser Lewyn said, coming from the end of the Stormlord's table to his niece's rescue at last. "Childbirth weakened Elia's constitution greatly...a cup of such strong wine and who knows what might happen."

"I'm already quite tipsy because of it, your grace," she lied, making herself sway as she stood, "May I have my leave to rest?"

The king smiled at last, setting the flagon back down. "Of course. If my good-daughter needs rest, then it is rest she shall have!"

"...does this mean the feast is over?" Rhaenys asked in confusion, looking around. "But...cake?"

"Oh, you can stay," Aerys said warmly. "But your mother needs to go lie down now. Isn't that so, Ser Lewyn? Please, escort her back to her chambers."

_So, he only wanted me out of the dining hall...well, I suppose that is better than him wanting me burnt or beheaded or any other number of things he might want to do._

"Of course, your grace," Ser Lewyn bowed as Elia went around the table, leaning on her uncle just enough as to appear tipsy, but not enough to appear properly drunk and risk having the lords of Westeros think of her as a drunkard, her white cloaked uncle escorting her down the steps of the dais and out towards the door, speaking with a low and quiet voice that could not be heard amidst the clatter of knives and plates and cups that filled the hall. "Don't worry about Rhaenys, even Aerys would not be that mad as to harm his granddaughter."

"Oh, believe me when I say that it isn't her I am worried for," Elia sighed, taking in a deep breath of the fresh and cold evening air. "I am worried that the king thinking that some jape or laugh is a threat against himself and having someone's tongue torn out."

"I would say that is unlikely," Ser Lewyn smiled. "The king has been in a good mood ever since he woke up earlier. Even his injuries were not enough to keep him bedridden, so excited and happy he is because of the dragon. And when the king is happy, he is predictable."

"So leaving the hall was probably the best way to avoid something unpleasant, then," Elia answered, rubbing her temples. "Seven, I didn't think I had this much wine."

"It's in the food as well as in your cups, Elia," her uncle laughed with amusement.

"...oh for Seven's sake," came the sound of Ashara's voice from near the Godswood, followed by an irritated sigh.

"Ashara?" Elia asked, her voice echoing through the empty courtyard. "Is something wrong?"
"Only that I managed to lose a dragon," came the response.

For a moment, Elia was silent.

"Please tell me you are referring to a gold dragon."

"Oh, I wish I was," Ashara sighed as she emerged from the godswood, arms crossed, hair tussled and completely alone. "He wanted to see the weirwood tree since he had never seen one before and was dragging me over there, so I let see it. Then he turned into a dragon, leapt into the sky and...he was gone."

Elia's jaw dropped.

"You mean...you lost him?" Ser Lewyn said, stunned. "You lost a dragon? The first one seen in Westeros for over a century?"

"In my defense, it is not as if I can stop a half-drunk half-sobbing dragon from deciding to fly off, as I am not in my dragon riding shoes to say the least," Ashara said innocently, "And besides, have you seen what color he is? He is the exact same shade of black as the damned night sky."

"He couldn't have gotten far, and I doubt he would have flown far anyway," Elia sighed. "Look around, and no matter what you do, do not tell the king what happened."

...it is going to be a long night...

****

Ravenseat

There was a flutter of wings as a raven soared through the palace's halls, looping around before the closed door before returning to its master's robed shoulder, powerful men and women, provincial governors of the new Empire and the kings and queens of the old kingdoms of Rivellon staying clear of his path, knowing who he was merely by the bird perched upon his shoulder. He walked in silence, the only sound the echo of his footsteps, with even the Emperor's own guards knowing who he was at a mere glance and opening the door to their charge's solar without even a moment's hesitation, the great engineer, the designer of all the weapons that had made the armies of the Empire invincible, passing through without even a moment's challenge. The chamber was dark and dimly lit, filled with the haze of smoke and whatever natural light could make its way through the thick curtains, and in the middle of the room, as always, was Sigurd, sat behind his desk with a bottle on the table and puffing a fat cigar, aged far beyond his years by the heartbeat and grief of losing the woman he loved.

The guards closed the door behind the Architect...and at last, he spoke, his sentences short and quick. "You wished to see me, your grace?"

"I did," the emperor said, taking his cigar from his mouth and placing it into his crystal glass ashtray to rest. "I need your help with a...sensitive matter. Your choice whether to help or not, since I know you might have...strong feelings about it. I wouldn't have turned to you at all, knowing the history you and I share, but other than Maxos I have no one else to turn to."

The Architect raised an eyebrow beneath his hood. "What is it, sire?"
Sigurd leaned forward, brushing a hand through the bristle of his unshaven cheeks before meeting the Architect's eyes.

"Remember Aurora?"

"Of course I do," the Architect answered flatly. "How could I ever forget her?"

Sigurd said nothing, allowing his gaze to speak for him.

"I vied for her hand just as much as you did," the Architect added, to Sigurd's satisfaction. "You won in the end and I was furious, of course, as any man would be, but I moved on...and then she died."

"We argued for so long, didn't we?" Sigurd said, seeming ready to laugh at the pointlessness of it all.

"Indeed we did," the Architect nodded...before asking. "Is there anything else, your grace?"

"I need you to find someone for me," the emperor said at last. "Someone very precious to me. I had given Maxos the task of finding them, but I am not entirely hopeful he can do it alone. You have made countless miracles on Rivellon, and I hoped you could do it once again, because we will be in dire need of one to get them back. They're in another universe."

The Architect...smiled.

"Considering what you spoke of before saying why you asked for me, it is clear that this precious person is a child of yours by Aurora," the Architect said quickly, piecing together the emperor's words with ease. "If he has been sent to another universe for whatever reason, then one could spend a lifetime searching for him and still never find him. He could be lost...forever."

The Architect saw the fear in the eyes of the Emperor of Rivellon. It made him feel warm inside.

"However," he said at last. "I do have a creation that could be of some assistance in this task."

"What is it?"

"You might well recall my experiments to create a teleporter and a cloaking device last year. Of course, there were a few minor teething problems with the project..."

"You mean how they had a tendency to explode or to melt whatever was travelling through them into goo?" Sigurd asked.

"...which did delay their development. However, after some work, I do believe that they are ready for another chance," the Architect answered, his voice full of pride. "Now, the cloaking device, you see, works by pushing the target object -"

"I do not need an explanation of how the technology works," Sigurd said firmly. "Can it help me get my son back?"

"With a few minor modifications, it would be possible to combine the two devices into one to create a machine capable of shifting an object from one universe to another," the Architect said quickly. "It will require a large amount of space. A room's worth, perhaps, with the need for a dedicated and\n\ninternal\n\npower supply to ensure that it make the return voyage. This means a large vehicle - a battleship, perhaps, armed and armored enough to face whatever challenges might come its way,
whilst being able to carry enough supplies for a long voyage."

"Then I will give you the flagship of the Imperial Navy to house it," Sigurd said instantly. "What else do you need?"

"A means to find your son," the Architect said simply. "I already have knowledge of the needed technique...you see, in the same manner that knowing the name of a demon gives you the ability to summon and control them, so too can anyone be tracked through a single drop of their blood...or that of their kin."

The emperor's jaw dropped and his eyes went wide, a chill entering the room.

"You're talking about -"

"*Magia Sanguinis,*" the Architect said at last. "Blood magic. They are foreboding words, that may be true, but even a tool with as terrible a history as that is still merely a tool."

"There must be an alternative," the emperor said quickly. "Something that we can do without needing to resort to demon's work and to such...foul things."

"It is possible to search for him manually, world by world, certainly," the Architect reasoned. "But it could take years, maybe even decades...or, using but a single drop of your blood, I could have his rescuers in his world in a few days and back with him by the end of the week."

Sigurd went quiet for a long moment.

Then he sighed.

"You will get what you need at the very moment you need it. Not a second before."

Inside the Architect, the demon smiled.

"Then I shall depart to start preparations," the Architect answered eagerly. "I will be in my workshop if you need me."

"One other thing," Sigurd said at last...and to the Architect's surprise, rose from his seat, taking his cigar and pressing its slowly burning tip into the glass of his tray. "The Raven. I want to take a look at it."

"The construction site could be dangerous, your grace," the Architect said carefully. "And there is not yet much to see. It is still a few years away from completion."

*And inoperable, till I have a sufficiently large source of magical power to drive the machinery...*

"And yet you pile report after report on my table about progress, designs for turbines and levitation devices and automatic music players," Sigurd said, picking up his coat and throwing it around his shoulders, quickly buttoning it up and starting to look a little more like the ruler he was supposed to be. "You promised me a ship the likes of which the world has never seen before, and it has cost the Empire millions upon millions already. I plan to see it for myself, even if it might not yet be done. I want to see what I am paying for, Architect."

*He must think I have been swindling the entire Empire. I would be offended by the suspicion, if it*
"Very well then, your grace," the Architect and the demon replied carefully. "If you will come with me, then I will gladly show you what your money is paying for. You will need to be careful, however. The worksite is...not entirely safe."

"I've been in dozens of battles, a shipyard scares me little," Sigurd answered, walking past the disguised demon and proceeding to the door, opening it quickly and entering the hall beyond, his guards immediately following without any hesitation and with weapons at the ready.

"He could have a little more courtesy for the man who won him his war," the Architect sighed before racing after the emperor, as much following him through the halls as he was walking alongside him.

"So, tell me the rest about this design of yours," Sigurd asked as they walked. "This...teleporter. I am not entirely familiar with how it works."

"It is little that you have not already heard before, your grace," the Architect answered. "The cloaking device and the teleporter both operate on the same principle of pushing an object outside of our own universe, if only for a short time. The cloak partially submerges one within it, like putting one's finger half under water and half not. It stays enough in our world to be able to collide with things, true, but far enough out that it cannot properly be seen."

"The other, the teleporter, is more...complex," he sighed. "Much so. There have been more than a few problems with it. In principle, the device works like this," he said as he took out his notepad, turning to a blank page before drawing two circles, a start point and a destination, with obstacles between.

"To get from one place to another, one would normally take the swiftest path...like so," he added as he drew a line, looping past the barriers and towards the destination. "This takes time."

"But if one could ignore the obstacles..." he said, pulling the page from the book before folding the page itself in half, then punching his pencil through the place where start and end points overlapped. "Then one can travel instantly. This is more or less how every single magical portal in the world works, and indeed, how my teleporter does."

"Then what went wrong?" Sigurd asked. "I want to know for certain that it won't happen again."

"A million different things could have happened," the Architect shrugged. "If I had to assume...well, I suppose the teleporter hit another universe and went through that on its way back. Somewhere the melon inside could not survive."

"Could not survive, you say?" Sigurd asked with amusement. "It had melted like wax."

"But the machine was intact, else it would not have came back at all," the Architect said. "That means we are on the right course. A reexamination of my calculations, a tweak to the machinery and indeed, we should have a fully functional teleportation device capable of carrying someone not only from one place to another, but from one universe to another."

"Without killing the passengers?"

"Without killing the passengers," the Architect nodded. "If a normal, magical portal from one place to another doesn't kill the transitioner, then neither should a mechanical equivalent. If magic can do
something, then science can do the same given enough effort."

"I hope you are right, Architect, for your sake," Sigurd said coldly.

For but a moment, a heartbeat, the demon was tempted to laugh in the face of his threat, to dare him to do his worst. He would tell him then how he had poisoned the minds of all three of his children, twisted them in their dreams, shaped and sculpted them into monsters who would tear the Empire to pieces the moment their father was gone and plunge all of Rivellon into a war of nightmarish proportions, and how he would do the same to his last and final child, his child with Aurora, once he had gotten his hands on him...but he stayed quiet instead as they came up outside his own office, content to ignore his words and to savor the taste of victory for another time.

"Stand guard," Sigurd commanded his guards, the pair taking up positions besides the door as the Architect led the fat emperor inside.

It was not only an engineer's office by name, but my look and function, too, covered in blueprints and designs for all sorts of machines and devices, from coal fired boilers and factory tools to machine guns and airships, the workhorses and creations of their industrial age, with miniature models never far away and even a few, small scale prototypes sitting at rest and covered with thin blankets to keep dust at bay. A draft board stood near the window, with the half finished drawings for a new type of rocket, and not far from it was a blackboard with all the calculations needed to make it fly written in white chalk, whilst on the furthest side of the room, past his paper strewn desk, was a long set of book cases that stretched from one side of the room to the other.

"Here we are," the Architect said at last, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. "Please, your grace, I would suggest not touching anything."

"These creations seem harmless enough," the emperor answered, examining a small tripod three inches high, a scale model of one of the Empire's future fighting machines, before flicking a switch on its side and watching as it marched across the table, occasionally letting out small puffs of steam from its chimney. "Certainly nothing to be afraid of."

"Then, please," the Architect said, examining his bookcases carefully. "Try not to touch anything too delicate, and especially not the chalkboard. It took a week to get those numbers correct."

"Very well," Sigurd answered, flicking the switch again and returning the tiny trooper back to its place before turning his attentions to a tiny double barreled tank floating half an inch off of the table's surface, pressing down on it only for it to spring back to its former height. "You haven't stopped designing weapons even after the end of the war. How come?"

"Demons," the Architect replied, half tempted to laugh at the irony. "It is better for us to continue developing new weapons to make sure that they never once close the arms gap than to become complacent and allow them to become a true threat again. Besides, new weapons and vehicles are a good way of turning theoretical knowledge into practical experience."

"You say that as if most people understand the work you do," the emperor replied with mild amusement. "Half the best minds of the entire world still have little idea how most of your machines work."

"All the more time for them to continue learning, then," came the demon's answer as he removed a book from the shelf and carried it over to an empty space on the other side, rearranging books at a quick pace. "If a mechanic whose only experience with machines comes from his grandfather's
windmill can mend an engine, then there is no excuse for a university professor who dedicated his entire life to science to be unable to figure out how it works."

The emperor laughed at that...and watched as the last book slid into place, the bookcase itself sliding apart in the middle and revealing another door, this one of hard steel and none of the elegance of the rest of the palace. It slid open with the clamor of gears, showing nothing more than an elevator suspended by a strong steel cable, surrounded by dismal concrete and dim lighting.

"This way, your grace," the Architect smiled, taking charge at last as he walked inside, glancing at the button to start their descent. "Mind your fingers on the rails. You wouldn't wish to lose them, would you?"

The emperor let out a sigh of mild annoyance before following him inside, keeping his hands clear of the edges of the elevator. With him inside, the Architect pressed the button...and they began their descent into the structure beneath the palace, the place where the small prototypes and designs he had on his desk were turned into very real and entirely functional machines.

"Look...about Aurora," Sigurd sighed. "I know you had feelings for her as much -"

"That matters very little now," the Architect answered, using a solemn voice to maintain the illusion of actually caring. "What is done is done. She loved you and wanted myself as nothing more than a friend. She is gone, anyway. There is no point mourning something lost when we might never be able to have it again."

"You make it sound so easy to forget," Sigurd answered sadly. "She was the love of my life. I miss her smiles, her golden locks, the way her voice flowed when she sang..." the Architect rolled his eyes behind his hood. "I miss her so much....it as if the light has gone out of my life..."

"I miss the peace and quiet of not being used as emotional support, but you don't hear me complaining..." The Architect sighed under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I said I miss the peace and quiet that she brought whenever she went," the Architect said innocently. "She truly was one of a kind."

"She really was," Sigurd said sadly.

"Ah, I still remember the day she first came to court," the Architect said, reminiscing...and trying to push Sigurd even further into his depressions by reopening his wounds. "She came to see you, fascinated by all your armies and how you had dragged all the realms of Rivellon to peace...golden hair wavering, a sweet smile..."

"I...I remember..." Sigurd sobbed.

"The way she spoke with such genuine interest," the Architect continued. "Such...wondrous admiration!"

Tears flowed down the emperor's cheeks as he stammered words...and then there was a loud beep as the elevator came to a stop at last, the door ahead of the opening once more to reveal a long tunnel.

"And here we are!" the Architect said with a smile, waving over to the trembling Sigurd. "Come
along now, your grace. You wished to see the Raven, after all."

The broken man who was the Emperor of Rivellon in title only nodded, brushing the tears from his cheeks before following the smiling, cheerful Architect through the tunnel. It was a long walk, with nothing but the sound of their footsteps to be heard at first, but after a few minutes, a dull sound began to echo through the tunnels, the sound of machines at work...grinding, humming, clanging, turning, a growing warmth and light, and then, finally, they emerged into the massive construction hall beneath the palace's gardens.

And the Architect smiled as he waved with an open arm towards the massive ship, watching as the emperor's eyes went wide. "And there it is."

The Raven.

Its massive steel skeleton dominated the entire room from one wall to the other, the immense vessel as long as the greatest battleship and three times as wide, a massive trimaran, held off the ground by a titanic scaffolding of girders and chains and iron, thousands of labourers working on the ship and on the massive foundries in the rooms connected to the main assembly floor, forging the great plates of enchanted metal that would form her glittering golden hull. The thunder of hammers echoed through the hot and humid air, the sound seeming to carry the smell of hot metal and sweat with it, along with the damp condensation from the boilers of the massive steam engines that powered the great cranes and hydraulic presses and rollers of the massive secret shipyard, workers hurriedly turning freshly poured moulds of white hot steel too hot to look at into the immensely strong ribs that would make the Raven's backbone and into the plates that would cover her decks and give the greatest creation of their age a beautiful form that would be spoken of for centuries to come.

"Look there," the Architect said, pointing towards one of the steam cranes. "They are raising one of her plates into place."

Sigurd's eyes snapped towards the target of the Architect's finger, watching intently as a dozen men worked with machines to raise a wall of steel an inch thick into place, plated with gold on one side to protect against the elements and covered in swirling patterns.

"It will take some forty thousand plates to form the ship's hull alone," the Architect said. "Some will be more ivory white than gold, but all of them must be specially treated, both with chemistry and with sorcery, to ensure that not a single drop of water can breach the ship's hull and corrode its ribs."

"Seven have mercy," the emperor said quietly. "This must be why it is taking so long."

"As I told you," the Architect smiled, watching as a crew of dwarves, the only race small enough to fit within the hull, fastened the plate to the frame from the inside, leaving the outside seamless and perfect. "Construction is underway."

"I must admit I was half expecting to see you burning money down here," Sigurd said quietly, recovered almost entirely from the demon's emotional prodding.

"The greatest things have the greatest price," the Architect answered. "This is but the first phase of construction; the second will have the installation of all the ship's machinery once the hull is structurally complete, and the third will be the time of decoration and furnishing."

"How in the Seven's name do you do it?" the emperor asked at last. "How can you be this great with the sciences?"
"Do you ask Maxos how he is so good with magic?" the Architect asked, deflecting the question. "Do you ask why a master craftsman is so good at working wood? Or how you yourself are so good at leading men into battle?"

"No, I do not," Sigurd answered, eyes fixated on the great machine before the both of them. "But you have always been good with machines. You can sketch out an engine on a piece of paper and have it work exactly as drawn," he glanced over to the Architect with curious eyes. "You can even draw a perfectly straight line freehanded."

"If you must know, I made a pact with a demon," the Architect said sarcastically, the emperor replying with an amused chuckle.

"How will this ship fly, anyway?" Sigurd asked, curious. "I see nothing like the soft skin of a zeppelin or anything like the wings of those planes the Imps are working on."

"An excellent question," the Architect smiled, gesturing towards four large, bare struts sticking from the ship's rear, two on the left and two on the right. "Though they are nowhere near completed, the combined effect of each array will allow the ship to defy gravity itself and levitate as high as twenty thousand feet, leaving a great thunderstorm in the ship's wake. In addition, they will help provide a shielded, protected atmosphere, so that the passengers will be able to resist the effects of altitude sickness."

"You really have thought of everything," Sigurd said with an approving nod.

"Satisfied that I am not squandering your money, your grace?"

"Don't take that tone of voice with me," the emperor answered harshly. "You may be the Empire's greatest engineer, but I am still your emperor...and yes, I am satisfied. I shall leave you to your work."

The Architect nodded, leaving the Emperor of Rivellon to return to the surface, walking past the construction site of the Raven to the thick steel door of his second, true office, the place where his experimental designs were kept amongst other and often more important things, the things he needed to continue his role at court. Ignoring the labourers and their work, giving them as much interest as a man might give to the ants of the grass he walked over, he stepped past them all and the opened the door with a crackle of energy before walking into the darker, colder room within and sealing the door tight behind him, finally alone in the privacy of his personal chamber, a spartan place lacking decoration but with pale white papers, tables covered in the most dangerous of his prototypes and bookcases and everything else he could possibly need to carry out his work, along with a large chemistry set.

Then he sighed, relieved to be free of the damned emperor at last.

His raven leapt off to its normal resting place besides his desk, and the Architect walked past, to the large mirror that was part of his dresser, removing his hood and black gloves and examining his hands and face, their skin as pale as curdling milk, for any sign of decay before reaching up, behind the mirror, and taking the syringe hidden inside. Unscrewing his lamp at the middle and extracting the hidden bottles of formaldehyde, phenol and pink dye, he drew forth the noxious mixture of embalming fluids and injected it into his carotid artery, just below his left ear, rubbing the site to put the color of living flesh back into his skin.
Then he cracked his joints before returning everything back to the way it was, slumping down into his seat, tired and weary from dealing with the fat emperor. His little raven flew over, curious, and the demon sighed again, reaching into his pocket...and drawing out a handful of corn seeds and berries before offering them to the raven to eat.

"It has taken so long, hasn't it?" he asked quietly as the bird leaned down and began its hungry pecking. "So, so long. But the time is almost here, and everything is going according to plan, isn't it?"

He smiled, brushing the bird's feathers without once losing his happiness. It had taken years of planning and nearly three decades of work, but finally, finally, everything was approaching fruition. At the start of it all the Architect had been a mere, unwitting pawn in the demon's work, a hopeful man with the dream of making the world a better place through the sciences, but one who lacked the ingenious spark needed to be a truly great inventor...and it was those frustrations that had first brought him and the demon together in the first place.

"I made him what he was," the demon smiled as he brushed his bird's feathers with the back of his hand. "He thought he was strong! Strong enough to tame the greatest of Acheron's creatures. And yet...he was a fool," he laughed.

"He forgot the first and most important rule of all. A demon's gift is never a gift. So hungry he was with the desire to change the world, so eager, he ran into my arms, begging for my knowledge! And so, I gave it to him, gave him what he asked for. Weapons the likes of which had never been seen before."

The demon smiled and leaned back into his seat, reminiscing in the sweet memory of his deception. He had always had a taste for the sciences and a patience that was rarely ever found in the others of his kind, but it was those very things that had made the greatest and most dangerous plan of any demon ever a reality, and why the Architect was so confident in his mastery over the infernal that he gladly accepted the designs that he gave him, following his advice to the letter and accepting the guidance that led him to Sigurd, still then a young king dreaming of glory. Armed with wondrous weapons the likes of which had never been seen before, it was trivial for the armies of the newborn Empire to massacre their foes, their treads war machines easily blasting apart charges of brave and heroic knights covered in shining plate armor and rolling through pike squares unimpeded. On the day that victory was finally achieved, the Architect had celebrated with all others the triumph of the Imperial Army over every other power, toasting with Maxos and Sigurd.

But as the sun rose the day after, the Architect had come back to him again, asking for more designs, for things to build the peace with, for things that would make him be appreciated and famous across the world...and once again, the demon had obliged him. He showed him how food could be preserved through canning and refrigerant gases, how electricity could be harnessed to create lighting and to cook with, all peaceful uses of science and industry with no use for killing other men with, and the Architect had happily made them real and basked in the glory of it. In that moment he finally fell under the demon's sway, heeding his words, building the things that the demon told him to build, and when Aurora first came to court it was the demon that encouraged him to try and vy for her love, knowing full well that she had no interest in him as anything but a friend.

And when she fell in love with Sigurd instead and when the Architect fled from the court, the demon simply had to watch and wait as the Architect's soul rotted, inside and out, from jealousy and anger and grief before whispering the formula, the recipe, for the most powerful poison he had knowledge of. The Architect, his mind clouded by bitter envy, brewed it himself without ever needing a moment's encouragement and returned to the capital to do the deed himself, though in truth, even the
demon did not know for sure whether the poison would work, as killing a member of the ancient race was easier said than done, though the weakness that was the result of childbirth had certainly explained why it had. Upon his arrival, he snuck into her chamber and poured it into her wine, watching from outside the window. When sweet, golden Aurora drank, she writhed and cried and choked and died in a matter of moments...and the Architect had been so overjoyed by the sight of his former love's death that he came at the sight before suffering a heart attack seconds later.

_Ah, I remember it well. I laughed so long at his throes of death and ecstasy that I wept blood. Such a twisted soul there rarely ever is!_

From that moment forward, the demon took complete control of the empty husk that was the Architect's corpse, directly able to continue his schemes without needing to influence its original owner into doing what he said, and slowly began to carry out the rest of his plan. With Sigurd fast plunging into grief at the loss of his love and the Architect's own trusted position at court, he had gradually sent the Empire on its path towards oblivion, using his own powers to twist the dreams of Sigurd's trueborn heirs into nightmares, making the children themselves into monsters in the process, paranoid madmen who would never for a moment even think of sharing the Empire with their kin, and all that led to now, where the captain of the ship of state was so busy getting drunk in his office in his grief that he refused to notice his own children plotting to usurp his throne, yet alone take action against them.

_Or so it had seemed...the old emperor still has some wits in him._

Corvus salivated at the thought of having the half dragon within his grasp, in using the incredible power of his draconic blood to fuel his blood magic, perhaps even taking his body as his own...the thought of the combination of dragon and demon was enough to make even him giddy with excitement, and so he walked over to his desk and left his pet to feed, finding the necessary papers amongst his collection to start the work needed to finish his task before grabbing a fresh and full pen, quickly and deftly putting pen to paper and drawing the combined machine on a third blank sheet with ease.

_I have dabbled with appetizers long enough...Sigurd's children are little more than madmen now, but once the dragon prince is mine, once Sigurd is broken by the loss of the last remnant of his beloved...the feast will begin, and all of Rivellon shall be the main course._

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End of Part 10!

Chapter End Notes

In Westeros, we finally see the first day of feasting at the Tournament of Harrenhal, though this is actually a smaller scale feast than the main one itself - not all the guests have actually arrived yet, particularly the Northmen, so what's been happening is that the cooks have been gradually ramping up to the full feast...but the sheer number of guests and the scale of the tournament means that even this smaller feast was huge, and that once the tournament itself starts it will be a feast like none other. No expense has been spared, and that's just to guarantee that everyone in Westeros who could possibly
have an interest in attending the tournament is attending the tournament...but the only reason it could be such a large tournament is because the Targaryens basically paid for the entire thing. Using the realm's strong finances - which are in damn good shape, hence why Robert took the throne whilst the treasury was still full after a year of war - to pay for the gathering was all part of the plan Elia and Rhaegar concocted to draw up support amongst the Westerosi lords to try and drag Aerys off the throne away from King's Landing where he would have the greatest amount of support, but Carik has distracted the crown prince in a way much, much worse than Lyanna ever did, to the point he was reading his book in the midst of the feast and making notes rather than doing what we was supposed to be doing - making friends.

So, after a little bit of a push, Elia gets him to go wine tasting with Lord Whent...which, as you can see, backfired later on :p But whilst Rhaegar reluctantly went off drinking and socializing, Elia and Ashara worked to figure out Carik once and for all, and see Carik taking a rather...unique approach to feasting in that he is approaching it like a dinner with a whole lot of course rather than, say, a buffet, which is what a medieval feast has more in common with...and of course, Rhaegar returns not long after and Elia and him finally end up on the same page after talking past one another for a few moments, thanks to the aid of the one woman amongst them who has actual experience dealing with young men - Rhaella.

But by the time things are sorted out, Carik is drunk...and he picks a fight with Jon Connington that quickly escalates into an all out brawl between the Stormlands and the Reach as Rhaegar starts feeling the impact of drinking alongside Lord Whent, leaving him unable to properly intervene and put a stop to the fighting. But once King Aerys arrives, his Kingsguard giving him the support he needs to continue standing and using a wooden cane to walk, the brawl ends quickly and Rhaegar is sent from the hall with an escort and Aerys sits upon the dais, smiling and happy and looking almost entirely the part of a king thanks to having his hair cut, his beard groomed and his nails clipped. Getting Carik to sit on the dais in the place of honor by the king's side, Carik

Carik sobers up not long after sitting in the place of honor by the king's side - the best way to think of his ability to tolerate booze is like having a group of machines in a row; the second machine can easily deal with the things that the first machine gives it, but can only process so much at a time and the third machine past the second even less, so if the first machine puts too much on the conveyor belts everything gets blocked up, which is more or less how he can deal with booze so easily even in his human form - and explains why he started the fight in the first place...and the reason is none other than his fear that the wine spilled over his shoulder could have damaged the photographs he has with him, the only thing he has left of his parents...and when he gets drunk again, it becomes obvious to all just what his problem is. I probably don't need to say anything about it, either :p

As usual, the summary is a bit too big for the notes, so the summary for the Rivellon section will be in the comments! :D
Man, it took longer to get back to this thread than I thought it would.

And, for a change of pace, rather than having almost comedic alternate universes where Carik is something like a lumberjack or movie star, which are kinda silly now that I think of them, we're going to have a rather serious one, or as serious as a tale with a talking dragon can be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Earth #155

Maxos peeked through the portal with curious eyes as the portal began to stabilize itself once again, its stormy surface swirling and resolving to reveal the land of a new world, a new world with grey overcast skies threatening to pour down their contents and fields of emerald green grass, strong and healthy and with glittering drops of water upon their blades. It was a healthy and fertile world, certainly so, and though he might not have been able to see so much as a single sign of civilization through its glassy surface, not so much as a single house of stone or wood or even straw. Yet he knew that looks could be deceiving, for the forest that had concealed one of the many Cariks he had seen on his search and hear that had accompanied him had not been much different. Properly cast and properly bound to his thoughts, the spell would always place him within a short distance of the prince, no more than a few miles to be sure...and even that inaccuracy could perhaps be brought down to but a few meters with the proper incantations, as Aurora had taught him all those years before, but he had little time for such things, not when it would take hours to complete a single portal, not when it was the young prince that he had sworn a vow to protect with all his strength and to his dying breath that was trapped in another world where every moment could risk bringing him into danger, into harm.

That was enough to motivate him to step through the portal, and step through the portal he did, marching his way through at a comfortable pace and lowering his staff as he stepped through to yet another world, not even the barrier between one universe and the next enough to keep him from the boy who was his foster son. Entering a new world with a motion as seamless as passing through a door frame, he felt the air blow against his cheeks and rustle through his grey hair and long beard with the lightest chill and the softest wetness, carrying with it the soft scent of damp soil after rain, a smell that was sweet and familiar no matter how strange the world itself may have been. It brought a smile to his face, reminding him of his homeland on Rivellon, but he turned his attentions to the task ahead, and as before and as again if the prince was not on this world, he raised his free hand and conjured a tiny speck of free magic, an orb of light no bigger than a dandelion's seed and just as inclined to drift at a calm pace towards a new home. It floated for a moment, almost tentative, and then it began to pick up speed as it began to waft towards a nearby well of energy, yet it gained speed a dozen times faster than any orb of light before it, its float beginning to rise into a sprint before he could even turn to see where it was going.
Seven, he thought as he spun on his heels, seeing that the land was wet plains all around for mile after mile but for a small stout home of grey cobblestone and mortar, hidden behind the portal itself and with a well travelled road leading to its edge. He must be close indeed for it to travel so quickly!

He squinted as the minute orb of energy zipped into the distance, watching its path closely and watching as it passed onto the field besides the home, where a single lone man stood toiling away on the earth, dressed in hardy wool and leather as he pulled along a plough with nothing but a rope and his own strength, golden hair shimmering as he moved with ease, unhindered by its burden and so much so that an ox would look on with envy. The wisp of light rush towards him at a frenzied pace, blinking out of existence whilst still twenty feet away, either travelling so fast as to simply teleport from one place to the next or because it had reached its destination, Maxos wasn't sure, but on the road's end he saw a heap of a thousand items, bottles and pitchers and pots and candles and fruit and clothes and even gold and glittering gemstones alike, a sight that was almost as bizarre as that of the golden prince slowly making his way around a great square field of dark soil, yet he walked his way towards the prince all the same, using his staff to steady his steps on the wet grass, hopeful.

He might not be my world's Carik, he realized as he walked, the prince too tall, but to meet another version of him has never been anything but a pleasure. I wonder what this one is like?

His mind filled with questions, all crying out for their chance to be answered. How old was he and how many years had he spent here in whatever world this was? How had he fared in this land without his wizard or his people to aid him and with only his wits and strength? Was he treated well or harshly by its people? Did it even have people? What events might have happened in his homeland that were yet to occur in Maxos' own Rivellon? Had he seen other wizards on their search for their own princes? Or even other princes that were somehow trapped on the same world as he?

"Greetings, my young friend," the wizard shouted as he walked closer, only for the prince to give him little attention, even as the wizard stood at the edge of his field. "It is me, Maxos!"

"What is it now, Maxos?" the golden prince asked with a weary sigh, not even raising his eye towards the wizard. "My answer hasn't changed since the last time."

"...is something wrong?" the wizard asked, confused.

The golden haired prince finally looked to him, then, only to narrow his eyes at some unseen, unheard revelation, standing still in the soil and letting go of the rope. "You aren't my Maxos."

"I had thought so much myself," the wizard answered with his kindest courtesy. "I do apologize if I may have raised your hopes...or dashed them, it seems."

"It's nothing," the prince said, sighing as he crossed his arms again. "What brings you here, then? Are you searching for your Carik, too?"

"I am," he said, politeful and respectful. "I had hoped that this world might have had him."

"You won't find him here on this world, then," came Carik's answer, meeting the wizard with ancient eyes. "I chose this world so as to ensure I would not be disturbed much, and I would know if there was another version of myself here."

"You mean you are here through choice?" Maxos asked with surprise, raising a hand to his beard. "You were not brought here by anything usual, such as a black rift of some kind?"
"I am," came the reply. "I opened the portal myself from my Rivellon and travelled a while to find one that seemed comfortable enough to stay at. This one was the best, even if close enough to mine to allow my world's own Maxos to find me."

"I see," Maxos murmured in quiet understanding, a barrier between the two, a wall that he had not felt with any of the others who had been waiting for their own wizard and one that felt wrong to be there as he spoke with so familiar a face, and so he tried to break it the best he could...and yet, he could not think of what to say. What could he possibly say to soften things between them, when this Carik had so clearly held some disregard for his world's equivalent of the wizard before him, one who held the power to open portals between worlds at his own whim? What could they possibly talk about?

He was at a loss for words, and the prince could see it plainly on his face, frowning, and so the wizard bowed. "I apologize for interrupting you, then. I shall take my leave."

"Forgive me," the prince sighed, straightening himself at last, arms crossed before his front. "I am simply frustrated with my world's version of you. I should not be treating you so coldly, it is ignoble of me. It has been a long day."

"You need never ask for my forgiveness," the wizard said with a warm smile. "But if I might ask...what has my equivalent from your world done to have upset you so?"

"There are..." Carik trailed off, before looking at him. "How old is the prince you are looking for?"

"He is sixteen," Maxos said, leaning on his staff as he spoke, explaining his quest in a way he hadn't to any of the others. "It was his birthday not long before he disappeared through a portal, a few moments after I told him of his parentage. Even the Damned One knows little about where he might have gone, and my scrying has revealed nothing that might help me. He h"

"...that was the day I came to ask you about becoming an adventurer," the Carik before him mused, his voice growing into a laugh. "Different times, then."

"Oh?" Maxos asked, curious. "How so?"

"I can tell you many, many things," Carik started, a small smile appearing on his face for the first time since Maxos had seen him, looking like his normal self again. "But that is something I can't tell you. Not without the risk of changing things so it doesn't happen."

"That is fair reasoning," Maxos said at last, nodding with understanding, but asking a question as he did. "But if I might know, my young friend, why are you here and not on Rivellon? Does the Empire not need you?"

And at that moment Maxos knew he had asked the wrong question, as Carik's grimaced with a pain that Maxos could scarcely believe to see upon his face, as though he had torn his heart out then and there, his smile turning to bitter sadness. It was a face that Maxos had never seen him wear before, but one that he had seen on his father too many times to count since that fateful day that sweet Aurora was taken from the world, poisoned, leaving behind a son without a mother and whose father could never be such a thing to him.

"I have my reasons," he said flatly, his voice turning to hard iron. "I will say no more. If you have anything else to say, please do so. I would rather not linger on this topic any more than I must."
"Then if you wish not to answer that question, might I know why you are here, at least?" he asked, trying to change the topic to a more useful one. "I have seen many Cariks who were sent to worlds other than their own in my travels so far...but never one who brought himself to a world of his own choosing, yet I know from the Carik of my world that he would surely use the power to explore lands none have ever explored before. Why did you come to this world to till soil, of all things?"

"It helps pass the time and keep your mind off of things," came the answer of the prince who was surely no longer a prince, but an emperor. "There are other things to do here, and the locals would be happy enough for my aid, but I fear that they might grow too dependent on me, and I would rather spend my time in peace than roaming the land attending to every small problem they have. I can do that on Rivellon."

"...then those must be gifts from them to you, then?" Maxos looking towards the heap of items on the end of the road.

"Offerings," Carik corrected. "Some seem to think that I might be a god, or at least a servant of one. They give me things that are precious to them in the hope that I might give them my blessing."

"...Seven," Maxos said with astonishment. "What have you done for them to think you are a god? Surely your dragon form is not enough to make them think so?"

"It is a very, very long story," Carik sighed. "And my dragon form is just a small part of it."

"I have time, if you are willing to explain," the wizard smiled.

"Do you really?" Carik asked. "You are meant to be searching for your world's prince."

"If you do not wish to say, then you do not have to," Maxos said, smiling, defusing whatever unhappiness might have been in the prince before him. "But if so, then we might well have nothing to talk about."

"I am far too old to fall for that trick, Maxos," Carik said, crossing his arms. "You haven't been able to pull that one on me since halfway through my first century."

"Your first...century?" Maxos blinked, thinking for a moment that he had misheard the one before him only for Carik's lack of correction to reveal that he had not. "How old are you?"

"Old," came Carik's reply. "Very, very old. I am older than you."

"Then your power must have become great indeed," Maxos said with a low voice. "It is no wonder that some might call you a god. Many would have done the same for your mother, if they knew what she was capable of."

"I am sick of it," Carik sighed weakly. "I am no god, Maxos. Nor a savior. People here and there look to me as an infallible being, like someone who can do no wrong, but I have failed more times than any of them can remember, one after another, and everyone just look to my glories and not realize what went wrong."

"But I am a dragon," he said, the pain clear in his voice, the grief. "I have perfect memory. I remember them all. Every mistake. Every time the men under my command went to their deaths on my orders. Their cries for help. Their sobs. I remember the lands we fought over. The graves that were dug. Everywhere I look on Rivellon is a graveyard, Maxos. I can't do it anymore."
"And that is why you are here," the wizard said with realization, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Take as long as you need, my young friend."

"I will," Carik said at last, calming. "This is a new world. It's...different. More than you might think. But more than anything else, it isn't Rivellon. I have no ghosts here. No reminders of..."

He trailed off, forcing himself to silence.

"You need not speak of it, if it hurts you so," the wizard soothed, patting his friend on the shoulder. "I will not force you to."

"Thank you, my young friend," the ancient replied at last, grateful, adding the words onto the end as a playing smile began to edge onto his cheeks again, the barest glimmer of the hopeful youth he had once been. "I will go back there eventually...perhaps in a century or two...but for now, this place is home."

"And what a beautiful home it is," Maxos smiled. "Is the whole land like this?"

"Much of it," Carik nodded. "The civilizations here are still young, so they have yet to truly cut the forests back as much as they might in a few centuries, so they are still thick and stretch on for mile after mile. If you see it from above, you might think the whole world was forest. But there are some cities here and there, and plenty of villages as well."

"Oh?" Maxos asked, intrigued by what the prince might know of the young realms of this world. "It is not often one gets to see the rise of a civilization. Have you travelled much, here?"

"A little," he admitted with a hint of a smile. "I can get bored of ploughing a field over and over, you know. This world is very different from Rivellon. It doesn't have elves, dwarfs or even undead."

"You mean it is a world populated entirely by humans? No one else?"

"Exactly," Carik mused. "I thought for a while that they might have simply thought that this world's elves and dwarfs were similar enough to be just called human by the rest of the people here, but aside from a few babies born every now and then with pointed ears or some being born as dwarfs, they simply do not exist here."

"That is peculiar," Maxos murmured, running a hand through his beard for a moment before turning his attentions back to the prince and raising his voice to its norm. "Still, there are worlds out there populated entirely by peoples not even found on our world."

"But these humans are exactly the same as the ones on Rivellon," Carik countered. "You would at least expect there to be some small differences between us and them."

"And yet there are none."

"And yet there are none," the dragon echoed. "It is...disconcerting. Even more so is that they have no magic, here, aside from some potions that I doubt the capabilities of...and it is not as if there is no magic in the world for them to use. It is here. There is not as much as there might be on Rivellon, true, but it is is here."

"You mean they haven't learnt how?"
"It would seem so," Carik shrugged, his voice as regal as it ever was, even whilst relaxed. "They haven't the first idea of how to make use of it, and are more stunned that I can than not."

"Still, I am making some effort to teach them how to make use of its power to ease their lives," Carik smiled. "They might not realize that it is there for them to use, but teach them that it is and they take to it as well as any might."

"How so?"

"I have taught a few how to heal," Carik said. "It is a useful skill, and one that they can't do much harm with, at least not deliberately anyhow."

"It won't take them long to learn how to use the powers you have taught them for destruction, however," Maxos cautioned. "It is only a short step from learning to heal with magic to learning how to harm with it."

"That is true," Carik nodded in agreement before speaking again with a soft, reasoning tone. "But if they were going to use their power to destroy, then it makes little difference than if they had decided to destroy with their swords and the like. Magic is just a tool. It can be used one way or another, but it is the user that makes it good or evil. It is better to let the people here have a chance to use it for good and to ease their lives than to leave them struggling forever for a lack of it."

Maxos smiled, and was ready to reply when there was the blare of a trumpet from down the road, the two men turning to see two dozen men riding towards them on horseback with great haste, warriors covered in grey chainmail and yet approaching unarmed but for the banners that flew from their lances, great crimson pennants with a golden dragon in their center, fluttering in the winds. Even from here, watching as they rode, he could tell that they were unaccustomed to riding at such speed, men who would ride to the battlefield and then fight on foot, shields and great axes on their backs and conical helms on their heads, but at the head of them all was a man with a golden crown, a king, tall and strongly built and with a hard and handsome face, middle aged, and it was he who dismounted first, climbing down from his small horse and marching his way towards Carik, his men speaking amongst themselves in a harsh language that Maxos couldn't understand.

"A pleasure to see you again, Harold, though I see you are a king now," Carik said fairly, his voice neither warm nor cold.

"Aye, and to you as well," the king answered in wonky Rivellonian, clear enough to be understood and yet with a thick accent twisting his words. "I have dire need of your help, nay, all of Englaland and the Angelcynn need your help."

"I am here to rest away from my homeworld," Carik answered wearily. "But I may help, depending on what it is that brings you here."

"It is the very survival of the realm that is threatened," the king said quickly. "Many thousands of troops have crossed from Normandy, as William the Bastard has mustered all his strength beneath a papal banner to usurp the throne. You know well that I would not interrupt your rest without reason, and that reason is that we need your help, now more than it has ever been needed before, lest we be conquered by our foreign foes."

"I told you all before that I have sworn off violence for so long as I am here in this world, so as to help me rest," Carik said to the king, his voice sympathetic but unwavering. "I am afraid you will
have to make do without me."

"I had thought as much," the king said, reaching to his waist to pull a rolled up letter from his belt, bearing a royal seal, passing it to the dragon prince. "I would hope that this might change your mind."

Carik slid a finger under the scarlet wax, prying it from the parchment, reading quickly before narrowing his brow, raising the letter between thumb and forefinger...and then it spontaneously caught fire, a furious blaze that devoured the parchment and the ink that was upon it in moments, the ash scattering in the gentle winds.

"I am not interested in wealth, titles, land or whatever else you might have to offer me," Carik answered flatly. "I have all three in an abundance beyond your imagining but a few moments away if I so desired them, not that I do."

"Then what would you wish?" the king offered. "Name your request."

"You have nothing that I might desire," Carik answered, his voice low and grim and dark. "I lost the one thing that truly mattered to me a millenia ago."

"Then do it for all the peoples of this realm if not for your own sake," the king spoke. "You might not be interested in gold or land, but surely you would be willing to defend those who cannot defend themselves? Should my army be routed from the field, there will be none left to defend the people from his men, and who knows what slaughter they might carry out?"

"But that needn't happen," the king reasoned. "Each and every time an invader has come to these lands Bryten has wept for her children. But she need not weep again."

The king closed with Carik then, and placed a hand on his shoulder, meeting his golden eyes with his own. "Come with me to Hastings."

For a moment, there was silence.

"I will join you," Carik said flatly, returning the king's gaze. "But only for as long as it takes till your enemy are beaten, not a second longer, and once this is done I will leave this realm to find another. Somewhere in Swabia, perhaps, or Muscovy. More, I will not allow any innocents to be harmed, even if they served your enemy, and there shall be no counterattack."

"But we will -"

"There will be no counterattack," he insisted, his voice iron. "Remember that, for if so much as one man sets foot on Norman soil, you will be the one to answer for it."

The king narrowed his eyes towards the dragon, yet Carik was like a mountain, unmoving, unblinking, unphased and utterly silent, so much so that for a moment MAxos wondered if he was still even breathing, yet not even the king could stand before such an unwavering glacier before letting out a sigh.

"As you will," the king answered. "But we rout his army and every man we capture remains our prisoner," he insisted. "It is foolish to allow them a chance to flee back to their lands and gather another army for a second invasion."
"That is fair, and a term I can accept," Carik agreed, crossing his arms at last. "Where is your army? Lunden?"

"South of the city," the king answered gruffly. "I rode here with my huscarls as quickly as I could whilst Gyrth and Leofwine lead the army southwards in my stead."

"William must be taking his time to have not tried to break from his landing so quickly," Carik muttered before raising his voice. "Are these all the men you brought with you?"

"Aye."

"Then I will carry you to your host," Carik said simply.

The king and Maxos alike blinked, then...and a heartbeat latter there was a brilliant flash of light, so bright as to be almost blinding with its radiance, and it faded to reveal a truly immense dragon that had taken the prince's place, a great titan of iron muscle covered in ebon scales and with a front armored by thick plates and with massive blades jutting from the tips of his wing bones and tail as long as greatswords, chipped and pockmarked just as his body was covered with the scars of uncounted centuries of battle, the air swiftly turning warm from the heat of his vast bulk. In an instant Maxos knew that this was what the Carik who had been slain and come back again as an undead would look like if he had flesh upon his bones, their skeleton surely the same size even if the bulk upon it might have been larger. It was a truly awesome and majestic sight for the wizard to see, a chance to see what the prince might one day grow to become, yet it was just as disconcerting as his eyes were drawn towards the ancient wounds that covered so much of his body from the tip of his bladed tail to the long since healed scratches upon his cheeks, all catching his attention more than anything else ever could. How many wars had he been in to have been marked over so much of his body? How many men had come forth thinking themselves a dragonslayer? How many had died at his claws and flame?

The wizard didn't know, and he didn't want to know, either .

I can only hope that my Rivellon is more peaceful than his turned out to be, he thought in dead silence, the ancient dragon stretching out, immense joints cracking like thunder before he rose to his full height again, sinking ever so slightly into the soil from his immense weight.

Then the great dragon raised a claw, extending but a single blade towards one of the banners, tapping its tip against the golden cloth in its midst, and for the briefest moment there was a bright spark as though a flint had struck iron, and then the wizard saw it, a wave of gold rushing up from the talon to his claw to his arm to his chest, scales shimmering as they changed color to match that of the ones alongside them in a wave that spread from his front to the tip of his bladed tail, even those that were scarred glittering for but a moment before turning to a similar shade of gold as those around, close but not exact, barely noticeable unless one knew where to look. The golden wave flowed over his wings like the waves of the sea washing over a beach, and Carik unfurled them wide, the light of the sun becoming all the more golden as it passed through, and the king's men looked on with stunned awe, as amazed by the sight as the wizard himself was, and the king smiled widely, grinning, and shouted to his men in the same hard language that he had spoke in at the start of his arrival, the huscarls climbing out of their saddles and onto the dirt roads that were their path, all stepping forward together and forming up besides their king but one who began to take the other horses by the reins, leading them away so that they might be brought safely back to their stables as Carik leaned down, lowering himself to the ground to give them a chance to climb atop his back,

"Oh, and one last thing," the ancient dragon said as it turned towards Maxos, the king and
his *huscarls* helping one another to climb onto his back. "You wanted to know my age?"

"It would be nice to know when my world's Carik will be like you," the wizard smiled. "And simply because all the others that I have met so far have told me their age as well."

"If you must know," the dragon answered quietly, seeming to smile as he did. "I am six thousand four hundred and eighty nine years old."

Maxos stared back at the dragon, then, stunned, waiting for a moment for Carik to say it was a joke and to say that he was much less, yet the laughter never came, only the pounding of his claws against the ground as he ran forward with the king and his men upon his back clutching onto the long horns that jutted back from his head and held onto one another, the great dragon building speed before unfurling his wings and throwing himself into the air, taking flight, and with that, Maxos smiled, watching the ancient dragon soaring towards the horizon before turning and making his way back to the portal...

...and although the land around him was peaceful and calm, a question raged inside of him, begging for an answer that he could not give.

*What is it that upset him so much that he has abandoned Rivellon?*

****

...sometime later, Hastings.

The air was filled with the soft flapping of the banners raised above the great host, the signs of knighthood and chivalry and all the strength of Normandy and its allies raised high for all to see, for the true to marvel and for the false to despair, flying alongside the crossed key banner of the Papacy itself, as sign of the Church's favor and the Pope's support of his conquest, and William, *King* William, could not help but smile as he looked around the green lands that would be his realm when the battle was over and fought.

*If there is a battle*, he thought to himself, looking across the rolling fields and gentle hills and thick woods and dank bogs to see no sign of the Saxon men anywhere, no banners, no cavalry, not even a trumpet to be heard across the open land that surrounded the hill that the Norman king had raised his banner atop - the Senlac Hill the locals called it, from what his men had been able to learn of their tongue - and it gave him a commanding view of the surrounding lands better than anywhere else might, a fine defensive position that would let his archers dominate the battlefield and shoot over the shield walls that the Saxons and their huscarls were so fond of. It was a commanding position that their swift march had given them, a chance to choose the terms of where their battle might be fought, yet it had taken some hours to arrive at the battlefield, his men crossing unfamiliar terrain, and that was something that made him wonder where Harold and his men were. This was *their* land, they would know the roads, the hills, the slopes, they were said to be in the south waiting for him to cross...and yet they were nowhere to be found. His men were comforted by the fact, some thinking that their enemies had already surrendered before the battle was to be fought, but William was less certain, a knot of uncertainty twisting itself in the pit of his stomach as he looked to the horizon, searching for his foe, the men at ease all around, a quiet murmuring amongst the ranks.

Why would they allow him to be the first to reach the battlefield and decide the terms of their battle by allowing him to choose where it was? Why would they give him the initiative? The single greatest advantage a commander might have? To ensure that everything was to his advantage?
"It makes no sense," he said to himself with a quiet voice, searching the field for his foe. "No man should be fool enough to let me take this position."

From this hill he could send his riders out and set blaze to mile after mile of countryside or march on the road to London itself if he so pleased, not that he was fool enough to try and take the city whilst his enemy still lived lest he be caught between its walls and his foe, but the fact that he had such an opportunity in the first place was the strangest thing of all, a bizarre puzzle that needed to be answered if he was to know what to do next without walking into a trap.

"Is all well, your grace?" one of his knights asked, stepping towards the king with the soft rattle of chain. "You seem uneased."

"Confused would be the better term," William answered. "Harold was said to be no craven, yet here we are, on his shores, and he refuses to show himself."

"It would seem they haven't the nerve to face us," the knight boasted. "Shall we advance onto the city?"

"Or that they have lain a trap," William countered. "If we march from this hill, we give up the terrain we will need to defend ourselves should he have combined his host with Morcar's and Edwin's before coming here to the south."

"We would be dangerously outnumbered," he said, turning an eye to the knight. "And easy to overwhelm. We will wait."

"We will not need to wait long," the knight said, looking to the horizon, and William turned...

...and heard the distant howling of horns wailing as he saw an army of thousands of men marching across the fields past the marsh and hills, scarlet and gold banners raised high and with pride as they sang a song in their rocky language, a song of their hero Beowulf and the dragon he fought, only different somehow, higher and not so dark as the Saxon tale so normally was, cheerful and noble even, William ignoring it to focus on the shape of the enemy force, a thick wall of iron and steel, Harold's huscarls on the flanks with their great axes and thick shields and heavy armor, reinforcing the militiamen who stood alongside and giving much needed strength to their line, not that it would help them much when William's knights charged down the slopes of the hill as his archers rained down shafts from above, but as they marched across the field, waving their banners so that the Normans could see the golden dragon on their cloth, before William could give the order to have them smashed from the field, he heard a sound in the distance.

A dread sound that chilled him to his core. A howl. A roar.

And then he felt a trembling in his feet. Once. His men looked to one another as they felt the disturbance under their boots, as though the ground itself was shaking beneath their feet, and they looked to one another in confusion. Twice. The horses neighed and shook with their riders, unsettled by that which they feel through their iron shoes and hooves and legs, uncertain of the earth that was beneath them and their riders struggling to keep them steady. Third. The banners wavered as the force of the distant banging reverberated though their thick shafts, even the papal banner itself wavering as if raised in a storm.

"Draca!" the Saxons chanted in the distance, repeating the word again and again, slamming their weapons off their shields. "Draca!"
"What in God's name are they doing?" the knight murmured, his voice cracking with unease.

"I...I'm not sure," the king answered quietly, the unease in his belly turning to a growing dread that something terrible was about to happen. "What is the meaning of that word? What is "draca"?"

Before the knight could speak again, the horizon answered for him, for in the distance walked a monster of steel scales and armored plates and vast wings, the ground seeming to tremble with his every step, golden body glittering in the sunlight as it marched behind the Saxon force, a rider upon its back holding a banner of scarlet and gold as some much of his army did, and though the monster was still far away from him, though it was difficult to make out its details, any child in all of Europe would have known what it was from sight alone, and in that instant he knew the meaning of the word the Saxons chanted so.

Dragon.

Frozen by the sight of the great golden titan, he could only stare in stunned shock as the dragon marched across the battlefield, the Saxon men advancing with its every step, walking in the shadow of their king's mount, and to his left, William saw one of his men lose his nerve, stepping backwards with trembling hands only for the knight behind to grab him in the shoulder and meet his eyes with a shake of his head, pushing him back into the battle line and at that instant the dragon began to run forward and leapt into the sky, rising higher, higher, higher, with every flap of its immense wings, soaring over a hundred feet amongst the awed men of Normandy and Brittany and Flanders, knights and men-at-arms and levied men all struck by the sight of it tipping its wings to the left on a long banking turn towards the army's flank...

...and then William realized what was about to happen, eyes widening.

"Disperse, you fools!" he shouted at the height of his voice, with all the breath he could put behind his words, breaking the stunned silence as horrified cries went up, drowning out the sound of his voice. "Scatter!"

And a few seconds later the dragon opened its wide jaws...and Hell had surely came to Earth, for the fire that came forth was so hot as to make the air itself scream in agony as it flowed forth from the beast's belly, an unending and all-consuming blaze that was not like any fire he had ever seen before in his life, never, for whilst it jetted forth like a bonfire it could flow like water as well, like wine, spraying across the battlefield and falling down like a rain of fire, devouring men and horses and steel alike beneath the flames that fell like arrows. Men screamed out in agony and horror just as their steeds did as the flame stuck to their bodies and set their clothes and armor aflame, so hot that their steel ringmail began to melt onto their bodies as burning flesh sloughed from their bones, steaming as the water inside their skin and muscles and blood boiled from the incredible heat, and the air filled with the sickening smell of burning hair and meat and ash and death, the heat suffocating as the grass itself set ablaze beneath their feet, not even its moisture able to douse the flames as men leapt into the bogs for relief only to be steamed alive in their armor, and it was all that William could to to slam his sharp spurs into the side of horse, desperate, the mount rushing forth just as the dragon's shadow passed overhead and as the firestorm reached the army's center, his best and bravest men dropping their weapons and armor and running to escape the flames...

...and everywhere he looked, he saw death. On the left flank where the Bretons had stood their ground before the dragon's attack there was but death and ash, the brave men left running madly trying to save their friends and brothers and sons and fathers from the flames, striking them with their cloaks to try and put out the hungry blaze, their banners fallen and Alan the Red nowhere to be
found, with nothing but ashes and smouldering bodies remaining where he had been, and in the center, the dragon having broken off its attack to loop around, even the great papal banner itself had not been spared from the fire, William watching with stunned shock as the cloth caught flame and the burning liquid ran down its wooden pole to set the leather mittens of the man holding it on fire, the knight shouting horror as he tore them from his hands, the banner falling to the ground, its keys turning black as they burnt away into nothingness, disintegrating as his army was.

And then there was the wail of another horn, and he looked to the front to see the Saxons advancing up the hill in battle formations, their lowborn fyrdmen throwing their spears into the broken Norman ranks as the huscarls advanced in lockstep alongside, kite shields side by side to create an impregnable wall of oak and iron, thudding with every arrow that struck as their boots stomped against the soft earth, the Saxon host widening to envelop the maimed Norman force, but he spun his steed around and saw the Flemish desperately holding their ground on the right flank, the dragon having passed them by with its deadly strafe and left them intact, but even they began to buckle, outnumbered and with their allies fleeing the field as fast as their legs might carry them, only for those retreating to be hit in the back by Saxon spears and arrows and axes thrown by their attackers.

From all this the dazed William knew what to say at last, words he had hoped to never need to say this day.

"Fall back!" he shouted, trumpets and horns carrying his commands around the battlefield to those who could still hear them. "For the love of God, fall back! Back to the ships! Fight and withdraw!"

With that, the army began to flee the field, broken but not shattered, still some miniscule hope of salvaging things, still some chance of withdrawing to fight another day, the Saxons lacking the cavalry they might need to make their defeat total, the Flemish covering the retreat of their broken allies, as Norman knights harried and harassed and as archers nocked and drew and fired into the mass, killing dozens. Turning his steed about to join the retreat, to coordinate the rout, the Saxons saw the two lions upon his tabard, upon his horse, shouting to their allies, turning their attentions on him, laughing and cheering and breaking formation as they rushed up the hill, yelling curses that he could not understand, all vying for the chance to be the one to fell him, to be the one to claim the royal reward they would get for bringing his head before their king, and with blade drawn he swung as a fyrdman rushed forward with spear in hand, hacking the tip from his weapon as he brought his steed about and urged it from the battlefield, rushing to the Flemish who were moving slowly from the battlefield -

And then his horse screamed as a spear buried itself in its rump, the noble steed crumbling as it was followed by another in the side, and then another in the thigh, the horse crying out in agony and thrashing as javelins buried themselves in its body...and William yelled as he leapt from his stirrups as the mighty beast finally fell, only for it to roll towards him, and he screamed as it pinned him to the ground by his left leg, crushing his bones and flesh into the soil below.

Yet something rose in him, then, not fear, not despair, but determination. Rouen, nay, all of France had to be warned. Sinking an armored hand into the soil, growling and grunting with iron will as he pulled himself forward, biting down so hard as to taste blood in his mouth as he pulled himself from beneath the horse, leg broken, he pulled himself forward, crawling from the battlefield.

"A horse!" he shouted. "Someone -"

Then there was darkness as a shadow passed above, the day turning to dusk for but a moment as he heard the crackling flames and looked to see the Flemish fleeing the field as the dragon soared above, and the flames came closer, closer, clearing through the last straggling groups of Normen determined
to die with their honor intact, as brave men and not as cravens, closer, consuming the ground beneath it as the Saxons fell back with all the haste they could, raising their shields to protect them from the flames, some simply dropping to the ground so as to roll down the slopes of the Senlac, but William could only watch as the devouring blaze came closer.

"God have mercy."

As the golden flames rushed towards him, his last thoughts were not of anger or hate, but of his family and his Normandy, praying that what happened here on this accursed island would never be repeated there.

And when they reached him, there was light.

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**Meanwhile, at Harrenhal.**

Rhaegar tossed and turned and rolled beneath the soft covers as he felt the warmth of the golden sun strike his cheeks as its light met his eyes, wincing as he began to rouse from slumber to see the bright light of dawn shining through the archway of his chamber's windows, shutters thrown open to fill his room with warmth and the smell of crackling bacon and baking bread and the murmur of men and women talking amongst themselves and the clatter of hooves as merchantmen brought fresh stocks to their stalls and as more and more guests began to arrive, the prince rising with a groan as he felt the dull, throbbing pain behind his eyes, the pain of too much wine and a pain that made the beautiful sky seem all too bright, his room all too dark and the noise of castle life all too loud.

He sighed, rubbing his brow and aching temples for a moment before throwing back the covers and staggering to his feet, keeping his eyes on the grey stone floor to help him find his balance and to keep the light at bay and give the fog of sleep a chance to retreat, but the ground itself felt unsteady beneath him, like water, and every step towards the stout dresser on the far side of the room was a challenge, the prince swaying as he walked till he slumped against the wood, holding it to help keep him straight.

"I hate wine," he mumbled to himself with a sigh, only for there to be the bang of a fist against his door, followed by another, then another. "What is it?"

"We have to talk, husband!" his wife said, the Dornishwoman speaking loud enough for him to hear. Sighing again, he walked towards the door, finding his feet and growing more stable with every step he took, and then undid the latch, Elia pushing on the door to let herself in, the small woman slipping through the opening before closing the door tightly behind her so that even the white cloaked knight of the Kingsguard outside might not see or hear, spinning on her heels to face her husband at last with exhausted eyes, taking no notice of the fact that the prince was still undressed for bed.

"He's missing," she said with the lowest voice she could muster, walking towards him and away from the door. "We searched all night and couldn't find him anywhere."

"Who?" Rhaegar asked, still tired and with a mind still clouded by wine. "Who's missing?"

"The dragon," Elia said with a hard whisper. "He went missing last night when Ashara was taking him back to his chambers. He's gone."
"Seven hells," the prince said with realization, eyes widening. "How did you lose the dragon?"

"We didn't try to," his wife snapped, sighing before regaining control of her temper and lowering her voice, apologetic. "Forgive me, husband...it's been a long night."

"Were you up all night looking for him?" Rhaegar asked with no little amount of fear, looking to his wife. "Elia, the Grand Maester said you should have remained in bed after Aegon for another month. You shouldn't be stressing yourself like this so soon."

"But we need to find him," Elia said wearily, sitting atop the small dresser to meet her husband in the eye as he sat upon the end of his bed. "Almost half the lords and ladies in the entire kingdom are here, Rhaegar. If they see that your family has been abandoned by the first dragon to be seen in the realm in years..."

"Then it will be a disaster," the prince sighed, understanding. "The dragon is my family's sigil. To have it act against us would be unthinkable. It would be like a Stark being eaten by a direwolf or a Lannister by a lion. Now, let's think this through. When did he disappear?"

"Last night, not long after you were led out the hall by Oswell," Elia answered, tired mind struggling to think. "Aerys came in and broke up the brawl between the Reachmen and the Stormlords, but Carik was drunk and very upset..."

Then she paused, trying to remember, brow furling.

"It was this image of his mother and father together that did it," she said at last, looking to Rhaegar. "He never knew them much, but being reminded of it whilst drunk threw him over the edge...it made him sob, Rhaegar. It is eating at him."

"And then Ashara started to take him back to his chambers?" Rhaegar asked. "How did she convince him?"

"He is a boy of six and ten who drank more wine than a sinkhole and she is one of the most beautiful women in the Seven Kingdoms," Elia answered. "It wasn't very hard. She told him to follow, and so he did, but then he went to the Godswood, and just...went."

"And no one could find him at night because of how dark it was," Rhaegar finished, leaning forward to cover his eyes as he sighed before meeting his wife again. "Does anyone else know?"

"Only me, Ashara, my uncle and you," Elia said quickly. "Aerys hasn't risen from his bed yet, and if the gods are kind he will have chewed his pillows and choked to death on the feathers, but when he does he will want to know where Carik is."

"I never thought having a dragon might be this frustrating," Rhaegar sighed.

"He is no dragon," his wife said, her voice low and soft. "He is a boy of six and ten who can become a dragon, yes, but he's still a boy first. If you saw his tears, you would know that he is not uncaring as a dragon might be."

"In any case," the prince began again. "We need to find him. Have you any idea where he might have gone? Any hints he might have said or footprints he might have left?"

"None," Elia sighed again, brushing hair from her eyes. "We've looked everywhere we can look and
found nothing. He could be on the Isle of Faces for all I know, or Riverrun or anywhere."

"Then we will have to find him quickly, before anyone notices that he ran off," Rhaegar said, looking towards the dresser that his wife was sat atop. "Would you mind...?"

"But what if he doesn't want to come back with us?" Elia asked, reaching down and pulling open a drawer and throwing the leggings within to her husband, Rhaegar catching them with ease, following with a linen shirt and a black and red doublet to go atop. "He doesn't have a bond the way your family's dragons did, else he would never have flown away in the first place."

"He is lost in a land that he doesn't know, filled with people he doesn't know, but he knows us and knows that we have only been kind to him," Rhaegar explained, smiling as he began to get dressed. "He will listen if we speak to him. We're friends."

"Seven, I hope you are right," Elia answered as her husband rose from the bed, dressed. "If your father breaks in front of the realm..."

"Carik has helped us more than he might think with my father," Rhaegar said, walking across the room and helping his lady wife down from her seat. "He managed to get him to bathe and cut his hair and nails...he looks more kingly than he does in years."

"But what if he uses that against you?" his wife asked, half challenging and half afraid. "He looks like a king, and if the dragon supports him over you, then there is nothing in the realm that could stop him from having you -"

"Disinherited?" Rhaegar asked.

"Disposed of," Elia said at last, letting out a sigh. "You know he doesn't trust you, but he loves Viserys...all it would take is an "accident" -"

"Even my father is not so mad as to think he could have me murdered and get away with it without half the realm knowing," he soothed with a gentle tone. "And if the dragon likes me, then my father will not even think to have me harmed."

"All the more reason for us to find him," Elia said quickly, allowing her tiredness to show at last with a yawn.

The crown prince only nodded in answer, then he opened the door again and stepped out onto the stairwell, Ser Barristan Selmy stood besides the door and giving his charges but a single nod before following them down the steps of the Kingspyre Tower in silence, his hand always on the pommel of his sword ready to be drawn at a moment's notice, yet the various men and women on the stairs, those who were the last to rouse from their beds and who would be the last to arrive at the Hall of the Hundred Hearths to break their fast, met their future king and queen with nothing but warm smiles and respect, letting the pair make their way down the steps at a dignified, if quick, pace. Yet as they rounded the first flight of steps, Rhaegar grateful that his birth had allowed his chambers to be placed on the lower levels alongside those of the Kingsguard and the rest of his family, they saw none other than Ashara hurrying up the steps towards them, the Dayne woman moving as quickly as her long dress would allow.

"They found him," she said with an out of breath voice to the prince and his wife, panting for breath.

"Where is he?" Elia asked quickly. "Is he alright?"
"We would never have found him," Ashara said, coming alongside them as they passed on the stairs and onto the second floor, moving quicker, more urgent. "He was underground."

"In the cellars?" Rhaegar asked, looking to the Dayne with disbelief. "How could he have possibly made it there?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Ashara answered, the tiredness clear on her face and causing some to whisper about who - not what - had been keeping her up all night as they passed. "But he's down there. Oswell is keeping guard and his brother is trying to keep it all secret, but it won't be long before everyone finds out."

_Hells_, the prince thought, allowing himself a rare curse. _The last thing the Lords Paramount need to know is that there was a dragon who got drunk and tried to run away from us. Even if he is only half a dragon and only six and ten, it would be a disaster for the rest of the realm to know that a dragon, our symbol and the means by which we forged the realm, left us for even a heartbeat...and Seven help us if is because he found someone else to follow._

"Is he alone?" the prince asked quickly as they stepped onto the last step and onto the ground floor, the great door that was the mouth of the massive Kingspyre Tower thrown open, near as big as a castle's gate. "Has anyone else found him?"

"I don't know, I only found out because Arthur told me that his sworn brother was on guard there," Ashara answered. "But if I had to guess, someone must have had an unpleasant morning to have found him there in the first place."

"But why would he go underground?" Elia asked, confused. "Wouldn't it have made more sense for him to have gone back to his chambers?"

"He is a dragon, Elia," Ashara shrugged. "Maybe he felt like he would be safer and more comfortable somewhere underground, like a cave...and seeing how big the rest of this castle is, I wouldn't be surprised if Black Harren made his cellars big enough for a dragon to rest in them."

"...that makes sense," Rhaegar murmured, looking to the Dayne with a nod. "Whenever a Targaryen dragon was scarred, it would always try to flee back to its lair, like the Grey Ghost. It let them focus on one way in and meant that larger dragons couldn't reach them. If he's upset, then it makes sense he would choose that place."

"But he isn't a Westerosi dragon," Elia countered. "He doesn't act anything like your family's dragon mounts had."

"But the fact that he is underground means that it is more likely than not," Rhaegar reasoned, smiling ever so slightly as they passed into the open courtyard, the grounds packed with guests making their way towards the Hall of the Hundred Hearths. "His kind of dragon might be able to talk, but there is little reason why they wouldn't try and flee underground as well, if things began to grow too dangerous."

"And the last thing we need is a dragon feeling like he's trapped with no way out," Elia sighed. "Harrenhal still hasn't recovered from the last time a dragon was here."

"You two go on ahead and break your fast," the prince said, turning away from the ladies. "You both need your rest."
"No, I'll come along," Ashara insisted, continuing before the prince could say otherwise. "He knows who I am and likes me...and I was the one to lose him in the first place."

"Fine," Elia sighed, trying desperately to stifle a yawn. "I'll be at the dais if you need me."

"We best get to him before everyone finds out that we have a sleeping dragon under their feet and want to see for themselves," Ashara said to the prince, more energetic than the weary Martell. "Do you know a way down? I know he's underground, just not how to get there myself without someone being so kind as to bring a shovel."

"Fortunately, Oswell made sure to tell me everything there was to know about the castle before we came," the prince answered. "The cellars beneath our feet are all connected together for when winter comes. Half of them probably haven't been used since the Burning, but the ones near the Wailing Tower were the main granaries. If there's a way down, it'll be there."

"Then I'll see you two by the time the tourney starts," his wife said at last, before departing towards the Hall of the Hundred Hearths...

...and with that, Rhaegar and Ashara began their way across the vast courtyard of the castle, a place that was so vast in comparison to the Red Keep or Dragonstone as to be one part vast labyrinth of stout stone buildings where the craftsmen who had built the massive castle had made their homes and where they would have worked to support Harren the Black's vast kingdoms, one part stone courtyards and roads that had been made bumpy and ruined by the sweltering heat of Balerion the Black Dread's ebon flames, yet there was still great swathes of the castle that were simple green grass, as any other castle might have, merely scaled up to match the stature of the rest of Harren's monster. Yet despite the great size of the castle, there was never a moment that either of the pair were lost, the towers above so tall and so distinct as to make finding one's way around a castle that neither had ever been to before easy, effortlessly so, and as they came out to a much less crowded path, the Wailing Tower letting out a soft cry as the winds blew from the north just as they approached from the south, but though the guards had been more scarce around the castle, they were more common here, and nowhere more so than a small building besides the tower itself, half collapsed, a place where the king's peasants might have been able to bring their harvest to get it lowered into the cellars beneath all the quicker. Walking towards the tower with arms at his side, he turned his attentions to the Dayne woman at last, remembering something through the red haze of the previous night's wine, something that the dragon prince had told him when he came to find his help for a bedchamber.

"Did you really kiss him?"

"What?" Ashara asked, surprised by the sudden speech from the prince.

"Carik," he said, explaining what he meant as they came ever closer to the tower's door with every step. "He told me you kissed him."

"Only a little, and it was on the cheek," Ashara answered. "He gave me his coin, and it was the least I could do in thanks. At least now I can get something from the market, if I want it."

"He was like a lovestruck puppy when I saw him," Rhaegar added. "He smiles a lot, but he hadn't stopped smiling for even a moment when he came to me. He likes you."

"Oh, not him too," she sighed. "He barely even knew how to speak to a woman he was interested in before we met."
"It probably makes you one of the most powerful women in the Seven Kingdoms," Rhaegar mused as they walked along, an idea beginning to transform into a plan. "After all, you could simply have him set the others on fire."

"That would almost make it worthwhile, you know," the Dayne answered, allowing herself a laugh. "And the king likes him, so mayhaps I could take over the entire realm. Control the dragon who controls the king, and I would have the entire kingdom to play with. I could have people hanged for writing soppy poems, then."

Rhaegar blinked, then.

"Is that something you hadn't noticed, my prince?" Ashara teased, knowing well how bookish the prince is. "The king does whatever the dragon tells him to do. He shaved his beard and no one - not even you - thought that anyone would be able to get him to overcome his fear of blades."

"But he did."

"Of course he did," Ashara shrugged. "He is a dragon whose wings end in swords. Your father thinks he's a dragon half the time, so he likes anything that a dragon likes."

"Like fire."

"Like fire," Ashara nodded. "But seeing Carik with swords sticking out of his shoulders means that dragons like swords, so the king isn't so scared of them now. That's why he didn't care about any of us having knives on the dais at dinner yesterday. It might even be why he's suddenly taken a liking to Rhaenys as well, seeing as Carik was kind to her."

"...seven hells," the prince realized, looking to the Dayne woman with new appreciation. "How have you noticed all this?"

"How couldn't I?" Ashara laughed. "Lords are raised from birth to learn all about killing people, but ladies are raised to run a household, so we learn about people and how to stop children from killing each other."

"...and I surely spend far, far too much time next to that wife of yours," she japed. "But she's noticed it as well. Carik likes to be loved, it doesn't matter where that love comes from, only that it does. But Aerys is so mad since Duskendale that he wants to be a dragon, so he takes after Carik because he is a dragon, so being like him makes him feel more like a dragon."

"I know that about how he wants to be loved," Rhaegar nodded in understanding. "But what does that have to do with Aerys wanting to be -"

"And here we are," Ashara said quickly and quietly, cutting the prince off as they stood before the tower, Whent men everywhere, one of them, a captain, quickly coming over to the pair. "Best not say much more."

"Lord Whent has ordered us to protect the tower, my prince," the captain said. "Ser Oswell waits for you in the vaults. I know not what he guards, however."

"We do, and we will go to him," Rhaegar answered. "Let none inside before we leave."
"As you command, my prince," the man-at-arms bowed in fealty, leaving the crown prince and the Dayne woman to enter the Wailing Tower...

...and the prince knew he was there the moment they stepped inside, his breaths rumbling through the masonry just as it had through the earth when they had first found him but a day before when they were still encamped on the roads, the air carrying with it an unusual warmth that came from the stairwell that led into the lower levels, and it was that warmth that guided him better than any guide ever could. Ashara looked at him with surprise before following him, following him down the dark steps and through the dark and dank tunnels and the many vaults and cisterns that branched from them, the places where the greatest castle ever built might store the food and water and fuel needed to endure even the longest, darkest winter. They had weathered the burning and the centuries since the fall of the castle well, their masonry utterly unscathed by dragonflame, yet the great expense of the castle's upkeep due to how it had been built to serve as the beating heart of a kingdom in its own right had meant that none of the houses that controlled but a fraction of the territories that had been meant to support it had the coin to maintain the castle, yet alone repair it, and so it was here, where none who might treat with the Lords of Harrenhal would go, that had been deprived the most. The sconces that held up the torches here were not forged of iron or copper or even sculpted from stone, but carved from simple wood, both cheap and easy to replace whenever there was a need, but even that was not enough to stop each and every torch from being thrice the distance that they normally were, leaving the pair to walk through the darkness, passing cellars, some collapsed, some filled with the belongings of the previous families to have ruled the burnt castle, all the way to the brief Qoherys family, the first to rule Harrenhal after the Hoares, whose moth eaten banner still flew in one of the most decrepit rooms, the entry way too collapsed to allow any to reach in to take it down.

But despite the great size of the tunnels beneath Harrenhal, despite their dim lights and twists and turns, it was easy to follow the echoing noise of a dragon's breath, and when they finally turned the last corner, they saw Ser Oswell stood besides a heavy and reinforced door, a massive thing of hard oak and iron bars and a great lock of solid steel, the newest part of the tunnels and a thing that little expense had been spared upon.

"My prince," the white cloaked knight of the Kingsguard said quietly as he walked through the dim tunnels, the sound of the sleeping dragon's breaths almost silencing Oswell's voice. "It is him, but he still sleeps."

"How did he get down here?" Ashara asked.

"It seems he smashed his way through the ceiling somehow," Oswell said. "And he chose a...interesting place to do so."

"How so, ser?" the Prince asked. "Is he in any danger?"

Oswell turned towards the door, and gestured for the two to follow with a silent wave of his hand, and so they did, Ashara tiptoeing along as the prince walked softly on the hard stones, Oswell trying his best to stop his armor from making much noise as he pushed the door open...to reveal that the black and red dragon was asleep atop a great mound of gold dragons, the coins that were the prize money for the tournament, chests knocked over to spill out the rest of their contents onto the stone floor as sunlight shone through a hole in the ceiling, the place where the dragon had smashed through the stonework, but the bruise forming on the end of the dragon's body was enough to show that he had not done so with his claws, but with his body, falling from the sky to crash into the ground and go through the thin ceiling of the cellar and straight into the vaults.

"Seven hells," Ashara said with as much amusement as there was quiet amazement. "It seems the
stories were right about one thing at least...dragons do seem to sleep on gold."

"Aye, and I am loathe to wake him," Oswell answered, looking to the sleeping dragon with unease. "They always said that Urrax fought so fiercely because he was protecting what was his."

"But he is not our kind of dragon," Rhaegar said, stepping past the Kingsguard knight. "Carik?"

There was a murmur, the dragon turning slightly on the gold, bladed tail shifting to protect him.

"It's time to get up," Ashara said, poking the dragon's cheek.

"...mrmr?" the dragon mumbled, blinking away the tiredness as it had before, looking around with tired golden eyes that filled with confusion as he they took in the details of the room, the dragon moving and hearing the coins rattle beneath his bulk before looking down to see his bed of gold, completely sober and utterly devoid of anything that might have come from too much wine. "What happened? I thought we were going back to my chambers?"

"You flew off," Rhaegar said. "Ashara and my wife spent the whole night looking for you."

"Did I?" Carik asked, slowly rising upward only to bang his horns off the ceiling again, fragments of stone falling and sending the three rushing back into the hallway as he blinked away the tiredness. "Sorry."

"You were very upset, I know that," Ashara said, arms crossed. "But why did you run away?"

"You mean flew away," Oswell corrected quietly, only to get a glare from the Dayne woman. "Sorry."

"I..." Carik looked towards the Dayne woman, thinking furiously. "I can't remember. It was something about -"

"In any case," Rhaegar said swiftly, smiling, trying to avoid the risk of him becoming upset again. "It is time to break our fast. Shall we?"

"No," Carik said at last. "I remember now. It was about my family."

Then he slumped down, back onto the gold, the sadness spreading over his face clearly visible even on a dragon. .

"I'll stay here till Maxos arrives."

"But what about breaking your fast?" Rhaegar said quickly, a growing fear rising in his chest. "Surely you want to do that at least?"

"I ate enough last night to last me a week," the grim dragon answered.

"But what about wine? A dragon like you must need something to drink -""

"I had too many cups last night," he answered again.

"But what about the pretty maidens?" Rhaegar suggested, gesturing towards Ashara. "Surely -"
"What Rhaegar is trying to say is that you should come with me and sit with me on the dais," Ashara said with a smile...

...but to Rhaegar's horror, the dragon paid her no attention.

"Seven hells," Ashara said to the prince, her voice near a whisper. "He is truly upset."

"But what about the travels you want to take?" Rhaegar said quickly, a hint of desperation beginning to form in his voice. "What about being part of the tournament?"

"I don't want to anymore. I just want to go home."

Rhaegar's eyes widened...and it was everything he could do to avoid bursting into tears. The dragon was lost to them. Utterly lost. The first dragon to have been seen since the death of the last dragon in the reign of Aegon the Dragonbane, strong and healthy and intelligent as no dragon before him had been, and yet lost to grief because of a few misspoken words the night before. With him had surely gone the last chance of the Targaryen dragon kings to maintain their throne, for they had always depended on their dragons to maintain order and peace in the realm, to prevent it from breaking down into petty kingdoms once more, to save themselves from the treacherous and the ambitious and those who would break their sworn oaths at the first sign of an opportunity. The dragon was a symbol of royal power, it had always been so from the day when Aegon first set foot on the shores that would become the ports of King's Landing to the day when the last dragon breathed its final breath and to the present day. Even the Blackfyres flying dragon banners of their own.

Yet now the dragon would leave, and the entire realm would see that they had a dragon that fled them. They would search for a time, but then they would realize: why should we stay loyal to a throne when the very creatures that forged it had turned against the king and his kin? When the very symbol of their power had abandoned them? It was unthinkable, but it was certain - none would be able to save them, and it was but a matter of time before the king made an error that would see a line that began in Valyria ended in Westeros. Grief began to well up in him at the realization, and he turned to the door, turned to flee, but then he saw a shadow in the hall and watched it step forth to reveal itself in the light.

It was his father.

Cleanly shaven and dressed well, smiling warmly and the very image of the king he had been years before, before Duskendale, leaning on the wooden cane for support as the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard stood behind him, looking more proud than he had in years, hand resting on his pommel with newfound dedication, forever ready to aid his king.

"There you are," the king smiled as he took tentative steps into the room, ignoring Rhaegar completely as he looked towards the weary dragon. "I was beginning to fear that my young friend had fled from us, but no dragon would ever do that to a Targaryen, oh no, never."

In that moment the prince saw and watched with stunned silence and awe as the dragon looked to the king, his mood changed in an instant by something that the king had said, something that surprised the prince, something that dragged him out of his apathy and put a glimmer of hope in his eye.

"Huh?" Carik asked, the sad edge in his voice replaced by a hint of his usual self. "What do you mean?"

"You are young," the king said. "And you are a friend."
"But what about the accident? You could've never walked again."

"And yet here I am, standing," the king smiled. "I forgive you, as a good king should."

"...thank you," the dragon smiled, switching forms back into the young gold haired man he usually was. "I was worried I might have crippled you when you fell. It was an accident."

"Of course it was," the king smiled, patting the young man before him on the shoulder as though he were a son. "No dragon would ever harm me by choice. And worry not about disappearing last night. Any dragon, myself included, needs a chance to...withdraw for a time. I will not have any man thinking less of you for it."

Carik seemed to smile at that, relaxing, and the king smiled with him. "Come. We have a fast to break and a tournament to plan!"

"Gladly, your grace," Carik said, and the king turned and the half-dragon prince followed, relaxed and calm and happy where but a few moments before he had been as grim and melancholic as Rhaegar so often was, the two heading out into the tunnels with the protection of the Lord Commander, leaving the three of them alone.

"Seven hells," Oswell Whent said, turning to the two. "It was as if the King knew exactly what to say to him."

"My father was always said to be charismatic before Duskendale," Rhaegar sighed. "It seems the dragon has brought that back to him as well as his desire to be clean."

"You wanted to know what I meant by Aerys wanting to be a dragon and Carik desperate to be approved of?" Ashara said, a grim expression rising on her face, arms crossed. "You just saw."

Then she reached out to the darkness into which the king and the dragon prince were walking, pointing.

"Aerys approves of him and accepts his every mistake, and Carik loves him for it," she said. "He never had a father of his own, so he latches onto men who might act like how he might expect one to be. Men who are older and"

"And Aerys just acted a father to him," Rhaegar stared back in fear. "Aerys has a dragon who will do what he tells him to do."

"Seven have mercy on us all," Ashara said, realizing the implications. "If he had him at Duskendale -"

"We have to do something," Rhaegar said, thinking furiously. "We need to split the two up."

"How?" Oswell asked, the knight more loyal to Rhaegar than he was to his king. "You saw the pair. Aerys loves him more than he loves you, and Carik wants that love."

"I'm not sure, not yet," the prince answered as fast as he could. "But we need to think of something. A way to split the two up."

"You could always tell him what he does to Rhaella," Ashara said lowly, her voice somber. "He
"But that might only send him running from all Targaryens," Oswell countered. "Then he might go elsewhere. The Lannisters, the Tyrells, the Arryns, even the Starks would be able to have him then, and use his support to claim the throne. Many would come to their banner for the dragon's presence alone, because all men know what a dragon can do on the battlefield."

Then the white cloaked knight turned to the prince. "You have to be the one to have his backing, my prince. Anyone else and the realm will bleed."

"The last thing the Seven Kingdoms needs is Aerys to have a dragon that loves him like a father," Ashara agreed. "You have to be the one to make friends with him, and you're going to have to make sure that something like that never happens again, because if it does, it will only push him and Aerys closer together."

"But how?" Rhaegar asked. "He wants to be loved, yes, and you say he wants approval. How in the Father's name am I supposed to give him such things?"

"You needn't give him them," Oswell reasoned. "He wants other things as well. A chance to prove himself. A chance to see things he has never seen before. To learn. You can give him all those things. You were doing it on the way here."

"You make it seem like he is a child."

"He is a man who grew up from birth with just a foster father and never knew his true parents," Ashara explained. "He is going to be...different. Seven only know what his foster father was planning for him to be like this, but he said he was only six and ten when he came here. Mayhaps he had planned something for the years afterwards to mend him?"

"And now you make him seem broken."

"But he is," Oswell nodded. "He might have scales on his body, aye, and breathe fire, but in his chest is the heart of a man. It can be broken the way he broke these chests," the knight said, tapping a shattered coffer with his foot. "He needs help. He needs you to guide him, and someone else to do the rest, whatever that might be."

"Just continue as you are," Ashara said. "You said everything that needed to be said, but you didn't do it right. You've seen how Aerys does it. You need to do it the same way."

"Very well," Rhaegar answered as he allowed himself a sigh, agreeing with them at last. "But I am not entirely sure that this will work. If he still favors Aerys -"

"Then our king won't need wildfire to burn his enemies," was Oswell's gruff answer, Ashara agreeing with a silent nod. "He knows you more than he knows Aerys."

"Then we best head to the dais and break our fast," Rhaegar said at last. "Ashara, please, don't upset him again."

"I didn't do anything of the sort!" the Dayne woman answered innocently. "All I did was take him to the Godswood as he asked and he flew off."

"...the Godswood?" Oswell asked. "The one with that horrid wierwood?"
"He said he wanted to see what it was like."

Rhaegar narrowed his eyes, then.

"After we break our fast, you will take me to this Godswood, Oswell, and I want you to tell me everything you know about it," the prince commanded. "It seems we will need to learn everything there is to know about them."

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End of Part 11!

Chapter End Notes

Whew! :D This took a bit longer to finish than I thought it would because of some distractions in real life, but now its done, and boy, am I glad to be back at writing this story again :)

As is usual, though, the part isn't truly done till the summary is done, we best get started!

And speaking of starts, this part started with Maxos visiting a world that should seem very, very familiar indeed and definitely one that I'm sure some people guessed very, very quickly, because this Carik, as ancient and powerful as he is, is in the then young kingdom of Englaland in 1066, a realm that is little more than a century old and dominated by Anglo-Saxon culture specked with hints of the Norse influence that came with the conquests of Sweyn Forkbeard and his son, Cnut...yet history has taken a rather different turn in their world than it did in ours to say the least, because rather than winning at Hastings and heading on to London to culminate what would one day become known as the Norman Conquest, William and much of his army were consumed by fire after Carik joined forces with the Saxons, a massive multiplier to their strength if there ever was one and a major boon to their morale to see the golden dragon of the banners of Wessex coming with them to the battlefield (though that's actually a little bit of a ahistorical thing, as the symbol of Wessex was actually a [I]wyvern[/I], not a dragon, but we can just chalk that up to butterflies from Carik's presence in there before then :) and utterly destroying their foes from across the Channel...but whatever help they might have desired to get from him will certainly not be coming, as the reason that this Carik is in their world is clear in that he is there to rest, and so departs the realm for one where he has a better chance of being left in peace and quiet.

And this is actually going to be the first part of a little transition from the normal for this story so far, because, being honest, a lot of the previous Maxos parts have been rather lacklustre in the choices of the worlds that he's been visiting being either silly or just plain dopey, even by my standards, so he's going to be visiting more serious worlds like this one where things have gone straight into alternate history, either because of Carik's direct actions, like the above, or because of the consequences of his presence resulting in people being in different places at different times and thus causing history to turn out rather differently indeed, but not all of them will be like that - some will be a bit more lighthearted or serious in a more fantastical manner, though certainly not anything as silly as moviestar!Carik turned out to be, so don't you worry about that :p
And this Carik is definitely a different one indeed from the ones that we've covered, one that is far older and thus far more powerful, but with his own problems...but for those of you who might be wondering what exactly he did to change color, this is actually an ability that the player has in the game and thus one that he has in the story called Chameleon Hide, which is used in the game as a stealth ability. If you're wondering what else might make an appearance, feel free to check this list, as it has all the spells that the player has access to in the game and which may or may not make an appearance in the story, as our man Carik is still too young and weak to be able to use most of them and some he probably isn't even aware of whatsoever, like the stealth power that allows him to change color and which the much more ancient Carik used to match the colors of the Wessex banner.

There's more summary but I've ran out of characters, like usual, so see the comments if you're interested in the rest! :D
Carik moved with a growing cheerfulness as he walked with the king and his sworn protector through the wide and open grounds of the massive burnt castle, Aerys moving with a smile on his face and with a spring in his step and with his movements slowed only by the stout and strong wooden stick that was his cane, the king having grown more comfortable and more at ease with walking with its aid. Yet although some might look to it and see disability and weakness, to Carik at least, it made him look all the more regal - cleanly shaven, hair short, nails clipped and dressed for immaculate perfection in the blacks and reds of his family's heraldry, the king looked as though he had become twenty years younger than he had been the day that he had first seen him, far more respectable, and the clear pride of the Kingsguard knight behind them only added to it, as did the eyes of the men and women around them, the lords and ladies who talked quietly amongst themselves as they saw their king walking alongside him and the serving men and women who saw him for the first time in their lives and looked at him with reverence.

And it was me that told the King to get dressed, Carik smiled to himself. Now he looks like a proper King.

"Such a beautiful day, isn't it?" King Aerys smiled as they walked towards the Hall of the Hundred Hearths, his voice as warm as his mood. "To think that it was still snow and ice but a few months before. The winter was so cold that I had to have the alchemists light fires in the streets to help keep the people warm."

"Everything has come to life," Carik answered, looking to the small gardens that dotted the castle, having long since grown out of their once carefully planned layouts but having grown all the more beautiful for it, the earth dotted with bright and blooming flowers of white and orange and red and yellow. "Summer must have come quickly this year."

"Indeed it has," the king nodded happily. "With any luck, this summer shall last for many long years. A good, six year summer will help the realm recover from the long winter. Another year of snow and we might well have ate through our stockpiles."

Carik looked to the king again, then, wondering for a moment if he had misheard. "What do you mean?"

"Even a castle as big as Harrenhal can only hope to hold enough food for a few years of winter, mayhaps eight at the most," Aerys explained, well spoken in a way that he had not been when they had first met. "Any more than that and it will begin to rot before anyone can eat it. Even the seed grain will start to wither then, and it will grow all the more difficult to get a good harvest."

"You have year long winters here?" he asked, stunned.

"You don't?" Aerys asked, as surprised by Carik's words as he was by the king's. "What are the winters like where you come from?"
"They only ever last three months," Carik said, the king looking back at him with amazement. "They might last a week or two longer or less, sometimes, but that just depends on whether or not we're having a cold or hot spring."

"A three month winter? Every time?" the king answered, wide eyed before laughing. "The maesters have never seen a winter that has lasted less than three years."

"We've never had a winter that's lasted anywhere near that long," Carik said, honest. "Ours really are that short."

"Your land has never had a winter that has lasted even a year?" the Lord Commander said, even his normally stoic demeanor cracked by surprise.

"Never," Carik said firmly, the two seeing that he was telling the truth. "Every year we have three months of winter, three months of spring, three months of summer and three months of autumn."

"Seven hells," the king murmured, the humor disappearing from his face. "Yours truly is a strange land."

And then in an instant the smile was back on his face again. "But that is no matter! In Westeros and as much as in Essos, our winters can last many years, as many as our summers might, and they are difficult to predict for the maesters of the Citadel, though they do try. Is that not so, ser?"

"They do," the Lord Commander nodded. "They measure the lengths of the days and their warmth as well, as they grow shorter as winter comes near and colder as well. When the time comes, they warn the realm with their ravens so that they might make the last preparations they need."

"Exactly," Aerys smiled to Carik. "The Grand Maester warns that this might be a false spring, as the weather has become warm but the days are still too short for it to be summer proper, but the weather is getting warmer with every day. It shan't be long before even he admits it is spring, but I fault him not for being cautious."

"But...why do you have year long winters?" Carik asked, confused. "Is there something wrong with your orbit?"

"...orbit?"

"Every child on Rivellon knows that the planet goes around the sun every twelve months," he answered, confident. "But it has a little tilt, so different parts of it face the sun at any time. That's why one half of the planet has summertime and the south has wintertime at opposite times of the year."

"Then why does the sun move across the sky?" Aerys asked, with a mix of interest and confusion. "That should only happen if it were travelling around us, would it not?"

"That's because you're spinning around it," he explained. "The sun stays in the same place, but..."

Then something clicked.

*Seven, he realized. They wouldn't have realized that yet...but it's a bit late for that now...*

"...do you know your world is round?"
"Of course!" Aerys laughed. "The ancient Valyrians determined that with their dragons and a stone column in the days of the early Freehold. They even measured its size with their sums."

"Then this should make sense," Carik started...

...and then he raised his left hand as a clenched fist, and clenched his right and revolved it around the first, as though reeling in a bucket, turning his wrist slightly as he did but keeping the left hand perfectly still..

"You're on the surface of a ball going around another ball," he explained. "The ball you're on is going around it and spinning as it does, with a tilt, so at times of the year you're closer to the sun than the south side of the planet because of the tilt. That's when you get the most light from the sun."

"And because that is when the days are longest, that must be summer," the king nodded with understanding.

"Right," Carik nodded, seeing that the King knew what he was meant and causing Aerys to smile all the more for it. "The reason the sun moves across the sky isn't because its going around us, it's because we're rotating and that makes it looks like it's moving when its actually staying still."

"Then why do we sometimes have longer winters and shorter summers, or short winters and longer summers?" the Lord Commander asked with an intrigued voice as they came to the entrance of the Hall of the Hundred Hearths at last.

"...actually, I'm not sure what causes that to happen," Carik answered, uncertain. "You should have roughly equal ones each year."

"In any case," the king smiled as the Lord Commander looked on with some skepticism before returning to his stoic demeanour. "Whatever the cause, it would seem our winters are much different than yours."

"You can say that again. A three year winter and half of Rivellon would probably starve," he said grimly.

"Oh, don't worry about such things," the king smiled again, clapping the golden haired youth on the shoulder warmly. "It is time to break our fast, and no man should ever be sad when he has wine and bread! Come! The dais awaits, my young friend!"

And with that the three stepped into the massive hall ahead of them...and though the stones and tables and chairs were all the same as they were the night before, the hall was almost unrecognizable. Where there had been laughing and singing and drinking and happiness, there was the sullen silence of men and women nursing headaches from too much drink the night before and some rubbing bruises and sprains that came from the previous evening's brawl. Even the clattering of the plates and knives and cups was quieter than before, lords and ladies and knights alike all loathe to eat any more than they had in the previous night's feast and lacking an appetite in their regretful state, barely touching the foods before them and drinking only plain juice with bits of ginger and peppermint floating in it...and drinking plenty of it to quench their thirst. Carik was almost surprised to see them so drunk in the first place the night before, as blurry as it was even to him, but it made sense - why was there a need to hold back, when the tournament had yet to begin and the night before was but a warm up for the next week or more of feasting, drinking and lancing?

*What a combination,* he thought, almost wanting to laugh because of it. *Half these men are going to*
be hungover when they go jousting and feeling like they want to throw up from eating too much. Even the Imps aren't that mad!

Following the king's lead, Aerys, entirely sober as Carik thankfully was, looked even more kingly than he had in the gardens now that he was surrounded by hungover men and pale women desperately trying to cover the bruises that had come from brawling against other maidens the night before, from the entirely unladylike actions they had done in their own drunken haze. There was even a man with a field of blackbirds on his yellow doublet who could only eat porridge and not the plates of bacon and sausages and eggs that were there for those who might want them, his jaw wired shut from where the Lord Commander's pommel had struck him the night before, trying to speak to his family with murmured words that they could barely understand, and at the end of the Stormlord table was Robert Baratheon himself, as jovial as ever and as though he hadn't drank so much as a single cup of wine, a stark contrast to Eddard besides him, who seemed fit to die at the table then and there, blankly staring at the bowl of oats and honey and cinnamon before him with eyes that would have looked more at home on a man fresh from from a bloody battlefield than not.

"Cheer up, Ned," Robert laughed, his friend wincing at the sound as Carik and the king passed. "Your brothers will be here in a few hours!"

"Aye," the Stark answered grimly. "And they'll see me for the first time in years like...this."

"Ah, the wine, eh?" Robert asked before shrugging his broad shoulders with a smile, raising a cup. "Best way to deal with it is to never stop drinking. You can't get hungover if you're still drunk."

"I can't meet Brandon and Benjen and Lyanna drunk," Eddard objected weakly.

"Then all you can do is try and force yourself through it," Robert said, reaching forth with a long, thin knife to skewer a sausage from one of the platter's before him before biting down, the Stormlord well versed on how to beat the aches and pains of too much wine. "Drink the juice. It helps."

The son of Winterfell sighed and did exactly as his friend suggested as Carik and the king ascended the steep steps of the dais, the high table far emptier than it had been the day before, with half the Whent family still missing and the Lord of Harrenhal himself nowhere in sight, leaving only the Targaryen family themselves in the highest and most honored place, the ever melancholic Rhaella sat alongside a weary Elia and the little princess, who perked up with excitement to see Carik again.

"Hi!" Rhaenys said happily, before looking to her tired mother and then to Carik with narrowed eyes and an almost confused expression. "Where were you?"

"Even a dragon needs to sleep," Aerys said with a gentle smile, dotting on his granddaughter in a way he hadn't before his beard had been cut. "He had simply found a comfortable place to sleep and overslept because of it."

"...a bed?" the princess asked.

"A bed of gold," the king smiled before carefully climbing into his seat, resting the wooden stick that supported him against the table, his white cloaked guardian helping him down before taking up a place in the seat that had been Oswell's the night before.

"Really?" the little girl asked with amazement as she looked to Carik with wide, violet eyes. "Did you really sleep on a pile of gold? Like Urrax did in the story?"
"I did," Carik smiled, the princess gasping with delight before hurriedly returning to her meal, smiling widely as he fell into a spare seat before looking towards Elia. "Is something wrong?"

"Only that I spent all night with Ashara trying to find you after you flew off and didn't get so much as a minute's sleep," she answered, more cold and distant than she had ever been to him before, a simmering anger concealed beneath her stoic expression. "Other than that, everything seems to be fine."

"I'm sorry," he answered with honesty as the king began filling his plate with rashers of bacon and thick sausages from the platters all around. "I can barely remember that part of last night...it's like it didn't happen. If I could, I would give you a better answer, but all I can remember is being upset because of my family and...you know."

"Well, it did happen," she said flatly, though her voice softened with every word, understanding. "And...yes, I do know. You were upset, so I had Ashara take you from the hall, but that doesn't explain why you flew off the moment Ashara took you to the Godswood."

"...actually, why were you two looking for me in the first place?" Carik asked, seeing the surprise rise on her face.

"Is she bothering you?" Aerys asked with a gentle voice that turned to an iron, sharp stare towards the Dornishwoman. "You need but the say the word -"

The king took a half-cut sausage from his plate, using his fingers to rip it down the middle and send the steaming hot pork within bursting forth as its insides became outsides, exactly as would happen to the Dornishwoman if he wanted it to.

"- and she shall never bother you again, you can be sure of that," the king smiled, a hint of madness in his eyes.

"That...won't be necessary," Carik said quickly, smiling as though he were not uneasy from the offer. "We're just talking."

"The offer was made," the king said with delightful cheer and warmth and with everything about him kind and friendly, tossing the sausage into his mouth.

"Because you are our guest and we have to look after you," Elia reasoned, ignoring the king's threat. "And because you were drunk and flying next to a lake. You crashed on land. That was lucky. If you had fell into the lake you would have drowned before any of us found you."

Carik blinked. He had never liked ponds and lakes and swimming or anything to do with large bodies of water, not that he had ever known why.

"No more flying after dinner for me, then," he said at last. "And I really am sorry for being such a mess last night. I never meant to be so much trouble."

"For a while we thought you had flown away and left us," Elia added with a tired sigh. "Just don't do it again. I shouldn't have stayed up to try and find you in the first place."

"I won't," Carik said with certainty. "I only learnt about my family a few days ago and there was so much wine that...I wasn't thinking clearly. But I won't be drinking that much wine again, so don't worry about that."
"If you have to have something to drink with the feast, then why not ale?" the king suggested eagerly. "You would need to drink gallons of it to be drunk, far more than the wine, and there is good ale here as well. The Starks prefer it for a reason."

"The First Men called it "bread water" in their runes," the crown prince said as he stepped up the dais, a tired Ashara alongside and a silent Oswell Whent behind, the three having finally come to the Hall of the Hundred Hearths. "They called it that because it could keep a man alive through winter when everything else was already used up and could keep for a long time, not just because it was made with barley."

And then he gave the slightest bow in deference towards his father, silver locks slipping from his shoulders with the motion. "Please, forgive our late arrival. We had a matter to deal with."

"I had not known that my son knew much of the runes of the First Men," Aerys smiled. "You are forgiven."

"Thank you," the prince answered, taking a seat besides his wife and besides his daughter, more than enough room for all of them on the dais thanks to the missing Whent household, Ashara sitting besides Carik. "And I only have a little knowledge about them, enough to help me understand certain texts that were first written not long after the Andals crossed the Narrow Sea."

"They have been written again since then to replace the rotting parchments," Rhaegar finished. "But the wording can be awkward if you don't understand the meaning behind the phrases they used."

"I know little about the tongue or words of the First Men. Valyrian glyphs were always easier to learn and more useful as well," the king admitted before turning his attentions onto the Kingsguard knight that had come with them. "Ser Oswell, where is the rest of your family?"

Then his voice darkened, distant memories flashing in his eyes. "...they best not be plotting treason, as the Darklyns did at Duskendale. I should have realized what they were planning when they hid the children so that they would not need to see men die...honest men would never hide their children from the king who came to visit."

Carik looked to Rhaegar.

"It's...complicated," the prince sighed.

"I assure you that my brother would never think of such a thing, your grace," Oswell said.

"They've been so welcoming so far I doubt they could ever imagine it," Elia said to the king, trying to calm him with her words. "The Whents are surely one of your most loyal bannermen."

Ashara tapped Carik in the side, flashing him the briefest smile and with a knowing look in her eye.

"I agree," Carik added, the king looking to him warmly. "They've been nothing but kind."

"Indeed, indeed!" Aerys laughed. "Not like the Darklyns! Never! Isn't that right Oswell?"

"It is, your grace," the Whent knight smiled to his king. "We have always been loyal to you, my king."
"Not always," Aerys said, Oswell swiftly opening his mouth to answer...  

...only for the king to smile. "I haven't always been king."

Oswell laughed, or at the very least faked one well enough for none to be able to tell otherwise. "Of course, your grace. Of course."

"Anyhow, please, go on," the king smiled. "Is he busy with a matter?"

"I am afraid my lord brother has taken ill, your grace," Oswell answered honestly. "He...drank too much wine."

"If he had me drink another cup I would have drowned," Rhaegar murmured, Rhaenys giggling at her father's words before he spoke louder and to his father. "He has always had a taste for wine. It seems now we know he has too much of one."

"Oswell, please tell your brother that I will not hold it against him," the king smiled to the knight again, forgiving and gentle where but a moment before there was a burning fury beginning to bubble beneath the surface. "Every man can drink a little too much every once in awhile. Better to have a few moments of embarrassment from it than a lifetime of sobriety. But where is the rest of your family? They cannot all be sick?"

"No, your grace," Oswell agreed. "My nephews are looking for the man who insulted my niece's honor."

Oh good, now I can get stabbed after breakfast rather than after dinner, Carik thought as he swore under his breath. Maybe if I'm lucky they'll all be so drunk that they'll miss...

"Oh, don't worry about him," Ashara said to the bat knight, not so much as even once turning her attention towards Carik for a moment as she did. "They probably fled the moment they realized she was upset. Besides, they should be getting ready to defend her in the tourney."

"Aye," Oswell nodded. "I tried to tell them the same thing, but you know how brothers can be. They're out looking for a man with blonde hair and light eyes."

"A Lannister bastard, maybe?" Carik said quickly, remembering the words Arthur Dayne had said on the road about Lannisters having light hair and light eyes. "They have blonde hair."

"He's right," Ashara agreed quickly, looking to Carik with a smile and a knowing look in her eye before looking back at the Whent. "Gerion always visited whores. Maybe he made a son who doesn't even realize he's part Lannister. A tourney like this was bound to draw hedge knights from across the entire realm."

"Hedge knights?" Carik asked, confused.

"A hedge knight is a lowborn fighter, sort of like a mercenary but one who focuses only on tournaments," Oswell explained. "Do you not have them in your land?"

"No, but we do have a few mercenaries still," Carik said. "They don't have much to do anymore, though. They tend to just do adventuring these days and deal with bridge trolls and the like."

"Trolls...?" Rhaegar asked, intrigued. "What is a troll?"
"They're huge monsters, ten, maybe feet tall and nearly half that shoulder to shoulder," Carik explained, the others going quiet as he spoke. "They're not very smart, but they're incredibly strong, so they use trees as clubs. They like the dark, but they like water, too, so they tend to hide in damp, dark places, but everyone knows you find them most under bridges. They hide there to eat the people that cross, but usually they'll ask for them to pay the troll toll."

"They charge people to cross bridges?" Ashara asked before smiling. "It seems we Westerosi have trolls too. They're called Freys."

"Ashara!" Elia said with barely concealed amusement as Rhaenys giggled and Oswell burst into laughter. "You can't call them trolls! They're not brigands."

"Is that why Aegon Frey lost his head in the Kingswood?"

"That was fine work," the Lord Commander said to Oswell quietly as Carik took the liberty to start breaking his own fast, eating little due to the massive meal from the night before, listening as the others spoke amongst themselves. "From what I heard of it, you took his head from his shoulders so cleanly that the Silent Sisters had to follow the hairs on his neck to sew it back on properly."

"He rushed to put on his armor," Oswell shrugged humbly. "Any man could have done it. I was simply in the right place at the right time to land the blow."

"And Aegon was in the wrong place," Ashara mused. "Is it true that Oswyn Longneck tripped over his head?"

"It is," Oswell said, smiling, reminiscing. "Tywin's son got him them, slashed out his heel when he stumbled and put the sword right here," the knight tapped the base of his neck. "Straight through the bottom of his helm. He probably didn't even realize he was hit before he died."

"There's someone for my brother to watch out for in the melee," Ashara said with a smile. "Might be Arthur will have some trouble this year...and speaking of that brother of mine, where is he? We spoke barely an hour ago and now it seems he's disappeared."

"He was on guard most of last night," the Lord Commander said as the king ate, Aerys picking the same foods that Carik touched, though in a greater quantity, having been much more restrained the night before. "He is sleeping it off for the time being, but he should be awake again for the start of the tournament."

"I hope so," Ashara said, genuine concern entering her voice. "The last thing I want is for my brother to hurt himself because he didn't get enough sleep for the tourney."

"There are still a few hours before then," Aerys smiled. "Enough time for him to be well rested enough to show his talents to the realm...but I am more interested in our guest's performance, to be sure!"

"That is if he still wants to ride," Rhaegar said before looking to the half-dragon prince. "You weren't that interested in it this morning."

"I wasn't interesting in anything this morning," Carik answered, smiling. "I'll give it a go."

"Oswell, would you be able to find him some armor for when the tourney starts?" the prince said as
he looked towards the white cloak. "He'll need a full suit, and we haven't time for a smith to forge him one."

"He could always wear your armor," the king suggested.

"He's too young for the prince's armor to fit him, your grace," the Lord Commander reasoned. "Better to have anything in the armory that can fit him than risk sending him into the lists without it. Men die from that."

"Hang on a second," Carik said quickly. "Just how dangerous are these tournaments?"

"I imagine they must be safer in your homeland, seeing as you have magic and all," Elia said, sipping a cup that was half full of wine and half orange juice to soften it. "Here in Westeros we aren't nearly so lucky. A tourney this big is bound to have someone hurt at some point, even killed."

"You don't have magic to soften the strikes or heal the injured," Carik realized at last.

"Exactly," Oswell nodded. "Harrenhal has a massive armoury. There must be something that can fit you in there, but we'll deal with that when the time comes. They're still setting up the field, and won't be done till after the rest of the Starks and the Lannisters arrive."

"I think I'm going to go for a walk till then," Carik said, rising from his seat and pushing his plate forward for a servant to collect, uninterested in anything on the table. "There's still so much to see, and I've got a better chance to do that now than when the jousting starts."

"But you've barely eaten a thing," the king said, as confused as he was concerned. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing," he smiled. "I just ate a little too much the last night."

"You know you're meant to pick and choose what you eat at a feast, don't you?" Ashara laughed. "That's what a feast is all about. Choice."

"I didn't think it would be very polite to let it all go to waste," he answered with a shrug of his shoulders. "Besides, I hadn't been to a feast before."

"...the more you speak about it, the stranger your land sounds," Ashara sighed.

"Half the people there would say the same thing about Westeros," he answered with a smile.

"I will have Oswell find you when the time is right," the king said at last, nodding in understanding, and so Carik began to walk around from the table, whistling cheerfully...

...only for Rhaegar, his wife and Ashara to quickly speak amongst themselves with voices that he could barely hear at all amidst the sounds of the great dining hall, slowly starting to return to the normal of the day before as the guests sobered and grew comfortable again, words that not even the king nor his protectors could hear, but words that were heated, an entire argument taking place in just a few moments before the three of them fell silent again.

Then Ashara rose from her seat.

"I'm not hungry either," she said.
"Really?" Carik asked, skeptical.

"Honestly," she insisted. "All that cake came at a price of today's bacon. And you need a guide."

"Alright then," Carik answered as the beautiful Dayne came round to his side, the two walking down the steps of the dais together and down the length of the hall, side by side, and all in grim silence till he tried to say something to ease the clear discomfort. "So...where first?"

"The market would be nice, but the merchants are stocking up for today, so they might not be open," Ashara said as the pair stepped out into the sun, Carik wincing for a moment as his eyes adjusted themselves from the dark interior of the vast, cavernous hall to the bright outdoor world again. "There might be a few mummer shows on, though, since not everyone has gone to break their fast."

"I guess we won't stand out all that much, then," he said, grateful for the fact. "I don't think I have much money on me anymore, though."

"I do, thanks to a very generous man being so kind to give me some of his coin," she said with a laugh as she relaxed again, showing him one of the gold dragons he had given her the day before.

"You must have wealthy friends," he said as he offered the Dayne woman his arm.

"Would you believe me if I said he slept on a pile of gold?" she teased, taking his arm as the two started to walk. "Not even Tywin Lannister does that."

"Who is Tywin Lannister, anyway?" Carik asked as they walked, curious. "Is he rich?"

"Very," she insisted. "He's the Lord of the Westerlands and the Lord of Casterly Rock, which is where most of the realm's gold comes from. His treasury is as big as the one the king has because of it."

"How was he able to get that much money?" he asked with confusion. "Shouldn't the king have tried to restrain his power? Stop him from getting too strong?"

"The Targaryen kings are what helped them get that strong," Ashara said flatly. "When all the kingdoms bent the knee to Aegon, they all got some reward or another for bending the knee after the Conquest to help hold the new kingdom together, so Aegon wouldn't have to deal with putting down constant revolts."

"For the Reach, that was special taxation privileges on wheat and wine, since they were the new kingdom's biggest source of both," she continued, "The Stormlands got timber charters for working the Rainwood to feed the new kingdom's workshops, but the Westerlands had gold, and a lot of it. They were given the task of making the realm's coin."

"So they can make themselves more money if they want it?"

"No, but they have a monopoly on gold mines in the Westerlands," she explained again. "If, say, Lord Brax found gold in the Westerlands, they would have to petition the Lannisters for the right to mine that gold. The Lannisters always give them the right since it helps keep the Westerlands as a whole strong, but they take a cut as well. That way, it isn't just their own mines that are giving them gold, its the entire Westerlands."
"So they're funneling their entire region's strength into themselves?"

"Exactly," Ashara said with a nod. "And there's a reason they have that right. They're the only place in the realm with any real amounts of gold, so they have to work with the Master of Coin in King's Landing to make gold dragons."

"Oh," Carik said with realization and a smile. "They have to control inflation."

Ashara looked at him with confusion.

"...you don't know what inflation is?"

"In a bedchamber, mayhaps," Ashara mused. "But with coin? No."

Seven, I need to learn to keep my mouth shut about things they don't know about...but boy, the dwarves would love it here. They'd have every last gold dragon in the world in just a couple of years.

"I might not be as good with money as I should be," Carik admitted. "But the more of something you have, the less it is worth. If there is only one bottle of wine in the world it's expensive because lots of people want that bottle of wine, but if there are thousands of them, they're cheap because everyone will be able to get one."

"Well, yes," Ashara laughed. "You don't need to be a magister to know that."

"But the same thing happens to money," he explained. "Maxos told me that my father's empire had a problem when it was young because the mines were so good at extracting gold that there was too much of it in the world, so it made it worth less than before. That meant that since the money was backed by gold the money was worth less than before."

"What do you mean?"

"Well...these clothes cost me thirty gold dragons."

"Thirty?" Ashara looked at him with astonishment before bursting into laughter.

"What?" Carik asked.

"You were had!" the Dayne laughed. "I could find you a tailor in King's Landing who could get you the same clothes for ten."

"Its not like I knew how much a gold dragon was worth!" he objected in his defense as she laughed. "I didn't even know what a gold dragon was till yesterday!"

"Sorry," Ashara said with a last giggle. "Go on."

"If these clothes cost me thirty dragons," he said, looking towards Ashara as she held back a laugh. "Then afterwards they would have cost me ninety, because there were so many coins around that the value of each was a third of what it used to be."

"Seven hells," Ashara murmured. "So each coin was worth less? How did they fix it?"
"The dwarves realized that there was too much money in the world, so they brought in the gold through banks and locked it away," Carik answered. "That way there was less money around, so the value of each coin went back up and caused the prices to go back down. It never actually recovered all the way, though."

"Actually, I think Tywin knows about that," Ashara said at last. "He put a halt on gold mining for a couple of years after he succeeded his father, who gave out lots of loans. I guess he must have done it to try and make the gold more valuable..."

Then she narrowed her eyes, thinking.

"...which would have made the Lannisters strong again," she said with quiet realization. "But that would have needed getting rid of the gold that was already out there. That's why he undid Aegon's soft taxes and replaced them with harsher ones and stopped the king from spending so much..."

"Huh?"

"I've just realized something that I should have realized a long, long time ago," she said with a sly smile on her cheeks. "I think I'm going to have a long talk with Elia later about our Hand of the King."

Then she looked at Carik, knowing that he did not understand the title, and explained. "The Hand of the King is...think of a regent, but one who serves even when the king is fit to rule in his own right and you wouldn't be much wrong. He leads the small council and manages all the more mundane parts of the realm so the king can focus on more important things."

"That makes sense," Carik accepted. "There's only so much Aerys would be able to do in a day. My father has Maxos act the same way in Rivellon."

"You talk about your home a lot," Ashara mused with a curious voice, changing the topic, genuinely interested in his home. "What's it like? For women, like me?"

"Its...close, but not exactly the same," he said carefully. "Rivellon has a lot of different peoples on it, so they all view things differently, and that's not mentioning how. Dwarven families are nearly the same as yours, but the Elves are very liberal so they don't really mind what they do, so they can work or fight if they want to."

"...you mean they can act like men?" Ashara asked in surprise. "Really?"

"...only a few of them, though," Carik said innocently and honestly, trying to disarm whatever concerns she might have. "Most elves would never even think of that. Most of them are just out of their heads from smoking their peace pipes all day. They're even trying to allow women only couples to get married."
"Women only couples?" she asked with even greater surprise than before. "You mean two women - together - as lovers?"

"The undead are against it, though, since they think it profanes holy rituals," he explained with a nod.

"Things like that are...somewhat accepted in Dorne," Ashara answered. "But most people there wouldn't even imagine allowing them to be married. Paramours, yes, but even the Rhoynar would stop at making them wives. The High Septon would never allow it."

"The Undead in Rivellon wouldn't want it, either, and neither do the dwarves," Carik answered, "The Imps are...in the middle ground. On the one hand they don't believe in gods, so they don't care about upsetting them, but on the other they need as many of them to have children as possible because most of them die by twenty and none have ever lived to forty."

"None? How do they die so fast?"

"You know that feeling that if you were going to jump out of a window, you would die?" Carik tried to explain.


"They don't have that."

Ashara looked at him funny, then.

"I am telling you the truth," he insisted, seeing the disbelief in her eyes. "They get themselves killed because they genuinely can't tell what's dangerous or not, so they get themselves crushed in mine collapses and crushed by trees and everything."

"Oh, so like you and women," Ashara teased with understanding.

"I'm not that bad," he laughed. "I wouldn't make that kind of mistake."

"Is that why Oswell's nephews are out for your head?"

"Well, except that one time," he answered with a smile. "I'm getting better at least."

"With my help," Ashara teased again.

"With your help," he admitted. "And...thanks for that."

"You're welcome," she said. "Just don't try using it on me."

Carik laughed, and then said, "Got any suggestions?"

"You want me to help find you someone nice?" Ashara laughed. "Go on, then. Might be you'll learn something about ladies whilst you're at it, and about Westeros, too!"

"More like make sure I don't anger anyone who has brothers who want to be dragonslayers," he answered with a smile, before glancing towards a pair of women dressed in the green of lush, dark
"Those are Mace Tyrell's sisters, Janna and Mina," Ashara explained. "They came to King's Landing not long before spring to bring gifts to little Aegon after his birth. They're nice enough, very gentle and tender..."

"They don't seem so bad, he thought to himself. Maybe -

"...but the only real reason they were there was because the Tyrells wanted them to be the first women around if Elia died," Ashara finished with an innocent shrug. "They would have given Rhaegar a shoulder to cry on, then. Or a breast. They are very fertile, though, and go to their husband's beds often. Tyrells have big families."

"That's...getting a little ahead of things," Carik answered, as surprised as he was embarrassed, and quickly turned his attentions to someone else, a woman who was surely a few years older than him, but lean and pretty and dressed in grey and with a blue bridge whose towers were on either side of her chest, giving charity to the servants with a laugh and a smile. "She seems nice."

"That's Walder Frey's second daughter. Lythene, if I remember right," Ashara said. "There are a lot of Freys, so you're just asking for trouble when Old Walder finally dies. Besides, she's betrothed, so unless you feel like having a duel..."

"And her?" he asked, looking to another woman, one who was certainly his own age and one who was dressed in a darker green than the Tyrell sisters, streaked with the black stripes that came from the broken wheel above her middle and its matching pair on her back, looking at him with a dreamy, blushing smile. "She seems -"

"- like the kind of woman who would be very, very easy to charm by anyone with a warm smile, even if it isn't a real one," Ashara interrupted before he could finish. "She probably thinks the whole world is a song and that love conquers all; best to stay away from her, since she will probably be found in bed with a sellsword or a blacksmith or something before long and think he meant what he said when he said "I love you", only for her to never see him again."

"Someone would do that?" Carik asked with horror.

"If it means an easy lay with a maiden whose family has plenty of gold, then yes, they would," Ashara said quietly. "Half the knights in Westeros might not act like the vows tell them to, but there are rules for them and they have to do what they say or risk having the matter brought before the king. A sellsword doesn't need to do anything like that, so they can run. And she has six sisters."

"Then what about -"

"There you are!" came an excited voice from the side, and Carik looked over to see Lysa Tully with a wide smile on her face, rushing towards him happily and as fast as her legs could move within her dress...

...and his eyes widened as she slipped on the cloth and began to tumble towards the hard stone plinth of a broken statue by the path side, its stone jagged and broken and sharp and at the perfect height to strike her in the neck and kill her in an instant.

Thinking quickly, he tore his arm from Ashara's hold and leapt forward as far as he could, straight
into her path and with arms wide, the young Tully woman letting out a yelp as she crashed into his arms and into his embrace, Carik staggering backwards for a few steps before finding his footing again, steady, a few feet from the broken statue and its dangerous edge.

"You...you saved me," Lysa said with awe as she looked up at him with eyes of deep blue, throwing her arms around him and holding him close. "Thank you!"

"And that is Lysa Tully," Ashara said with amusement as she walked over to the pair.

"We've met," Carik said with a smile as she rested her head against him, holding him tight even as he took his arms from around her, "You can let go now, Lysa."

"But you're so warm," she said, a smile of blissful content on her face as she placed her head against his chest and listened to the sound of the heart beating within, her breaths soft and slow. "Seven...I could listen to this sound every morning...it's so strong..."

"Uhm..." Carik murmured, utterly at a loss as to what to say in reply. "...thanks? Can you let go now?"

"Sorry!" she said as she instantly let go, blushing in realization, seeming to shrink back down into the shy girl he had seen in the narrow alley the day before, barely able to say a word to him. "I didn't mean...I mean...I just wanted to say...thank you?"

"Oh, she wants much more than that," Ashara muttered under her breath with a roll of her eyes, drawing Lysa's attention to herself...

...and the look that was in the young Tully maiden's eyes at the sight of Ashara Dayne was nothing like that which she had ever had towards him, never, for it was neither the shy and fearful eyes she had the day before nor the ones filled with adoration that she had looked at him with in his arms, no, for now it was a glare that he would never have imagined her to be able to make, hard and cold and hateful as though she had never hated before. Ashara met her back, eye for eye, the older Dayne woman towering over half a foot over the Tully, closer to Carik in height, a woman fully grown in comparison to Lysa who was perhaps a year younger than him, utterly unafraid of anything that she might do, that she might say, unfazed.

"And who is this?" Lysa asked, without turning her attentions to Carik, protective.

Seven, he stared in silence. She looks like she is going to kill someone.

"This is Ashara Dayne," he said, trying to be as warm as he could, trying to stop anything from escalating. "She's leading me around the castle since I've never been to Harrenhal before."

"Yes, I am," Ashara said coldly, without taking her attentions from the young woman before her. "Carik and I are friends."

"Oh!" Lysa said, instantly relaxing, laughing before looking back to Carik. "I thought - "

"Lysa!" came the shout of Brynden Tully. "Where in the Seven's name are you?"

"...I best be going!" Lysa said, apologetic, quickly giving Carik one last hug before hurrying towards the sound of her uncle's voice, more cautious than before.
"Well... that was something," Carik said quietly the moment she was out of earshot.

"You are a young man looking for someone to love and that is fine, regardless of what the singers might say," Ashara said quickly and quietly, a genuine co. "But whatever you do, no matter whether or not you might think it is a good idea, stay away from her, no matter what."

"Why?" Carik asked. "She's a little too attached, but -"

"Because she doesn't love you, she is obsessed with you," Ashara said, pleading with him to listen to her words. "There is a difference. A woman in love would never do what she did just, she wouldn't stare or fake a fall that might have killed her just so she could end up in your arms."

"You mean she faked that?" Carik asked, narrowing his brow. "How? She seemed to have just slipped on the stone."

"She did it by stepping on her dress as she walked, and that means she did it deliberately" Ashara explained simply. "Women spend every day of their lives in a dress from the moment we learn how to walk. We can run wearing them, probably better than you can do in your leggings because they are loose. Our feet don't even come near the hem of our dress. See?"

Leaning against the edge of the statue's plinth, she reached down to the edge of her dress and raised it enough for him to see where her legs ended, little velvet slippers worn within a larger, harder wearing leather overshoe with a wooden sole to make the smaller, softer and more valuable shoe within waterproof.

"There is no way a woman her age could have slipped on her own, but if she was to step on her dress..." Ashara stood up straight. "...hold your arms out to catch me."

Carik did exactly as she said, putting his arms wide to catch her the same way that he had for Lysa, and then Ashara started to walk towards him...only to step on the inside of the white dress and tumble forward exactly as Lysa had, straight into his arms.

"My hero," she said with a laugh as she broke away, a smile on her face. "See?"

"But... why?" he asked, confused. "Why would she do that?"

"Because she wants a happy ending to her fairytale and net herself a big, fat trout of her own."

Carik looked at her, confused...and then he realized.

"She wants to marry... me? Why?" he asked, a growing unease rising inside him. "We've only just met a day ago!"

"Because you're a young, dashing prince from a distant land who came riding to the rescue of a beautiful young lady in need of help," she said with a playing smile before growing serious at last. "It might seem romantic, and to her it is, but in reality she doesn't know you well enough to know what you are like, she just likes the idea of the two of you together based on what she does. You might as well have known her for years."

"That's insane."
"Not to her it isn't," the Dayne woman sighed, taking him by the arm again as the two continued on their way. "For Lysa, it would mean she gets to spend the rest of her life with a man she loves...and who she is very protective of, seeing how she looked ready to stab me for your attention. Did you think it was only men who dueled each other for people they loved?"

"But she seems so...innocent," he said. "She doesn't look like she could hurt a fly."

"You would be surprised what someone "innocent" can do when someone is in the way between them and someone they love," Ashara said grimly. "The whole world is one long song for her. Anything that gets between her and the hero of that song is a monster, so she will force it out of the way to get her happy ever after. As far as she cares, you are already hers the way this dress is mine. You just don't know it yet."

"So I have been here two days and I am already being hunted down by a bunch of Whents with swords because I upset their sister and a young woman who looks completely nice on the outside but is obsessive on the inside," he sighed. "What next? A dragonslayer? Demons?"

"What?" Ashara laughed, returning to her normal self again. "Are demons real in your land?"

"Very."

"...you mean...they are?" she asked, stunned. "Actual demons?"

"The Empire has managed to push them off Rivellon thanks to their guns," Carik explained, careful to avoid giving away too much information about his homeland and risk getting himself in trouble. "It doesn't matter if you're the most dangerous swordsman in Acheron if you're fighting enemies who can pick you off before you get close with a single shot."

"But before the Empire, they were monsters," he said, remembering the bloody tales that his foster father had told him of how every demonic incursion had only been thrown back with massive losses on their side "It took all five of the Civilized Races to drive them back last time...Elven archers, Impish artillery, Dwarven infantry, Lizard sorcerers and Human knights, all united."

"Things had been going in our favor even before the Empire, though," he finished. "Too many incursions too often had sapped their numbers and cost them valuable materials they can't so easily replace, so each invasion was getting weaker and less successful before the Empire came and finished them off. I don't think they'll be bothering us again for a long time."

"No, I mean, you have demons, but demons always go against gods, so -"

"Oh! You're asking if our gods are real?"

And then Carik shrugged.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

And with that, Ashara laughed.

"You're having me on, aren't you?" she teased. "About your demons."

"Believe me if you want," he laughed with her. "We honestly don't know."
"Then at least both realms have no idea," she japed. "It would make things interesting if your gods just showed up here one day and started doing miracles everywhere. Our gods are probably passed out drunk somewhere round the back of the Seven Heavens."

*Gods, she's just...I think I like her*, he thought as he smiled again, happy. *Maybe...I don't know. She is beautiful, though...*

"You went quiet all of a sudden," Ashara mused, smiling. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, no, I was just thinking about something," he said with a smile. "So...still want to help with ladies?"

"If it means we get to continue walking rather than standing around here all day, then gladly," she teased. "And...well, your main problem is still how you talk to women. When Lysa threw her arms around you it looked more like you were about to suddenly fall over dead. You had no idea what to do."

"It was...well..."

"...was that the first time you were ever hugged by a woman?" Ashara asked with disbelief.

"No!" he said instantly. "I just didn't expect her to get so close so quick. I mean, I caught her in my arms and stopped her from falling, but then she placed her head on my chest."

"Actually, Lysa might well be a bad example for this, seeing how she is mayhaps a few arrows short of a full quiver," Ashara sighed. "But let's say..."

Ashara looked around, then pointed towards a woman in the distance, a woman in the same colors as Lysa had been and with the same trout on her clothes and even the same shade of hair, but taller and older and far more beautiful.

"Let's say Catelyn Tully comes over and talks with you, and you both take a liking to each other," she said as the pair continued through the castle, looping around towards the main courtyard where they had arrived the day before. "What do you do next?"

"I continue talking to her?"

"About what?"

"...her?"

"Close."

"Me?"

"Wrong," Ashara said with a knowing look in her eye. "If all you talk about is you, then it will look like you only want to talk to *yourself*. If you don't talk about her, then it seems like you aren't interested in her for who she is, and even my suitors know to try and talk about me."

"What you need to do is talk about both you and *her* at the same time," Ashara said. "Talking is like a stream, with one thing after the next. You already know how to talk, so just...follow the stream and see where it goes. There isn't a technique to it, or anything. Just...be yourself."
"Isn't that what upset -"

"Well, be a more polished version of yourself, and make it clear what you mean," she laughed. "It really is that simple. We're talking now, and I'm a woman and you're a man, so it really isn't that hard."

"Actually...why are we even talking about this when most of your marriages are prearranged?" he asked with growing realization of the realities of his situation. "I mean, even if I did find someone nice here and they like me back it's not like we can...you know, hammer-the-anvil."

"On the contrary, I would bet my hand in marriage that at least half the realm's ladies get into bed with someone before they have their wedding," Ashara said. "No one knows whether a woman lost her maidenhood because she fell whilst climbing a tree when she was little or because she fell whilst climbing a tree."

"In fact, Lord Whent knows that a lot of maidens aren't going to be maidens by the time this tourney ends," Ashara said with a quiet voice, a knowing smile on her face. "That's why he had his maester make a barrelful of moontea and to have all the ingredients he might need to make even more incase he runs out. Having an army of young men and an army of young women and a river's worth of wine wouldn't end without a few dozen babies without it."

"Moontea?" he asked with confusion. "Is that some kind of...infertility potion?"

"More or less," Ashara shrugged. "The stuff tastes horrible, though. But if the difference is one cupful of grass to hours of agonizing childbirth, I would choose the former, and so would every other woman in here willing to do "things" outside of marriage. It prevents scandals from having bastards, allows women to choose who gets them pregnant and lets us embarrass rabbits if we want to."

"Truly," she said with a reverent voice, playing. "It is the Seven's greatest gift to womankind."

"But how do I tell the difference?" he asked.

"Between women who will wait for marriage and those who won't?" Ashara asked. "You'll know. Believe me, you'll know. A wave of a hand here, a thinly veiled word there and then...fun."

"You know," she said. "Considering how much trouble you are having with this, I must wonder what this sort of thing is like where you come from."

"Well, that depends. For most people its the way it is here, or at least close enough to not be much of an issue, but for a prince, things are a little different," he said, remembering the lessons his foster-father had taught him about the history of the kingdom that had become an empire. "My father got his wife through a bride show." "A bride show?" Ashara asked with genuine interest. "What's that?"

"Instead of meeting lots of ladies one by one, the best ones - usually the ones with the most value, so princesses themselves or women with massive dowries - are sent for, and all of them come to him at the same time," he explained. "It takes around a week, but by the end of it he would just pick one from the lot and marry that one."

"That...actually sounds rather reasonable," Ashara said. "It saves time travelling and gets marriages
sorted out quicker. Though seeing that you exist at all, I suppose your father mustn't have been very fond of his choice."

"He...had to make a different choice," he answered honestly and with a little unease. "It was because he needed to unite the realm before creating the Empire, that way he would have a strong place to start from."

"Just how large is the kingdom you are from, anyway?" she asked. "Half of the time you speak it sounds like its small, but then the other half you make it seem bigger than Westeros."

"Big," he said quickly. "Very, very very big."

"But how big?"

"Big."

She sighed.

"Can't you tell me more detail than that?" she asked. "Will your foster father have you whipped for saying that your realm is, oh I don't know, a thousand miles across?"

"It's...more than a thousand miles," he answered. "Much, much more."

"Well, how many men can it field?"

"A lot."

"Oh for Seven's sake," Ashara laughed. "You were just talking about which women you liked before Lysa came, and now you're getting tightlipped about your home?"

"Maxos wouldn't want me to talk about it," he answered. "And for good reason. It doesn't make sense for the people here to set out trying to find Rivellon when its on another planet."

"Fine," she sighed in defeat. "But are there any ladies in your homeland that you would want to marry? You have to be thinking about that, at least?"

"Actually..." he hesitated. "I don't really know."

Ashara laughed for a while, then, but she stopped when he turned the question on her.

"Is there anyone that you're thinking about marrying?" he asked, a teasing smile on his face as he saw her go quiet. "After all, you have to find someone."

"Don't remind me," she sighed.

"Is that a no?"

"No," she answered, cross. "But it is a shut up."

...best not bring that conversation up then! But at least it stops her asking about Rivellon and how...well, being kept in a tower isn't exactly good for finding someone to love, unless you like books.
"...well, Lysa did seem rather nice before you said what you said," he answered. "She seems really...shy, though."

"You would be surprised what people can be like beneath the surface," she answered, eager to get away from the topic. "Being fair, though, she...might not be entirely the way that I think she might be. She might very well be what she appears to be. A lovestruck young girl, thinking she has stumbled on her promised hero. She very well acts it sometimes from what I've seen of her at King's Landing before."

"You've met her before?"

"Once, at King's Landing, and it was a few years ago, so no wonder she doesn't remember me."

Ashara said with a sigh. "She was so happy to meet Prince Rhaegar and King Aerys that it was easy to think she was always like that, but...gods! Spend a few moments talking to her and you would realize that there is something broken inside her."

"And no wonder," she said, her voice sympathetic. "Her father has an obvious favorite in her elder sister and another in her brother, so he has little love to spare for her. She might just be desperate for someone to love her the way she wishes she was loved."

Carik looked to Ashara in silence, then, and thought. She sounded like him. Had they both had the misfortune of being ignored in favor of a favorite child, as she had been in favor of her own brother and sister...and the way he might have been? What else could explain why his father, the most powerful man in the entire world of Rivellon, cared so little for him? Was that why he had never visited him for even a minute, nor wrote him even the briefest letter to tell him who he was, or even send the humblest gift for his birthdays or do any of the things that a loving father was supposed to do for his son? Was it because he simply didn't care for him the way he had Faran, Karthan and Cybelle? Were it not for Maxos he would not have even known that he was his son, and he would not have trusted it were it not for the photographs he had been given just before his arrival here, and were it not for Maxos he would not have any family at all.

_He was more my father than Sigurd ever was...I just don't understand. Why even bother sending me into safety if he didn't care enough to do anything more than that? How hard could it have been for him to have just given Maxos a letter to give to me, or anything? Did I do something wrong? Something to stop him from caring at all?_

And then a thought came to mind, horrible and cold.

_Does he blame me for what happened to my mother?_

"Are you alright?" Ashara asked, her voice quiet and more gentle than it had ever been before, the Dayne woman seeing his struggle on his face. "You look like someone just rode down your dog."

"I'm fine," he said, not wanting to speak of it, not wanting to linger on it any more than he already had.

"We can speak about it, if you want," she said. "It helps."

"I just want to take my mind off it," he answered. "I'm just...nevermind."

"Alright, but if you ever want to talk about," she said. "I'll listen..."
...and then she looked to a new banner being flown from the walls, a grey wolf prancing on a field of
darker grey, and swore under her breath.

"Seven hells, we missed the arrival of the Starks!" she said, her embarrassment turning to laughter. "I
thought at least the king would have sent someone to find us before welcoming them here."

"The Starks?"

"The Lords of Winterfell and the North," she explained. "They're one of the King's major
bannermen. Lord Rickard is the Warden of the North, which means he protects the realm against the
wildlings on the other side of the Wall. The land they rule is nearly as big as the rest of the
realm combined, but there aren't many people there, so it evens out and...hang on, how do you not
know who the Starks are?"

"What?"

"You ate with one last night!" Ashara laughed. "Don't tell me you were so wine sodden that you
didn't remember seeing him sat besides you?"

"Oh!" he laughed with embarassment, remembering. "Those Starks."

"Yes, those Starks," she laughed. "Not like there are any others. Well, there are the Karstarks, but
I'm not sure if they were actually coming. The Northmen are so far from Harrenhal it would at least
take them a month to reach it, so not all of them would come."

"A month?" he said with amazement. "Just how big is the kingdom?"

"I'll only answer that if you tell me how big yours is," she said with a teasing smile...and then she
looked at him. "Gods, that sounds wrong."

With that it was his turn to burst into laughter, and so he did, laughing as she sighed in
embarrassment, the two walking along and going about a corner to reveal dozens of tents on either
side where humble knights and squires and merchantmen might be able to make their residence, even
the great towers of Harrenhal limited in the amount of space they might have for use, but it was only
when he heard shouts and laughter that he stopped his own, looking ahead to see a small brown
haired boy being shoved and beaten bloody by three young men, laughing and with none around to
stop their brutal bullying.

"Bogscum!" one of them snapped, kicking the boy to the ground with a strike behind his knee,
laughing as he did and laughing at his pain. "No wonder they never said your kind could take a stand
up fight!"

"They're going to kill him," Carik said, astonished and with anger rising inside of him. "Wait here."

"Carik -"

The others laughed, kicking the fallen boy, beating him against the hard cobblestones that were the
path, and Carik pulled his arm free from hers and began to walk forward all the quicker. The boy
was utterly defenseless, yelping with their blows and yet refusing to cry from an iron will, but of all
the things that Maxos had taught him, he knew one thing true of all and certain.
"Hey!" he shouted, raising his voice. "Leave him alone!"

"And who the seven hells are you?" one of them shouted back, a brown haired and brown eyed young man the same age as him and the same height and dressed in red and gold and brown with a red horse on his breast, the others kicking the boy again before coming to the side of the brown haired man. "Get out of here, before -"

"He wears Targaryen colors, Hendry," one of the others said quickly. "And he has the look."

"His hair is gold, not silver," Hendry answered.

"I am Prince Carik Sigurdsson, of the Empire of Rivellon," he answered, switching to the formal voice his foster-father had taught him. "I demand you leave him alone this instant, else I will make you."

"It's three on one," Hendry laughed. "Are you that eager to go to the maester?"

"It is three on one," Carik answered. "Not very fair, I know, but I do not have time to wait for you to get your friends."

There was laughter, then, and the brown haired man stared back at him, one of the others giving him a shove.

"Are you going to let him talk to you like that?"

"Carik, this isn't our issue," Ashara said carefully and quietly as she came over. "Let's move on, tell Rhaegar and have him deal with it. Better that than getting stabbed."

"And who are you?" one of the men said, looking the Dayne over with intrigued eyes. "You're much too beautiful to care about a crannogman."

"...you're Ashara Dayne," another said with amazement, admiring the beautiful woman for himself. "You're the prettiest woman in the Seven Kingdoms. I know a song that I am sure you will love, it's about Jonquil and Florian the Fool -"

"I changed my mind," Ashara said, tipping her head towards Carik, meeting his golden eyes with her violet ones. "Set his ass on fire and I swear on the Maiden that I will give you a kiss."

"If you're that desperate to go to the maester, then we might as well send you there with an injury worth it," Hendry answered...

...and then he reached to his belt and drew out a long, thin dagger of sharp castle forged steel, the other men backing away..

"I would suggest thinking about what you're about to do, Bracken," Ashara said quickly. "Else it will be my brother and the king who comes for -"

"I've got this," Carik said as he turned to Ashara with a calm brave smile on his face, Hendry inching towards him with fast but small steps. "Watch."
And then he reached to his waist to where his trusty saber was...

...and then he realized it wasn't there. He looked down, confused, only to see the sword belt missing from his waist.

"You left it on the wall at the damned feast!" Ashara said with horror. "Look out!"

The half-dragon spun on his heels, quick enough to see Hendry's clenched fist strike him square in the jaw, the bastard son of Sigurd staggering backwards with a pained grunt as Hendry and the others laughed. Ashara came to his side, concerned, but Carik paid no attention to her or to the pain of the blow stinging in his cheek, and simply straightened himself again.

"Mayhaps we should have beaten you instead of the Reed," Hendry Bracken laughed. "At least then it would be someone our own size."

"Leave him alone, you cunts!" came a woman's shout from down the path, and Carik and the others turned to see a young woman the same age as Lysa dressed all in grey, a blunt sword in her hand, messy locks of brown hair falling to her shoulders as she walked towards them with fury in her grey eyes. "Howland Reed is my father's bannerman!"

"But this one isn't," Hendry said, turning towards Carik as the grey woman charged over. "And it is fair. Once I have beat this whoreson -"

Carik's brow twitched.

And then there was a flash of light that lasted but a single instant, there and gone in the blink of an eye, but when the light faded away, it faded to reveal his dragon form, Carik throwing out his dark wings to make himself seem all the larger in front of the horrified Bracken and his bullies, a dark patch appearing on the front of the Bracken's leggings as he wet himself in terror, in anticipation of his death, dropping the dagger from his hands as the dragon advanced towards him, a smile on his face and his body lowered to the ground, as if to pounce upon him and crush him into the stones beneath the weight of his bulk, every step of his making the stones crunch deeper into the path and every step making his ebon scales and skin ripple with the strength of the mighty muscles beneath, drowning the Bracken and his horrified allies and even the boy they were beating in his shadow.

And he lowered his head down towards Hendry, now so small, and met him with golden eyes filled with hate.

"Who was the whoreson, again?" he snarled through dagger teeth, a thin plume of black smoke streaming from his nostrils, his breath carrying with it the sweltering heat of the fire within.

"Mother have mercy," the Bracken cried, even the brave woman who had rushed towards them struck still by the sight, looking at him with as much awe as surprise and fear.

And then he ran, the Bracken bursting into a run with a cry of horror and tears on his cheeks, his allies running with him, and Carik, the rage fading from him with their flight and knowing that he had revealed himself in the open, quickly grabbed a nearby barrel of wine from the nearest tent and stabbed a claw through the wooden lid, tearing it from the top and throwing the amethyst contents towards the three, soaking them with it all before throwing it to the side and switching back into his human form again with another flash of light, turning towards a shocked Ashara with a smile, all the anger gone from him.
"Told you I could deal with it," he smiled.

"Only by revealing yourself in public," she countered, overcoming her own surprise at his transformation. "And Seven...I hadn't realized you could get so big so quickly."

Carik laughed.

"Oh, not again," she sighed, ignoring his amusement with a shake of her head as she walked over to the bloodied Reed. "Are you alright?"

"I...I...I think so?" the boy answered. "Are they gone?"

"They are now," Carik said warmly as he walked over, crouching down to give the boy his hand. "You won't have to worry about them -"

"Stay away from him!" the woman challenged with trembling hands, Carik looking up to see the blade pointed against his chest, against his heart. "It might be blunt, but it isn't that blunt!"

"Uhm...Ashara?" he said carefully, standing straight and raising his hands slowly to show he held no weapon. "Can you help?"

"I think you need my brother, he's the one good with swords, not me," Ashara said quickly before looking towards the girl with a warm, careful smile. "We don't mean him any harm."

"Then what was that?" she snapped, turning the sword with shaking hands towards the Dayne, giving Carik a chance to see the many little wolves on her dress and a chance to remember what Ashara had said. She was a Stark. "He turned into a bloody dragon! He was going to kill them!"

"I only wanted to scare them off, Lady Stark," he said quickly and carefully, the woman looking towards him with narrow eyes, untrusting, uneasy.

"It's alright, Lyanna," the battered Reed said as he rose from the ground, his lip broken and bleeding, his left eye swollen shut, his body and face alike covered in bruises and scrapes and yet with a smile on his face all the same. "You can put the sword down, now. They helped."

"Are you sure, Howland?" Lyanna asked, hesitant to lower the blunt iron sword, to remove her greatest defense against him. "He's got magic."

"If he really wanted to kill us, I don't think a blunt sword could stop a dragon," Howland Reed said, a laugh slipping from his throat, followed by a pained wheeze. "Not that it would stop you trying."

"...fine," the Stark woman sighed, eying Carik suspiciously. "But I still don't trust you. Sorcerers are always evil in the stories. And dragons, too."

"Considering this dragon just saved your friend from being beaten into the ground, I would have thought you would be more grateful," Ashara mused, earning herself a glare from the Stark girl. "Or at the very least been less interested in stabbing the man who helped you."

"I would have helped him even if you weren't here," she answered coldly. "I wouldn't let my friend be beat."

"Thanks for that, by the way," Howland said as he gave a pained smile to the half-dragon. "I
mightn't be walking away if they kept that up."

"You took a beating back there," Carik said, smiling back at the Reed. "I'm amazed you can even stand after that."

"We crannogmen might be small, but we're tough," he laughed. "It was nothing I couldn't take."

"Is that why he probably has a broken rib?" Ashara asked the Stark girl as the Reed wheezed again as he tried to take a deep breath, a wince cracking his calm demeanor and making him groan in pain. "We need to get him to a maester before it gets worse."

"I could fly him there, if you know the place," Carik offered warmly...

...only for the Stark girl to meet him with uneasy eyes that betrayed her attempt at a solid, iron voice. "He's my father's bannerman. I will take him there, not you."

"What about you?" he asked, turning his attentions to the Reed. "It would be quicker."

"Not in a castle this big," Howland said, joking. "You would have to loop round the towers and you'd smash your head off the stone. Then you'd need a maester, too."

*Oh! He was on the ground and didn't see me in my dragon form,* Carik smiled in realization. *Well, that's one less person to worry about at least.*

"Well, if you say so," he smiled innocently before turning towards the Dayne. "Where is the maester, anyway?"

"He has his own little tower," Ashara said. "And we're heading away from it."

"He doesn't need a maester," Lyanna said, her words forceful and hard. "He hasn't broken a rib, it is just bruised. If it was broken he wouldn't have gotten up off the ground."

"Don't count on that," Howland smiled, the Stark girl letting out a sigh as he did, the Reed letting out a laugh before wincing in pain. "But she's right. It isn't broken. I just need to walk it off for awhile."

"See?" Lyanna answered with a told-you-so smile. "He'll be fine."

"He should get looked at by the maester at least," Ashara suggested. "He's almost missing an eye."

"I've had worse," Howland answered.

"How?"

"I almost lost my legs to a lizard lion when I was two and ten," he answered with a shrug.

"...those are actually real?" Ashara asked with surprise. "I thought they were just a myth you crannogmen made up to sound more fierce."

Howland Reed pointed to his boots, then, and Carik looked to see that they were not made from leather, but from the dark brown, almost crimson scaled hide of some mighty lizard, as hard wearing and strong as any other shoe might be.
"I would be walking barefoot if they were," he said.

"Northmen don't lie," Lyanna answered.

"Oh, truly?" Ashara asked, a cunning smile starting to appear on her face.

"Truly," Lyanna answered.

"So if that whoremongering brother of yours promised to marry me afterwards he would?"

"How do you know about that?" Lyanna snapped before realizing what she had said. "I mean -"

"Thought as much," Ashara smiled triumphantly. "Seems Northerners do lie after all."

"...where did you find this one?" Howland asked Carik quietly. "She's slippery like a snake."

"She found me," Carik answered with a whisper. "And more like an eel."

"Will you two be quiet?" Lyanna demanded, cheeks red with embarrassment at Ashara's knowledge of her brother's habits.

"Are you always this moody?" Ashara asked, drawing Lyanna's attention to the arms crossed Dornishwoman. "Or is that reserved for when you aren't allowed to play the hero and come riding to the rescue?"

"Oh for the gods' sake," Lyanna sighed. "Will you just be quiet already?"

"Only if you answer my question," the Dayne smiled, tying her in knots with every word she spoke. "Or apologize."

"For what?"

Ashara looked to Howland, then, who simply shrugged as Lyanna looked to him in turn.

"Fine," the Stark sighed...

...and then she spoke.

"Thank you for saving my friend."

"You're welcome," Carik smiled warmly.

"I still don't trust you, though," she said firmly.

"How come, Lya?" Howland asked, confused. "He couldn't have actually turned into a dragon."

"You didn't see it!" she objected in response. "He turned into a dragon!"

"As if that was ever possible," Carik laughed. "Half-dragons don't exist."

"Next she'll mention magic tricks," Ashara laughed with him. "As if that would ever happen."
"I saw it!" Lyanna snapped, angrily, turning on her heels to face the two of them as she walked backwards towards the corner. "I saw him become a dragon, Howland. You couldn't see it on the ground, but I did and I know what I saw. I swear it."

"I don't know." Howland said hesitantly, looking towards Carik only to see him shrug. "He doesn't look like a dragon to me. A bit like a Targaryen, but not a dragon. He hasn't a tail, for one."

"I know what I -"

And then there was a clunk as Lyanna walked into Ser Oswell Whent as he came round the corner, the Stark girl blinking in surprise before turning around slowly to see the white cloaked knight looking down at her, the Stark girl seeming to be frozen in place for a moment, fearful of whatever punishment she might receive for walking into a Kingsguard.

"My apologies, Lady Stark," the knight apologized with a slight bow. "I hadn't seen you."

"It was my mistake."

Oswell nodded with understanding, then turned his eyes towards Carik. "The Lannisters have been delayed an hour or more as the Goldroad had been washed out by a mudslide in the west a few days ago. They'll be here soon, but that gives us time to find you some armor."

"I'll be with you in a bit, I just want to make sure Howland doesn't get bothered by anyone else, first," he said with a nod.

"Has someone done something against you, Lord Reed?"

"Hendry Bracken and his cronies beat him," Ashara said. "Probably because of the bad blood between the Crannogmen and the Riverlords."

"Is that so?"

"It is," Howland answered. "But they went running with their tails between their legs when he showed up. I'll be fine, ser."

"Still, I will make sure my lord brother knows of it," Oswell said. "Best for him to put more guards on duty here than risk having one of his guests beaten again. My apologies again, my lord."

"You're a lord?" Carik asked, amazed.

"He's one of my father's bannermen," Lyanna said again. "That means he's a lord."

"I might not look it, but I am the Lord of Greywater Watch," Howland explained proudly. "The Reeds are one of the North's most important houses...haven't you heard of us?"

"I didn't even know what a Targaryen was before I came here," he answered with as much honesty as he could, only for the Reed and the Stark to look at him with even more surprise. "Long story."

If this keeps up I'll be able to explain it all by memory.

"Still, I shall escort the both of you to be sure that you aren't bothered by anyone again," Oswell began before either of them could speak. "At least until"
"But to be sure that you aren't bothered by anyone again," Oswell began before either of them could speak, "I shall escort you till you're near friends or family again. Are your brothers anywhere near, Lady Stark?"

"Good question," Lyanna sighed. "Ned is nursing a hangover, Benjen is exploring the castle with that niece of yours and I haven't a clue where Brandon is."

Ashara smiled, then, and was about to open her mouth to speak again before Lyanna glared to her. "Don't you start."

"Is she always this angry?" Carik asked the Reed quietly. "She hasn't calmed down since we met."

"Oh, not always," the Reed answered with a low voice. "She's like a loaf of bread. Hard and crunchy on the outside, but soft and sweet on the inside. She wouldn't have came to help me at all otherwise."

"He might still be near the tower," the Stark woman said at last, either not hearing what they had said or having ignored it. "Assuming he has wandered off."

"You mean wandered off in search of -"

"Ashara, it'd probably be a good idea to stop now," Carik said, tapping the Dayne with his elbow to draw her attention to him. "The last thing we need is to upset someone else."

"But I was only going to say that he has probably set out looking for wine," Ashara answered innocently. "They don't keep much of it in the bedchambers and only one kind. I just thought he might want a different one than they have."

And then she mumbled something under her breath as Oswell came alongside the Stark woman, ready to lead her through the unfamiliar grounds just as he would Carik. "What tower is his? The Kingspyre Tower?"

"We all got different towers," Lyanna said with a sigh, looking up to try and find which one was hers. "His was the Widow's Tower."

"Then that's the one connected to the Kingspyre Tower," Oswell said, pointing to the stone bridge that connected it to its taller brother. "Harren kept his wife in that one. Come along, we can get there quick enough."

"Lead the way," Lyanna said at last and with the smallest hint of a smile as she followed the Whent along, and with that, there was quiet at last as they set off together, Ashara letting out one last sigh before following along.

With Oswell to guide them through it, the twisting and turning alleys and paths that would have perhaps been the seed of a city in another world were all the easier to navigate, the Whent not hesitating for even a moment whenever they came to a crossroads or a junction or a corner or any of the other confusing twists in the long paths that had been built into the castle's vast courtyards for the massive garrison who would have served there or made by the collapsing of masonry over the years since the burning of it all, so much so that Carik wondered for a moment whether or not he had memorized the castle's exact layout...and as they came ever closer to the towers in the midst of the castle, as they emerged out into the main courtyard again, the grounds filled with men and women
highborn and low going about their daily lives, it seemed all the more likely he had.

"It should be easy enough for you to find your way from here," Oswell said with a smile. "But I will make sure to tell my brother to have more signs put up as well. It's easy to get lost in Harrenhal."

"Thank you," the Stark smiled, the others giving him their thanks as well as they started towards the tower, Oswell falling back to Carik and Ashara and letting Lyanna take the lead.

"Shall we head to the armory, now?" the whitecloak asked. "It might take a long time to find you anything that fits."

"In a bit," he said, lowering his voice enough to not be overheard as they made their way through the busy grounds where many were make their plans and preparations for the tourney to come. "I just need to say something in private when I get the chance."

"Oh?"

"She...saw me," he whispered, the Whent's eyes going wide. "It was the only way that I could stop Hendry and the others from beating him. Howland didn't see because he was on the ground, but -"

"There! There he is, ser!" came the voice of the Bracken youth, as if summoned by Carik's presence.

"He's the one?" came the gruff voice of the squire's master, an aged and hard faced knight dressed from head to heal in ringmail and with a thick but well groomed beard of brown laced with grey on his cheeks and chin, wearing the colors of the Freys and with their twin castles on the long tabard that reached to his knees. "He's the one you said became a dragon?"

"He is!" Hendry Bracken said quickly. "The others! They saw it too!"

The Frey knight took a long look at Carik, who looked to him with a smile and with Oswell Whent at his side.

Then he turned round and struck his squire round the face with the back of his fist, just hard enough to make him yelp in pain and surprise.

"What did I tell you about drinking too much wine, Bracken?" the knight sighed as Carik's smile grew all the wider. "If you went into the tourney with that much wine you would have the lance through you."

"But, but ser!" Hendry objected. "I saw it!"

"Through his wine cup, it seems," Oswell said, the Frey knight sighing with shame as he looked to his squire, their party coming to a stop. "Your squire was so drunk he beat the Lord of Greywater Watch bloody."

"Did he now?" the Frey snapped as he looked to his squire. "Damn you, boy. What in the Seven's name were you doing? And it was with those friends of yours, wasn't it?"

"I wasn't drunk!" he objected feebly. "I was defending our honor! The Brackens and the Reeds have always been -"
"Enemies?" the Frey scolded. "You serve the same king. He is your ally."

Then the Frey sighed again, and turned to Oswell and the Reed and all the others. "My apologies. It seems Hendry is still a boy in a man's body and far from knighthood."

"He didn't even hit that hard," Howland laughed, eye swollen shut.

"Aye, well, if there is any punishment that you think fitting..." the Frey smiled. "...it might well help him learn his lesson."

"Oswell, isn't your brother in need of help with the tourney?" Howland asked, a smile forming on his face.

"With a tournament this big he needs all the help he can have."

"Does he need anyone to help cover the privies?"


"Oh gods, not that," the Bracken said with horror.

"You best go make yourself useful, boy," the Frey laughed, clapping his squire on the shoulder. "Off you go."

"But -"

"Another word out of that mouth of yours and your father will hear why I deem his son unworthy."

"Fine..." Hendry sighed.

"Fine, ser," the knight corrected him. "And stand up straight."

"Fine, ser," the Bracken answered obediently, straightening his back...

...and then he marched over to the nearest guard with all the dignity he could muster, only for the man-at-arms to laugh and point him into the distance, the squire keeping his straightened back for every step as he walked off to where the Lord of Harrenhal's servants were hard at work.

"My apologies, my lord," the Frey answered to the Reed, extending a hand. "My squire seems to have a lot to learn. I am Ser Stevron Frey, my lord father's heir. You have my condolences for your father, from what I know he was an honest and noble man."

"He was," Howland answered sadly before shaking the knight's hand. "Thank you. I was worried he might get away with it."

"I will make sure the others learn of it as well," Stevron said at last. "If any of them have a squire who is stinking of wine, you'll know about it."

"And a happy ending for all," Ashara said with a smile on her face. "Truly, we live in the Age of Heroes come again."

"We can't be," Oswell answered. "Your brother isn't here."
"Alas," Ashara laughed as they all walked together through to the entrance of the Widow’s Tower, its doors and walls and steps and rooms exactly the same as those of its twin, only mirrored so that they might more easily connect with the Kingspyre Tower through the bridge. 

*If there's one thing the Westerosi seem to know, he thought as he looked around to see a perfect copy of the room in his own tower, it is how to build a castle. Seven! We don't even have anything nearly as big as this on Rivellon, and we have magic to make things easier!*

"Come on, Howland," Lyanna said, waving her small friend over to the steps. "Even if Brandon isn't here, I can clean you up easy enough."

"Thank you, my lady," Howland smiled. "But I think it best if I do so myself."

"Why?" she asked with confusion. "I know how to deal with scrapes."

"Probably because he doesn't want your betrothed thinking that you are fucking each other," Ashara explained. "Otherwise, he might very well get a hammer to the chest and it'll take more than a few linen wraps and some hot wine to heal that."

Lyanna looked to the Dornishwoman with daggers in her eyes, looking for a moment as if she might pounce on the Dayne and beat her the way that Howland had been beaten, but the Reed stepped forward and nodded. "More or less."

"Are you sure?" she offered, softening. "You can barely see."

"Ah, it's nothing I haven't had to deal with before," the Reed said as his swollen cheeks twisted themselves into a smile. "You have to learn how to look after yourself in the Neck. Give me a sunflower, some pepper and a cucumber and I'll be back on my feet in an hour and you'll barely know I was hit at all."

"Fine, but...take care of yourself," she smiled.

"I will," he nodded as he put his first step on the stairs, waving the Stark girl goodbye before rising up, whistling a tune to himself.

"We best be heading to the armory, now," Oswell said. "The prince has made it clear that he wants to be there as well."

"The prince?" Lyanna said with surprise, looking to Carik with nearly as much curiosity as she had suspicion earlier. "Who are you for Prince Rhaegar to be there to help you find armor?"

"I'll be with you in a bit, Oswell," Carik smiled.

"Well, if you're going to go get some armor, then I best find something to do," Ashara murmured, looking around and at a loss before getting an idea and heading out into the courtyard.

"I'll wait for you by the door," Oswell nodded, knowing what Carik wanted him to do without him need to say it. "But we best not keep the prince waiting."

And with that Ser Oswell walked towards the door, out of earshot, leaving him and the Stark alone at last, Lyanna crossing her arms as she looked at him. "What is you want to say, then?"
"I think we got off on the wrong foot," Carik apologized. "And I'm sorry about Ashara acted. She's just trying to help...I think."

"Help with what?" she asked coldly. "Finding the fastest way to anger the daughter of Winterfell?"

"Help with covering up...well, you already know," he sighed. "I am half-dragon."

Lyanna looked at him incredulously.

*Oh not that again.*

"Not like that," he said quickly. "My mother was a dragon."

"How in the hells does that work?" she asked in shock, Carik putting a finger to his mouth to make her quieter. "Did your father bed -"

"Not like that," he said again, even quicker than before. "She could take human form. I got my dragon body from her."

"That makes sense, or as much sense as a half-dragon might make," she nodded with growing understanding, her expression softening, the Stark woman beginning to relax for the first time since he had met her. "So the dragon you became was...you."

"It was," he explained as best as he could. "I've got a human body, this one, and a dragon body, which you saw. It isn't really magic, it's just...me."

"But why are you trying to keep it secret?" she asked. "If you were to tell the realm, everyone would be happy to see you. You could do anything you wanted. Half the realm would bury you with gold just to have you stand by them."

"Yes, but I just want to be treated like everyone else," he said with a shrug. "I come from a very, very far away land. I'm a prince."

"So you're a travelling half dragon prince from a far away realm," she said, her voice cracking with laughter. "Even Old Nan couldn't come up with that."

"But it is true," he smiled. "I'm just trying to stay out of people's way for the most part. I mean, I'm here for the tournament, but...I don't want too much attention. I just want to be treated like everyone else."

"I guess that's fair," she accepted. "But was there really such a need to lie to me? Or to have Ashara mock me as she did?"

"I can't say anything for what Ashara did, but I don't think she realized you would be upset," he answered. "But I didn't know what you might do. You were upset just at the sight of me because I was a dragon."

"And for good reason," Lyanna said. "In one moment you were a man and in the next a dragon threatening to eat the Bracken squire."

"He...upset me," he answered with a sigh, trying desperately to keep his mind off the matter. "I know
we haven't gotten along so far, but will you at least keep my secret? Please?"

"I...fine," she answered hesitantly before growing more sure of herself, a true smile forming on her long face, revealing her beauty to him for the first time, stormcloud eyes meeting his golden ones. "But you better let me ride you sometime. No Stark has ever ridden a dragon before."

"It won't be today, but maybe after the end of the tournament?" Carik offered. "I'll be heading to King's Landing with the Targaryens, then, and being outside the castle will give you a chance."

"Alright, but you best hold up to your side of the deal," Lyanna spoke as she turned defensive again. "Or else -"

"You have my word," he answered with his lordly voice. "I best get to Oswell, else I won't get a chance to be in the tournament, but thanks."

She nodded, and turned to the steps just as he turned to the door, Carik walking back to the entrance, and right as he felt the warmth of the sun shining on him again through the open doors, right when Ser Oswell Whent stepped over to speak to him again, he heard a whistle from behind, and turned to see Lyanna stood on the stairs.

"And...thanks for helping my friend," she said at last. "I don't know if those three would have ran if you hadn't helped."

"It wouldn't have been right for me to just stand there and do nothing," Carik said, echoing the words of his foster father and causing a smile to appear on her face. "If it ever happens again, though, it might help for you to bring a sharp sword."

Lyanna laughed then, and started up the stair as he returned back to Oswell, the white cloaked knight reaching down to his waist and unfastening a sword belt, raising it up to Carik to reveal...

...that it was his.

"You left this at the feast last night," the white cloak said with a smile. "You are lucky I found it. Swords like this go missing more often than not at a feast. You wouldn't find Arthur Dayne putting Dawn on the wall."

"Thanks," Carik smiled as he took the thin, sharp blade from the knight and fastened it around his middle again, fingers flexing on the grip to make sure it was in the right place. "I was starting to wonder where that was."

"And speaking of wondering, we best get going before the prince starts to wonder where we are," Oswell said at last. "Come on, then."

I'm really going to be riding in a tournament! This is going to be so much fun, he admitted to himself as he smiled and walked along with the white cloak. I know I'm meant to be just hiding low for a while till Maxos can get here and take me back to Rivellon, but I'm really starting to like this place more and more. Everyone's just so nice, and there's so much to see! The Wall! King's Landing! Dragonstone! I've got to see them when I get the chance, if Maxos still isn't here by then...but until then, everything's up to me!

And with that, he smiled all the more.
With the spell in place and the portal swirling, resolving away and forming itself into a vision of the world that lay beyond, the wizard couldn't help but wonder what world might lie past its silver veil, or what worlds he might go to next. Every one of them had been different from the other so far, every one unique not just in the way their world was, not just in the way that they had developed their civilizations or how events had gone or the timeframe, but in the Carik that was there awaiting the call of their own Maxos. Some had spent many years in their worlds and created new lives for themselves there whilst waiting for their own wizards to arrive and whisk them back to the world that was their own, and he had expected to find such versions of his world's own, perhaps closer in age than they were, but something he head expected to see all the same.

But he had never expected to see so ancient a Carik as the one that he had met in the previous world, and even as the portal resolved to reveal a room of pale, imperfect bricks and beautiful mosaics and warm sunlight, he hesitated and he thought, trying to put together some semblance of order to the things that he had seen. All of them had been the same in that they all wanted to come home, to return to the Rivellon from whence they came and continue their lives...all of them but one. All of them but the ancient one who had chosen to leave the world behind in favor of another, more willing to spend his days tilling a field with a hand drawn plough and live within the smallest of shacks than to rule the world of his birth and live within the greatest of palaces and to never want for nothing.

But why?

The thought was a mystery to him: why would any version of the half-dragon prince from any universe be so willing to abandon Rivellon, and at such an age? What could possibly have occurred to not only make him turn against the wizard of his world, against the man that would have been a foster father to him just as Maxos was to his world's own prince, but to have turned against the world of his birth and, perhaps, one that he had ruled for centuries or millenia before his self-imposed exile?

I can think of at least a few things that might well have upset him, but I cannot imagine any of them being so much so as to be able to make him break with his own world's wizard, Maxos considered, a hand brushing through his beard as he glanced towards the portal with curious eyes. Even my world's own Carik was not too bothered by them...indeed, he seemed happier than he had been in years to have learnt that we were to travel the realm together so that he might have a chance to see how its peoples live.

But I cannot think of anything that might have made him forsake Rivellon as a whole, he sighed. What could possibly have occurred to have done that? Surely it is something that has yet to occur, but what?

He shook his head, letting out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He had little time for such contemplations, not when the child he had sworn to protect and serve was lost and away from him in
a world he did not know surrounded by unfamiliar peoples with strange customs, people who might very well use him against the Empire...they could even hurt him. The thought of it all was unbearable, and enough to motivate any man to charge through the portal, but the wizard remained rational, calm, steady, knowing that one's emotions could very well change the nature of the spells that they weaved and the nature of their magics, and with that, he stepped forward again, walking across the room and through the portal and feeling but the slightest chill on him as he passed from one world to the next...

...and then he felt the great warmth of the world around, a comfortable dry heat that came to him with the sounds of a great city, the clatter of horse's hooves on stone and the rolling of carts and the distant wordless murmuring of thousands upon thousands of conversations dotted with happy laughter and the playing of children and the calling of seagulls swirling above a port, and turning to the source he saw a window that revealed a mighty city, built besides a great river - no, a narrow strait - and with mighty walls around it greater than many of those that had been built on Rivellon. Merchant ships lazily moved their way through the calm waters of the great city's port on a gentle wind, drifting to the wooden wharves and stone quays on sails alone, some helped in by throwing ropes ashore where gangs of men could help pull them into their resting places, others using a handful of oars to correct their course as curious crowds came to see them all and what wares they might have brought...

...but of all the things that caught his eye, it was what was surely a great temple not far from him that was the greatest of them all, a massive square structure with a great dome at its summit, a towering cathedral to whatever god or gods were kept within, dwarfing all the structures around on either side and painted a verdant orange and with a glimmering golden cross on its summit, something that was surely as tall as he was and with a man on its front as well, a figure he couldn't see from so far away but one that he could see there all the same, shining in the light of noon as the crown jewel of a monument of architecture.

"It is beautiful, isn’t it?” came a familiar voice from besides, and Maxos turned to see Carik smiling at him warmly, only to know that he was surely not the one from his world, taller and more broadly built, a grown man in his twenties rather than a youth of sixteen and dressed in a long, flowing robe of white made from a single long length of cloth. "There were some issues with the dome, but they managed to fix them with a few adjustments to their calculations...it could well have caused a costly rebuild if it wasn't noticed when it was."

"It is splendid," the wizard smiled, waving the portal up to the ceiling where it would be out of the way. "What is it called?"

"The Hagia Sophia," came the answer. "It means Holy Wisdom in the tongue of the Rhomaioi."

And then for all the changes that this Carik might have had, for all the years he was older than the boy Maxos knew, he gave him the same smile. "It's good to see you again. I'll be ready to come back in a few months at most."

"I apologize, my young friend," he said grimly and as he had almost a dozen times before. "But I do not believe that I am the wizard of your world...I am looking for you, but a sixteen year old you."

"Oh," the Carik before him sighed, disappointment replacing his warmth and happiness as he turned back towards a great desk of oak, surrounded by beautiful mosaics on the walls depicting legendary heroes and the same figure upon the cross atop the Hagia Sophia, slumping into his seat with a stack of journals and logs and books of parchment jacketed with thick leather before him. "Then I best get back to work calculating how many pounds of gold I can invest in the city thanks to the retaking of Italia."

"But before I leave, might we talk for a little while?" he asked, curious and hoping to rouse the spirits
of the prince before him after having dashed them with his appearance. "I have some time."

"Gladly," Carik answered, a smile returning to his face. "I can leave my work for a little while. What is it you want to know?"

"How old are you, exactly?" Maxos asked, stepping towards the table, staff in hand and tapping off the tiled floor with every step. "Yours is not the first world I have visited, and each and every one has had versions of yourself who were a different age."

"...I am twenty four," Carik answered with surprise, leaning onto the table as he looked the wizard in the eye with amazement. "...you mean you have been to other worlds before coming here?"

"Indeed I have," Maxos nodded, "But I am sure your world's own wizard shall be here soon enough."

"They have an infinity to search," Carik said grimly, reaching for a pitcher of wine and pouring himself a cup. "They might never find me."

"I would not be so uncertain," the wizard said, trying to smile, trying to cheer up the youth before him as much as he needed to cheer up himself. "Though I will admit that even my vast knowledge is little compared to what your mother's had been, the spell is...somewhat accurate. Why? How long have you been here, friend? No longer than a year, I hope?"

"Just a few months, thankfully," came the answer, followed by a smile. "The first few days were more than a little rough, but I managed to carve out a little position for myself here thanks to a little luck and everything that you taught me."

"Well, my universe's version of yourself," the prince laughed, reaching out to a clay pitcher and pouring himself a glass of wine. "Sixteen year old me would have had a lot more trouble."

"Oh?" the wizard hummed, stepping forward to take a seat on the other side of the table, letting his staff rest against its side. "What is different between -"

And then he realized, and smiled.

"You are what he would be like after we toured Rivellon," he said with understanding.

"Prince Carik Sigurdsson of Orcha, rightful Heir to the Empire of Rivellon by the declaration and will of my Imperial father, Emperor Sigurd the First, at your service," he said with a slight bow in his seat as the two laughed together, the prince raising his glass.

"I've had time to perfect that."

"I can tell," the wizard smiled. "Did you learn much of value during the tours?"

"Looking for advice for when you find your own version of myself?" the prince asked as he relaxed, offering the wizard a cup of his own.

"Perhaps," Maxos answered, pouring his own glass and happy to have a prince with which he can talk normally again. "It wouldn't hurt to know which parts were the best and which were not."

"The entire thing was good from start to finish," the prince replied, his mannerisms and movements somehow all the more regal, and yet still...the way Maxos knew them to be from his own world's prince. "Every stop. In fact, if it weren't for the tours...I probably would have lost sight of myself here, what my responsibilities are on Rivellon and why I must return there when the time comes,
even if I did enjoy having a little time here."

"I am glad to know they went so well," Maxos smiled, tentatively sipping the wine - it was fine, but little more than that, lacking the sophistication and cleanliness of taste that the industrial era had brought to Rivellonian winemaking - before allowing the prince to continue.

"More than anything, however, is that you taught me how my actions as a ruler will affect the lives of all," Carik answered with a beam of pride in his voice. "More than that, the value of peace and the impact of our technologies and magics upon the lives of the people who call our world home."

"...but I thought the tour was to be about the general lives of the people?" Maxos asked. "Was that different in your world?"

"We went mostly to war memorials and the like," Carik answered with a narrowed brow. "You said I had to learn the cost that had to be paid to make the Empire what it is, so that the sacrifices of those who fell are remembered?"

"Yes, but that was never supposed to be the main lesson," Maxos said. "Rather it was how those men had lost their lives in the chaos of futile wars that did not need to happen and the value of a true, lasting peace between the Civilized Races of Rivellon and the order that it has brought to the world. Surely you understand that?"

The Carik before him paused, thinking...and then he smiled again and supped his wine and continued. "In any case, the lessons that my Maxos taught me sank in, and made me realize what I need to do here, for the good of all!"

Maxos leaned forward with interest, smiling. Had he helped organize the people here so that they could govern themselves more properly? Helped them solve a crisis like a plague or famine with what knowledge he had? Protected them from an invasion of demons and -

"I am going to conquer the world for Rivellon."

Maxos blinked.

"You what?"

"I am going to conquer the entire world for the Empire," Carik said with a proud smile. "I will admit, I'm...something in the early days of that plan. But think of it like this: it took centuries of warfare and the loss of millions of lives for Rivellon to reach the point where the Empire could be born and the world united under one ruler..."

"But if I use the lessons of Rivellon here, on Terra, then I can make sure that such bloody centuries are avoided here the way they were not on Rivellon," the prince continued eagerly. "Then, when my Maxos finds me, I am going to make sure that this world and mine are connected together. That way, our technology can be brought through en masse to develop it and make it a fruitful part of our civilization. Millions upon millions of souls will be saved and have their lives raised, and they can be encouraged to have their barbaric practices discarded."

"...did you say barbaric?" Maxos asked with growing horror. "And what do you mean discarded?"

"There are things in this world that need...correcting," the man who had Carik's face but not his personality said simply. "They do not know about the Seven, for example. But with education - state schools would do well enough - we can correct these things and put them on the right path."

"Tell me," Maxos began, trying to drag the prince before him from the dark path that he was on.
"What do these "barbarians" of yours do?"

"They sack our cities, slaughter our people, rape our women and plunder our lands and riches for
themselves," Carik answered. "That is what happened in Italia when the western empire collapsed,
and before then at Gaul and before then at Britannia."

"And how did these parts become part of the empire?"

"They were conquered, during the days of the republic and then the empire," Carik answered. "What
of it?"

"And what happened during those conquests?"

"...the enemy was defeated?"

"So you mean their cities were taken?"

"Correct."

"And their armies destroyed?"

"Correct again."

"And the riches of their lands claimed by the victor?"

"Correct once more," Carik smiled.

"Then what is the difference between your barbarians and...civilization?" Maxos asked. "Both
conquer, slaughter and pillage. It makes little difference which prevails."

"Ah!" Carik laughed. "I thought about that myself, once. We are doing some of the same things, that
might be so, but our goals are not petty sackings for small quantities of plunder or anything of the
sort, but to restore the empire and bring the light of true civilization back to distant lands once more,
bringing with law, order, commerce and peace, whereas the barbarians will create only greater
anarchy."

Seven have mercy, Maxos sighed to himself. This is a tragedy. He has become another petty
warlord.

"But!" Carik said, as if sensing what Maxos had thought before sighing. "It might sound like I am
planning to destroy everything that makes these people what they are, but that is not so. I am going to
conquer them for Rivellon. Two worlds. One Empire. One people."

"Carik, my young friend," he started with a sigh. "You are falling into a dangerous trap. When your
father constructed the Empire, he did it with the noblest of goals. To bring peace to a world that had
only ever known war. And it was that which he did...and little more. Beneath the Empire's banner,
the old realms were dismantled and made into provinces, that is so, and their peoples given the
benefits of our science, but they still live the way they wish to live.

"They still write in their own languages, learn their own culture as it has always been. Not some
greater Imperial culture as you seem to envision, but their own. Indeed, the very diversity of
Rivellon's peoples is Imperial culture. It is what makes Rivellon what it is. Would you have the Elves
made to eat meat or the Dwarves made to give up their ale out of conformity?"

"But that goes against everything that you've taught me and Rivellon's history!" Carik answered with
a throw of his arm. "On my world he lined all the dwarven kings against a wall and had them shot! Then he did to the Elves and their own kings and queens and then their priests -"

Maxos looked to this Carik again, confused.

"What?"

"He had all the kings shot," Carik answered. "He broke the nations up, forced their people to learn Imperial culture and went forward from there. That's why the Empire only has one alphabet."

"...I think our worlds may have taken a rather different turn," Maxos said as he placed his cup down on the table. "Such things never occurred in my world."

"Really?" Carik asked with genuine astonishment. "Then...how does your empire hold together, if not for uniformity?"

"For its love of its emperor and its ideals," Maxos smiled. "Ours is a world with many voices, but one goal. Peace. Elves and Dwarves might well have feuded in the past, once, but with the Empire they have a way to resolve their differences with one another in the courts and offices, not on the battlefield, and both alike are committed to your father's dream of a free world, united."

"But wouldn't so many different interests pull it apart?"

"On the contrary, so many different interests push it together," Maxos smiled. "How else would we realize the value of our forests and lakes if not for the Elves reminding us of their value, or of how such choices might impact the businesses whose work gives so many a means to put food on their family's tables without the Dwarves, or the Undead who give us a way to look to our past and remember the deeds of our forebears just as the Imps help us step towards the future?"

"One brick alone is weak, but many are strong," Maxos finished with a proud smile, seeing the understanding beginning to grow inside of Carik's eyes. "That is what makes the Empire strong, my young friend."

"I'll...need time to think about this," Carik said with a genuine voice, showing in an instant that the wizard's words were sinking in. "But...it might be doable..."

And then he sighed, and looked to the wizard.

"The empire I am a part of here is similar to that on Rivellon, but only a little," he explained. "Any man can be Romaíos if he accepts the basics of the empire's culture. Its alphabet and religion, for example. It matters not whether you are part of Dalmatia or Anatolia or any of the other provinces, so long as you meet those requirements, they are Roman."

"Just as how any Elf, Dwarf or Human is part of the Empire?"

"More or less," Carik reasoned. "I have the Basileus' attentions due to my...talents, for a lack of better words, and I wouldn't be Eparcho if it was for the reclamation of Italia. Belisarius is a magnificent leader of men, better with these kinds of armies than I would be for certain, but having a dragon on his side to destroy his enemies didn't hurt either, and let us take vast swathes of territory and do so without exposing any weakness to the Sassanians."

"That," he said, rising from his desk and walking over to a nearby bookcase and taking out a rolled up scroll, a map, and placing it on the table, unrolling it to reveal a vast empire that dominated a continent and wrapped itself around a great sea, but the words themselves were written in an alphabet that was alien to the wizard. "Has let us make fast progress...nearly as much as gunpowder
"You taught the locals to make gunpowder?"

"And cannons," Carik shrugged. "That's just the start. Justinian wanted to restore his empire, I saw no harm in making it invincible. That's just the start, however. I would hope to get the telegraph here in a few decades if my Maxos doesn't get here soon, to centralize the empire and shrink the massive administration down to size. Things are getting a little...labyrinthine."

"You have this knowledge?" Maxos asked with amazement.

"Anyone can come up with gunpowder, and cannons aren't that difficult either if you know anyone who knows how to cast a big iron cooking pot," Carik shrugged. "The rest, though..."

Then he smiled, and reached under his desk to pull out a massive lockbox, a thing of thick oak ribbed with bands of hard steel and with a hefty lock the size of the wizard's fist. Reaching beneath the white cloth that wrapped itself around his neck, the eparch pulled out a key, and slotted it into the front, twisting softly till he heard a click and flipped open the lid to reveal...a second lockbox within that was as fortified as the first, Carik reaching down to his boots to take out a second key he slotted into the second box and flipped its lid open to reveal a book wrapped with leather and laced together to protect it from the elements.

"...the rest come from my secret weapon," Carik said with a cunning smile on his face as he gently lifted the book from its casings and placed it before the wizard, gently undoing the laces and pulling the leather aside to reveal -

"An encyclopedia," Maxos said, leaning forward to inspect the cover, the text made by an Imperial printing press.

"The Complete Collection of the Architect's Creations. A dry text," he mumbled before turning his eyes towards the smiling prince. "But one that would make you invincible."

"It doesn't have enough information for me to give the world anything of real value, but it has enough for me to be able to point the best and brightest minds of the empire in the right direction," Carik answered. "The cannons they have are just the start. They're getting better at casting them, and that lets them use more gunpowder and reduce windage, and that means more range and accuracy both."

"And against enemies without gunpowder, it means they have little chance," the wizard mused before looking to the prince with a smile. "No wonder you have been able to rise so far."

"It helped, believe me," the prince answered with an honest voice. "But it has more than that in there, Maxos, more than just weapons. It has pumps for draining water out of mines. It has canning. It has electricity."

"It would take centuries for them to get it all," Carik said, wrapping the book again and sealing it with its strings before placing it back into the lockboxes and sealing them as he spoke. "But it is a start and throws them miles ahead of where they would be otherwise."

"I must admit, you are rather different than the prince of my world, no doubt because I myself am different in that world and raised you differently," Maxos said at last, rising from his seat. "I think you might be on the right path...but please, think of what I told you. Consider it well."

"I will," Carik said, extending a hand to his friend. "And though you might be different from the Maxos who raised me, you're close enough for me to be happy talking to you again."
The wizard smiled, shaking hands with his friend. "Likewise."

And with that, Maxos turned towards the place the portal had been, tapping his staff against the ground to lower it into place, to make it possible for him to go back to his own world again, but before he could step through, the prince spoke again.

"You will find him eventually, I'm sure of it," Carik said. "I can feel it."

"I hope so," the wizard smiled. "I mean to search every universe till I find him and bring him home again."

"Goodbye, Maxos," Carik said sadly at last, nodding.

"Goodbye, for now," he said with a reassuring smile, a glimmer of hope appearing in the prince's golden eyes just as they would in his world's own...

...and with that sight still in mind, he stepped through the portal back to his world, to Rivellon, and let out a long breath.

*The prince of that world is so much like my own, and yet so different,* he thought as he tipped over one of the crystals with the tip of his staff, closing the portal again. *And yet...despite it all, he's still the Carik I know in his heart. Despite how the Maxos of his world might very well have changed him from how he is in mine, despite how their conquest might have gone differently than it did in ours, I hope he acts more like mine.*

And with that, he yawned. How many hours had it been since he started his search? His wizarding room lacked a window and would have been complete darkness were it not for the wondrous nature of artificial light, but all that left him with no idea of what time it might be. Reaching into his robe to pull out a pocket watch that was the exact mirror of the one his foster son carried with him, ticking softly in the silence of the room, he glanced at its surface and blinked.

"Two in the morning?" he said to himself in amazement, realizing at last how tired he was. "I must have spent the entire day making portals..."

He sighed to himself. There was no point trying to continue his search when he was so exhausted, no, for such a fatigue would only serve to make the spell all the more imprecise and make it all the harder to find the prince he was so desperate to find, and though all wizards could use their powers to sustain themselves for a great period of time without either food or drink or rest and though they could persist in such a state for so long as they might desire with little ill effects and be able to precisely continue their work, something as sensitive as the creation of portals on so grand a scale as to go from one universe was not so simple a thing. He had to rest, else it might make it all the more difficult for him to find the world that was where the prince had gone, even if so much of him wanted to simply stand there and open one portal after the next and keep doing so till he found his way to the right planet and brought the prince home again.

"I will continue tomorrow," he sighed to himself as he looked at the crystals before him, remembering how the beautiful Aurora had taught him how to travel from one world to the next. "I promise."

Raising the crystals back onto the shelf with a wave of his hand, he darkened the room again with a snap of his fingers before walking out to the now empty hall and closing the door tightly behind him, the room still lit and yet utterly devoid of even a single person, all of them having either concluded their business with their emperor or their councillors or whoever it was they had come to visit or retired for the night, but as the wizard walked to find the rooms of his own, rooms even bigger than
those he kept on Orcha at the tower where the prince was raised, but as he walked he passed a
window, peering out to reveal the darkness of night, a darkness dotted by the lights of the palace
grounds and the light of the distant foundries and forges of Ravenseat glowing red against the dark
sky, taking in their night workers so as to stop them from needing to cease production for even a
moment.

But perched upon a tree unseen in the darkness, there was a raven.

And it was watching.

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End of Part 12!

Chapter End Notes

And here we are with the part that so many have surely been waiting for: the arrival of
the Starks and so many more guests at Harrenhal! This part might have been
unscheduled, but god, I just have so much fun writing this story that I couldn't help but
write another after the last one, so here we are! :D I'll be getting back to the Many Sons
of Winter after this and going around the rotation, but I think this is a pretty good place
to stop for the time being at least,

And now for the summary:

In Westeros: Things pick up exactly where they left off in the last part, with Carik
following the good King Aerys back to the Hall of the Hundred Hearths to break his
fast, and their conversation reveals to Carik one of the most important things about
Westeros, something completely different from Rivellon, and that is the year long
 winters that have shaped Westerosi history since the day people thought to start
recording it. To say that the King and the Lord Commander are stunned to hear that
Rivellon has such a strange climate in comparison is a serious understatement, finding
the very idea of a land that would go through four different seasons in a twelve month
timespan to be utterly insane to say the least :p

And that causes Carik to ask a question and give an explanation that I'm sure quite a few
people reading this story realized the moment he mentioned orbits - it doesn't take a
genius to know that the world goes around the sun and not the other way around, and
that's exactly what Carik just explained to the king, trying to describe what causes
winters on Rivellon the best he can, the people on his homeworld having developed
scientific instruments and the like with their technology that has made it possible for
them to be able determine such things well enough, though some things, like continental
drift, would likely still be outside their knowledge. For the Westerosi, however, who are
more developed than most people tend to give them credit and certainly realize that the
world is round, that's an entirely new concept...even if Carik's attempt at explaining the
cause of their winter was less than convincing for the Lord Commander :p

After that, we see Eddard with a skull splitting hangover, and then the three arrive at the
dais and we see that Aerys isn't exactly...mended, though I probably didn't need to say
that. After that, Carik ends up touring the castle grounds with Ashara Dayne! :D I
probably don't need to say much after that :p
On Rivellon: Our man Maxos visits another, different world...and this one is yet another alternate history of our own, one where Carik's presence has caused things to go for a radically different path indeed - arrived during the reign of Justinian and not long before the Gothic War, his powers combined with the strategic excellence of Belisarius added together for a war-winning combination that has seen the Eastern Roman Empire swell. The entire empire hasn't been restored just yet, and it'll never be the way it once was, but it is rapidly expanding and doing so from a much greater position of strength than in our timeline, more confident in its abilities to win wars thanks to Carik's abilities on the battlefield that are maintained as theirs thanks to his lasting presence in Constantinople as the city's eparch, a title that effectively makes him the city's administrator and the Basileus' right hand man...and more than that, because of a few gifts he has given, particularly gunpowder. Armed with simple cannons to support his forces, Belisarius has been given weapons that can breach the walls of lesser cities and fortresses with ease and which would utterly humiliate any wooden fortifications, and though it is only a matter of time till others begin to realize the power of it and develop gunpowder weapons of their own, for now, they have a crushing advantage.

But this Carik isn't quite like the one in Westeros, to say the least, as he had a rather different upbringing in a rather different Rivellon, a Rivellon where the Empire itself quashed all the other factions and established itself as the sole power left standing not only on a political level, but on a cultural one as well, subsuming the different civilizations into its framework regardless of the damage to their cultural heritage and the like and effectively annihilating their own power structures like the aforementioned Dwarven kings who were given a fine cigar, a cup of ale, a blindfold and a wall to stand next to and the Elven priests who had the same, only with a sparking of a peacepipe first. This is in stark contrast to the Empire from the main universe where these structures are more or less intact and are considered a main part of the Empire's heritage.

...and after he returns to Rivellon, a raven watches...

I think that's enough summarizing, so I'll leave things here! :D
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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Within the Armory of Harrenhal...

Rhaegar sighed as he looked through the pages of the book, glimpsing the faded images as best as he might in the bright light sun, shining through the open shutters and bringing its warmth and the smell of blooming flowers to what would otherwise be a cold, dark chamber filled with the scent of dust and rust and a hint of mould, Harrenhal's massive armory built by Black Harren himself to support a garrison of thousands and impossible to fill or maintain without the wealth of a kingdom at its back. With gentle, gloved fingers, he carefully turned one page to the next, scanning the texts with a quick eye in search of anything that might be of use, examining the cracking paints of old drawings and the disappearing texts of old ink that filled the tome he had sent for from the library of Harrenhal, a vast place, but a place as decaying as the rest of the castle, burnt for the first time when Aegon the Conqueror came to the shores of Westeros, worn down by the ravages of passing centuries, then burnt again when the dragons danced through the skies and the Targaryens of old made war against one another, never to recover to what it once was.

"...nor us, for that matter," he sighed with true melancholy in the loneliness of the armory, his light touch causing a flake of old red paint to crumble into dust. "The years haven't been kind to us, nor have they to you."

He shook his head ever so slightly, setting aside his thoughts on the decline of his family over the centuries since the death of the last dragon and focused on his task. Ashara had said in the quiet darkness of the vaults that it had been the heart tree of Harrenhal's godswood that had made the young dragon take flight the night before, made him flee when he was a young man being escorted back to his bedchambers by perhaps the most beautiful woman of their generation and when his veins were as full of drink as they were blood. A man did not need to be a maester to know that something had surely happened to make him go, something that even the dragon inside of him thought it wiser to flee rather than try to fight, but what?

Harrenhal's library, for all the damage that the years had done, was one of the greatest in the Seven Kingdoms, packed from stone floor to the high ceiling three stories above with leatherbound tomes and cracking scrolls and curled maps that would snap like glass if unrolled, and it had a most rare tome, something that surely dated to the Century of Blood, a hundred years before the Conquest and four hundred years before the arrival of the strange, half dragon prince. By rights the text should have been given to the maesters of the Citadel for transcribing to new and younger parchment, its words rewritten and its images redrawn, but for now, he could not think to let it out of his sight, so precious was the tome and so rare was the knowledge contained within, for this book was one of a handful that covered the tales of the Dragonlords of Old Valyria, from the time before the Doom, and their visits to Westeros, visits that had grown more and more common in the final few centuries before the fall of the greatest nation the world had ever seen and the Targaryen's own ancestral homeland, but visits that had seen them greet the lords and peasants of the lands of the Sunset Sea more with curiosity than not.

Visits that had brought the old Lords Freeholder in contact with the heart trees and their pale faces of
carved wood. Visits that referred to a word that he had never heard before, not even in all the long years of his story.

*Ifequevron.*

It sounded as though it came from High Valyrian, but High Valyrian that had been bastardized, corrupted, like the Gutter Valyrian of the Free Cities, making it nigh impossible for him to understand. The closest word he could find was the High Valyrian term for a lumberjack, but what a lumberjack had anything to do with the flight of the Valyrian dragonlords to Westeros he had not even the first idea, and without the understanding of that word, the words around it made even less sense, and the ones around them less. High Valyrian was a language that allowed words to be slotted together, like bricks and mortar, elegantly allowing whole new terms to be created from the combination of existing ones, yet missing just a single piece of the chain rendered the entire thing confusing in its disorder, and all hew could do was try and find a word that matched the meaning of the sentence to reveal what it actually intended.

"Why did my forefathers come up with such a damned language," he murmured, leaning back against the wall as he thought, uttering a sentence aloud. "*Ifequevron arlinio buzdari valar.*"

He paused.

"*Valar* means men and *buzdari* means slave, but *arlinio* is to change," he pondered, arms crossed. "Change slave men."

...to change slave men. That's right, *arlinio* is to change, not change itself. That makes sense, but the rest of the sentence before *Ifequevron* doesn't. It needs that word, and even what comes after might change if I knew what *Ifequevron* meant.

The prince sighed, slumping back against the wall. Everything that he had done since the half-dragon prince had arrived had only served to start raising more and more questions about what to do next, questions that simply had no answer for him to give them, yet questions that could decide the future of his family and whether they rose from the ashes and returned to the peaks of their power or finally fell into the abyss, like the Justmans and Teagues and Hoares and Reynes and thousands of other dynasties had. But the others and his wife were right; beneath the scaled breast of Carik's draconic body lay the heart of a young man, marked forever by his upbringing away from his true kin, and such a heart responded in the way any heart might, smiling upon compassion and frowning upon its lack. That was simple. That was obvious. That was something he didn't doubt after seeing how he responded whenever Ashara came near.

What confused and puzzled the crown prince was the half-dragons reaction to the world around him, not only the mystery of how a man could have *literal* dragon's blood coursing through their veins, but how he could command the elements and create fire at whim, or switch between two bodies easier than Rhaegar might change clothes, or his talk of wizards and other such things. More than anything was the mystery of the half-dragon prince himself and why he seemed to swing from joy to grief so quickly and how that grief could devour him for hours and hours on end, and though his wife and her friend thought that it would simply be a matter of befriending him with warm words and witty japes, how could one possibly hope to become his friend if they did not know what troubled them so? When accidentally opening such a wound could send him fleeing from the Targaryens and into the arms of the Lannisters or the Tyrells? How could he be kept close to the three headed dragon when he was more interested in travelling the world than not, or kept loyal to the Iron Throne rather than
How could be kept loyal to Rhaegar, and not his mad father? He could tell him the truth about his father's condition, how he had lost his wits in the dungeons of Duskendale, how he brutalizes his wife and how he left her covered in scars and scratch marks, but what if that soured his thoughts of the Targaryen line and sent him fleeing? What if he didn't believe him and simply thought him jealous of his father, not seeing the madness that lurked within, and turned against Rhaegar?

There were so many things that could go wrong that he could not bring himself to blindly step forward into the unknown the way his wife might, no, he had to plan, to understand, to learn what made him sad so that it might be avoided. It almost made it feel inhuman to talk about, as though he were disarming a trap rather than trying to make a friend, and yet it was necessary, necessary in the way that few things were, as the very future of his family depended on a strong, nay, *unbreakable* relationship with him. Anything else was to risk utter annihilation, for the appearance of a dragon only to be swiftly followed by its disappearance would not go unnoticed by their vassal lords, and wars had started for less, for the Blackfyre Rebellion itself was over just a single sword that was also the symbol of the crown. What might happen if it was the symbol of the Targaryen line, the very thing they were on their shields and flew on their banners, the creatures that had forged the Seven Kingdoms, was to choose another dynasty? What was there to stop him from crossing the Narrow Sea and finding out if Maelys had a daughter before he died, a daughter whose appearance on dragonback would do more damage to Targaryen support than the rise of Daemon Blackfyre?

He couldn't help but think. Everything truly hung on keeping his support, and he *could* tell him that, but what then when he has to return from wherever he came, for whatever reason, and leave the Targaryens as abruptly as he had arrived?

The door clattered open with the grinding of squeaky and rusty hinges, clunking downwards as it reached its greatest extent...and Rhaegar looked to see Ser Oswell Whent, utterly unfazed by the dank conditions of the armory, even seeming to have a smile of nostalgia on his face, with the half dragon prince himself right behind, who looked around with near horror at the decrepit state of it all.

"...are you sure this is the armory?" Carik asked, reaching out for an old sword on an arming rack only to pull the pommel straight off. "It looks more like a junkpile."

"Aye, it's a bit of both these days," Oswell said grimly, taking the broken ironwork from Carik and tossing it into an old helmet-turned-bucket by the door. "Harrenhal has some of the richest lands in Westeros, that's true, but the castle's so ruined that its never enough to pay to maintain it all, so something always has to rot and get worse, and that's the armoury nowadays. Lothston lost the best of all the weapons and armor here during her war, but there's still some good pieces left if you take a look around."

"Not many, I assure you," Rhaegar said, closing the book and setting it aside on a nearby table covered with the stubs of old candles. "Some of these pieces look like they've been in here since the Conquest."

"They have been, and some before," Oswell nodded, pointing down the far end of the long and wide room, packed from one wall to the next with dusty armor. "You can find Hoare shields down there if you look hard enough, aye, and the ones near the front will have a different coat of arms beneath the paint if you scratch them."

"How is this supposed to help me fight in the tourney?" Carik asked, picking up a dusty helmet only to drop it again when a spider crawled out the visor. "It's all bits and pieces. Is there are a full set in here anywhere?"
"Not for you there isn't," Rhaegar said, turning his attentions towards the half-dragon prince with a smile. "No one buys armor for someone your age. You would grow out of it quick and need another suit in months, so it isn't worth making."

"The prince is right," Oswell agreed, patting the dragon prince on the shoulder. "You're too young to have armor of your own, so we'll piece you something together from what we can find in here. Shouldn't be too hard to find you something in here."

"Is it even safe?" Carik asked the Whent with concern. "And won't it look terrible?"

"Would you rather wear mismatching armor and live or wear nothing, die and leave a fashionable corpse?"

"Let's get looking, then!" Carik said, clapping his hands together with false enthusiasm. "I'm sure there's going to be something in here."

"Spiders, by the seems of it," Oswell muttered under his breath before looking to the prince. "Found anything of interest, my prince?"

"Only more questions than I already had," Rhaegar sighed, rising from his seat to help them look before speaking to the half-dragon. "Had any luck remembering what happened yesterday?"

"I've...had my thoughts elsewhere," Carik smiled, the very same smile that he had after Ashara had kissed him. 

Well, that is an answer in its own right, Rhaegar thought as he paused to examine some dull steel gauntlets, scratched by battle but otherwise in good condition. Not one I think Ashara would like, but an answer.

Careful, he grabbed the gauntlets by the wrist and shook hard, flexing the fingers as he did to loosen any dirt or dust or anything else that might have been trapped inside over the years, placing his own hand above its empty mitten to see if the fingers might fit and if the wrist was wide enough for the young dragon's own. There was no denying it; Rhaegar and Carik did look more similar than not, but Rhaegar knew well how big he had been at the dragon's age and knew that he had been smaller, less bulked, though mayhaps that was simply down to the prince preferring to sharpen his mind in the libraries of the Red Keep than strengthen his arm in its courtyard, yet the fact that there was a similarity at all was an even bigger mystery than how he was somehow part dragon and could command magic. That was something that he would need to research as well, once he had made his way back to King's Landing and could consult with the Grand Maester, but for now, he busied himself with trying to find the half dragon prince some suitable armor, to ensure he wasn't harmed in the tourney and could take part in it, and all the better that it did, as it would keep him busy and close to the Targaryens where they could keep him out of trouble...

...and that made him realize.

"What took you two so long, anyhow?" Rhaegar asked, genuinely curious. "I was able to read nearly half that book before you arrived."

"Ashara and I went on a tour around the castle," Carik said without losing his smile for even a heartbeat. "We were just talking...and I guess we just lost track of time."
Then Rhaegar almost laughed at how he had looked past it all and ignored it in favor of other things. 

*He's in love.*

And it gave a better idea than any that he had thought of before, for what better way was there to keep him around for certain than by encouraging him to be with the woman he loved? That was something even the Westerlands or the Reach couldn’t offer, because for all their mountains of coin and armies of men, they could not control who he loved. And it was not as if he would be doing wrong by encouraging him to try and pursue the beautiful Dayne, for there were many a story and song where the shy young heir is encouraged by his friends to go after the charming, beautiful maiden. What could possibly go wrong with that?

*Rejection. If she turned him down, then he'd be heartbroken...but if I give him a little advice...*

"Have any plans for who you might crown your Queen of Love and Beauty, if you win?" he asked innocently, trying to gauge the dragon’s reaction. "There's many a woman here deserving of it. Cersei Lannister will be here soon enough, and from what I hear of her, she might well be even more beautiful than Ashara Dayne or Catelyn Tully."

"I think it'll be Ashara," Carik said, almost wishful as he gave away his hand. "She's...nice. She's been helping me ever since I got here, and she's funny, too."

"You'll have a lot of competition for her favor, you know," Rhaegar added, Oswell glancing over only to be met with a knowing smile by the crown prince. "She has a lot of would be suitors, but most of them fail to see past her looks to see the woman within, and Ashara does hate that."

"You can say that again," Oswell laughed. "There's nothing she hates more than having some lovestruck fool run up to her and start saying poetry."

"Indeed," Rhaegar smiled to the Whent knight. "If a man really wanted to find his way to her heart, he would show her things, not tell her them. It is one thing to tell a woman that you love her so much that you would defend her honor and another to actually do so."

"...you think I should...ask her?" Carik asked, sitting on the edge of a half broken arming rack. "I mean, I like her..."

"But do you *love* her?" Rhaegar asked, curious.

"I...I think so," Carik admitted to himself.

"Then why not try?"

"But what if she says no, or she isn't interested in me like that?"

"You're a dashing prince from a distant land," Rhaegar said, encouraging him. "What is there not for her to like?"

"But how?" Carik asked with a sigh, spirits dropping. "I barely even know how to talk to girls like her."

"Don't talk, just act," the crown prince suggested. "Don't pretend to be her gallant knight, *be* her gallant knight."
"...that doesn't make much sense."

"He's saying you need to act the way the others are talking about," Oswell laughed. "I've known Ashara for years, and if there's one thing I know about her, she hates two things: empty words and an empty head. Don't say you'll make her laugh with your japes, just make her laugh. Don't say you want to"

"But what about Lysa?" Carik asked. "She seems nice, but -"

"Lysa?" Rhaegar asked, straightening his back and looking towards Carik, gauntlets in hand. "Lysa Tully?"

"Ashara says she's obsessed with me."

"Aye, that's Lysa Tully alright," Oswell sighed. "That father of hers is a bastard of a man."

"That is the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands you are talking about, your brother's sworn lord, ser," Rhaegar said with surprise. "What's soured you on him?"

"Lord Tully's a worse father than Lord Walder Frey, and he doesn't have the excuse of having half a hundred sons and daughters to look after," Oswell said, examining the straps on a breastplate to see if they could be tightened enough to fit the young prince. "See, he was married to my sister - Minisa - and she always told him that he never treated them properly. He never really wanted daughters, just sons to replenish the Tullys and make the dynasty wider."

"That's hardly something that you can blame the man for," Rhaegar said, flipping open an old wooden crate to see it packed with stacks of boots. "Half the lords of Westeros want the same thing. You don't have to pay dowries for boys."

"That's true, but he paired it by having an obvious favorite, too," Oswell said with a throw of his arm, a temper rising inside of him before he realized it and tamed it. "My sister told him not to treat them so unequally, and what does he do? He lets his son Edmure do whatever the hells he wants because he is his only son, then makes Lysa wear the dresses her sister grows out of to save coin, and doesn't care much about her anyway. She's starved for love."

"Poor girl loves us Whents more than she does her Tully kin."

"Is that why she seems so...excitable?"

"She's excitable because she's away from her father," Oswell suggested with a shrug of his armored shoulders. "She'll latch onto anything that gives her even the slightest approval. She just wants to be loved, is all."

Carik mumbled something under his breath, then, sad and too quiet for the Targaryen prince to hear, but Rhaegar realized it might not be so wise an idea to offer the young prince romantic advice after all, not when he might be pushing him in a direction that could very well take him away from the royal court. Moving quickly before the prince could be thrown into his gloom and made to drown in it as he had seem content to do in the morning, Rhaegar walked over with the first few pieces of armor, sabatons and pauldrons and gauntlets and even a half decent set of tassets that must have come from a knight's plate and were shaped like bats.
"Whatever you do, though, you'll need armor," he said with a reassuring smile, forcing it onto his cheeks for the sake of the half-dragon his family was so dependent on. "Try these. They aren't perfect and weren't very good when they were made, but they look small enough to fit you properly."

"Thank you," Carik said, forcing a smile of his own as examined the different pieces...and Rhaegar saw in his eyes that he had no idea what to do. "So...how do you put these on?"

"Are there no squires in your land?" Rhaegar asked, confused.

"Not anymore," Carik answered, careful.

"What do you mean not anymore?" Oswell asked, walking over with an old breastplate made from four pieces, two at the front and two at the back.

"...you don't want to know," Carik said quickly and more cheerfully, examining the piece that Oswell brought over. "So do I put the top front piece on first, then the back -"

"I would like to know, actually," Rhaegar asked, arms crossed and more intrigued than he had been since he arrived, his voice careful to avoid agitating the young prince any more than he might have done already. "What happened in your land that you stopped having squires? Or knights, from what I hear of things?"

"We had knights," Carik said quietly and with more than a little reluctance. "They just got...well, shot."

For a moment, there was an uneasy silence, and it was Oswell who broke it first.

"What do you mean they were shot?" the Whent asked in stunned surprise. "With crossbows?"

"Something like that," Carik shrugged. "Either way, they're gone and won't be coming back."

Rhaegar and Oswell looked to one another with concern. The prince never liked to talk about his past or his homeland, by the seems of things, being far more interested in Westeros than he was in explaining his own lands...and with the simple fact that a single wrong word could perhaps tip the balance between him and his father and see the young Carik coming to Aerys' side, damning the crown prince in an instant, as Rhaegar was well aware that his father would rather his second son succeed him on the throne than the first.

"Now then!" the half-dragon prince continued, desperate to change the topic. "So what do I put on first?"

"An arming doublet, to stop you from getting crushed in your armor when hit," Oswell said flatly, bringing over the great heaping jacket of quilted cloth, once a bright white and now a dark cream color from years in the armory, scratched and worn, but still strong.

Carik smiled for a moment as the Whent knight helped him...only to suddenly look to Oswell in surprise. "...that can happen?"

"There are...more than a few ways to end up dead in a tourney," Rhaegar said, letting Oswell deal with the task of armoring the young half-dragon prince whilst he stood and watched and spoke. "You said before that you know how to lance, but are you any good at it?"
"We don't really have knights any more, but we still have jousting tournaments," Carik explained as Oswell did the straps, Carik fidgeting for a moment as he tightened them into place. "Besides, how hard can it be?"

"...you didn't answer my question," Rhaegar smiled. "In any case, you shouldn't have too much trouble if you know how to ride a horse. That's half of it."

"More than half," Oswell agreed as he gestured for Carik to place his foot on an old barrel of arrows, sliding the armored shoe onto his foot and quickly doing the claps. "If you can ride a horse, you can joust in a tourney. The rest is just aiming the lance and any fool can do that with enough practice."

"Still...this is my first tourney," Carik admitted. "Anything I should know before we get started?"

"If you lose, you can still take part in the melee," Rhaegar started. "I wouldn't suggest fighting in your dragon form, but if you can wield your sword well, it might be wiser than taking part in the lists. Either way, you can compete in both if you wanted. They take place an hour apart."

"I might do," the half-dragon said with a smile, looking towards Rhaegar with golden eyes that showed not even the tiniest trace of the unease and unhappiness he had just had a few moments before. "Do I get any coin for winning a round?"

"Where in the world do you get coin just for winning a round?" Oswell laughed. "Here in Westeros, you either make it into the three or get nothing, though that brother of mine has prizes for everyone in the top hundred. Not big prizes, but prizes."

"If you're desperate for coin, though, you could just ask my father or me," Rhaegar offered warmly. "The realm won't be beggared by me giving you just a few gold dragons. The treasury at King's Landing is overflowing with gold and silver both."

Or at least it was, he thought, the words coming with his wife's voice. Lord Whent certainly found a way to spend his way through it all.

"Best not to tell him that, Rhaegar, else he might go sleep on it," Oswell said, making both princes laugh. "You know the stories about dragons and gold hoards."

"It was only that once," Carik laughed, Oswell having armored his entire lower half. "I just needed to get away from something, and that was...well, away."

"Speaking of getting away, what was it that upset you so, anyhow?" Rhaegar asked, noticing that Carik had mentioned it himself. "Ashara said you were fine to walk with her till you reached the godswood."

"I'm not quite sure," the half-dragon said quietly, fidgeting with a moment's discomfort, clearly unsettled. "I was pretty drunk, so I can't remember it all..."

And if Ashara doesn't know, then we'll never find out -

"...but it was something to do with that tree," Carik said at last, Oswell stopping with the fastening to look towards Rhaegar. "There's something odd about it. Something...wrong, and I don't mean the creepy face. Who the hell carves faces like that into trees anyhow?"
"The First Men," Rhaegar sighed. "Oswell, you know the history of Harrenhal better than I. Where did Black Harren get that tree of his? The Isle of Faces?"

"Now there's a place I'll never be visiting anytime soon," Carik said with a whistle that masked his unease.

"No one really knows," the Kingsguard knight shrugged, honest. "Most think he sent men over on rafts to the Isle of Faces to get one for his godwood, but my nurse always told me it was already there when he raised the castle and built the godwood around it. How it escaped Andal axes I'll never know."

"...I'm getting the feeling that I should go and burn it to the ground whilst we still can," Carik said, his words as much an offer as they were a suggestion.

"I'm not sure fire would do much good," Oswell mused, utterly un-phased. "Either way Harren got the tree, it was there the night Aegon the Conqueror came on Balerion the Black Dread and survived when even stone melted, and did so again in the Dance. That's when it got those scars that weep red along with the eyes."

"...the tree...bleeds?" Carik asked, horrified. "And you haven't had the idea that it might be just a little bit too evil and chopped it down?"

"...I must admit, ser, he does have a point," Rhaegar agreed. "Could your brother not have had it replaced with a new one from the Isle? I can't imagine it being good for morale to have a tree that bleeds in their gardens."

"He could, but it doesn't bother us at all," Whent said with a smile. "When you've been raised from birth in a half ruined castle, told stories about how it was haunted by all the families that died out here before we were given it and which is full of bats, spiders and mayhaps a few ghosts, you don't scare easy. A wierwood tree is just a tree, even if it has a face, and a tree's nothing to be worried about."

"Even a tree that somehow survived being set on fire twice and is covered in cuts and has eyes that bleed?" Carik asked. "On Rivellon, that'd be enough to get a priest out to do an exorcism or two, maybe have it checked out by a wizard and chopped down for safety's sake."

"Is the fear of demons actually so great a threat in your land that you would lop down trees just because they looked funny?" Oswell asked, a laugh on his cheeks. "Even the old Andals didn't do that."

"Considering demons like to do things like that because people tend to expect them to do so, yes," Carik explained with all seriousness, his voice changing to a tone that Rhaegar would even go so far as to call lordly. "They might have a flair for the dramatic, true, but that does not make them any less of a threat to Rivellon. Anything that could be considered a sign of demonic activity is investigated, for the protection of the realm and all its peoples."

And then he relaxed with a laugh. "Nowadays, though, it's the demons who are worried about being invaded by us, not the other way around."

"...you don't mean your people are planning to invade hell?" Rhaegar asked, stunned. "Is it even real?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Carik asked, confused. "Where else would demons come from?"
"...are you talking about demons, like a woman whose washing comes out cleaner than her neighbours, or are you on about actual demons, with horns and claws and the rest, like in the stories?" Oswell asked.

"Actual demons," Carik said with a shrug. "We've been fighting them on Rivellon since...forever, I guess."

"...then does that mean the Seven are real?" Rhaegar asked, amazed and desperate for answer towards one of life's greatest mysteries. "Hugor was right?"

"...Hugor? Who's that?"

"Hugor of the Hill, King of All Andals and Speaker for the Seven-who-are-One," Oswell said instantly, as if by reflex. "He was the one who the Father crowned and who the Maiden brought a bride that the Mother made fertile...you know the rest."

"Actually..." Carik said, an awkward silence following for a moment. "I've never heard of him before."

"Then did the Seven pick a different speaker for your people?"

"Actually..." Carik said again...

"What?" Oswell asked, even more interested than Rhaegar.

"...they came to us in person," Carik admitted at last. "But I don't think your Seven are the same as our Seven. Ever hear of Rhalic, warrior god of Mankind? Or Duna, who forged the first Dwarves on his anvil? What about Tir-Cendellius, maker of the Elves?"

Carik looked at the both of them in surprise when their answer was silence. "Zorl-Stissa, the one with the tail? Vrogir and his whip? Xantezza the joker? You must know of Amadia at least?"

"I know as little about them as you seem to know about Hugor," Rhaegar answered honestly, Oswell finishing the straps on Carik's breastplate with a concerned look about him. "But are those honestly your Seven? No...Father or Mother or Maiden or Smith?"

"No, we don't have any gods like those in Rivellon," was the half-dragon's swift answer. "At least not that I know of, anyway. Xantezza is meant to be the god of the Imps, but they don't actually worship her that much because they find the idea of gods silly since they haven't been seen in a long, long time."

"Do they...answer, if you pray to them?"

"Nobody really knows for sure whether they're real or not, even the Undead," Carik said. "But a lot of people who curse them tend to get struck by lightning right after."

Rhaegar could only fall silent, then, as this made things even harder than they already were. What would happen if people found out that the half-dragon before him comes from a land where demons are not only real, but regularly invade the world of men and where the people there had seen the gods with their own eyes and more, were struck down by their wroth for cursing them, even if they were not so commonly spotted as they once were? Even more, what would they think when they
find out that the armies of hell itself were little match for the "Empire" of which he spoke so often? Was that simple exaggeration? Perhaps, Rhaegar certainly hoped it was, a tale made to make his homeland seem all the grander than it already did, but then there was the fact he possessed magic and could switch between a human body and a draconic one, so who knew what was fact and what was fiction?

Another thing that Westeros cannot learn about, Rhaegar sighed. Who knows what might happen when people begin to wonder why the Seven they know haven't done anything for them or answered their prayers or smote the sinful as their septons say they do. It could mean civil war.

"Carik, I would like to ask a favor of you," Rhaegar said quickly and with his kindest voice, pushing aside whatever thoughts he might have had of religious war. "My family has been nothing but hospitable to you and we are happy to help guide you through a land that you do not know, and I ask only one small thing in return."

"Sure," Carik smiled. "You've been a great help so far, the least I can do is help you back."

"Don't mention your Seven here. If anyone asks, say you keep the Andal gods and keep to the Warrior first of all."

"That's easy enough," Carik reasoned, Oswell tightening the straps that bound together the pauldrons and couters and rerebraces and vambraces together."

"Now you best be careful with anything you hit with these," Oswell said, sliding the gauntlets onto Carik's hands, tapping a finger against the sharp studs that covered the knuckles. "These are battle gauntlets, made with gadlings already fitted. Hit a man in the face with those and you'll smash half his teeth and break his jaw as well."

"You Westerosi really know how to have a bloody good time, don't you?" Carik laughed, examining the steel and almost comically oversized knuckles that covered his hand. "Why would you even need that on the battlefield?"

"A knight's job is killing and don't let the poets tell you otherwise," Oswell answered, fastening them in place with a single bronze clasp beneath the elbow, safely protected from the risk of an enemy's strike. "When you're in the melee a punch might not seem like it'll ever be useful...but when it is, aye, you'll be glad you have those on your hands. You can kill a man with them if you hit the nose."

"He's not lying, either. Men have died in trials-by-combat when they were hit in the nose with a gauntleted fist" Rhaegar said, placing a finger on the bridge of his nose. "A hit there and you can drive the bone straight into the brain."

"I'll, uh, try not to get into any fights then," Carik said, flexing his hands. "What next?"

"The most important bit for a tourney knight," Oswell said at last, raising a bevor with a pad of soft leather up to the half-dragon's neck, pressing carefully as he positioned it. "For the love of whatever gods you keep, tell me if this fits properly or not. Else you could get a wooden splinter a foot long buried in your throat."

"How am I supposed to know whether its on right or not?" Carik asked, barely able to speak. "I've never worn armor before."

"Don't your people wear plate?"
"Not anymore," Carik said. "It's...not quite as useful as it used to be."

"A good enough answer for me," Rhaegar said, uneager to find himself pondering another problem that might threaten to rip the realm apart or another question that seemed impossible to have an answer. "As for the bevor, it needs to be able to rest on your shoulders, but still cover the lower half of your mouth and do so without crushing your throat."

"I think it's alright."

"You think?" Oswell said with a laugh. "You want to be certain!"

"It's fine, I'm sure," Carik smiled, causing Oswell to instantly fasten it into place before taking a nearby salet and putting it on the half-dragon's head, visor raised and straps done in but a few moments with the knight's practiced hands...

...and then he rose for the first time since he sat down, armor plates clattering as they rolled over one another for perhaps the first time in years, what little dust that was left after their assembly shaken loose by the movements of the man within. There were many words that came to mind as the half-dragon prince moved in the armor, stretching after a long time seated and flexing his hands to get a feel for the movements, many words that could be an apt description of how he looked and moved, but none of them were "impressive" or "graceful." No, the pieces were not only mismatched from different suits of armor, but from entirely different styles and times as well - the helm, bevor and breastplate were forged in the Riverlands style, yet the gauntlets and legs and all the rest were a mix of styles from those times when the first suits of plate were still imported from across the Narrow Sea or painstakingly forged in the great smithies of King's Landing or Gulltown or Oldtown, three cities that had a different idea of how a suit of plate should look...and all four of which used different ore with different impurities and different forging techniques that resulted in all four of which having different shades of grey, with the helm and chest and bevor all the same grey as bright smoke and the others darker and duller still, tinged with rust where the elements had been able to leak through the decaying mortar that bound together the stones of the armory's walls and ceiling.

Perhaps that would have added to Carik's charm if he could move easily in it, make him seem like a battle hardened sellsword or a seasoned hedgeknight who had bought more and more armor to replace that which had been damaged or lost during his travels, but it was obvious from his first steps that he had not the first idea how to move in plate armor, carrying the weight on his spine as though he were carrying a bag of wheat on his back rather than allowing the armor and its weight, spread out over the body, to rest naturally the way he might wear any normal clothes...and it showed. Carik was hunched over, and one single step forward was nearly enough to send him tumbling to the ground for a loss of balance, needing to grab Oswell's shoulder for stability. It was like watching a toddler learning to walk for the first time, so strange was his stride, but once he stabilized himself again, he let go of Oswell, and after the briefest moment where he looked set to fall back into his seat, the half-dragon seemed to finally find his footing, laughing to himself as he turned to Rhaegar with a wide smile.

"This feels really strange," Carik said, bending his knees and flexing his arms as eh began to find how the armor was supposed to move. "It's a lot lighter than I thought it would be."

"It is," Oswell smiled and nodded, gesturing with an open hand for him to take a few steps. "Go on, take a walk. You wouldn't see us walking around in it if we had trouble staying balanced."

"And if you fall, we'll catch you before you hit the ground," Rhaegar nodded with a warm voice,
watching the half-dragon taking his first steps in armor, growing more confident with every foot he placed in front of the other, more certain in his motions, his steps going from swaying and uncertain things to a confident stride. "See? It's easy."

"Thanks," Carik said with a cheerful voice muffled by his visor, raising it himself with the clatter of a gauntleted hand. "I'd have never figured this out without help."

"Aye, but it might be a good idea to get you a squire for the future," Oswell said, turning to the crown prince. "It wouldn't hurt to get him someone who can put his armor on for him whenever he needs it."

Carik mumbled something under his breath about a Bracken squire, then, but Rhaegar thought it best not to pry, not lest he risk upsetting the half-dragon as he had before and risk making things worse: interacting with him could not be like interacting with any normal man, as Carik was far too valuable for any approach other than the most delicate, even if that made things all the more difficult or awkward for it.

*Every word has to be thought through carefully.* the prince thought to himself, considering what to say next. *Else he could leave us the way he did last night and doom us all by doing so.*

"Still, regardless of whether or not you get one," Rhaegar said with a smile, extending an open arm towards the door. "You still need to head out to the tourney field...and a horse, too, but I am sure Oswell has something in mind?"

"Since you're not riding in the lists, you could always loan him your horse," the white cloaked knight suggested to the prince with a shrug of his shoulders. "It'd be better than any other horse he might have, and its not like there's going to be many around here that don't have a master already."

...*and it would ensure that Elia would not be able to try and guilt me into riding.* Rhaegar realized with a smile.

"Perfect," he said to the prince with a smile, placing a hand on his shoulder as the two walked towards the door. "As Oswell says, you can ride my horse. Balerion is his name, though he's better tempered than that dragon to be sure...but for now, just busy yourself getting used to moving around in armor."

"I'm going to try and find Ashara, see what she thinks," Carik laughed, lowering his visor to help him get used to the limited field of view. "I bet she'll be surprised!"

And with that Carik marched out the door, misfitting plates clattering like a kitchen as he went, his closed helm protecting him from the noise as he moved.

"Oh, she'll definitely be surprised," the Whent said before bursting into laughter. "Seven have mercy, he'll win the tourney just from the sound of that armor rattling as he goes."

"But he'll be safe?"

"As safe as any man might be when armored with what we could find in here, aye," Oswell nodded, reaching down to his belt to take a sip from his wineskin. "Its not perfect, but its no deathtrap either. Better than going in naked anyhow."

"How reassuring," Rhaegar sighed. "If that boy gets hurt we will be in a dire position, and I do not
mean simply because he is the first dragon to be seen in Westeros since the Dance."

"Because you have no idea what his father might do?"

"Exactly," Rhaegar nodded, taking a piece of armor and throwing it into the heap with a flick of his wrist. "You heard what he said about his people fighting off demons and you have heard the other things he has said about his land. If he is hurt, then it will be to us his father looks. Westeros has enough problems as it is, and the last thing we need is an invasion from across whatever sea he comes."

"True, but imagine what might happen if he grows fond of this land," Oswell smiled, wiping his mouth. "You see how he likes it here. That's protection enough from whatever his father might do, and we do not know for sure how much is truth and how much is boasting. Seven, we don't even know how many swords his father commands."

"Carik is a talking dragon with magical powers. I'm inclined to believe that when he says his land is the way it is and full of magic that he is telling the truth. For all we know they are as mighty as Old Valyria was before the Doom came, with hundreds of dragons!"

"...for all we know, his father's realm could be a hundred peasants and a keep the size of this armory," Oswell shrugged, rising from his seat. "Either way, there's no real point worrying about it, my prince. Carik's happy here. So long as he stays that way, I doubt there's anything much for us to be worried about."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we'll find out whatever is upsetting him and deal with it, for the good of the realm and its king and prince," Oswell said softly and with a smile, looking ready to drop to one knee in fealty before his prince. "For now, though, there's no harm in leaving him be till a problem comes."

"A problem like a certain wierwood tree," Rhaegar said, walking over to a rack of weapons and taking out a hefty battle axe before passing it to the Kingsguard knight before taking one for himself. "Come on, ser. We will do what Aegon and the others didn't."

"White Sword Tower could always do with another wierwood table, your grace," Oswell smiled, hefting axe into his grip before resting it against his shoulder. "Might be a good idea to keep a change of clothes ready, though. All that sap is going to get sticky, and swinging an axe into a tree is an easy way to spray it everywhere."

"That is nothing that I am afraid of dealing with," Rhaegar said instantly and with absolute certainty. "If that tree is a threat to Carik - if that tree is a threat to me and my family - then I will bring it down."

"Then we best get started," Oswell laughed as the two started to walk towards the door. "Chopping a tree that wide down will take a long while."

"Then lead the way," Rhaegar commanded...

...and the white cloaked knight obeyed with a nod, walking to the door with axe in hand and stepping out into the courtyard, the sound of Carik's armored clattering finally gone and the sun finally beginning to crest its way towards its highest point in the sky as morning slowly turned to noon. Yet Rhaegar paid no attention to such things, nor other surprised whispers of noblemen and
noblewomen alike as he passed them with axe in hand, making his way to the godswood. It was a place with a battered old door, threatening to fall apart at the hinges and full to the brim of growth that had not seen a groundskeeper's blade in months, perhaps years, perhaps decades, covered in half a hundred types of wildflower and filled with bushes that had grown to rival trees, vibrant and green and tall, but at the center of it all was his goal: the great white wierwood tree of Harrenhal, the heart of its godswood, its face twisted in rage, a furious scowl that threatened him more than any of his mad father's darkest moods. Its bark was covered in the scars of countless ages, its leaves long and thin like dagger claws that grew from deformed limbs that all added to its monstrous visage, yet Rhaegar did not hesitate for a moment when he placed the blade of the axe against its white timber and drew back for the first strike.

And then it felt as though the tree was whispering in the winds. It was angry. Angry that he had dared to come into its home with blade in hand.

But Rhaegar was angrier.

With every strike it felt as though some of the frustration he had felt rise inside of him with every puzzled moment of his dealings with the half-dragon prince was banished away, thrown to dribble down to the earth like the crimson sap of the wierwood tree, every blow relief, every blow an answer.

He didn't stop till it crashed to the ground and let him axe its face into the soil.

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**Storm's End, Planetos #122.**

Lucerys could only smile widely as the cool winds of Shipbreaker Bay fluttered through his silver-gold hair, his dragonmount Arrax seeming to grin to himself as they soared through the skies, the young dragon of fourteen years relishing in the chance to spread his wings and take flight. Arrax kept his head low and his wings tipped ever-so-slightly, gliding downwards through the air for as long as he could before flapping his wings to raise him enough to do it again, genuinely enjoying his time in the open skies of the Stormlands, even if it slowed their journey down that little bit...but even with two riders on his back, the young dragon moved swift and certain, as Lucerys always knew he would.

*(He'll be as big as Vhagar, one day, the young prince knew with a smile. Maybe even bigger than Balerion was!)*

His cheer grew, his and the dragon's own, the pair eager to be away from the dank and dark and grim shores of Dragonstone for even a while, to do their part to make his mother the queen that she was meant to be, to stop her from being another Queen Who Never Was like her aunt and his grandmother, Rhaenys. That was a war worth fighting, but he didn't expect it to be a war; he didn't expect his half uncle Aegon to be all that interested in keeping the throne for himself when his mother comes, ready to make fight of it, especially if she promised to give him a manse of his own somewhere in the city for him to call his own and where he could keep his whores and feast as he liked to do, Lucerys having known that Aegon had no interest in the throne himself...but his brother Aemond and his mother Alicent were an entirely different breed, and ones who would be willing to force him to war in the name of their own ambitions.

For that, he had been sent to the mighty Stormlands, perhaps the most martial of all the Seven Kingdoms and renowned for the quality of its soldiery and especially its longbowmen, to the great
fortress of Storm's End that had never once fallen to storm or siege, to the family of his grandmother who had once supported her bid to become the first woman to be able to call themselves Queen Regnant of the Seven Kingdoms and rule in her own right...and who it was hoped would support their kin still, bringing with them the might of one of the realm's kingdoms and placing King's Landing and the Crownlands under threat of invasion with the very joining of their forces to hers.

For that, her mother had sent her most trusted bodyguard to protect her, a man Lucerys had seen around Dragonstone, but one he didn't know as well as she did...despite the rare few times he had heard the servants whispering that her bodyguard was actually his true father. Still, he knew his name at least and that he came from an immensely distant land and was seemingly in exile from it, having apparently spent nearly as much time in Westeros as he had in his "Rivellon", but that was the end of it - it was almost as if Carik had stayed away from him deliberately, and the young prince had never heard of any glories that he might have won on the tourney fields or in the melee. But for how little he knew, he knew that his mother made him promise to keep him by his side whenever he was away from hers, no matter what, and that Carik had been made to make the same vow.

*Just getting the Stormlands on our side will win us the war before it begins,* he thought excitedly, eager to play a major part in things. *If it begins, anyway. Aegon and the others will probably give my mother the throne when they find out that they've got so few people in the realm want them to rule.*

He looked around with curious eyes, trying to see whether or not they were there yet, looking ahead and peering out over Arrax's side, feeling the stiffness of the lock that tethered him to his saddle as he looked down to see the green earth far below the dragon's wings...and lowered his brow in confusion, the dragon sensing it and looking back as much as it could with concern, circling about.

"Storm's End should be here," Lucerys said, looking back to his mother's bodyguard to see him clad from head to heel in red and black steel covered in draconic motifs and imagery, adorned. "At least...I think it should be here."

"I think we are a little too far to the north," Carik answered, pointing towards the coast, Arrax seemingly emboldened by his movement. "If we follow the shore southwards, we should find it quick enough."

"Alright, it's worth a try," Lucerys agreed with a smile, barely needing to press his heel against the dragon's side to get Arrax to turn towards the south, not caring whether it was right or wrong, only that he had a chance to fly even longer than he already had. Before his grandfather had died, he had only rarely been allowed to ride Arrax, in case the Three Daughters across the Narrow Sea found him and captured him and used him as a hostage against the realm, but since then, his mother - knowing that she had another rider in him - had been reluctantly willing to let him fly and help her gather the support she needed to become Queen.

*She'll let me fly, so long as I don't get into any fights anyway,* he smiled, looking up to see the clouds so close that he felt as though he could reach out and grab them with his own two hands. *She made me swear on the Seven Sided Star not to. But she didn't say anything about letting her bodyguard fight for me!"

"So..." he started as he turned in his seat, suddenly curious. "How did you meet my mother, anyway? I've never heard of you riding in any tournaments or anything, so you couldn't have met her there."

"It's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"I've got nothing better to do but look around at clouds," Lucerys said warmly. "That's fun when you're flying, but I'd like to know why my mother asked for you to come along instead of someone
like...Ser Steffon."

"You mean Lord Commander Steffon, now that your mother is queen."

"Exactly! Why did she send you rather than her own Lord Commander? Why does she trust you so much?"

"If you are really that interested, I was simply passing through on the day that I met your mother. I had found myself in Westeros in strange circumstances that even now I still have trouble understanding the exact nature of, which resulted in my marooning on the isle of Dragonstone on the day that your mother married Laenor Velaryon," Carik explained. "She gave me hospitality when few others were interested in my tale, and I have been at her side ever since..."

"...though, not much on the continent," the ebon knight added as an afterthought. "I preferred to stay at Dragonstone, where it was warm and comfortable and where there were other people that I knew well to talk to and look after. Compared to that, even the greatest tourney meant little...and besides, it's not as if the glories I won there would be able to come back to my homeland with me."

"Haven't you been back there?" Lucerys asked, confused. "I mean, if you were just passing through, you should have been able to get back there by now."

"I would've thought so too, but here I am," came the solemn answer. "My homeland is further from Westeros than the Wall is from the Summer Islands. Getting there from here is...no easy feat, and I've tried to make it back, with no success."

"I can tell," Lucerys laughed.

"Still, it isn't all bad, I suppose," Carik reasoned with a shrug of armored shoulders. "There's a lot of nice things here."

"Like...wine?"

"Your wine isn't as good as you might think it is, believe me," Carik laughed to the young Velaryon prince's surprised amusement. "But there's plenty of other things here to make up for it. The land here is something to look at when you're flying above it, that's for sure."

"Have you ridden on dragonback before?" he asked, seeing how little interest he had in the flight that would have taken any other man's breath away. "You're not as impressed as I thought you might be when mother said you were to come along."

Carik only smiled, then.

"You could say that."

Lucerys narrowed his eyes, then, trying to figure him out. "...do you have a dragon of your own?"

"You could say that."

"That's not fair," Lucerys laughed. "You could at least give me an answer!"

"But it was an answer," his mother's bodyguard said innocently before reaching out with an open hand to point into the distance. "...and there's Storm's End, just as I told you it would be."

"So, you've flown around here before?" Lucerys asked, trying to bait him into an answer only for him to laugh in answer as Lucerys pressed his heels into Arrax's side, the dragon seeming to sight
sadly in response before tipping his nose towards the earth and extending his wings as far as they could go, gliding towards the earth and all the sadder for it. "It was worth a try."

"Your dragon doesn't seem very happy about landing."

"He doesn't get a chance to fly often," Lucerys said, echoing the dragons' own sadness. "I'm hoping we'll get a chance to fly more once my mother is queen, since we're not allowed to fly too far from Dragonstone and flying around the same island can get boring."

As if by cue, Arrax looked back towards his master with sad, almost puppy-like eyes, the young dragon having learned that he could get more ham for dinner if he made sad faces for the servants...just as he learnt that he could make his master feel guilty with the very same expression.

Dragons are a lot more clever than people like to think they are, he thought to himself as he shook his head and the dragon faked a sniffle, as if it was crying. They're a lot like crows like that. I mean, you don't see dogs figuring out how to use a door knob!

"No, Arrax, we have to land to talk with Lord Borros," Lucerys said, Arrax looking away with a disappointed whine as Lucerys kept his heels where they were and kept his command for them to land, the young prince looking around for a place for them to land near the walls. "After that we can fly back to...Dragonstone?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Is that...?"

Carik leaned forward...and he nodded. Lucerys could only sigh, a chill running down his spine as Arrax dropped any pretend feelings of sadness and instead murmured with unease, a low rumble that Lucerys could feel in his legs, and just to be certain, the prince swallowed the fear he could feel rising inside of him and looked over the edge of his dragon to see...the greatest of the dragons of their day. She was a dragon who had soared the skies at the side of Balerion the Black Dread during the days of Aegon the Conqueror himself, adding her flame to his and reducing the greatest host the realms had ever assembled to ashes at the Field of Fire and ending the most ancient of the dynasties of Westeros. She was a dragon who had been the smallest of the three then, but one that had grown and grown and grown in the years since, till now she neared her two hundredth nameday and dwarfed every other dragon in Westeros, with none coming near her vast size, none of them even coming close, her jaws so wide across that she could fit the chest of his Arrax between her swordlike fangs of black bone. Yet even in her youth, the very sight of her crimson wings had been enough to bring kingdoms to their knees, the Vale of Arryn surrendering their crown and their sovereignty to the woman who had simply been able to ignore the defenses that had smashed a thousand armies and rise to the summit of the Eyrie on dragonback, more a god than a woman.

Her name was Vhagar. She was the very symbol of Targaryen might.

And she belonged to Aemond Targaryen. Bold. Wild. Willful. Cruel. A blackheart encased within black plate. All that was Aemond One-Eye. He had a sapphire in place of his right eye, the Velaryon prince knew, because it was Lucerys that took it out of his skull at five years old with his dagger, to stop the Targaryen from beating his brother Jacaerys to death. Lucerys had his nose broken for that, and it had never healed quite right, but the occasional blocked nose when the air was stuffy was worth his brother's life. He'd make that trade again and again and again if he had to, though Aemond had hated him before then and loathed him all the more afterwards, mocking him whenever he had the chance.

And if Vhagar was resting outside the walls of Storm's End, curling up to keep warm in the winds
that came in from Shipbreaker Bay, then that meant that his so called "uncle" was there. He had beaten them to Storm's End, and no doubt was already trying to make a deal with Lord Borros Baratheon to bring the Stormlands to his brother Aegon's side...and who knew what he might do, when he had surely been nursing a grudge for year after year and when the two were surely to be on opposite sides of what could soon become a war?

He swallowed hard. Arrax was strong for his age, formidable and swift, but a battle between him and Vhagar would be no battle. It would be a slaughter.

"This isn't good," Lucerys said quickly, feeling the knots forming in his middle and the tension in his throat. "Maybe we should turn back, before Aemond can mount again, make our way back to Dragonstone."

Carik lowered the visor of his helm and placed a hand above the view slit, blocking the light of the sun as he peered down towards the massive fortress of Storm's End, a castle that had never fallen since the day it was built, some eight thousand or so years before. Then he took his hand away and raised his visor again, meeting the young Luke with golden eyes.

"I could see the Seven Sided Star flying from their walls," Carik said with knowing certainty. "A banner of truce."

"Then we should be safe if we land," Lucerys nodded with quick understanding. "Safer than if we're flying around up here, anyhow..."

And with that, he pressed his heels against the sides of his dragonmount that little bit harder, and the young Arrax, playing reluctance replaced by true unease, dipped lower, lower, raising his wings ever so slightly with every yard that they came closer to the ground, using them to slow his speed, to break the stream of air that flowed around his body and carried them the way the waves of the ocean carried the ships that sailed upon their surface. Lucerys wanted to smile, to enjoy the flight as he had but a few moments before, but instead he could only feel his stomach twisting and turning inside him, his throat tightening with anxious thoughts. What good could his mother's bodyguard be, if Vhagar came upon him outside the walls of Storm's End? What could he possibly do with Arrax against so great a monster as his uncle's mount? What would he do if the Baratheons had sworn themselves to Aegon and made war an inevitability? What would his mother do? Would they truly go to war against their cousins? Was that not a crime in the eyes of the Seven?

He didn't know. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

When Arrax dipped low enough to the ground, the dragon carefully raised his wings and tipped them forward again, lowering his legs towards the ground, clawed toes digging into the soft soil and scraping and for a heartbeat Lucerys thought they might crash at the last moment only for the dragon to run across the ground, losing momentum with every step...

...till at last they came to a halt before the dark eyes of Visenya's battlemount, the great red dragon looking down on them with amusement, seeming to laugh at the younger dragon and the ones who rode upon her, half mocking and half entertained, yet as Lucerys undid the buckles that fastened him to his mount with trembling hands, as Carik climbed down onto the earth, rolling his shoulders and getting comfortable in his armor again, Vhagar sniffed the air.

And her reaction was something he had never seen the great dragon do before, for mighty Vhagar, queen of dragons, looked around in confusion. Confusion turned to uncertainty and Vhagar came out of its curled up form, stretching its wings with a soft yawn before leaning in close towards Arrax, so close that the two dragons were nearly touching, Vhagar staring at the little dragon...only for Arrax to laugh in the eyes of the greater, which leaned back, uncertain, propping herself up on her wing
tips as she examined the area, clearly looking for something that she could find, but something that
Arrax knew and refused to reveal.

Then she leaned in towards Carik, examining him curiously.

"I think she likes you," Lucerys couldn't help but laugh as he climbed down the sides of his dragon,
watching Vhagar move forward ever so slightly to look at the red and black knight's back, as if
checking to see if he had wings. "I've never seen a dragon do that before."

"I'm not sure if she likes me or if she just wonders who I am," Carik laughed before turning towards
Vhagar with a smile, the red dragon narrowing her eyes before leaning back, uncertain of him,
Lucerys thinking for a heartbeat that he might have even seen attraction in her eyes. "I am exactly
what you think I am."

Then he patted her on the cheek with the back of his hand and laughed as Vhagar coiled back,
suddenly unnerved by his touch, plopping to the ground as though her spine had simply disappeared
and covering her head with her wings, silent and occasionally peeking from behind her wings to see
if he was still there before retreating back beneath, like a child peeking out from beneath their
blankets to see if a monster was at the end of their bed.

"What did you do to her?" Lucerys asked with amazement as they started walking towards the open
gate of Storm's End, the walls standing overhead like sheer cliffs. "She's terrified of you!"

Carik shrugged.

"I'm just that good," Carik japed, the young prince bursting into laughter as they entered the
cavernous passageway, the few guards standing next to the walls with halberds in their hands and
dressed more for show than for battle, paying little attention to the either of them except to straighten
themselves as they came towards and relaxing again as they passed. "...being serious, I'm not quite
sure. Dogs, cats, rabbits, they all like me, but your dragons aren't very fond of me."

"Of all the animals that could be scared of you, I wouldn't have expected dragons to be the only
one," Lucerys smiled before looking back to Arrax, the young dragon seeming to tease the fearful
Vhagar. "He didn't mind you very much, though. Maybe its just...she-dragons?"

"Dragonesses, you mean," his guardian corrected as they emerged into the courtyard, where banners
of truce and friendship seemed to flow from every wall and from every window and from every
tower, Storm's End revealing for all that it was free ground for any man to make their peace...and a
man approached them, a knight out of armor, black of hair and blue of eye and high cheeked and
hard jawed, like something a mason might hew from marble. "I'll let you do the talking."

"Greetings to you, my prince. I am Ser Ormund Baratheon, heir of my father, Lord Borros," the the
Baratheon introduced himself with a courteous bow, exactly as polite and ordered as was demanded
by the tradition of meeting beneath a banner of truce and nothing more nor less. "You are here to
treat with him, yes?"

"I am," the young Lucerys said, switching to the princely voice his mother had taught him. "Though
I saw Vhagar outside the walls. Has my -"

"Oh yes, he has," came the amused voice of his uncle, walking out in his armor and with a wine cup
in hand, smiling as if he knew a jape that noone else had heard, the older Aemond looking down
towards the younger Lucerys with an eye of sapphire and an eye of amethyst. "How nice to see you
again after all these years, nephew. Come to welcome the Baratheons into the fold of their rightful
King?"
"Aegon isn't a king," Lucerys said defiantly, crossing his arms. "All the lords of the realm swore fealty to my mother, so that makes her Queen."

"It makes her something, true, but a few oaths do not make someone queen just as how losing one eye doesn't make me blind," Aemond said, calm and collected in a way that he rarely was. "Mayhaps my brother doesn't have any men who swore oaths to him, but he has men, and those men will make him king, oath or not."

"In fact, you will find that it will be men like our good host, Lord Baratheon, who will ensure that my brother is a king in fact as well as title," Aemond said, almost laughing. "To think your mother sent you all the way from Dragonstone for nothing. It would seem that dragon of yours is slow as well as small, nephew."

"He's not slow!" Arrax snapped. "He could run rings around your Vhagar before you even got her off the ground!"

"Would you care to put that to the test, nephew?" Aemond smiled. "Why don't you and I leave such fine hospitality as the Baratheons offered," the Targaryen said with a respectful nod towards Ser Ormund, who seemed to offer Aemond even less warmth than he did Lucerys, "Why, we can find out for ourselves...and when I see your face when you find that /Vhagar can outfly your little dragonling, why, it'll be so precious that I might have my brother put it on the wall in the throne room, right besides the dragon skulls..."

"...though now that I think about it, therem ight not be enough room," Aemond laughed. "Meleys, Vermax, Stormcloud, Syrax...why, there'll be so many more skulls to be placed on the wall that we might well have to expand the hall. We could put the ones of usurpers alongside and have ourselves a family reunion."

Young Lucerys grit his teeth, then, feeling his fists tightening. His uncle had always been cruel, had always been able to find a man's weakness and use it for his own ends or his own amusement, but he could be cunning as well and make a threat without needing to say it. It was then that he felt a hand on his shoulder, calm, and looked to see Carik slowly shake his head with unblinking eyes.  

*It's not worth it,* he seemed to whisper in Luke's own voice. *Don't be the one to break a banner of truce. It a crime against gods and men alike.*

"And who is this?" Aemond asked, looking towards the knight of ebon and crimson. "I don't believe I've ever met you. Are you another one of my sister's servants, come to pretend that they are queenmakers? Or has she resorted to no-names to build herself a host?"

Carik was so silent that Lucerys wondered for a moment if he was even breathing.

"Do you not speak the common tongue?" Aemond asked before taking a sip of wine. "Has my half-sister gone across the Narrow Sea to find men foolish enough to fight for her and her doomed little cause?"

Carik said nothing.

"You don't talk much, do you? You could at least have the courtesy to answer."

Carik said nothing.

"Have you lost your tongue, somehow, or do you just lack the wits to know how to speak?"

Carik said nothing.
"...I must wonder how many lives have ended looking into those silent eyes of yours, ser," Aemond said, a hint of uncertainty in his voice, taken off balance by the lack of answer from Luke's guardian. "You best watch yourself around that one, nephew, and I mean that sincerely. Stories are full of silent killers for a reason, because those are the kind of men who will do it without hesitation. They kill without so much as a threat being said."

It was only then that Carik broke his silence.

"I make no threats, Aemond. I state facts," Carik said softly and with absolute certainty. "If I wish you dead, you will be so."

"Threatening a prince of royal blood," Aemond said with a whistle as their Baratheon host sighed, Ormund simply wandering off to find his father. "That is a hanging offense in these lands, ser...that is if you are a ser. For all I know, you might be just some smith that my sweet sister took a liking to and placed into a suit of armor and called a hero..."

Then Aemond leaned back, placed his cup down on a nearby table, crossed his arms and examined the two as a pair, thinking in silence.

"...oh, I do believe I see the truth now. Old Laenor was more interested in his swords than in his sheathes and poor old Rhaenyra needed to find someone to warm her bed in his stead," Aemond laughed. "Lucerys Waters! What a fitting name for a bastard who is one in truth and tale alike!"

"I am not a bastard!" Lucerys roared in anger, hand going towards the grip of his sword. "Another word from you -"

"And what?" Aemond asked, taking up his wine cup again, utterly unfazed. "You will strike me down, here, beneath a banner of truce? Condemn your eternal soul to the hells for breaking the peace of the gods? Become a kinslayer?"

The black and gold Targaryen shook his head.

"I think not. You don't have it in you to be a flyslayer, yet alone a kinslayer. And that's what you would be, my little bastard nephew."

Lucerys fumed silently, then, feeling the temptation to prove his uncle wrong growing inside him, feeling his fingers tightening on the steel of his sword. But when the blade rasped, when Aemond's smile reached his cheeks, his guardian spoke once more.

"Leave him be, Lucerys," his protector said from within his suit of onyx plate. "Do you remember your mother's promise?"

"I...yes, I do," Lucerys sighed, letting the blade slide back into its resting place. "I swore I would make no battles and did it on the Seven Sided Star."

"If things must turn to violence, then there will be time enough for that later and I will deal with him then," Carik insisted without raising his voice above that which he had used to soothe the young Velaryon prince. "All you must do is keep your calm."

"Oh, believe me, it will not be who is "dealt with" this evening," Aemond smiled to himself. "And please, tell me the name of which dragon you ride...or do you not have one?"

"So, you must be one of Rhaenyra's boys?" came a booming voice, and Lucerys turned and saw him.
Storm's End was not a vast castle, but neither was it small. It was compact, with little space between buildings and even less allowed to go to waste, with smithies sharing walls and chimneys with bakeries and carpenters sharing space and tools with cooperers and cartwrights and all the others whose work in wood was necessary for the daily life within the walls of any great castle, all dwarfed by the massive and outright monumental nature of the battlements, the lowest wall taller even than Dragonstone's greatest tower. Even here, in the beating heart of the Stormlands, the martial traditions that had allowed the Stormlands to survive as an independent realm in the days before Aegon's Conquest despite being surrounded by giants on all sides dominated the thinking, the castle's great defenses designed so that an enemy's numbers could be overwhelming and still give them no advantage against the small garrison, there simply being not enough room for more than a handful of ladders or a siege tower or two on any section of wall, allowing the defenders to destroy any attacker one wave at a time, but even still, there was some room in the courtyard for the defenders to move around, to train and move supplies and entertain in times of peace.

And Lord Borros seemed to fill it all.

He was a giant amongst men whose shoulders was as wide across and large as those of a man in plate even though he was in nothing more than his lordly clothes of black and gold and decorated with prancing stags. He was his son writ large, with hands that looked like they could crush a dragon's skull in their vice grip, scarred and worn like the rest of the man was, his face unwrinkled from a lifetime spent in the steel helms of the tourney field and the melee grounds and the courtyard, his eyes of darkest blue, like the nighttime sky, and his arms thick like tree trunks. He was a colossus of a man, yet from all the things that Lucerys had heard of him during his time at Dragonstone and everything that he had been told before leaving the island on his mission of diplomacy, what Lord Borros had in strength he lacked in intellect, being unable to even read or write, and balance, being clumsy as if unused to his build, with it even being said that his understanding of tactics could be summed up with a single word: attack.

Yet few men cared about that and fewer still dared to mock him for it, not when he could send grown men flying off their horses with a single blow with a single blow of his morning star or break their necks with his own two hands in the midst of a battle.

"My son and heir tells me that you've come to make terms," Lord Borros said warmly and with all the courtesy that a lord might offer. "The banners of truce fly over my halls, so tell me your proposal and tell it true. No harm will come to you here."

"My proposal...?" Lucerys asked, confused.

"Aye, your proposal," Lord Borros laughed. "Surely your lady mother gave you a list of things that you might offer this day, to bring the Stormlands to your side?"

"I must admit...my mother wasn't expecting for me to have to bargain," Lucerys said, laughing awkwardly. "She thought you would be willing to join outright, because your Rhaenys' cousin."

"Aye, I am," Lord Borros nodded in understanding. "But surely you have something to offer us? The Stormlands cannot be expected to fight for a king or a queen who will not give its people something in return?"

He doesn't seem as stupid as they told me he'd be, Lucerys thought with a growing concern. He's going to try and squeeze us for everything he can get.

"Maybe we can come to some kind of agreement?" he suggested, smiling. "My mother would be happy to make a deal with you, if it's reasonable."
"That might be so, but Prince Aemond has already made a very compelling offer," Lord Borros cautioned. "You will have to try hard to surpass it."

"Really?" Prince Lucerys asked, narrowing his brow to his uncle. "What did he say?"

"It seems my lonely days as an unmarried man are to come to an end," Aemond said. "Lord Borros is to give me the hand of one of his beautiful maiden daughters in return for his support."

And with that, Lucerys swallowed harder than he had ever done before, feeling the hairs rising on the back of his neck.

"Still, the king's brother would be a worse catch than my future queen's second born son," Lord Borros said, turning to him. "All it takes is a hunting accident and you could be king. What say you? Might you wed one of my daughters, and bind my house to yours?"

"I'm sorry, Lord Borros," Lucerys said as carefully as he could. "My brother and I...we're betrothed to marry our twin cousins. My brother younger brother Joffrey -"

"He's too far from the succession to be suitable for a daughter of the Stormlands. I don't have to be a Baratheon to see that," Aemond teased.

"Hmmm," Lord Borros murmured in thought, like a slowly bubbling cauldron. "Still, there's somethings that might be enough instead. If your mother is to a be a Queen, then she needs to have a Hand to call her own, does she not? A Small Council?"

"A small council for a small realm," Aemond japed, the Baratheon's lips flaring in a suppressed smile.

"She does," Lucerys said with a nod. "My uncle Daemon is her Hand, but there's still a few places -"

"You're asking me to go to war for you, boy," Lord Borros sighed in growing frustration. "What will the wives and children of thousands of good, Stormlander men think if they find out their lord sent their men to die for a seat on a small council?"

"That it was because it was the right thing to do," Lucerys said with quiet desperation. "You swore an oath to her when Viserys was king."

"Aye, but honor and good intentions won't bring those men back, nor will rewards for their liege, but at least it might salve the wound, give them something to make it other than placing a queen they've never seen on a throne they've never seen instead of a king...who they've never seen," Borros explained. "So I'll ask but one last time. Is there anything that you might be able to offer that will make us doing our part worthwhile? Gold from the royal treasury, mayhaps? Haven't you a sister?"

"My mother was pregnant, but when she gave birth, the girl was..."

The silence was worth a million words. He hadn't had the chance to see little Visenya before she was burned by dragonflame, as was the tradition for a family of dragonriders, a tradition going back to the elite Dragonlords of Old Valyria, but he had heard the whispers. She had been twisted, with knees that bent backwards. She had been deformed, a stubby tail affixed to the base of her spine. She had been scaled, with a hole in her chest where her heart should have been but wasn't. Serving men and women alike had spoken when they thought that they were alone or in their cups that his mother had surely lain with a dragon to conceive such a twisted offspring, that it was proof from above that their cause was not favored, but his goodfather Daemon had been swift to silence such discord from within their own castle as his mother's grief turned to rage and was focused towards the usurper in King's Landing.
Aemond seemed ready to make a jape of some kind, mocking his mother for her loss, yet a cold glare from Lord Borros was enough to make even him silent.

"You have my condolences, for what they are worth," the Stormlord apologized. "I hadn't known."

"News travels slowly," Lucerys forgave. "But I have no living sisters...I don't think there is anything my mother can offer other than her gratitude."

"Then I have no choice," Lord Borros said quietly before turning towards Aemond, the Targaryen prince smiling to himself even as he was cast in the Stormlord's shadow. "Tell your brother Aegon that the Stormlands will honor their vows and join their forces to his."

"Gladly, my lord," Aemond said with a diplomatic bow. "Or should I say, goodfather?"

"You...you can't mean that you're going to declare for Aegon?"

"My great-great grandfather was Orys Baratheon, who marched besides the Conqueror himself in making these realms his own," Lord Borros said, his voice deep and certain for the first time since he had came. "We swore an oath to serve our kin, just as he did. We are Targaryen men, now and always, and we'll fight for Targaryens and Targaryens alone."

"And you, boy, are no Targaryen," the Stormlord finished. "You are a Velaryon."

"But my mother -"

"Your mother was a Velaryon by marriage, and when the time comes and she passes, your brother would succeed to the throne as a Velaryon king," Lord Borros said simply. "Velaryons are no kings, they are lords. Only a dragon can sit the Iron Throne, aye, and certainly no falcon or rose or wolf or lion or seahorse or stag can have that right."

Then the Stormlord straightened himself.

"Tell your mother that we reject her offer. Tell her that the Stormlands knows no king nor queen but Aegon Targaryen the Second of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. Tell her in the name of our kinship that we advise her well to set aside her fool's crown and submit to Viserys Targaryen's rightful heir, and that though we are loathe to make battle against her, we will if she leaves us no choice but to do so if she continues her treachery. You tell her that, boy, and tell it as I said it."

"I..."

"Well said, my lord," Aemond smiled, genuinely pleased by the statement of the

"...you're a traitor," Lucerys said, stunned. "You, of all the people in the Seven Kingdoms, are a traitor to your rightful queen, -"

"Don't call me that," Lord Borros growled. "Your mother forced my hand -"

"No, she didn't," Lucerys answered with a sad whisper. "We're cousins you promised to help and you turned your back on us."

"I think you will find that they turned their back on a doomed cause, actually," Aemond said with a shrug before turning towards Lord Borros, passing his cup to a waiting servant. "When this business is over and done and Rhaenyra is in chains, you have my word that I will come to Storm's End the moment the fighting is done and take one of your daughters to wife, as was promised."
"As for you, nephew," Aemond said with a smile, reaching towards his belt and drawing a dagger. "I do believe you owe me an eye. I aim to collect."

"No, we may soon be enemies, but there'll be no fighting within the walls of Storm's End," came the voice of the Stormlord, reasonable at last. "A banner of truce flies from this castle. There'll be no fighting here this day. Outside of them is a different matter, but here? No."

"Come," Carik said, tapping the prince's shoulder. "There is nothing left for us here."

"And I too must take my leave, it seems," Aemond said to host with a bow. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Baratheon, but I have places to go, things to do..." he glanced towards Lucerys, "...princes to kill. You know how it is."

Those words earnt a glare that the young Luke had never seen the man who was his guardian make before. It was cold anger, simmering beneath a veil of courtesy, and it was something that he had never seen even his mother make before, even in her foulest moods.

"I will say this to you only once, Aemond, and I offer it because we needn't be enemies," Carik said, honest and truthful. "Come with us to Dragonstone, swear fealty to Queen Rhaenyra, the First of Her Name, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that you are allowed to live freely and do what you will, might be that you will be granted lands to call your own for your part in settling the matter."

"But if you refuse, you will die," he finished. "You will struggle and you will fight, mayhaps you might even fight well, but I promise you here and now that you will still die and you will die today."

For a moment, there was silence. For a moment, Lucerys thought that Aemond might even accept.

"I am shaking in terror already," Aemond answered with a sarcastic tone as the Stormlord burst into laughter before starting towards the gatehouse. "Come on, let's get this over and done with already. I have to plan the rest of my day."

"Then let it not be said that you weren't warned," Lucerys' protector said with a sigh before turning towards the Velaryon. "Let's get back to Dragonstone."

Lucerys nodded grimly as the realization sank in. There was no way that his Arrax could hope to defeat Vhagar in a straight and honest battle, none in the slightest, it would be like a newborn pup going up against a direwolf. It was suicide to try and take to the skies whilst he was still there, yet...what choice did he have? Aemond would not leave Storm's End until Lucerys had, and the banners of truce offered protection for seven days and seven days alone unless renewed by the ones that raised them, seven days that would end with him being thrown into the dungeons and his dragon fed to Vhagar at best.

But more than anything, he had been given this mission because he wanted to contribute. Because he wanted to be like his brother Jacaerys and help their mother take her rightful throne. To be useful. That was the thought that dominated him as he and his protector turned away from the traitorous Stormlord and made their way back to the gate, walking through in dead silence. His mother would not have sent him on this mission if he had not asked for it. She could have sent someone else. She could have sent his grandmother Rhaenys atop her Red Queen, her Meleys, and she might well have been able to convince the Barathens with her own blood as proof that the Stormlands should march for Rhaenyra as they had promised and not for Aegon, using the fact she was born from a Baratheon mother to help her cause. Perhaps she could have driven Aemond away, the gold and black prince choosing to avoid risky battle, or perhaps she could have crippled or even slew Vhagar over Storm's End, for her dragon was far mightier than his Arrax, a closer match to Vhagar than not.
Perhaps there were many things that could have been done, but weren't.

_It doesn't make a difference_, he sighed to himself as they emerged into the light once more, the world shining with vibrant colors as his eyes adjusted to the light of day. _I'm here, she isn't. No one is but...him. My mother's bodyguard. What use will he be against Visenya's dragon?_

He sighed, looking back towards Arrax...and though it was always said that a dragon knew the feelings of its rider better than even they themselves did, that it understood what they loved and what they hated and what they hoped and dreamed, Arrax showed none of it in his actions, for where Lucerys was sullen and uneasy and grim and certain only of his own impending end, the young dragon seemed excited and eager and _confident_, making Lucerys wonder for a moment if he had somehow bonded with Vhagar a few dozen feet away, the great red dragoness hugging the ground in her concern, as if trying to stay as far away from the sky as possible, her fright visible clearly in her dark eyes and on her trembling cheeks. She was obviously anxious and uneasy, and such unease gave him a thought he hadn't considered, for in all her years, Vhagar had never flown against another dragon before. Could that have been where her discomfort came from? Would she choose against making battle and leave, despite her rider's commands to do otherwise?

_If...if she does, then I'll be able to get back to Dragonstone before she can come around again_, he realized with a growing smile. _I'll be able to warn everyone there that the Baratheons are going to declare for Aegon, and that means we could stop them by coming here again, in numbers, and showing Lord Borros that we are stronger than Aegon!_

He smiled as his guardian often did. It was not much of a plan, nor much of a hope, but it was a little of both and a chance to turn what might be a crushing defeat into a marginal victory. That was enough for him, enough to cause him to mount his Arrax with nearly as much confidence as his own mount, who seemed all the more rejuvenated for it, the young dragon stretching and flexing in preparations for his flight.

That was when Lucerys noticed that his mother's bodyguard had not come with him, had not crossed the soft earth from the gates of Dragonstone to his dragon, but had gone over to Vhagar whilst its rider remained in the courtyard, the red dragon's fear clearly coming from _him_, from a single man she could snap up between her jaws and swallow whole and all in a heartbeat. He almost refused to believe his eyes when he saw Vhagar shy away from him, inching back as if she saw something that no one else could see, till at last the mighty dragoness rose up, standing as tall as she could, unwilling to break her rider's command to leave the space she had landed upon and yet not wanting him to come any closer, looking at him with pleading eyes that begged him not to make her break her commander's order.

"What in the Seven Hells...?" Lucerys whispered to himself, his Arrax utterly unbothered by the sight before him.

"Hello there, Vhagar," Carik said, as if introducing himself. "Its me. We've met before, not long after Laena died, before Aemond became your rider. You know who I am, and you know that I mean you no harm. I only want to talk."

Vhagar murmured, lowering back towards the ground, more at ease, but still clearly uncomfortable.

"Is there anything you can do to convince Aemond to avoid battle?" he asked. "I have no desire to fight him, if it can be avoided, and I know you don't want that to happen either."

The red dragoness seemed to pause for a moment, thinking, and then she tipped her head and hummed lowly.
"It was worth trying, but it seems we'll have no option but to fight," Carik sighed.

Vhagar leaned back in alarm, then, fearful, only for Carik to laugh and cause her to lean back down again, comfortable, if perhaps not entirely relaxed.

"Don't worry," Carik said, patting the scared dragoness on the side of the face, Vhagar seeming to understand every word he said. "I have no quarrel with you, only him. I'll try not to hurt you, alright?"

Vhagar seemed to mumble something in reply, clearly saddened by his answer.

"Yes, I know you're bound to him and will fight in his defense," Carik sighed. "But I have as little choice about things as you do, it seems. I will defend my ch-

"What in the name of the Seven are you doing with my dragon?" Aemond snapped in a red fury, revealing his true nature in an instant as he emerged from the gate. "Leave her be!"

"I will make you the offer one last time, Aemond," the ebon knight said, Vhagar looking back towards her rider with pleading eyes. "Yield yourself to us and you will not be harmed. If not for your sake, then do it for her!"

Vhagar seemed to nod, as if begging him to agree, and Carik pointed to her sad cheeks with an open hand. "She has already lost too many friends and riders as is. She doesn't want to lose another so soon after the last."

"I know not what you have been doing to her whilst I was talking with Lord Borros, but banner of truce or no," Aemond snarled, drawing his sword. "Touch her again and she will be the last thing you ever touch."

"I'm sorry," Carik sighed as he took his hands away from Vhagar. "He gives me no choice."

With that he left the great red dragon and its furied master, Vhagar looking to the ground sadly before looking back towards Aemond with pleading eyes, begging him to stop, begging him to stop the madness before it became any worse, like a mother refusing to let her son go off to fight, more like his own mother than not, Carik walking back towards Arrax and Lucerys as Aemond climbed onto his dragon, Vhagar trying to stop him for but a few moments before he cursed and she relented, allowing him to climb onto the saddle on her back and affix himself by the waist to the straps with a lock of blackened steel, carefully sliding his feet into the stirrup like frames on her side and fixing his legs into position, one strap at a time.

But Lucerys paid no attention to that. His attentions were on his mother's bodyguard, who climbed up the small steps on Arrax's side and slumped in behind Lucerys with a wearied sigh.

"...you...you can talk to dragons?" Lucerys asked with as much fear as amazement. "...are you a maegi?"

"If you mean I use blood magic, no," came the answer. "And yes, she understands me, as I understand her and...no, I don't speak the secret speech of dragonkind of whatever it is the warlocks say. I just know."

"Well...what did she say?"

"She's scared that she will lose the people she cares about most, so she doesn't want Aemond to fight," Carik said with a sullen nod. "I can understand that, and she knows that my hand is forced by his choice."
"So...she won't fight us?"

"She will fight as hard as she can for the ones that she love the most," was the soft-spoken answer the golden eyed knight gave. "Neither of us hate the other, but we'll both fight to protect the ones we care about if we must. But more than that, she wants me to give Aemond a quick end if I win. She remembers how her last rider, Laena, died. She knows how they suffered, not just from the fever, but from losing a child she never had a chance to know -"

"She knows that Laena died from fever? That she lost her child?" Lucerys asked, remembering his aunt. "How? She was never by her after the birth."

"But she was by people who were," Carik said grimly. "However it was she learnt, she did, and she doesn't want her Aemond to die in agony the way Laena did. She'll fight like a demon to keep him safe."

"Then...then all is lost," Lucerys sighed in defeat. "Arrax can't fight her. She's too powerful."

"Vhagar told me she'll try to avoid battle, if you do so as well," came Carik's quiet words, so lowly spoken that the prince could barely hear. "It's no guarantee - she'll turn if Aemond commands her to do so long enough and hard enough - but she will try."

"She told you all this?"

"She did, and she told me that she'll try to stall him from taking off as long as she can," was the swift answer, the ebon knight glancing towards the great red dragon with a knowing look in his eye as Aemond struggled to finish strapping himself in, Vhagar fidgeting as if itchy as Aemond himself laughed and cursed and laughed, telling his mount that now was not the time for play. "We best make the best use of that time."

"Right, no argument here," Lucerys said quickly, pressing his heels against the sides of his Arrax. Let's hope he isn't lying when he says he could talk to Vhagar...

The dragon answered instantly, and it dragon answered with a cheerful whoop, as if laughing in delight at being allowed to fly again, utterly unafraid of the great red dragoness before him, the way he had been whenever other friendly dragons were nearby at Dragonstone before Vhagar had Aemond as a rider, seeming to chirp as the dragon pressed his wing tips against the ground to hold him in place as he carefully waddled around on his feet, swaying ever so slightly with his movements till Lucerys took his heels from his side...and tapped him twice, as if he were clicking his heels. Arrax took a deep breath, filling his lungs with air and making the pair atop his back even feel him expand underneath them with his breath, then the little dragon carefully raised his wings and balanced himself entirely on his feet.

Then he began to run. One step. Two steps. Three steps. Four, five, six, all blurring together as Arrax built into a sprint, hurling his great bulk from one foot to the next as he built up momentum, rushing towards the edge of Durran's Point, towards the edge of the cliffs that Storm's End had been built upon countless aeons before, moving faster and faster still, the dragon's run turning from steps to jumps to leaps, vaulting from one foot to the next as Arrax began to lower his wings as he came closer and closer still to the cliff's edge...

...only to jump straight off. Lucerys yelped in shock as his stomach dropped, even the stoic bodyguard behind him letting out a surprised groan as the pair fell back into their seats as Arrax fell diving towards the ground, the young prince frantically pressing his heels against the sides of his dragon who kept his wings tightly closed still, Arrax staying quiet and staring at the approaching
"Arrax, up! Up!"

Lucerys grip tightened on the saddle as the air screamed past his ears as the dragon fell towards the pale white sands, the young prince nearly screaming as they hurtled towards certain death, only for the young dragon to throw out his wings at the last moment and turn their dive into a glide and into a soar, the prince bursting into laughter as he felt himself be thrown back against the saddle by the force of their movements as the dragon grinned, letting out the last of the air it had taken, fluttering its wings for a moment to level their flight, dropping and raising their tips a dozen times in as many seconds to find his balance.

In that moment, all thoughts about everything that had happened at Dragonstone before his flight, about everything that had happened at Storm's End, about everything in the world, all of it seemed to melt away. Lucerys was a man of fourteen years, and yet here he was, flying over the Shipbreaker Bay as only the gulls should, feeling the cool winds rushing past his neck and through his hair and fluttering against his clothes and rattling his bags. Arrax rolled with the winds, turning and seeming to dance amongst the sky as he did, with the earth becoming the sky and the sky becoming the earth in his loops, Lucerys only able to laugh and laugh in delight with its each and every movement, sound that only seemed to encourage Arrax all the more, till at last the young dragon settled down for the long flight to Dragonstone, saving his strength for the miles ahead...and leaving Luke with a smile that spread to his cheeks, the young Velaryon prince unable to do anything but grin in delight.

This was what he was supposed to be. This is where he belonged. This was what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to soar through the skies, to feel the winds rush past him and to reach out and touch the clouds and the stars. He was supposed to be here, so far above the surface of the world,

He was alive, and he was in heaven.

"This makes all that worth it," Lucerys said as Arrax raised and dropped his wings and climbed that little bit higher, allowing him to glide forward. "It's so...peaceful here."

"It is, isn't it?" his guardian said, looking around. "When you look down from here, the world and all its troubles just seem so..."

"...small," Lucerys finished with a whisper in perfect agreement.

"Exactly," Carik agreed with a small smile that Lucerys couldn't see, the young prince looking up into the clear blue sky. "There aren't any battles here, or arguments, or threats, or anything."

"It's innocent."

"It is. People like to make the land and seas romantic with their stories, but there's always dangers in them, like brigands or slavers. Not here," the ebon knight seemed to sigh in contemplation. "There's just wonder and..."

For a moment, Carik seemed to hesitate, the prince feeling it in the air, in his expression, in how he had paused so suddenly.

"Is something wrong?" the young Velaryon turned and asked, as confused as he was intrigued.

"...this is a better place than any, I suppose," Carik said at last with a sigh and a troubled look, suddenly at a loss for words in a way that he hadn't been on the ground. "We need to talk."
"About what?" Lucerys asked, narrowing his eyes. "...did my mother ask you to convince me not to do anything else for her till she has the throne? I only want to do my part, like my brother Jacaerys is."

"No, it isn't, its about far more than that. I'm having trouble even finding the words to tell you," he sighed. "But it is important. To me and you."

"But what is it?" the prince allowed himself to laugh, growing more relaxed. "You've only said that it was important so far!"

"When I first arrived in this land," Carik started. "I found your mother on the day of her wedding to Laenor, but -"

Then the tranquility of the clear blue skies was broken by a deafening howl like that of the greatest thunder, a roar so great that he felt it in his legs as much as he felt it in the pain of his ears, all three of them, even Arrax, looking back to see her coming for them, mighty Vhagar with her wings thrown out wide over the waters of the Shipbreaker Bay, her crimson scales glittering like a coat of rubies in the brilliant light of the sun. Her jaws were open, revealing the swordlike fangs of smoky black dragonbone that filled her mouth, flickers of flame coming forth from her draconic throat, but it was Aemond that Lucerys locked his eyes upon, Aemond in his black and gold armor, longsword in one hand and shield in the other, the Targaryen prince lowering the blade as though it were a lance as his vast dragon closed the distance with little Arrax, a dozen feet at a time.

Immediately he felt the discord of the ground come back to him, chilling him to the core in the very same way that he had felt at Storm's End when he had seen the dragon and known how it could crush him and his dragonmount between its teeth, that it could slaughter them as easily as he might swat a fly. It was the chill of the Stranger, he knew, the chill of death's hand on his shoulder, for that was what Vhagar was. She was death incarnate.

And she was coming for him. Any courage he might have had left him as the prince turned pale. It would not be a fight, no more than a farmer drowning a bag of unwanted puppies was a fight. There was no way it could be won by him and his Arrax not without a bigger dragon, not without the help of another dragon, not without experience.

It couldn't be done. It couldn't be won.

Oh, gods have mercy, the realization dawned on him, cold and painful. I'm going to die.

"It looks like we will have to have this talk another time," Carik said quickly, turning his attentions back towards the prince. "Just know that I will do everything I can to keep you safe."

"What?" Lucerys asked. "We can't fight that!"

"You can't, but I will."

"You're insane!"

"Land, quickly, and get yourself to safety," Carik said, his voice iron and begging no more disagreement, yet with no little amount of love. "I can deal with Vhagar and Aemond."

"But how?" Lucerys asked quickly, looking at the ebon knight with growing fear in his belly. "You haven't a dragon!"

"I need no dragon," Carik smiled softly, moving a hair from Lucerys' eyes as he reached to his leg and undid the latch that fastened him to the saddle. "I am one."
Lucerys could only look at him, stunned into silence, watching as he stood upright atop Arrax's back, placing a boot on his hind before throwing himself off his back and towards the great and ancient mount of Visenya Targaryen, the young Velaryon thinking for a moment that he had just leapt to his death in a mad fit of insane heroism before looping around to see -

Instantly there was a brilliant flash of light, as bright as the sun yet with none of its warmth, and young Arrax howled as if in triumph as his rider was forced to wince and squint and shut his eyes entirely, opening them a heartbeat later to see that the glow had faded...revealing that there was now a vast dragon in its place, a great beast, covered from tip to tip in mismatching scales of onyx black and vast plates across the bulk that gleamed like burnt steel, all rippling with the movements of the massive and powerful muscles beneath the surface, corded like a rope of iron. It was a dragon the likes of which he had never seen before, on Dragonstone and in the skies above or in the books below or elsewhere in the world, never, a dragon whose shoulders led down into arms like those of a man rather than into the wings of a dragon like his Arrax, a dragon whose wings were on his back and whose spars ended in great, knife like protrusions, swords longer than the young prince’s legs...and as if to match the armor of the ebon knight who it had come from, the great dragon was streaked with stripes of crimson across his wings and down the length of his body.

But it was his size that caught the eyes of the young Lucerys most, for the great black dragon was immensely built, Lucerys even daring to think that he was overly so, a titan of flesh and bone with wings.

And he was ready to fight.

Vhagar banked hard to the side, screeching madly and in terror as Aemond shouted wordlessly in surprise as the pair dove past the great black dragon's side as he swung to strike her down with the first blow, sparks shining through the air like the stars of the night sky as his claws scraped harmlessly against her iron scales in a glancing blow...and then the great black dragon pulled his wings in and roared like booming thunder as he dove after her, immediately drawing Aemond's attention from attacking Arrax to defending himself, the great dragon doing everything in his power to stop the Vhagar from coming near Arrax as the two began their deadly duel amongst the skies of Storm's End circling and looping and diving and climbing to gain the advantage in the first moments of their struggle.

He turned into a dragon! Lucerys could not help but think in awe, a smile creeping onto his face as he pressed his heels into the side of his dragon, Arrax responding in an instant and hurrying back towards the protection of the truce banners of Storm's End. And gods! He's huge!

It was everything that Lucerys could do not to turn his eyes skywards and focus on the duel rather than flying, catching his Arrax taking peeks at the fight above, the dragon's cheeks and eyes shining with the reflection of distant flames, of the flashes of Vhagar's yellow and Carik's gold. Everytime the prince was tempted to do the same, yet tapped his heels into the excited dragon's side and brought his attentions back to the journey, and so they went, yet they could still hear the sound of battle raging, all the way down to Storm's End, where little Arrax landed himself atop the battlements themselves to get a better view...and where the men and women and children highborn and low of Storm's End were already gathering, not to see his dragon, but to see the battle for themselves, for the chance to see something that many of them would never see again and which they great-grandchildren would call a dream half-remembered. And though some reached out to touch Arrax with their own hands, to feel dragon scales beneath their fingertips and the warmth that radiated from his body, even the dragon seemed awed by it all, drawing the prince's eyes with them to see the battle of dragon against dragon and rider.

And a battle it was.
The two dragons were both vast, matching one another in size and seeming to fill the sky with their wings, battling against one another not only with fang and flame, but with maneuvering and motion, trying to put themselves into positions that would give them the advantage. He watched as Vhagar's flame sprayed against his guardian's armored front, darkening it from the sheer heat of her breath, only for the red dragoness to nearly be struck by the returning blow, Aemond forced to duck down and hug her body to avoid being set ablaze as she weaved past the strike and rolled to protect him from harm. He watched as Vhagar came in to bite and strike and claw with the sharp tips of her toes and the fingers of her wings, only to be rammed backwards by the curled tips of . He watched the two dance through the heavens, playing the hunter and the hunted as they soared and dove and banked and looped and rolled and dove and whirled, dragon and dragoness switching places every now and then only to switch back, back and forth and back and forth, the two rising so high into the skies as to disappear into the clouds and play the game of ambush before dropping down so low to the ground as to shake the walls of Storm's End with the force of their passing and make new wind to mess the hair of all those there,

That's when Lucerys realized it.

The fight was a stalemate. It seemed fit to go on forever, for the simple reason that Vhagar was fast and swift, but her flame simply could not penetrate the immensely thick scales and plates of the great black dragon, but the weight of his inborn protection made him slow on the turn and slow on the climb, unable to keep up with the more agile dragoness except on the dive and unable to keep his fiery breath on target when she could simply roll out of the way. More, Vhagar was thin and lithe in comparison to the great black dragon, sleeker in form and smoother in flight, whilst his massive muscles and his claws - as powerful as they were - made him unable to flow through the air anywhere nearly as easily, letting her dance around him, poking and probing to try and find an opening, yet failing each and every time as the black dragon proved more able to rotate on the spot and keep her attacks striking harmlessly against his most heavily armored point.

For all their strength and for all their size, neither of them seemed able to end the fight. They were going in circles.

Yet Lucerys noticed that Carik had one advantage that no one else in the realm could possibly have, an advantage that was allowing him to gain ground upon his foes, one moment at a time...for whilst Aemond and Vhagar were dragonrider and dragon, closer than any man and mount on the earth beneath could ever possibly be, they were still separate. They were two minds, two wills, one each one having one half of the fight under their control, with Aemond having the wisdom and understanding and tactical ability of a man and the other the predatory instincts and knowledge of flight and the mighty body of a dragon, two forces working together, and it was there that Carik's advantages were most prominent, for whilst Vhagar and Aemond needed to work together perfectly in order to fight as well as they could, to combine their experience and understand the actions and reactions of the other, to predict the choice they will make next before it is made...

...Carik was one mind, one body with one will. Where Aemond had to first see his opponent ad press his heels against Vhagar's side to make the red dragoness heed his commands and take a few moments longer to carry it out, the black dragon's body was his own and reacted as his own, and that let him gain on her during the twists and turns of Aemond's battle plan, the black dragon's raw power married directly with the cunning tactics that only intelligence could provide and welded directly to a dragon's instinct. Where she turned right, he began to tip his wings to the left and banked towards her on his dives, corkscrewing around in turns that were bringing him ever closer, one yard at a time, yet it was everything he could do to not be danced around by the more agile red, her agility her greatest advantage over him and making the stalemate so seemingly unbreakable - though she could not breach his protection, his flame could not even hit her except as glancing blows that could do no
harm to her, even as he began to increasingly become the pursuer and not the pursued.

*They're going to tire each other out before either of them win*, Lucerys' thought to himself, his lessons as a dragonrider fresh in his memory. *That's still a win for us, though. Having Vhagar too exhausted to fight on would let me get back to -*

Then the black dragon changed tactics in a way that could only ever have been noticed from the ground. He broke his turn to the side early, whether on purpose or by mistake Lucerys could not be sure, allowing Vhagar to *loop* around him, Aemond reacting with a fighter's instinct and coming around for the attack, Vhagar obeying his command in an instant and coming about as victory seemed to near, but the black dragon tipped his wings and brought himself towards the ground, trading height for speed, rolling into a loop that leveled out at her height and brought him upright...

...and rather than coming towards his unarmored rear and wings, mighty Vhagar could only screech as she found herself coming towards his armored front face first with no room to break off, the black dragon bracing his shoulder as though he were a man in a brawl as he dove towards the red dragoness, and for the first time in his life, Lucerys watched as two dragons crashed into one another in mid air, both howling in pain as they collided and tumbled through the skies. Aemond could only hold onto the dragon by his saddle, prevented from plunging to his death on the earth below like the blade that slipped from his fingers by the tiny metal fastenings and straps and locks that secured him to his mount, yet even as the dragons leveled out again, it was obvious that the fight would end here, with the two face to face, neither able to turn away lest they give the other a chance to hit their unarmored back, the wings that let them soar, dragons black and red snarling and struggling.

But at such close ranges, the black dragon's greatest advantage came into play.

His claws.

Circling around one another, wings pounding against one each other's bodies, serving as another weapon with which they might fight, but whilst she could only try and and snap at him with her jaws, Vhagar knowing that she was too close to use her flame without it blowing back at her, Carik's claws could hack and slash and rip and tear, all things he did not do, for whilst his claws were sharp and long, they were also *hands* with thumbs and fingers that could anything that the thumbs and fingers of the Velaryon's own hands could.

And that meant he could grapple.

Hurling himself towards Vhagar, the black dragon swung for her face, for her eyes, and she dove down and to the side to avoid the tips of his claws, trying her best to evade the strike before trying to bring a wing around to protect herself and the rider on her back from harm. Yet this played directly into his hands by forcing her to expose herself, allowing him to loop an arm around her neck, not from the front but from behind, locking the head of the scarlet dragoness beneath his arm, pinning her in his grip...

...and forcing her to lower her body beneath his, where her sharp teeth and hot breath were safely out of the way, yet allowing the black dragon's golden eyes to meet the amethyst ones of the disarmed prince on Vhagar's back.

Even from where he was on the walls of Storm's End, Lucerys saw him *smile.*

And it was then that Lucerys realized that Carik had no interest in trying to slay Vhagar.

He wanted the prince. He wanted *Aemond.*
And Vhagar had just given the Targaryen to him with a single costly mistake.

The gold and black prince could only scream as the black dragon's free right hand snatched him from the saddle, the locks and strappings and fastenings and everything else snapping in an instant as he ripped him from the back of the dragon, Vhagar wailing in horrified realization as she was kicked back and as Carik dove back with a mighty flap of his wings, his claws tightening into a clenching fist -

Then there was the loud bang of a breastplate being crushed in on itself.

The screams fell silent. Vhagar screeched in grief.

It was done.

The castle was silent when the black dragon let out a victorious howl, blood dripping from his hand like distant rain. The crowd was silent when Vhagar threw herself towards the ground, fleeing as fast as she could towards the north, towards King's Landing, seeming to sob as she did. Lucerys was silent as his guardian returned to the earth, landing not with the fast steps and slender grace of his Arrax but with a crash into the grounds outside of Storm's End and with enough force to shake the fortifications of the great fortress from the highest levels of the ramparts to the lowest part of the foundation, dust that had been trapped for decades coming loose as the people of Storm's End could only stare, stunned into silence by the sight that they had just witnessed.

And they could only stare as the dragon walked towards the gate one footstep at a time before there was a flash of light as the young Velaryon prince rushed to the steps, pushing his way through the silent tears of the crowd, his Arrax leaping off the walls to take flight before looping around to follow his master into the castle's great courtyard, where Carik, once again a man, walked through the gate, body in hand.

"I..." Lord Borros murmured, placing a hand over his mouth as he saw the ebon knight stood before him again. "...what are you, to be able to a man and a dragon?"

"Half and half is what I am," Carik answered. "I can switch between either body at will."

"...you...you actually did it," Lucerys said with stunned awe, more amazed by the victory than by the transformation. "You killed Aemond."

"We are nothing if we do not keep our promises," Carik said, speaking with a regal voice that Lucerys only rarely ever heard him use, feeling more like a mask than the truth. "And I do keep mine."

And with that he threw Aemond's broken body to the feet of the horrified Lord Borros Baratheon, his men and his family and his daughters gathering around in horror as the scarlet blood seeped through the cracks in his armor into a growing pool of softly steaming crimson, his arms and legs twisted to unnatural angles and his chest crushed in and his breastplate bearing the mark where the dragon's claws had punctured the steel and the man within, the once mighty and strong and daring Targaryen prince now cold and still and dead. A young woman little older than Lucerys was and dressed in the golds and blacks of the Baratheons and with the stag upon her breast gagged at the scent of so much of blood, her septa quickly covering her eyes and rushing her away from the sight, muttering a prayer to the Maiden to restore the innocent eyes of her charge...and many of the other women went with her, whispering amongst themselves as the men looked on and spoke quietly amongst themselves, talking of the battle that they had seen rage over their castle, of how the ebon knight had changed from one body to the next and back again, but more than anything else they spoke of how the death of Prince Aemond and the flight of Vhagar would change everything,
breaking the silence of the courtyard with their words.

It was a silence that broke entirely when Lord Borros Baratheon's horrified expression turned to realization, looking away from that which was all that remained of the once arrogant and scathing Aemond. Then he looked to Lucerys.

"...please, tell your lady mother that the Stormlands will march on her behalf," Lord Borros said to the young prince as quickly as he could, his eyes filled with a pleading that his words could only begin to hint at. "And...please, forgive me for the choice that I made. For the deal with Aemond. His dragon was great, and we all know of the tales of Harrenhal -"

"No."

"Please -"

"I will tell my mother exactly what happened here today," Lucerys said, bitter for the Baratheon betrayal, not quick to forgive. "I will tell her that you betrayed not only the queen you swore to serve, but your own family, your *cousin*, Rhaenys, who should've been queen herself."

Lord Borros dropped to his knees, then, kneeling before a boy who was little more than half the giant's height. "I **beg** of you. She will raze the Stormlands to the ground, slaughter its people like lambs -"

"But I will also tell her how you realized that you were wrong," the prince softened. "Maybe she'll choose to forgive you if you fight hard for her, or maybe she'll have mercy on the Stormlands at least."

"...and I would be inclined to take that offer and not try to haggle for more," Carik suggested, taking up his position at the prince's side as before. "I don't think you'll be getting a better one."

"Of course," the Stormlord said swiftly in acknowledgement, desperate for even this one chance at redemption, rising to his feet again with the look of a truly regretful man on his face. "We will need time, though. To muster our forces. Can your lady mother keep us safe from Aegon and his riders? Till our armies are assembled to fight?"

"I'll ask her to see about sending my grandmother here," Lucerys suggested as a group of septons came along to take care of Aemond's body, servants rolling him onto a stretcher and carrying him away. "But if she can't, you could always send a raven to Dragonstone for support, and it'll come as quickly as it can."

"What about Aemond? Should we burn him, as is tradition for Targaryens?" Borros asked softly, trying his hardest to be a good and loyal lord. "Or should I have the septons sent away and leave him for the crows?"

"...I...uhm," Lucerys mumbled, caught off guard by the question before his piety told him what to do. "My mother will send you a message on what to do with him, but for now, give him his last rites. He deserves that much."

"Aye, he does," Lord Borros agreed quietly before forcing a smile and a jovial facade onto himself. "So, my prince, what say we honor our new alliance with a feast? My cooks have been working all morning on a honey roasted ham, aye, and made enough to feed a dragon!"

Arrax perked up, starting to slobber at the mere mention of ham.
"I'll hold you to that," Lucerys laughed, relaxed instantly by the sight of his excited dragon pattering over on his wing tips, looking around for any sign of the meat. "Arrax can eat his weight's worth."

"Aye, and what about you?" Lord Borros asked, turning towards the prince's protector, his sudden hospitality a clear showing of his desire to make up for his earlier transgression in any way he could. "Might you be willing to partake in the hospitality of Storm's End?"

"I don't see why not," the knight agreed before his voice hardened as he looked to the Stormlord. "But I will be keeping my eye on you, Lord Borros."

Lord Borros swallowed hard, then, but nodded to his men to open the door to the keep...and the smell of hot food wafted out, the smell of freshly baked bread and meat and fish and cake flooding his nose and making his belly growl with a hunger he hadn't realized he had.

"You're safe beneath a banner of truce, aye, but I doubt we could do much against you even if you weren't," the Stormlord said quietly before walking into the castle, barking his commands to the servants to make sure that everything was perfect, to make sure that Lucerys was treated as well as he could possibly be treated, as if he were king himself.

And hospitality he was given. He did not even need to ask for the servants to bring him wine, no, they stood at his side with flagon in hand and poured whenever he sipped to keep his cup full. They carved him the best and greatest cuts of meat, Lord Borros taking some only when the young prince had that which he might desire, and when the time came for dessert,

Yet as the sun lowered itself to the horizon, as the wine began to take its toll and as others began making their preparations to retire for the night, Lord Borros offering him the best of the castle's chambers to make his residence for the night, he felt the call of the sky, and remembered his mission. He had to make his way back to Dragonstone and tell his mother and his goodfather that the Stormlands would answer the call to battle, that Aemond was dead and that Vhagar lacked a rider, and so he went with his guardian to the courtyard, mounting an Arrax who was clearly fattened from his feasting before taking to the skies with him once more...only this time, Carik flew alongside him rather than with him, escorting him back to friendly skies, above and to the left and behind, ensuring he could always keep an eye on anything that might approach his charge.

"I don't know if this went better than I expected or not," Lucerys said, the great dragon leaning in as the prince spoke. "I mean, I'm alive at least, but my mother won't be happy when she finds out about Lord Borros."

"But she will be happy that you still live," the great black dragon answered. "Even the brief betrayal of the Stormlands is nothing compared to that."

"And when she hears that Aemond is gone," Lucerys said more quietly. "I know he was my uncle, and I know the Faith would have me mourn for him..."

"But you don't?"

"No, I don't. I'm glad he's dead," Lucerys admitted. "He was cruel, and gods, he was always so angry. He tried to kill my brother with his fists when he was just six!"

He sighed, trying to take his mind off it all...and then he remembered.

"So...what was it you were going to say?" Lucerys asked as Arrax soared beneath the protective shadow of the great black dragon. "Before the fight?"

"That can wait for another time," came the bellowing answer, the voice of the ebon knight turned
dragon deep and rumbling, yet with a hint of hoping in it. "Maybe your mother will tell you instead?"

...then something strange occurred to him.

Why was he not so bothered by the fact that his guardian had gone from man to dragon to man again, as easily as changing clothes? Why was he utterly unfazed by it, when everyone else was stunned or amazed? Why did the very idea of being able to switch between two entirely different bodies trouble him so little? The more he thought about it, the more natural it seemed. Why couldn't a man switch from human to dragon and then back to human? What reason was there that he couldn't? Because people said that he couldn't? Because it would be magic? Because it shouldn't be possible?

For some reason he couldn't quite place his finger on, none of the reasons he could think of why he couldn't seemed convincing, and that made it feel all the stranger, for he was sure that he was supposed to find the idea of men turning into dragons absurd. He shook his head with a laugh, focusing his attentions on the long flight ahead, but as he did, his mind turned more and more to the matter of the Stormlord's treachery. His betrayal of a sworn oath and his kin, done for the simple thirst for power, however thinly it might be veiled behind a lord's obligations to the people of his land.

*He's a traitor to his queen and his kin, a part of him snarled. He deserves to be punished for it.*

*...but I made a promise to tell my mother he realized he was wrong,* another answered, the prince sighing aloud as he thought and flew, torn between the options, feeling the fresh string of betrayal still.

But by the time that he saw Dragonstone on the horizons again, by the time he landed upon the shores of home, the flames of any anger that had burnt inside of him were gone, snuffed away by the awe of the endless skies in which he flew and the simple joy that came with it.

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**End of Part 13!**

**Chapter End Notes**

And there was the long awaited continuation of this story, and I hope everyone enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it! :D

This is definitely my favorite story to write, but it can take me sometime to get my grip on it again when I've been away for a while, but whilst I felt I had trouble getting started, I definitely think this one got to the place it needed to be by the time Carik found his armor, and certainly so by the time we got into the second half. Even still, there might be a few offish sections at the start of this part, but don't worry about them too much...and because I really, really enjoy working on this particular tale, I'll probably write another part for it, but certainly no more than three :p

Anyhow, here's the summary, and like the part itself, it is divided into two sections!

1. In Westeros, Rhaegar Targaryen and everyone's favorite bat-man, Ser Oswell Whent, help Carik with the critical task of finding him some fitting armor...even if it doesn't fit...
too well. But at the same time, they talk with him about many things, not just about women that Rhaegar thinks that Carik has feelings for, including a certain Dayne woman, but also about his homeland and the radically different gods that can be found there, for whilst there are seven gods in both realms, the Seven on Rivellon are dramatically different from the Seven in Westeros. Not just that, but they pose a serious problem for Rhaegar and the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, because Carik's very mention of how his realm struggles against demons and has things such as the Undead and the like make the question about whether or not the gods truly exist seem a lot more...convincing, to say the least. More than that, Rhaegar ponders the very, very difficult situation he is in with regards to the half-dragon prince, in that he believes that he needs to have a very, very careful hand to keep Carik on side, knowing that to reveal the truth about his father to try and pry the two apart could instead blow up in his face, with Carik backing away from the Targaryens as a whole...and even if he doesn't mean to do it, the presence of a dragon around any other family could spell disaster for his family, and with him afraid of pushing the prince in any direction too hard, lest he be driven away or end up the way he had been when Rhaegar found him in Harrenhal's treasury, but even still, he knows that things need to be done and is entirely willing to carry them out.

In short, this is the beginning of Rhaegar taking a more active approach towards trying to keep Carik on side, and though it starts with just a few words of advice, its something that is going to get much more interesting as we go onwards, to say the least :)

And of course, Prince Rhaegar and Ser Oswell Whent go and chop down a certain tree...

2. In another Westeros, Lucerys Velaryon travels to Storm's End on the back of Arrax...and though he didn't realize it at the time, another dragon has flown with him. This is the Planetos that was seen in an earlier part where our man Maxos stumbled upon a world where the Carik that had been transported there found himself in the time of the Dance of the Dragons, and where he now makes battle on behalf of Queen Rhaenyra and her children...or rather, their children. Lucerys time at Storm's End goes much like it does in canon, with him arriving to find Aemond and Vhagar already there and Lord Borros Baratheon having already made a deal with the Targaryen prince to see one of his daughters wed to his hand...but from there, history changes, for the duel above Shipbreaker Bay is a duel between two great dragons rather than the lopsided fight between Arrax and Vhagar in canon. And it is it there that Carik's greatest advantage over the dragons of Westeros is shown - his hands. Where the Targaryen dragons have no forelimbs but their wings, which jut from the shoulder, Carik has arms that end with claws, and it is those claws that let him do something few other dragon riders can do, because he doesn't need to bite his foe to pieces or burn off a limb, he can slash and grab...and he hunts the rider, not the mount.

The result is that Prince Aemond Targaryen dies at Storm's End, which needless to say, will have massive consequences for the remainder of the Dance of the Dragons...yet Vhagar survives the battle, fleeing northwards as fast as her wings might carry her as Carik brings the prince's broken body and throws him to the feet of Lord Borros Baratheon, who has no choice but to declare for Rhaenyra out of terror of seeing his castle razed to the ground, and starts to bend over backwards for Lucerys and his guardian as a result.

And with the summary done, I'll end things here with the mention that the next part is going to be an Arthur Dayne one, continuing roughly from where this one left off and
with the long awaited arrival of the Lannisters, a part that promises to be an important and big one both! :D

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