

G.O Thrones 161

Chapter 161: The Eyrie

"Roar..."

Cannibal roared incessantly, its massive body weaving through the peaks of the Giant's Lance. Occasionally, green dragonfire flared from its muzzle.

Compared to the confines of the Dragonpit, the vast mountains provided a perfect wilderness for the dragon to unleash its power.

Rhaegar didn't rush Cannibal, allowing the dragon to revel in its freedom while he waited for Rhaenyra and Laenor to catch up. Syrax and Seasmoke had only just reached adulthood; their speed and endurance were still far inferior to Cannibal's.

Had he not been accommodating them, Rhaegar would have arrived at the Eyrie long ago.

He looked down at the Giant's Lance below. From the mountain's summit to the base of the Vale, the view was endless, bathed in the twilight hues of the setting sun.

Eyrie towered over the top of the Mountains of the Moon, straddling the Giant's Lance. Due to the treacherous terrain, The Eyrie was not very large, consisting of a cluster of seven long, slender white towers.

At this moment, Cannibal's roar echoed across the Giant's Lance, naturally alarming the inhabitants of the Eyrie. Guards emerged from the castle, forming two lines to protect a noble, tall woman with long hair and a graceful demeanor.

"Roar..."

The roars of Syrax and Seasmoke followed as the two dragons carried their masters over the Giant's Lance. In full view of the public, the three dragons circled and landed in the front yard of the Eyrie Castle.

Boom!

Three waves of air rose, and the guards moved quickly to shield the long-haired woman.

"Jeyne!" Rhaenyra shouted joyfully, dismounting first.

"Rhaenyra!" The woman waved her guards aside as the smoke cleared, her surprise matching Rhaenyra's.

Rhaenyra, dressed in her black riding attire, trotted forward. The woman, in her long skirt, greeted her with a swift swing of her dress. Soon, they met and embraced joyfully.

"It's been a long time, Rhaenyra," Jeyne said, smiling brightly and hugging Rhaenyra's waist before kissing her cheek.

Rhaenyra smiled daintily, patting Jeyne's back. "It's been half a year, and you're still so slim," she said with a hint of jealousy.

"Hmph, you're as capricious as ever," Jeyne teased, pinching Rhaenyra's waist to mock her lack of diet control.

As they spoke, Rhaegar and Laenor dismounted and approached. Jeyne, noticing them, whispered, "Let go of my hand. I need to perform a formal greeting."

Two meters away, Rhaegar placed his hands on his belly and smiled. "The Targaryens greet you, Cousin Jeyne."

Jeyne broke away from Rhaenyra, straightened her dress, and offered a formal salute. "The Eyrie welcomes you, Prince."

The two maintained their formalities, meeting rarely but observing the courtesies.

Laenor placed one hand on his chest and said solemnly, "Laenor of Driftmark, greetings to Lady Jeyne."

"Give my regards to your parents, Ser Laenor," Jeyne replied with a warm smile, her demeanor gracious.

"Well, now that everyone has greeted each other," Rhaenyra said, taking Jeyne's hand and placing it over Rhaegar's. "We're family, there's no need to be polite."

Understanding his sister's intention to bring him and Jeyne closer, Rhaegar took the initiative. "Forgive us for taking the liberty of visiting, cousin."

"No need for forgiveness. The raven sent word long ago, and I have been looking forward to your arrival all these days," Jeyne replied graciously.

Maintaining her ladylike demeanor, Jeyne gestured, "I've prepared a reception for you, as you've come a long way."

"Thank you," Rhaenyra expressed gratitude.

Guided by Rhaenyra, the group entered the castle, the atmosphere growing increasingly harmonious as they proceeded.

The main hall of the castle, located on the first floor, greeted them with a long table in the center. At Jeyne's command, the maids swiftly served plates of food, and soon the hosts and guests were seated.

"Greetings, Prince," a beautiful lady with curly black hair said as she brought the last dish, curtsying to Rhaegar.

Rhaegar glanced at her, noting her pale skin and striking dark eyes. Jeyne introduced her as "Lady Jessamyn of the Redfort House, my good friend accompanying me."

"Greetings, Lady Jessamyn," Rhaegar replied with a faint smile.

"You are as handsome as the rumors say, and also very graceful," Jessamyn complimented, offering Rhaegar a light embrace and a kiss on the cheek.

Rhaegar's face stiffened slightly, and he nodded in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"Jessamyn, you're too passionate," Jeyne scolded her friend gently, then guided Rhaegar to a seat at the long table.

Observing the interaction, Rhaenyra couldn't help but feel a sense of amusement. Catching Rhaegar's eye, she exchanged a knowing smile with him. She had heard the rumors about Jeyne and Jessamyn's close relationship, so she was relieved that they were welcoming Rhaegar warmly.

Meanwhile, Laenor, uninterested in the ladies, surveyed the guards at the door, seeking a companion with similar interests.

As the banquet proceeded, Rhaenyra, after taking a few bites of her food, inquired, "Cousin, why don't we see Lord Yorbert?"

His full name was Yorbert Royce, he was the Lord of Runestone and the current Lord Protector of the Vale, Jeyne's mentor and guardian, he had resigned from his title when Jeyne was three years old to assist her in managing the Eyrie.

Jeyne paused, her expression turning slightly grave. "I believe you've heard of the rebellion of the Mountain Clans."

"Not long ago, the Mountain Clans attacked the Hunter House in Longbow Hall," Jeyne explained. "Upon hearing the news, Lord Yorbert summoned his bannermen and led his army to support Longbow Hall."

Rhaegar frowned, surprised by the severity of the situation. "The influence of the Mountain Clans is this serious?"

Jeyne reassured him, "You can rest assured, Lord Yorbert is skilled with bow and horse. The Mountain Clans, who are like scattered sand, will not take long to be defeated."

Rhaegar nodded, acknowledging her words tacitly. He sensed an undercurrent of unease in Jeyne's tone but refrained from pressing further, respecting her reluctance to discuss the matter in depth.

Rhaenyra, however, had no such reservations. Turning to Jeyne, she asked, "Jeyne, with the impending war between the kingdom and the Three Sisters, how many knights of the Vale can be deployed?"

Jeyne explained the difficulty of deploying more men due to the Vale's own troubles, with most troops gathered in Longbow Hall. "If you wish support for the Stepstones Battle, you should turn to the great families of Gulltown."

Understanding the purpose of their visit, Rhaenyra was concerned about the Vale's capacity to contribute to the war effort.

"Cousin, why don't you let me take the dragon and ride to aid Lord Yorbert, and put an end to the rebellion once and for all?" Rhaegar offered, eager to assist.

Jeyne's eyes lit up at the suggestion, but before she could respond, Jessamyn kicked her friend discreetly under the table.

Jeyne fell silent, as if suddenly remembering something.

Chapter 162: Rhaegar's Charm

Rhaegar sharply noticed Jeyne's reaction and asked, "What's the matter, cousin?"

Jeyne smiled apologetically. "Nothing, just something that suddenly came to mind. In a couple of days, it will be Lady Rhea's wedding. Lord Yorbert will be back in time, so you can talk to him then."

"Is that so?" Rhaegar kept his expression neutral, but inwardly, doubts arose. Yorbert was Lady Rhea's uncle, and he had passed the earldom to his niece. It made sense for him to return in time for her wedding.

Jeyne resumed her confident smile, got up, and sat next to Rhaenyra. Rhaenyra naturally drew close to her and asked, "I hear your cousin Arnold Arryn is questioning your inheritance?"

"Yes, and I have driven him away," Jeyne sighed helplessly. "The boy was quite good, but unfortunately, too ambitious."

Rhaegar took a sip of sweet wine, listening intently to their conversation. Arnold Arryn was Jeyne's uncle's son, just eleven years old and working as a squire at Runestone. In terms of male inheritance, Arnold indeed had a stronger claim than Jeyne. However, Jeyne had already inherited the Eyrie at the age of three, long before Arnold was even born.

Rhaenyra, concerned for her best friend, took Jeyne's arm. "Protect yourself. You are the first female Lord of the Vale."

Jeyne hummed softly, glancing at Rhaegar. "I said the same to you a few years ago."

Rhaenyra puffed out her chest proudly. "I lost my inheritance rights but gained more. I don't have to fight for my place or make peace with advisers. I have my own fiefdom, and most importantly, no arranged marriages. Over the years, I've traveled between King's Landing and Dragonstone, occasionally visiting the mainland. I've been living a happy life."

Rhaegar glanced at her and remained silent. If Rhaenyra had been more competitive, she would have lived the life she deserved.

Jeyne's eyes filled with envy. She looked at Rhaegar and quietly asked, "Do you plan to follow the traditions of House Targaryen?"

Rhaenyra blushed slightly and rolled her eyes, ignoring her friend's question.

Seeing this, Jeyne's eyes sparkled. She stared at Rhaenyra for a while, making her uncomfortable. Rhaenyra pushed her friend's face away in annoyance, causing Jeyne to laugh uncontrollably.

Jeyne stole a glance at Rhaegar's profile—his long blonde and silver hair, pale handsome face, and clear purple eyes.

As the two women bickered playfully, the party grew livelier. Laenor, having filled his stomach, stood up and excused himself. "Thank you for the hospitality. I'm a little tired and will go rest."

Jeyne smiled delicately. "Then I wish you good dreams."

"Thank you," Laenor replied, smiling as he walked over to Rhaegar. "Cousin, I'll continue my journey in the morning, so I'll head down first."

Rhaegar nodded, watching Laenor head towards the second floor. As Laenor passed a thin male attendant, they exchanged a knowing look, and the attendant followed Laenor upstairs.

Rhaegar watched blankly, feeling a sort of admiration for Laenor. He had just arrived at the Eyrie, the banquet wasn't over, and he had already found his "prey."

Rhaenyra noticed this and pinched Rhaegar's arm. "The Velaryon House may not have a throne, but father is still waiting for you to carry on the family line."

Laenor's preferences were well known—he only played with boys and never touched women. The Sea Snake, Corlys, was very worried about this.

Rhaegar chuckled. "I am not interested in men. Mature women are my favorite." As he said this, he glanced at the three women present and leaned back in his chair. After his father's teachings, Rhaegar had become much more open about his attractions. His father had told him that there was no woman a Targaryen man couldn't capture.

Rhaenyra glared at him, a silent warning. Jeyne and Jessamyn exchanged looks and turned their heads as if they hadn't heard.

The party continued with the three women exchanging drinks and laughter. As the hall began to quiet down, Rhaegar excused himself and went up to the second floor to rest.

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Night

After the banquet, the three drunken women helped each other up to the third floor. First, they saw Rhaenyra to her guest room, then Jeyne and Jessamyn returned together to the master bedroom.

Creak...

The cedar door closed, and Jeyne patted her red cheeks, her eyes clearing, no longer appearing drunk. Jessamyn didn't even blush as she elegantly walked to the bed and sat down.

Leaning against the doorframe, Jeyne whispered, "You shouldn't have stopped me. By sending out a dragon, the Mountain Clan's rebellion would be quickly quelled."

"Arnold is hiding in the shadows. If you don't lure him out, your lordship will be over sooner or later," Jessamyn warned.

"Rhaegar is my cousin. He will support me," Jeyne insisted.

"Don't forget where he got his heirship from," Jessamyn countered.

Jeyne held her forehead and said no more. Jessamyn's disdain for men was too strong to argue with.

Jeyne walked back to the bedside and laid down languidly, murmuring, "Let's wait a little longer. If Yorbert can't solve the Mountain Clans issue, then I'll ask for help."

Rhaegar and Rhaenyra were also going to attend the wedding in Runestone and would stay in the Vale for a while. With their relationship, there was no fear of not getting help.

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The Following Day

In the front yard of the Eyrie Castle, Laenor, wearing leather armor, stood in front of the light silver-gray scaled Sea Smoke. Rhaegar and the others were there to bid him farewell.

"I'm leaving. You guys be careful in the Vale as well," Laenor said, giving each of them a hug, his dark-skinned face full of smiles.

"Take care on the road. We'll wait for your good news," Rhaegar urged patiently.

Laenor's smile grew even bigger as he climbed up the soft ladder onto the back of the dragon and waved from above. Rhaegar returned the smile, knowing from Laenor's demeanor that last night's experience had been enjoyable.

"Roar..."

With a roar, Sea Smoke flapped its wings and slowly rose into the air. Not long after, the light silver-gray dragon disappeared from view.

Rhaenyra stood by Rhaegar's side and said softly, "Jeyne will be leaving soon, so let's follow along?"

Rhaegar looked at Jeyne with surprise. "The wedding in Runestone City is still a few days away, right?"

"We don't have dragons, and we have to bring our gifts, so of course we have to leave early," Jeyne explained, smoothing her long chestnut-colored hair blown by the wind.

"Simple," Rhaegar said, smiling. "Rhaenyra and I will ride the dragons and carry you."

"Before we left for the Vale, I ordered five hundred Dragonkeepers to go ahead with the goods from the Mushroom Set's caravan. They should arrive soon," he added.

After a pause, he continued, "Among them are gifts I have selected from goods all over the world, and they will be specially delivered to the Eyrie."

Chapter 163: Crackclaw Wildlings vs Mountain Clans

The Mushroom Set's merchant caravan only operated in the Crownlands and the Riverlands.

Taking advantage of this trip to the Vale, Rhaegar planned to open up a new trade route. The Mushroom Set's caravan was to be developed in the Vale.

Facing Rhaegar's invitation, Jeyne raised her eyebrows lightly and hesitated. Rhaenyra noticed her expression and, with a mischievous smile, said, "What, you don't dare?"

She knew her good sister was afraid of heights.

Jeyne tilted her head defiantly. "I am the Lady of the Eyrie. Do you think I will be afraid?"

"How about I carry you?" Rhaenyra teased, closing in on her.

"Just let the dragon through," Jeyne replied, fear aside, full of determination.

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Noon, in the guest room.

Rhaegar stayed in the cramped, stone-built room, holding a letter from Driftmark.

"A letter from Driftmark? What does it say?" Rhaenyra, sitting on the edge of the bed, looked a little worried.

"Don't worry, it's good news," Rhaegar replied, handing her the letter with satisfaction. "Corlys' fleet was stationed at Bloodstone Island. Pirates from the Three Sisters tried to launch a sneak attack, but just as the Stormlands' fleet arrived, they were caught in a pincer movement and wiped out."

"The first battle is a great success, and the advantage is ours," Rhaegar added, watching Rhaenyra smile, pleased with the victory at the Stepstones.

"Yes, Corlys has secured his position in the Stepstones. Once support from the rest of the realm arrives, the Three Sisters will be defeated," Rhaegar analyzed, considering the support from the Vale.

Once the wedding ceremony at Runestone was over and the fleet in Gulltown was gathered, they could proceed with their plans. As for the rebellion of the mountain clans, if Jeyne asked for help, he would hold the dragon at the ready. If Yorbert resolved it, they'd head straight for the Stepstones.

"This cousin of ours is a bit unreliable," Rhaegar mentioned abruptly.

Rhaenyra tilted her head, "How so?"

"A woman in charge of the overall situation, relying on the Regent's bannermen to fight foreign wars—I suspect she doesn't have enough real power," Rhaegar speculated boldly.

"Jeyne has Yorbert's counsel, and the Vale has not been in chaos all these years," Rhaenyra countered, thinking of the Defender of the Vale who is out in the field.

Rhaegar shook his head. "Yorbert is getting old. If he passes away, there will be countless troubles for Jeyne."

Yorbert had resigned from his position as the Lord of Runestone in his prime and had supported Jeyne for over twenty years. The death of such an old man would not be sudden.

"Aren't you still here?" Rhaenyra murmured. "Jeyne is our blood relative, your staunch supporter. You can't just stand by and watch."

"I'll help her, but she has to be strong herself," Rhaegar said indifferently. "Let's see how Jeyne responds to this Vale rebellion."

Rhaenyra was unsure and looked at him quizzically.

"Shh~ Listen," Rhaegar said, suddenly placing his index finger on his lips and pointing to the narrow window.

Bewildered, Rhaenyra pressed her ear a little closer. "Hear what?"

"A noise?" Rhaenyra looked skeptical, feeling he was playing a trick on her.

"It's the sound of Alyssa's Tears," Rhaegar said, pulling her up and pushing open the wooden door to go outside. "There are many sights in the Vale. I've seen the Bloody Gate and the Giant's Lance, but I haven't yet seen Alyssa's Tears."

His pace quickened, and he quickly walked down the stairs and out of the castle gates.

"Roar..." Cannibal, his dragon, had long been waiting in the front yard of the castle, its green eyes staring at the two approaching.

Rhaegar pushed Rhaenyra up the soft ladder, and they sat together in the saddle.

"Let's go, Cannibal!"

"Roar..." Cannibal shook itself, ran a few steps on both feet, lifted its wings, and took off.

"Rhaegar!" Rhaenyra, riding on Cannibal for the first time, gripped the saddle with a mix of nervousness and excitement.

"Don't be afraid. Syrax is too slow. I'll show you Cannibal's speed," Rhaegar reassured her, staying close with a smile.

Sensing his rider's wish, Cannibal picked up speed, plunging into the clouds and then charging back up.

"Ah!..." Rhaenyra screamed, unable to hold on, gripping Rhaegar tightly.

Rhaegar laughed and rose from the saddle, enjoying the weightlessness against the howling wind. He would never fall off the dragon's back. It was just a trick he and Cannibal had practiced to strengthen their bond.

In a few moments, Cannibal flew to the west side of the Giant's Lance. A huge waterfall appeared before them. The sound of the water falling like a torrent was like a roar.

"This is Alyssa's Tears," Rhaegar said, pointing to the waterfall located at the top of a towering mountain. According to legend, a woman named Alyssa Arryn watched her father, husband, and children being killed without shedding a single tear.

The gods punished her by turning her into a waterfall after her death. The gods forgave her for her indifference when the waterfall's water once again irrigated the fertile black soil of the Vale. Interestingly, not a single drop of water from the waterfall has ever fallen on the plains of the Vale.

"When you visit the Vale, you can't miss the view," Rhaegar said, marveling at the sight.

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Mountains of the Moon

In the dense forests along a mountain trail, a convoy of wagons moved slowly. The caravan was long, guarded by hundreds of soldiers clad in armor. At the head of the procession, a silver-armored and white-robed member of the Kingsguard led the way.

"Ser Erryk, wait," called a soft male voice from behind.

Erryk turned back, cautiously addressing the voice. "What is it, Tormund?"

Tormund, leaning against a covered wagon, looked bewildered. "I see a large group of men hiding on the hill road ahead. They have iron weapons, bows, and arrows."

"How many?" Erryk's brow furrowed.

"Around three hundred," Tormund estimated.

Erryk's expression grew serious. He called a large soldier over and ordered, "Stop the caravan. Three hundred men stay behind; two hundred men follow me."

"Yes!" the soldier responded, rallying two hundred tall soldiers with great efficiency. These were former Crackclaw Point freefolk, now serving as Dragonkeepers of the Dragonpit, accompanying the Kingsguard to transport goods to the Vale.

Erryk swiftly mounted his horse and led the two hundred soldiers into the dense forest, advancing quickly.

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Meanwhile, a group of rough men in animal skins lay in the dense shrubs, eyes fixed on the distant intersection. They had heard from scouts that a group of well-laden travelers had entered the Mountains of the Moon, ripe for plundering.

The tribe, poor and desperate, had been waiting for a long time with no sign of the caravan. Growing impatient, a one-eyed bandit poked his head out. "Where's that caravan? Why hasn't it arrived yet?" he grumbled.

Slap! An ugly, burly man emerged from the bushes, striking the one-eyed bandit. "Patience. Make another sound and I'll rip your head off and stuff it up your arse."

Whoosh—

Before he finished speaking, a sharp arrow flew through the air, piercing the one-eyed bandit's remaining good eye.

Pfft—

The iron arrow exited through the back of his head. The one-eyed bandit, his expression still grimacing, staggered and fell to the ground.

The burly man looked dumbfounded, blurting out, "Now he's only got his arsehole left."

Chapter 164: The Clever Shagga

"Kill!!!"

Shouts of battle erupted from all directions as a swarm of soldiers emerged from the dense forest.

Erryk led the charge, his sword cleaving the head of a mountain clans man. "Leave no one behind!" he roared.

The Dragonkeepers, clad in armor, advanced valiantly. Swords and axes gleamed as they hacked through the mountain men who were too weak to resist.

In the blink of an eye, the Dragonkeepers had slashed their way through the mountain clans people's ranks, blood staining the bushes. Faced with their superior equipment and ferocity, the mountain clans men scattered like frightened birds.

"Don't run away, stand and fight!" bellowed the burly leader, raising a double-bladed axe. He smashed the heads of two Dragonkeepers and rallied a group of warriors.

Swish, swish, swish...

A shower of arrows rained down from the forest, piercing the bodies of the mountain clan mens without mercy. The burly man, startled, grabbed a warrior to shield himself from the first wave of arrows. But another wave quickly followed.

"Ah!..."

The arrows didn't target the burly man but shot down the men who were trying to escape down the trail. Screams filled the air as they fell.

Erryk, his sword plunging through a man's chest, shouted, "The front squad pursues! Rear flank, secure the battlefield!"

"Yes!" The Dragonkeepers split into two groups. Archers fired from the shadows, picking off the enemy one by one.

Within ten minutes, the battlefield was littered with the corpses of the mountain clans tribe members.

"Ser, I have captured their leader," announced a tall soldier, dragging the burly man forward and kicking him down before Erryk.

"Bastard! Have the guts to let me go and fight alone!" the burly man spat, his face smeared with dirt.

Bang...

The tall soldier kicked him in the head. "Be honest, dumbass!"

"You piece of shit, my name is Shagga, smart Shagga!" The burly man, Shagga, cursed as he spat out more dirt.

The soldier raised his hand to strike again, but Erryk waved him off. "Trangal, I'll interrogate him myself."

"Yes!" The former Crab Claw, Trangal, stepped aside, respecting the Kingsguard.

Erryk pulled his white robe behind him, wiping his blood-stained sword. "Shagga, which Mountain Clan do you belong to?"

"Who do you think you are, daring to question the clever Shagga!" Shagga sneered defiantly.

Swish...

Erryk's long sword sliced through the air, severing one of Shagga's ears. The bloody ear fell to the ground and twitched.

"Ah! Damn you, you cut off Shagga's ear!"

Shagga screamed, clutching his head and writhing in pain. Erryk planted his boot on Shagga's neck and pressed the tip of his sword to Shagga's forehead, speaking coldly, "I'll ask you again, which Mountain Clan are you from?"

"The Stone Crow Clan, Shagga comes from the Stone Crow Clan," Shagga admitted, fear overcoming him.

Erryk continued, "The Stone Crows are a large tribe among the Mountain Clans. Are you involved in the rebellion?"

"Yes, Shagga and his two foolish brothers gathered many warriors and scattered them throughout the Vale," Shagga confessed.

"How many of you are there, and how many are involved in the rebellion?"

"The Stone Crows tribe has a thousand people. The Black Ears tribe, the Burned Men tribe, and the Painted Dogs tribe are part of ten or so tribes, adding up to tens of thousands of people."

"Then how come you only have this many people here?"

"The tribal warriors were taken by Shagga's two foolish brothers to follow the Flame Witch in her siege of the Hall of Longbows."

"Who is the Flame Witch?" Erryk frowned, suspicious of the term "witch."

Shagga, trembling, said, "A red-robed woman with a large naiad, a messenger of some god who can summon fire."

"Really?" Erryk was skeptical.

"Shagga did not lie. The Flame Witch seduced my father, and I saw her use flames to cover her weapons," Shagga replied, a mix of fear and envy in his eyes.

"Ser, is the interrogation over?" Tormund's Falcon, seeing the end of the fighting, led his team over as the Dragonkeepers continued to clear the battlefield.

Erryk mused, "Almost, but there's something unsettling about it." He glanced at the white falcon circling in the sky. Magic existed in the world, and Skinchangers, just like dragons, had their own mysterious gifts. Erryk took Shagga's words with a grain of salt.

"I will send more eyes to observe the Vale," Tormund said, wary of the trial's revelations.

"I told the truth. Can you let me go?" Shagga asked, hoping for mercy.

Erryk sneered, "Killing you degrades my sword. Get lost!"

"A wise Shagga thanks you, Tin Man." Shagga, overjoyed, ran off.

Ka-ching...

Just a dozen steps away, a double-bladed axe flew through the air, striking Shagga in the back of the head. His skull cracked, and he fell dead.

Erryk glanced at Trangal, who had thrown the axe, and asked, "Is he smart?"

Trangal scratched his head and grinned, "Obviously."

"Bury the corpses on the spot and set up camp on the hillside tonight!" Erryk ordered, sheathing his sword and glancing at the sky.

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A few days later.

Eyrie Castle's front yard.

The Cannibal lay prostrate on the ground, allowing a servant to climb the soft ladder and secure various gift boxes. Rhaegar stood by the dragon's head, gently rubbing its muzzle. "It will be over soon, don't be angry," he murmured.

"Roar..." The Cannibal bobbed its head slightly, a low growl rumbling from its throat, showing its displeasure.

"Be patient." Rhaegar pressed his hands against the dragon's scales, smiling reassuringly.

Rhaenyra approached with light steps and asked, "Not waiting for Erryk and the others?"

"Runestone has sent a raven urging us to hurry. Jeyne needs to go ahead to help set up," Rhaegar replied. "The roads in the Vale are rugged, and with Erryk's caravan being so large, I think they were delayed on the way."

King's Landing was far from the Vale, and the mountain roads within the Vale were notoriously difficult to traverse. Rhaegar understood Erryk's delay.

"You should leave a letter for him, so he doesn't come to the Eyrie for nothing," Rhaenyra suggested, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"No need, he'll find me," Rhaegar shook his head with a confident laugh, trusting in the abilities of Erryk and Tormund. Both were key members of his inner circle, known for their bravery and insight.

After chatting for a while, the servants finished securing the gift chests, tying them to the saddle with hemp ropes. Soon after, Jeyne arrived with Jessamyn, whispering, "Ready to go?"

Rhaegar turned to see the two women in their corsets and dresses, looking poised yet different. Jeyne forced a smile, glancing nervously at the black dragon beside Rhaegar and fidgeting with her fingers. Jessamyn held her hand, looking at the Cannibal with anticipation.

Noting their emotions, Rhaenyra and Rhaegar exchanged glances and said in unison, "Of course!"

Chapter 165: Runestone

Syrax hovered over Eyrie Castle before landing gently in the courtyard.

Rhaenyra stepped forward and took Jeyne's hand, inviting her, "How about the two of us share a dragon?"

Jeyne glanced nervously between the Cannibal and Syrax, her apprehension clear. She shook her head and declined, "Let Jessamyn ride with you. I'll take the black dragon."

The Cannibal, over three times the size of Syrax, had a strong black body and a wide, flat spine. For Jeyne, who feared heights, it offered a greater sense of security.

Rhaenyra grunted softly but didn't push further.

"Cousin, please," Jeyne said, extending her hand towards Rhaegar, clearly nervous.

Rhaegar took her hand and helped her climb the soft ladder. In a voice only they could hear, Rhaenyra whispered to him, "Make sure Jeyne enjoys the ride."

Rhaegar, puzzled, asked, "Aren't you sisters?"

"I can't keep quiet when she jokes, and she won't forget it," Rhaenyra replied, her tone brooking no argument. She then turned and led Jessamyn towards Syrax.

"Tsk, ts, no wonder Alicent and Laena can't get along with you," Rhaegar muttered, shaking his head and smacking his lips. "But I like it!"

As he climbed onto the dragon's back, Jeyne was fastening her safety chains.

"Hold on to the grips tightly; the Cannibal flies fast," Rhaegar reminded her as he settled into the saddle.

"Uh-huh," Jeyne replied, too nervous to speak, her eyes wide with fear. Who would have thought that the Lady of the Eyrie, perched in the highest castle on the continent, would be afraid of heights?

"Cannibal, let's go!" Rhaegar commanded, and the Cannibal leapt into the air, soaring towards Runestone.

"Roar..." Syrax followed closely behind, flapping its wings to keep up.

Runestone lay north of Gulltown, adjacent to the Bay of Crabs, with its castle built on the sea. As the two dragons soared over the plains of the Vale and the southern mountains of the Mountains of the Moon, they could see the Bay of Crabs in the distance between the eastern Vale and Crackclaw Point.

The distance between the Eyrie and Runestone was similar to that between King's Landing and Dragonstone Island. At its normal flying speed, the Cannibal would reach Runestone before noon.

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Runestone

"Roar..."

The Cannibal's roar echoed like a thunderclap as the pitch-black dragon appeared over the Vale near the castle. Its vertical pupils surveyed the scene below with keen judgment.

Rhaegar looked down at the majestic castle built in the middle of the flat terrain, a common architectural style in the Vale.

"Land, Cannibal."

Rhaegar held the pale-faced Jeyne close, guiding the Cannibal towards the castle. He hadn't intended to frighten her, but her repeated pleas to hurry had made him anxious about their altitude, prompting the Cannibal to fly at full speed to reach Runestone as quickly as possible.

Boom!

The Cannibal's massive body landed in the castle courtyard with a resounding thud. Lady Rhea and a group of guests emerged from the castle to welcome the royal family.

"We've arrived."

Rhaegar unfastened the chain around Jeyne's waist and helped her dismount. "I'm a little dizzy; tell them my regards," she murmured weakly, leaning against him as she fought off nausea. The dragon ride had nearly overwhelmed her.

As the people in the castle gathered around them, Lady Rhea approached swiftly, her demeanor as composed and sharp as ever. She assessed Jeyne's condition with concern.

"Help her inside; she's feeling ill," Rhaegar instructed, passing Jeyne to Lady Rhea. "I wish you a happy wedding, Lady Rhea."

"I need a husband to impregnate me; this marriage is better than the first," Rhea remarked with a hint of self-pity, her outlook on marriage seemingly bleak.

"Rhea, how is Lady Jeyne?" a middle-aged man with a beard asked, approaching with concern.

"I'm fine, let's welcome the prince and Lady Jeyne into the castle first," Rhea replied, then introduced the man to Rhaegar. "This is my fiancé, Gerold Royce."

"Greetings, Prince," Gerold said respectfully.

"No need for formalities, Ser Gerold," Rhaegar replied, feeling a bit awkward meeting his aunt's fiancé. His thoughts briefly wandered to Daemon, imprisoned in the dungeons of King's Landing.

"My good uncle, will he regret not drinking his ex-wife's wedding wine?" Rhaegar mused with a quiet chuckle.

As Rhaegar and Jeyne approached the castle, more guests came forward to greet them.

"Prince, House Arryn of Gulltown salutes you."

"Prince, House Grafton of Gulltown salutes you."

"Prince, House Melcolm of Old Anchor salutes you."

Rhaegar smiled warmly, acknowledging each greeting. "Greetings, my lords. Please forgive me and Lady Jeyne; we've traveled a long way and may need to rest for a while."

Turning to Gerold, he added, "On the back of the dragon are gifts from the royal family and the Eyrie for your wedding. I'll help you retrieve them later."

Gerold glanced nervously at the Cannibal, its spine towering like a castle wall. He swallowed hard. "There's no hurry, Prince."

Gerold had met dragons before, including Daemon's Caraxes, but the Cannibal's sheer size and menacing appearance were overwhelming. The Cannibal's green eyes and black scales gave it an aura of malevolent power.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal, sensing the humans' attention, lowered its head, its piercing eyes scrutinizing the gathered crowd. Everyone instinctively took a step back.

"Cannibal, don't scare my friends!" Rhaegar chided gently, hiding a smile.

"Prince, please come inside," Gerold urged, gesturing toward the castle and leading Rhaegar in, surrounded by the crowd.

The castle's first floor featured a grand hall, lavishly decorated. Rhaegar called for a maid to assist Jeyne upstairs to rest while Gerold stayed to manage the guests.

Rhaegar took the first chair beneath the main seat, greeting the nobles of the Vale one by one. Most were from the southern part of the Vale, untouched by the Mountain Clans' rebellion. Gerold, despite his ordinary appearance, was courteous and attentive, ensuring everyone felt welcome.

Among the guests, Rhaegar spotted familiar faces from Crackclaw Point, including Yara Crabbe of Whispering Castle. After a brief greeting, Rhaegar asked, "Why don't I see your father?"

Yara's beautiful face turned somber. She forced a smile. "Father's health has been declining these past few years. I represent the Crabbe House."

"What a pity," Rhaegar replied, offering comfort. Despite the years, he felt a deep sense of nostalgia for the family that had been loyal to him since childhood.

Chapter 166: The Lord of Gulltown's Goodwill

Rhaegar had only exchanged a few words with Yara before she was called away by other noble ladies.

He hadn't even had a chance to take a sip of water when a tall, white-haired old man approached, accompanied by two teenagers.

The man and the young people bore a tower-like emblem on their collars: a yellow burning tower on a black triangle, set against a flame-like red background. This was the coat of arms of the House Grafton, lords of Gulltown.

With a warm smile, the old man bowed slightly. "Prince Rhaegar, Grimm Grafton at your service."

Rhaegar stood and returned the greeting, "Lord Grimm, it's good to see you again."

The purpose of this trip was to garner support from the influential lords of Gulltown, so a friendly demeanor was essential.

Gulltown, with its natural harbor on the Bay of Crabs, south of Runestone, was one of the five major cities in Westeros, rivaling White Harbor but smaller than Lannisport, Oldtown, and King's Landing. The Grafton House held significant wealth and influence in this crucial city.

"Prince, you have grown even more handsome and noble since I last saw you," Grimm said, his tone friendly. He then introduced the teenagers. "These are my grandchildren, Joffrey and Jonelle."

Rhaegar observed them closely. Joffrey, about sixteen or seventeen, was handsome with the Grafton House's signature black curly hair and light gray eyes.

Jonelle, similarly aged, was strikingly beautiful with a notably fit physique. To Rhaegar's surprise, Jonelle had silver-blond curls and purple eyes—a classic Valyrian appearance.

"Miss Jonelle's hair color..." Rhaegar began, glancing curiously at Lord Grimm.

Grimm laughed, his eyes shining. "My grandmother was Lady Prudence of House Celtigar. Jonelle inherited her Valyrian characteristics from her great-grandmother two generations ago."

"Ah, I see. Lady Jonelle is truly a sight to behold," Rhaegar praised, genuinely impressed.

He recalled the historical connection between the Grafton and Celtigar Houses. The Graftons' wealth made them desirable allies, and many great houses sought marriages with them.

Moreover, in the brief history of House Targaryen, it was mentioned that Lady Prudence had once saved Rhaegar's great-grandmother, Queen Alysanne.

Feeling a genuine warmth, Rhaegar's smile broadened, and he engaged in an even more enthusiastic conversation. Jonelle stood by her brother's side, her head slightly bowed and her cheeks tinged with pink as she stole glances at Rhaegar.

The conversation concluded. Rhaegar broached a serious topic, "Lord Grimm, the war between the Kingdom and the Three Daughters is about to begin, and we need your house's support."

"Prince, I've already received the raven," Old Grimm replied cheerfully. "The Grafton House of Gulltown is ready to fight for His Majesty and for you, Prince, whenever needed."

"Excellent," Rhaegar said, his respect for the old man increasing. "With your family's help, the kingdom will surely defeat the Triarchy."

The kingdom needed loyal bannermen who could step up in critical moments.

"Prince, I still have to catch up with a few old friends. You young people can carry on better without me," Old Grimm said, excusing himself and leaving his grandchildren behind.

As the old man departed, Rhaegar, Joffrey, and Jonelle found themselves in an awkward silence.

"Prince, let me pour you a glass of wine," Jonelle offered delicately, picking up the wine bottle with a shy, timid expression.

"Thank you," Rhaegar said, taking a polite sip despite not usually drinking wine. He felt even thirstier afterward.

Old Grimm's quick promise and leaving his grandchildren behind signaled a clear intent. Rhaegar understood what he meant. He glanced at Jonelle. She was a pretty girl, her Valyrian features making him feel a sense of kinship. However, he didn't favor shy girls.

Turning his attention to Joffrey, Rhaegar said, "Joffrey, I see you wear a sword at your waist. Do you practice swordsmanship?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Joffrey replied formally. "I have been studying and practicing since I was young."

The Grafton House was known for its strict and thorough training.

"Relax," Rhaegar waved a hand. "You're a bit older than me, so let's just talk casually."

After a moment's thought, Rhaegar asked, "How skilled are you with a sword? Have you considered becoming a knight?"

"Yes, Prince," Joffrey's eyes lit up but then dimmed as he added, "My sword teacher says my talent is average. It's hard for me to excel."

"Talent is important, but hard work and dedication are the keys to success," Rhaegar encouraged, offering an olive branch. "Are you interested in taking up some official positions?"

"I've only managed some accounts with my grandfather. I have no experience in governance," Joffrey explained, though his excitement was palpable.

"You could start by serving wine and observing how other advisers handle their duties," Rhaegar suggested, leaving no stone unturned in his efforts to draw Joffrey closer.

Rhaegar wasn't interested in marrying Old Grimm's granddaughter, so he decided to focus on her brother. He believed Old Grimm would understand his intentions.

After chatting with the siblings for a while, Lady Rhea came downstairs and called the attendants to arrange the banquet.

The wedding banquet was still two days away, but a reception banquet had to be held for the arriving nobles.

Long tables were set for the feast. Rhaegar, as heir, sat at the head table with Lady Rhea, her betrothed Gerold, the esteemed Lord Grimm, and other high-ranking nobles.

Lady Rhea presided over the event, while Gerold sat beside her.

Rhaegar, with his noble status, sat across from them, alone at one end of the table. The people of the Vale were passionate, and the atmosphere at the banquet was lively, with much shouting and laughter. Rhaegar played the role of spectator, responding to toasts from time to time.

Nearby tables were filled with noble ladies and their daughters. Many of them were drawn to Rhaegar's handsome face and sought to speak with him. Old Grimm, seeing an opportunity, called Jonelle over to pour wine for Rhaegar, citing his discomfort in doing so alone.

This action set off a flurry of activity. Other nobles, seeing a chance to present their daughters to the prince, began calling them over for various reasons, hoping to catch Rhaegar's eye.

The nobles at this table were not fools. They knew the kingdom was preparing for war with the Triarchy, and Rhaegar's presence in the Vale was a clear sign of his intentions to rally loyal supporters. They understood the potential benefits of aligning their families with the royal family.

The greatest benefit would be a marriage alliance with the royal family. If their daughters or granddaughters could attract Rhaegar's attention, their family's future would be assured.

Rhaegar found himself surrounded by eager young women. The attention was flattering, but the enthusiasm was overwhelming. The noble ladies vied for the chance to pour him wine, nearly tearing each other apart in the process.

From a practical standpoint, Rhaegar thought, what good is it to pour wine for him when he doesn't even drink it?

Halfway through the banquet, a dragon's roar echoed from the sky above the castle. A gust of wind kicked up dust and rattled the hall's glazed windows.

Chapter 167: The Angry Rhaenyra

"It's Syrax," Rhaegar announced as he rose, "Rhaenyra has arrived."

He immediately left the table to greet her, and the other nobles followed his lead, not daring to delay.

The castle gate swung open, revealing Syrax landing in the front yard. The dragon's scales glimmered, its crown of horns curving backward, and its head held high in regal splendor.

Rhaenyra, dressed in black dragon-riding attire with her hair braided behind her head, descended the soft ladder. Her demeanor mirrored the dragon's arrogance.

Behind her, a disheveled Jessamyn followed, her cheeks tense and her steps unsteady. It was clear she had endured a rough ride, much like Jeyne.

"Rhaenyra, did you have a safe trip?" Rhaegar asked as he stepped forward.

"Aside from being left behind by you, it was business as usual," Rhaenyra replied, smoothing her hair and greeting Lady Rhea and the other nobles with calm familiarity.

She knew these people well; they had all sworn allegiance to her before, making her more at ease than Rhaegar.

Once inside the castle, Jessamyn asked after Jeyne and was helped by the maids to find her friend. Rhaenyra leaned close to Rhaegar and laughed softly, "You flew so fast, Jeyne was afraid she'd fall apart."

"Don't blame me; she's the one who's afraid of heights and wanted the ordeal to be over quickly," Rhaegar responded, his expression innocent.

Rhaenyra smiled, sniffing his lapel. She detected Jeyne's minty scent and a hint of wine but nothing else suspicious. As she glanced around the hall, her eyes landed on the noble ladies who had recently been vying for Rhaegar's attention.

"Rhaegar, you are quite popular," she remarked, adjusting his collar with a knowing smile.

Rhaegar's good looks and noble status had made him the object of many ladies' affections. Rhaenyra, having once been the center of similar attention herself, could sympathize.

She recalled how, as a teenager, men of all ages had sought her hand, including the Lannister brothers Jason and Tyland, who nearly fought over her.

Chairs were brought in, and Rhaenyra took her customary seat beside Rhaegar. Her presence brought the party to a climax, with nobles toasting and boasting of their achievements.

Rhaegar, now relaxed, enjoyed the respite her presence afforded. The noble ladies, intimidated by Rhaenyra, kept their distance.

Even the timid Jonelle, who had been pouring wine, now stood quietly by Lord Grimm's side, avoiding Rhaenyra's gaze.

"Rhaenyra, you still command the room as usual," Rhaegar remarked amusedly, finishing in a low voice. "Have I said or done anything?"

Rhaenyra smiled sweetly, clutching her dinner knife in one hand and resting the other on Rhaegar's thigh.

"No," Rhaenyra assured him, holding her slender hand on his thigh with a sincere smile.

...

Two days later, the wedding was held at Runestone.

Nobles arrived daily, and the castle's stables were so crowded that some guests had to park their carriages nearby.

The ceremony was not held indoors, but in the back garden of Runestone, as the Royce House, with its long history, still adhered to the worship of the old gods.

In the back garden stood a sturdy weirwood tree, ancient and revered. Under its thick, rustling leaves, Rhea and Gerold, dressed in ceremonial robes, swore their vows of love and loyalty to each other.

Jeyne, as witness, placed a crown of flowers on Rhea's head to mark the end of the vows. The nobles applauded and offered their heartfelt blessings.

With a beaming smile, Rhea held Gerold's hand, and the couple invited everyone to return to the castle for a feast.

Another great feast began. After being persuaded to take a few sips of red wine, Rhaegar managed to escape the persistent toasts of the nobles. He slipped away to the second floor to find a moment of peace.

The second floor was filled with noble ladies, their laughter and chatter echoing through the corridors. On the balcony, through an open floor-to-ceiling window, Rhaenyra sat elegantly in a rocking chair, dressed in a striking red gown, one leg crossed over the other.

"Rhaenyra, why aren't you with Jeyne and the others?" Rhaegar asked, surprised to see her alone.

Rhaenyra gently swirled her glass of red wine and turned her face away from him without a word.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Rhaegar leaned down, holding the back of the rocking chair to look at her closely.

"Get away!" Rhaenyra chortled, playfully pushing him away.

"Who upset you?" Rhaegar asked, concerned, as he squeezed her shoulders. Rhaenyra had been in good spirits the previous night, so something must have happened to upset her.

Rhaenyra remained silent, staring out the window. Following her gaze, Rhaegar saw the lush greenery of the Vale and the weirwood tree in the garden where a group of children played beneath its branches.

Rhaegar frowned slightly, seeing nothing amiss. Thinking it over, he slowly wrapped his arms around her waist, leaning in to whisper in her ear, "Did I make you unhappy?"

Rhaenyra usually took on a sisterly role, caring for him daily. Rarely did she get angry with him. Perhaps the warmth of his breath was too much; Rhaenyra headbutted him lightly, her mood sour. "What does my dress look like to you?"

Rhaegar was momentarily stunned, then seriously examined her strapless red gown. "It's beautiful," he said innocently.

"Doesn't it look like the red carpet you gave Jeyne?" Rhaenyra turned her head, their faces inches apart.

Rhaegar froze, black lines forming on his forehead. "Have you read the messages from the ravens from the Eyrie?" he asked. The previous evening, Erryk had led a caravan through the Bloody Gate to the Eyrie, bringing many exotic treasures, including the red carpet.

Rhaenyra's eyes were filled with anger. "That red carpet was my gift to you on your eleventh naming day!"

"Uh..." Rhaegar felt a chill run down his spine and took a step back.

"Get back here!" Rhaenyra demanded, pulling him by his collar. Their foreheads collided, and they stared at each other.

"I choose all my gifts from my private coffers; I had no knowledge of that red carpet," Rhaegar stammered, trying to find an excuse. He had secretly added the carpet to the gift list, not realizing Rhaenyra would notice.

"You think I'll believe that?" Rhaenyra's eyes were fierce. The red carpet had been costly, and she had gone to great lengths to acquire it.

"Alicent!" Rhaegar quickly invoked the queen's name to divert blame. "She saw the gift list; she must have added it by mistake."

Chapter 168: The Valyrian Steel Necklace

Rhaegar didn't want to face Rhaenyra's wrath, so he quickly decided to throw his stepmother to take the blame.

"You think I'm a fool?" Rhaenyra snorted, her eyes growing more and more hostile.

Rhaegar's cold sweat ran down his back as he recalled childhood memories of being at the mercy of Rhaenyra's temper.

He coughed lightly to cover his nervousness and tried to sound profound. "The red carpet was just something we couldn't use. Giving it away seemed practical."

Rhaenyra was silent, but her grip on the soft flesh of Rhaegar's waist tightened. It wasn't about the red carpet's value but the principle of giving away her gift.

"Sister, I also prepared a gift for you," Rhaegar said, trying to defuse the situation. He held her small hand at his waist with one hand and pried her fingers off his collar with the other.

Rhaenyra bit her lip lightly and listened to his explanation, curious about what he could come up with.

Rhaegar held out his hand, opening five fingers in front of her eyes. "Look!" He shook his arm, and when his fingers opened again, a delicate, square gift box appeared out of thin air.

Rhaenyra lifted his cuff, revealing a silver-gray space bracelet. After years of living together, she knew about Rhaegar's magical bracelet.

Rhaegar smiled sheepishly and placed the gift box in her palm, saying softly, "Open it and see; you'll definitely like it."

"Hmph, let's see what trick you're playing now," Rhaenyra said, her mood lightening slightly as she pressed her lips together in a hint of a smile.

She opened the gift box, which was padded with black soft cloth, but found it empty. She pinched the soft cloth, thinking the gift might be hidden in a compartment. However, after examining the box thoroughly, she found nothing.

There was a short silence. Rhaenyra glanced at Rhaegar, who was all smiles, and gently closed the box without saying a word.

"Do you like it?" Rhaegar asked.

Rhaenyra closed her eyes, crossed her arms, and leaned back in her chair. She didn't want to talk to him. Just take it as received, she thought.

Seeing her reaction, Rhaegar restrained his smile, reached out, and waved his hand in front of her eyes. He whispered softly, "Look again; you'll definitely like it."

Rhaenyra's knuckles turned white as she suppressed her anger. Perhaps she had been away from Rhaegar for so long that he had forgotten what the wrath of a sleeping dragon was like. Her hands itched for action.

The sound of bells jingled softly in the air, and Rhaenyra's breathing quickened as she heard the crisp ringing.

"No more teasing. Open your eyes," Rhaegar urged gently.

Rhaenyra turned her head away in anger, refusing to open her eyes. She had already decided to punish Rhaegar tonight and a gift would not change her mind.

Seeing her stubbornness, Rhaegar smiled and took action. Rhaenyra kept her eyes closed, still angry, when she suddenly felt something cold against her cheek.

Unconsciously, she opened her eyes and tilted her head back to see an exquisite silver and gray necklace. The necklace, made of forged Valyrian steel, consisted of tiny links forming a slender chain.

Rhaenyra's eyes were immediately drawn to it. "A Valyrian steel necklace?" she asked in amazement, turning to Rhaegar.

"That's right," Rhaegar replied, smiling as he gently shook the necklace between his fingers. He had specifically instructed the blacksmith to keep some of the steel to create a piece of jewelry for Rhaenyra after forging two weapons.

It was as if the necklace had been forged just for her.

Rhaenyra was mesmerized. She relaxed her arms and touched the Valyrian steel necklace in front of her. She hadn't realized that Rhaegar had prepared such a precious gift for her.

Suddenly she remembered something. "You said you wanted to forge two weapons. Will there be enough Valyrian steel left after you make this necklace?"

Rhaegar hung the necklace on her fingertips and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, it's just a piece of jewelry."

"A piece of Valyrian steel for a necklace? How extravagant," Rhaenyra said, giving him a reproachful look. But the corners of her lips betrayed her, curling into a smile as she caressed the necklace like a treasure.

The necklace had its own pendant, designed by Rhaegar himself, with three tiny dragon heads to honor the first dragons of House Targaryen: Meraxes, Balerion, and Vhagar.

Meraxes had sharp horns and half-squinted pupils, exuding an elegant and luxurious demeanor. Balerion's fierce expression and rounded eyes emanated a solemn authority. Vhagar, with a dense crown of horns and closed eyes, appeared as if in a deep sleep, drawn from the dragon's prime.

The three dragon heads, one low and two high, hung from the necklace, carved with such precision that they seemed to host the soul of a dragon.

"It's beautiful!" Rhaenyra exclaimed, marveling at the intricate details of the necklace. The craftsmanship of the Qohor blacksmiths was truly top-notch.

"I'm glad you like it," Rhaegar said, resting his hands on the back of her chair and admiring her profile. He remembered how Daemon had given Rhaenyra a Valyrian steel necklace, and despite her hatred for Daemon's actions, she had kept the necklace in the bottom of her jewelry box.

With that in mind, Rhaegar leaned close to her ear and whispered, "Now you have a new family heirloom."

Rhaenyra looked at him in amazement, then smiled sweetly. "Rhaegar, put it on for me!"

"Okay," Rhaegar agreed, removing her old necklace and skillfully placing the new one around her delicate white neck. He casually tossed the old necklace out the window.

Rhaenyra looked down at the necklace, its three dragon heads like a talisman. The more she looked at it, the more she loved it.

Rhaenyra clasped Rhaegar's neck and planted a kiss on his cheek.

As he buried his head in her hair, inhaling the fresh scent of lavender, he said, "Rhaenyra, Father has prepared a list of partners for me."

"What are your plans?" Rhaenyra asked quietly, tilting her head as she played with the necklace.

Rhaegar said, "You know what I mean."

Rhaenyra laughed out loud and smiled, her eyes glowing as she encouraged, "Just tell father who you want. He has always spoiled you."

"Yes, but I am greedy," Rhaegar replied, his eyes playful and pretentious.

He knew that Rhaenyra cared for him as much as he cared for her. Thinking about it, he propped his hand on the rocking chair and caressed the solid wood.

Outside the window, the fish-beam tree stood tall, its thick trunk teeming with anticipation. Two little green creatures moved in tandem, one ascending with eager determination while the other descended with deliberate intent.

The climber reached a branch and discovered a tender, succulent leaf, its vibrant allure impossible to resist. It eagerly mounted the leaf, savoring each bite with the hunger of one who had waited far too long.

Meanwhile, the lower creature inched with relentless effort toward a tantalizing ball of soft, sticky sap. It approached its prize with bated breath.

Splat...

Just as it was about to indulge in the sweet resin, a pair of small hands intervened, thwarting its feast and leaving it quivering with unfulfilled desire.

"Rhaegar, no!" Rhaenyra exclaimed.

Chapter 169: Confession

Rhaenyra whimpered in surprise, her heart thumping and her body tingling.

Rhaegar heard the sound and lifted his head to look out the window.

He saw a little girl squatting under a fish-beam tree, her hands covering a small green insect, her face full of innocence.

"Let it go, bugs are dirty," a little boy came running, disgustedly reminding her.

"Oh, okay," the little girl replied. With wide eyes, she picked up the small green worm and threw it onto a branch above her head.

The bug landed right next to its companion and crawled toward another young leaf, taking small bites.

Judging by the speed at which the two little green worms were eating, the young leaves of the fish-beam tree must have been extremely tasty.

"Rhaegar, the feast isn't over yet," Rhaenyra said, her cheeks slightly flushed, her heart trembling.

"No one is looking at us," Rhaegar replied, glancing at the beaded curtain at the entrance of the balcony before lowering his head.

As Rhaegar lifted his head and Rhaenyra lowered hers, their eyes met. Rhaegar's cold violet eyes flickered, his lips crimson, and the knot in his throat moved as he swallowed.

Rhaenyra's eyes were moist, her lips slightly parted.

The wind blew through the beaded curtains, causing them to sway and the strings of beads to move closer together, constantly overlapping.

Outside the window, the little green bugs on the fish-beam tree were still eating. Two similar white snakes climbed up the branches. The white snakes' bodies were entwined, their heads touching each other's, spitting out their tongues and not giving way.

It was a chilling scene, as if they were vowing to swallow each other alive.

...

On the second floor, in the banquet hall, Jeyne was dressed in elegant attire, holding a glass of wine as she exchanged pleasantries with noblewomen and ladies who approached her.

"Jeyne, come here for a moment," called Jessamyn, who was wearing a blue dress and clutching a slip of paper in her hand.

Jeyne glanced at it and recognized the letter delivered by the raven.

"Excuse me, I need to attend to some business," Jeyne said to the chatty noblewoman beside her. She set down her glass and left her seat.

Jessamyn smiled apologetically at the noblewomen and ladies who watched them leave. The two of them walked hand in hand to the corner of the stairs.

Jessamyn handed over the slip of paper and said in a low voice, "There's been an incident at Longbow Hall."

Jeyne opened the note, reading the brief message.

The Longbow Hall has repelled the Mountain Clans. Yorbert was ambushed on his way back and was seriously injured.

The Mountain Clans are well organized and are suspected of raiding the Vale.

"Yorbert is wounded!" Jeyne's face turned pale, her small hand clenching the note tightly.

Yorbert was her regent, the one who had taught her how to govern the Vale. His injury would be a great blow to the Eyrie.

Jessamyn asked worriedly, "What should we do now?"

She believed they should take advantage of the banquet to gather more bannermen and besiege the Mountain Clans.

"The Mountain Clans hide in the mountains and forests; even if we mobilize our men, we can't pinpoint their movements," Jeyne sighed, understanding her friend's concern. "Tell all families to secure their castles and prepare to face the Mountain Clans."

"If we let the Mountain Clans ransack the Vale of Arryn, they'll have plenty of food and supplies for years," Jessamyn worried.

The Vale was surrounded by the Mountains of the Moon, but the plains in the center were fertile, with highly productive black soil. If the Mountain Clans plundered the Vale, this year's production would be severely impacted.

"Jessamyn, you don't understand my plan," Jeyne said with a slight headache. "Go to Rhea and tell her I will return to Eyrie tomorrow. Prepare the carriage for me."

Jessamyn opened her mouth to argue but knew she couldn't change her friend's mind. She nodded helplessly.

As she walked away, Jeyne called after her, "Have you seen Rhaenyra? I need to discuss something with her."

She planned to talk to Rhaenyra about solving the Mountain Clans problem. With two dragons in the Vale, they could easily repel the barbaric Mountain Clans.

Jessamyn recalled, "Try the second-floor balcony, but she seems to be in a bad mood."

Last night, ravens from Eyrie brought news that the Kingsguard and royal gifts had arrived. They also reported that the Mountain Clans were roaming the Mountains of the Moon.

Jessamyn had shown Rhaenyra the letter and the accompanying list, as Jeyne had instructed, but Rhaenyra's mood had changed after just one glance. Jessamyn assumed she was worried about the Vale's safety and paid it no further mind.

"I understand. Go ahead," Jeyne said, waving her hand tiredly.

Jessamyn nodded and turned to walk down the stairs. She didn't notice Jeyne's expression change to one of cold calculation as she watched her friend's retreating back.

Jeyne sighed, restored her composed demeanor, and headed toward the second floor. She greeted the noble ladies she passed with a smile, responding to each one before continuing to the balcony.

Through the swaying beaded curtains, Jeyne saw two figures, one in red and one in black, on the balcony.

Gently lifting the beaded curtain, Jeyne stepped inside and called, "Rhaenyra, I'm here to see you."

"!!!"

Her voice startled Rhaenyra, who quickly looked over, a bit flustered.

Rhaenyra's face was flushed and she looked panicked.

"Jeyne, what brings you here?" Rhaegar, standing behind the rocking chair, appeared unfazed.

Jeyne froze, blinking in confusion, wondering, "Did I interrupt your conversation?"

"No! You're just in time," Rhaenyra replied with a vague smile, covering her chest with one hand. All is calm again, she thought darkly, glaring at Rhaegar.

Rhaegar's face was full of innocence and pleasure.

"Jeyne, what did you want to see me about?" Rhaenyra redirected the conversation to Jeyne.

Jeyne, snapping out of her confusion, stammered, "I received some new information and wanted to discuss it with you."

"Come sit down and we'll talk," Rhaenyra invited, giving Rhaegar a look signaling him to leave.

Rhaegar smirked, and as if no one else was there, he removed his top jacket and draped it over Rhaenyra. "I'll leave now; you rest a little longer."

With that, he brushed shoulders with Jeyne, lifted the beaded curtain, and departed. The words that should be said have been said, and the words that want to be heard have been heard. Just go.

"Come on, ignore him," Rhaenyra said, adjusting her black blouse.

Jeyne smiled helplessly and walked over to sit down beside her.

...

Out on the balcony, Rhaegar emerged in front of a group of noble ladies and women. Having taken off his jacket, he was left in a black inner shirt, exposing his solid muscles.

The ladies blushed and hesitated to approach him. The more mature women remained composed outwardly but secretly eyed him up and down.

Rhaegar, in an agitated mood, hurried down the stairs, oblivious to their reactions.

Downstairs, the scene was chaotic. Two ugly middle-aged men were glaring at each other with angry eyes and exchanging harsh words, on the verge of a physical altercation.

"Such a foolish Coldwater, you are poor, but you cannot stand to see others rich!"

"Bitch-born Borrell, you are a bunch of scum who deserve to be gutted and hung on the gallows."

Chapter 170: Forced to Compete

The scene was chaotic, filled with noble lords watching the confrontation, their attention focused on the two figures in the center.

Rhea was absent, and Gerold watched the unfolding events with a solemn expression on his face.

Today was his wedding day, yet the destructive behavior of these two individuals showed a blatant disregard for etiquette.

"What's going on?" Rhaegar approached leisurely.

"Prince," Gerold replied with a forced smile, "Pierce Coldwater of Coldwater Burn and Godric Borrell of Sweetsister are quarreling."

The Three Sisters are a group of three islands—Sweetsister, Longsister, and Littlesister—found in the Bite, located south of White Harbor and north of the Mountains of the Moon.

The Borrell House hailed from Sweetsister Island, one of the Three Sisters Islands, while the Coldwater House, was located at the estuary west of the Five Fingers Peninsula, was a secondary noble house in the Vale, loyal to Runestone.

Gerold explained the cause of the dispute between the two parties.

The Three Sisters is the most notorious smuggling den in all of Westeros, and countless crimes have been committed there.

Pierce Coldwater's nephew had smuggled goods into the Three Sisters, intending to sell them as stolen items, only to be blackmailed by local gangs.

These gangs, under Godric Borrell's control, were responsible for the loss of Pierce's nephew and his merchandise.

Godric, fearing retaliation, had avoided returning to the Three Sisters to avoid punishment.

So Pierce used today's wedding as an opportunity to seek revenge against Godric.

Rhaegar listened intently to the story, feeling resigned to the vicious cycle of vendettas between the factions.

After a moment of reflection, he inquired, "Coldwater is a bannerman of Runestone. Shouldn't you intervene?"

Gerold shook his head in frustration. "Ever since Rhea became the Lord of Runestone, these bannermen have been at odds with each other. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare disrupt a wedding."

Rhaegar was speechless as he realized the challenges of controlling the nobles.

"In that case, allow me to suggest..." Rhaegar leaned in and whispered an idea to Gerold.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Gerold nodded in gratitude as Rhaegar approached the two quarreling men.

It was imperative to maintain order, especially on the occasion of his previous aunt's wedding, where Rhaegar represented the royal family.

With his sword drawn, Gerold slashed at the tabletop and shouted, "Enough! You're both itching for a fight, aren't you?"

Instantly, the room fell silent. Pierce and Godric, the instigators of the confrontation, glared at each other, faces flushed with anger.

Pierce, a bannerman of Runestone, held his tongue, unable to retort.

Godric, his head crowned with white hair, stood tall and imposing. With a scrutinizing gaze, he pointed accusingly at Gerold, exclaiming, "Gerold, look at your family's bannerman, starting a brawl at your wedding!"

Having spent years in the criminal underworld, Godric possessed a cunning intellect that was far different from his outward appearance. With just a few words, he shifted the blame to Pierce.

"Godric!" Gerold's voice boomed, his eyes darting between the two adversaries. "I don't care what grievances you and Pierce have. Don't cause trouble in my castle."

"Nonsense! As a guest, I have every right to speak my mind," Godric retorted arrogantly, his chin held high.

"What do you have to say, Pierce?" Gerold turned to the burly man.

"Hmph! He killed my nephew and I'm just stating the facts," Pierce roared, pounding on the table in frustration.

It was evident that neither side held much regard for Runestone.

Amidst the tension, Rhaegar stepped forward, a playful smirk on his lips. "I hear some of you are eager for a fight to liven things up?"

Rhaegar's presence shifted the atmosphere once again. The onlookers, who had enjoyed the spectacle, now grew tense, siding with Pierce.

"Prince, Pierce of House Coldwater insulted me, disregarding the rights of a guest!" Godric interjected, attempting to deflect blame.

"I have ears and eyes, I don't need your explanations," Rhaegar retorted, stepping closer to Godric, his gaze cold and unwavering.

Caught off guard, Godric stumbled backward, his pride momentarily shattered by the prince's imposing presence.

The Three Sisters, once a haven for pirates and bandits, had surrendered to the might of Visenya Targaryen and her dragon, Vhagar. The fear of dragons and royalty had since been ingrained in the natives' hearts.

"Keep quiet, or I'll silence you myself," Rhaegar's voice cut through the tension, his contempt evident.

Turning to Gerold, Rhaegar raised an eyebrow. "Ser Gerold, how do you intend to handle these troublemakers?"

Before Godric could protest and tell them he had the right of a guest, he felt a firm kick to his back. Turning, he met the stern gaze of Lord Sunderland, the lord of the Three Sisters Islands and his liege lord.

With his Lord's warning clear, Godric fell silent.

Supported by the heir, Gerold seized the opportunity. "Prince, since the festivities seem lacking, why don't we organize a small tournament to test our skills?"

As Gerold proposed the idea, his eyes fell on the two troublemakers. If they wanted to cause a scene, let them do so in a controlled environment.

"Agreed! I think that's a splendid idea!" Rhea's voice emerged from the crowd, having rushed back upon hearing reports of the commotion.

Stepping forward with a smile, she addressed the gathering, "If you seek battle, then do so honorably, like true men!"

The people of the Vale, accustomed to tradition and rough in character, eagerly voiced their agreement.

"Right! Let's settle scores honorably!"

"I'm itching for a fight! Who will face me?"

The hall erupted with chatter and anticipation.

After much commotion, Rhea instructed someone to clear a space in the back garden and led the guests to move there.

It wasn't a far walk from the banquet hall, and soon they were gathered in a circle on the grass.

Pierce and Godric, with grim expressions, were pushed onto the grass by their respective supporters.

"Let the duel commence, my lords!" Rhea declared, her demeanor stern.

Rhaegar chimed in, "Mind your blows. It's a wedding day; let's not draw too much blood."

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" The noble spectators egged them on, some even placing bets on the outcome.

With no other choice, Pierce and Godric drew their weapons and faced each other fiercely.

The pressure to fight was immense; to refuse would mean enduring lasting shame.

"Die!" Pierce roared, swinging his longsword downward.

Clang...

Godric parried the blow with his scimitar, swiftly kicked Pierce's knee, then deftly adjusted his grip and slashed across Pierce's chest.

A sickening sound filled the air.

Pierce's shirt tore open, revealing a deep, bloody gash across his chest, his skin lacerated.