

G.O Thrones 321

Chapter 321: Aemond's Growth

"Roar....."

Sunfyre let out a pained roar, its golden scales marred with bruises and bites. The Sheepstealer's relentless assault gave it no chance to fight back. With fangs locked around Sunfyre's neck, the Sheepstealer thrashed its head like a mad beast, dragging Sunfyre across the ground.

Pinned on its back, Sunfyre stretched its neck to avoid further bites, its sharp claws stabbing into the Sheepstealer's abdomen.

Rip!

Sunfyre's claws tore through a layer of chunky keratin, finally piercing the scales and hooking into the flesh beneath. For a moment, it seemed like the Sheepstealer had no flesh and blood, only rotten bones, until hot dragon blood oozed from the wound.

"Roar....."

The Sheepstealer shrieked in pain and immediately released its grip, pulling away with lightning speed.

Freed from the adult dragon's oppressive weight, Sunfyre quickly rose and unleashed a torrent of golden dragonfire.

"Roar....."

The Sheepstealer screamed again, its chest aflame, and it stumbled back. Sensing an opportunity, Sunfyre ignored its own injuries and lunged for the exposed neck.

But just as Sunfyre closed in, the Sheepstealer counterattacked fiercely. Its claws raked Sunfyre's body, and a burst of brown dragonfire erupted from its jaws.

Boom...

The mud-colored flames engulfed Sunfyre's head, causing it to recoil in agony. Despite this, Sunfyre's ferocity was undiminished. It fought to sink its teeth into the Sheepstealer's neck.

"Roar....."

The Sheepstealer shrieked, stabbing one claw into Sunfyre's chest and another into its neck, regaining the upper hand. The size and age disparity between the two dragons became starkly evident as the Sheepstealer's hideous, fierce visage bore down on Sunfyre.

With its vertical pupils locked onto Sunfyre's golden scales and pale pink wing membranes, the Sheepstealer bit down on one of Sunfyre's flailing wings, attempting to tear it apart.

"Roar....."

Sunfyre struggled, spewing golden dragonfire and gnashing its teeth into the Sheepstealer's bloodied abdomen. Though the Sheepstealer was massive, its body was unusually thin, its abdomen appearing slender.

Sunfyre's sharp jaws pierced the scales, biting into the scorching blood and flesh, aiming for the internal organs.

"Stop!!!"

Aemond yelled in desperation, "Sheepstealer, get out of the way!"

The fierce battle between the two dragons had stirred up the cliffside, with winds driving the onlookers back. Each sought refuge beside their own dragon.

Despite Aemond's dislike for the Sheepstealer's ugly form, he knew this rotten dragon was fighting for him.

Rhaegar held Aemond back, considering whether to send the Cannibal to separate the dragons. But dragons, with their hot blood and cold hearts, were difficult to separate once engaged in a real fight unless it was a matter of life and death.

"Roar..."

The Sheepstealer screamed in pain, its claws pushing away from Sunfyre as it tore violently at the other's wings in a last act of defiance.

Rip!

Sunfyre's pale pink wing membrane was slashed open with a two-meter-long gash, the edges ragged and filled with small, uneven holes. The bite marred the dragon's once magnificent appearance.

"No! My Sunfyre!" Aegon cried out in horror, as if he felt the pain himself.

Boom!

The Sheepstealer flapped its broad brown wings, launching into the air and spraying dragonfire to block Sunfyre's counterattack. Dragging its wounded body, it fled into the dark clouds, disappearing from sight.

Sunfyre, drenched in blood, was left behind with torn flesh on its neck, ribs, and right leg. Golden scales had been plowed out, and the large tear in its wing membrane made it difficult to fly. Despite its fury, Sunfyre struggled to stay aloft and eventually crashed back to the ground.

"Aemond, look what your dragon has done!" Aegon shouted, gripping Aemond's collar and forcing him to see Sunfyre's injuries.

"Let go of me, you fool!" Aemond retorted, his indignation fueling his struggle to break Aegon's grip.

Aegon, grimacing in pain, spat out, "Your dragon tore the wings of Sunfyre, the most majestic dragon of all!"

"Aegon, you started it," Aemond sneered, unmoved. "And for the last time, the Sheepstealer isn't my dragon. But I'd love to see it fight to the end and make you pay!"

Anyone could see the Sheepstealer had the upper hand in the fight, its size, strength, and combat skills clearly superior. Had the fight continued, Sunfyre would have faced a grim fate.

"Shut up, you two! You're blood brothers!" Alicent's anger reached its peak as she tried to separate her sons.

Otto stood by, silently pressing down on Aegon's clenched fist, his expression a warning. Losing Maester Mellos's support and possibly the heir's favor tonight, Aemond taming the Sheepstealer had been a rare piece of good news. Sibling rivalry at this critical moment was a dangerous joke.

As the brothers continued their heated argument, others stepped in. Helaena and Daeron squeezed between them, protecting Aemond and pulling Aegon away. Rhaegar was pushed to the side, bewildered by the sudden intensity of the brothers' anger.

Rhaenyra's foster young daughters clung to her thighs, frightened by the dragon fight and the ensuing quarrel. She gently comforted them and glanced helplessly at Rhaegar. "What should we do?" she whispered.

Rhaegar hesitated, understanding the need for intervention. He saw his father's anxious expression, Viserys's chest heaving with barely contained fury. What should have been a joyous occasion had devolved into chaos.

Viserys, furious, initially wanted to scold and separate his sons as usual. But he stopped himself. Though he was their father, he realized he couldn't always mediate between two dragon masters.

With that in mind, Viserys scanned the room.

Daemon stood with his arms crossed, watching with a smug expression. Viserys felt a surge of disgust, knowing he couldn't rely on him.

Eventually, he locked eyes with his eldest son. Their gazes met in understanding.

"Rhaegar," Viserys said softly, just the name.

Rhaegar instantly understood. "Leave it to me, father," he responded solemnly.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for—his father's approval. Despite his efforts to guide his younger siblings, his success had been limited. His interactions with Aemond during the day had made him realize the importance of blood, identity, and affection.

As the eldest, he wasn't fully trusted by his half-siblings, a consequence of their different mothers and his father's previous inaction.

Now, his father was giving him the authority to discipline, to manage his siblings as needed.

"Aegon, calm yourself!" Rhaegar stepped forward and yanked Aegon out of the fray, causing him to stumble back.

"Rhaegar, why do you care?" Aegon protested.

Aemond, equally annoyed, jumped to his feet and glared at Aegon. Rhaegar stood firm, his face calm, and shot Aemond a cold stare that stopped him in his tracks.

Under his older brother's stern gaze, Aemond reluctantly stopped.

Rhaegar turned back to the defiant Aegon. "Is fighting fun?"

Aegon froze, unsure how to answer.

With a warning look, Rhaegar glanced at the seething Aemond and exhaled. "Have you come to your senses?"

Knowing that Aegon had instigated the conflict and Aemond had been the target, he didn't want to lecture too harshly.

Rhaegar stood between his brothers, his collar blowing loose in the evening breeze.

Aegon hesitated, working up the courage to speak.

"Aegon, just take care of your dragon," Rhaegar said lightly, frowning slightly.

Aegon immediately fell silent and walked angrily toward Sunfyre.

Seeing this, Aemond reluctantly muttered, "It was him..."

"Shhh!" Rhaegar raised his index finger, signaling for silence.

Aemond, his face turning red with frustration, was forced to comply.

Rhaegar sighed, rubbed his head, and said with a straight face, "Congratulations on gaining the recognition of an adult dragon. You have proven yourself."

Without waiting for Aemond to answer, he glanced over at Helaena and Daeron and added blandly, "It's time for the children to go to bed."

Daeron hid behind Aemond, his shy eyes showing his discomfort at his older brother's severity.

Helaena stood quietly beside Aemond, her small head bowed, her violet eyes looking around nervously. She remembered her brother stepping in to teach Aegon a lesson when she was younger.

Rhaegar didn't speculate on her thoughts, but said firmly, "Now go to bed and forget tonight's unpleasantness."

Helaena winced and tugged at Aemond. "Let's go," she muttered.

Daeron nodded in agreement.

"Fine," Aemond agreed reluctantly.

Alicent gathered her children and started to leave.

After a few steps, Aemond stopped suddenly. "Aegon, you still haven't apologized to me."

Aegon paused, dismissive.

"Aegon, we are brothers. Is it so hard to apologize?" Aemond said through gritted teeth.

Rhaegar watched with interest, curious to see Aemond's true feelings.

Aegon continued toward Sunfyre, ignoring him.

Aemond stared at his back, his fists clenching and unclenching. "Aegon, you owe me an apology, and I'll make you pay for it," he muttered.

With that, he broke away from Helaena and Daeron and walked back to the castle alone.

"Aemond..." Alicent murmured, standing still, lost in thought.

Otto patted her shoulder. "Leave him alone for a while. Bickering between brothers is normal."

Rhaegar's eyes twinkled as he silently watched Aemond's retreating figure. He sensed that Aemond was a precocious child with his own plans.

Rhaenyra walked over and took his hand. "Let's go. Tell me about tonight," she said softly.

Father and Aemond had been out taming dragons, and Rhaegar had killed Grand Maester Mellos. These were events big enough to stir the continent.

"I do have a lot to say," Rhaegar replied emotionally, looking up at a streak of red in the night sky. The red meteor seemed to stretch from one side of the sky to the other.

He glanced sideways at his father. The deaths of Mellos and Borros, and the marriage of the Targaryen and Baratheon Houses, all needed his father's presence to be decided.

Alicent took off her cloak and draped it over her husband's bare shoulders as they strolled along, leaning on each other. Rhaegar tilted his head slightly, sensing it wasn't the time to interrupt. Rhaenyra laughed and followed the group, arm in arm.

Chapter 322: Dragon Eggs and Wild Dragons

Three days later...

Dragonmont, Eastern Mountain Range

"Give me your hand and stamp your feet hard."

"Wait, I haven't stepped firmly yet."

...

On the steep mountainside, Rhaegar lay half-faced on the rock face, reaching out to help Aemond climb up.

Rustling...

After an arduous climb, Aemond finally made it up the steep slope and collapsed to the ground, panting and exhausted.

"Take a breather, the cave is just around the corner."

Rhaegar took a sip from his water pouch and handed it casually.

Looking around, the brothers stood on a treacherous peak, their silver hair fluttering in the salty sea breeze. The mountain was barren, littered with sharp debris, miles away from the towering active volcano.

"Roar..."

An ear-splitting roar echoed as a cascade of debris fell from the mountain top. The dragon covered in brown, mud-colored scales, known as Sheepstealer, landed on a craggy patch of cliff, peering down at the brothers with a mischievous look.

Aemond's face fell at the sound. "This stupid thing will wear me out before it's ready to do anything."

After days of separation, he had reluctantly accepted the fact that he had won Sheepstealer's favor. But the dragon still found ways to torment him.

"This treacherous peak is Sheepstealer's territory, and it insists we visit its lair," Rhaegar explained, rubbing Aemond's head in amusement. He stood up to continue climbing.

Cannibal and Silverwing had suffered minor injuries from their battles and were recuperating at the sea cliffs. Sheepstealer had also been injured dealing with Sunfyre and was not yet ready for Aemond to ride.

Aemond's eyes darkened, and he said despondently, "I'd rather not have any treasure. I just want to take a boat back to King's Landing with Father and the others."

The day after Viserys tamed Vermithor, Rhaegar explained the mounting troubles one by one. The vacation had abruptly ended, and the overwhelmed king led his family back to King's Landing to address the problems. Aemond, however, was pestered by Sheepstealer and forced to stay on Dragonstone.

At this moment, only Aemond, Rhaegar, and the unaware Four Storms remained on the island.

As the sun climbed higher, reaching noon, Rhaegar was the first to reach the mountain top. He took a deep breath. "It's been a while since I've been this active."

Looking around, he saw Dragonmont stretching far and wide under the azure sky.

Aemond soon joined him, tired and sweating profusely.

"Roar..."

The Sheepstealer roared, perching on the mountain peak and flapping his wings as if to show off his self-proclaimed majesty.

Rhaegar shook his head with a bemused smile, glancing at the sullen Aemond before moving towards the cave, littered with sheep bones and dragon dung.

The cave entrance was narrow, but the interior was spacious and surprisingly shallow, resembling a natural cavern.

The brothers entered, tripping over bones and rotten rocks until they reached a makeshift nest. Dragon nests are best located near volcanoes, where they can bask in the high temperatures of underground magma. The next best are dark, stifling underground caves like the Dragonpit.

Rhaegar stared at the crude nest made of rotten wood, stone, and mud with dismay. "Aemond, you've really found a treasure. The Sheepstealer is definitely not an ordinary dragon."

"Rhaegar, please stop," Aemond muttered, covering his face with his hands.

Rhaegar's brows furrowed in concern. "Let's see what's in the nest."

He recalled that wild dragons had different habits than those tamed from birth, and their survival environments varied significantly. The Grey Ghost lived on the east coast of Dragonstone, finding a cliff cave with seabirds as neighbors. The Cannibal had no fixed nest, living wherever it pleased and flying all over the world. Compared to them, a Sheepstealer's nest seemed logical.

Navigating through a field of skeletons was difficult. The grotto was filled with bones, rotten rocks, and dragon dung. Most of the skeletons were goats, but there were also large dogs and human remains scattered about.

"Not bad for a wild dragon with the most contact with humans," Rhaegar mused, raising the perceived danger of wild dragons.

"Rhaegar, come look at this!" Aemond called, his smaller frame more agile as he navigated through the mess and climbed up the massive nest.

Rhaegar stopped dawdling and quickly joined him. Climbing along the exposed logs of the nest, they uncovered the collapsed center, revealing a hoard of different-colored gems, a rotting wooden box glinting with gold, broken swords, and remnants of armor—all shiny objects that dragons favored.

Rhaegar's eyes were drawn to two oval dragon eggs nestled among the gems. "Dragon eggs?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and they look like they can hatch," Aemond said excitedly, holding out the two dragon eggs.

Rhaegar examined them; one was green and the other light purple, both showing signs of hatching activity. "Could the green egg be Silverwing's?" Aemond speculated, touching it carefully.

"Probably. Vhagar stopped laying eggs long ago. Only Silverwing would be suitable," Rhaegar agreed, looking out of the cave with an odd expression. "Do Sheepstealers have a penchant for stealing dragon eggs?"

He had thought only Cannibal would do such a thing, and that was mainly for satisfying his hunger.

"What if it's an egg laid by Sheepstealer?" Aemond guessed.

Rhaegar pondered for a moment and shook his head. "Dragons don't have genders, but they do have habits. Sheepstealer doesn't seem like an egg-laying dragon. Otherwise, it wouldn't have let us take them."

Aemond's eyes brightened, and he let out a relieved "Oh."

"Don't dawdle. You found the dragon eggs, and when you have children in the future, you can pick from these two," Rhaegar said cheerfully.

Aemond pursed his lips and remained silent.

The brothers soon emerged from the cave.

Aemond took off his cloak, using it to wrap the two dragon eggs and secure them to his waist. Rhaegar, not wanting to waste the Sheepstealer's goodwill, used his space bracelet to collect a pile of precious stones and the crushed gold from the chest.

This unexpected bounty would help cover the costs of constructing Harrenhal and training the Fearless, expenses that had been significant.

He and Aemond agreed to split the loot, taking advantage of the Sheepstealer's unwitting generosity.

As the afternoon wore on, they slowly descended the mountain, chatting as they went. Aemond often sought out his older brother Rhaegar to discuss dragon taming, warfare, and the management of fiefdoms. Rhaegar, in turn, offered specific advice, hoping that Aemond would grow into a reliable leader, unlike their useless brother Aegon.

"Roar..."

Suddenly, the Sheepstealer swooped overhead, its sharp claws piercing the rock as it perched on a ledge.

"What's wrong with it?" Rhaegar asked, puzzled.

Having just raided the dragon's nest, Rhaegar wondered if it was coming for revenge.

Aemond shook his head, unable to sense the dragon's emotions because of their lack of a bond.

"Roar..."

The Sheepstealer roared shrilly, its dried-up dragonhead sniffing the air before flapping its wings excitedly and taking off.

"It seems like it's found an enemy," Rhaegar observed, frowning slightly. "You keep climbing down. I'll check it out."

Dragons had a strong sense of territory, and the Sheepstealer's reaction suggested it felt threatened by an intruder.

Click...

Navigating the uneven mountain rocks, Rhaegar slowly approached the crags, examining the area where the Sheepstealer had landed. The rocks bore several messy, huge claw marks, each about three fingers in length—unusually large.

"A dragon?" Rhaegar's eyes widened with surprise. The size and shape of the claw marks could only have been left by a dragon, given the steep cliffs.

Examining the marks further, he noted they were larger than Syrax or Sunfyre's but smaller than the Sheepstealer's. "Not a dragon on the island," he speculated. "A wild dragon!"

Considering the known dragons: Vhagar, Cannibal, and Vermithor were all true giants, much larger than the Sheepstealer. Silverwing and Dreamfyre were also larger, and Caraxes and Meleys, although slightly smaller, still exceeded the size of the claw marks.

The fourth-generation dragons, Syrax, Sunfyre, Seasmoke, and Grey Ghost, were all smaller than the Sheepstealer.

"This wild dragon is probably around forty or fifty years old," Rhaegar calculated, "its size between the family's fourth-generation and third-generation dragons."

A sudden realization struck him. "The Wild Dragon of the Smoking Sea?" After the Doom of Valyria, the Targaryens' dragons were supposed to be the only ones left, with all others residing on Dragonstone or the Dragonpit.

The Cannibal was the only known wild dragon, notorious for eating dragon eggs and young dragons. Now, there's a new trace of a wild dragon on Dragonstone Island?

A sense of urgency gripped Rhaegar. Tightening the cloak around his waist that held the dragon eggs, he quickly descended the mountain with Aemond.

The steepness gradually lessened, and they landed safely at the base, where an old man and a young Dragonkeeper were waiting.

"Prince, you finally came down the mountain. Miss Cassandra asked about you many times," the older Dragonkeeper spoke in rich High Valyrian.

Rhaegar unbuckled the cloak and carefully handed the two dragon eggs to the young Dragonkeeper, instructing in High Valyrian, "Store them in the cellar under the Stone Drum."

"Yes, Prince," the young Dragonkeeper replied, handling the eggs with great care.

Rhaegar then turned to the older Dragonkeeper, pointing to the mountain with the claw marks.

"There is a wild dragon on the island, in Dragonmont, the east coast. Increase Dragonkeeper patrols in these areas."

The older Dragonkeeper peered up in surprise. Rhaegar grabbed his arm, eyes cold. "If you spot an unknown wild dragon, leave a marker and send word immediately. I will ride the Cannibal to hunt it."

"Hunt?" The elderly Dragonkeeper's mouth fell open.

"That's right," Rhaegar affirmed. "Do you hear me?"

No dragon that did not belong to the Targaryens would be allowed to roam free, potentially threatening the family. If this wild dragon dared to appear, it would either be captured and added to the Dragonpit or hunted down and killed to satisfy the Cannibal's appetite.

Chapter 323: The Lost Dragon Eggs

"As you wish, Prince," the elderly Dragonkeeper replied, understanding the gravity of the situation.

Nearby, Aemond absorbed the information and asked, "There really is a wild dragon on Dragonstone Island?"

"Thinking about taming it?" Rhaegar teased, calming down.

Aemond quickly shook his head. "Sheepstealer... it's more powerful than Sunfyre."

Rhaegar chuckled. "Let's go, silly boy."

The Four Storms were still waiting for Aemond back at the Stone Drum Tower with high expectations.

On their way back, Aemond couldn't contain his curiosity. "Why hunt the wild dragon? Can't it just stay on Dragonstone Island?"

Rhaegar glanced at him. "How would you feel about living in Storm's End with a Baratheon daughter?"

"No! I don't want to," Aemond replied instantly.

"Exactly," Rhaegar said with a playful smile.

Aemond paused, realizing the implication. He wouldn't want to stay in Storm's End, and the wild dragon likely wouldn't want to remain on Dragonstone Island.

Seeing Aemond's thoughtful expression, Rhaegar decided to teach him a lesson. "Aemond, why do you think our family rules Westeros?" he asked softly.

"Because we have dragons," Aemond answered confidently.

"Exactly, the dragons," Rhaegar said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Isn't it amazing that the Conqueror took Westeros with just three dragons?"

"Of course," Aemond replied without hesitation.

Aegon the Conqueror, along with his sisters and queens, Visenya and Rhaenys, had three dragons and established a unified dynasty in just a few years. Aemond, well-versed in their history, felt a surge of restlessness in his young heart.

To him, if three conquerors with three dragons could subdue the continent, their family, with so many dragons, might even rule beyond the Narrow Sea.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Rhaegar said, giving Aemond a light slap on the back of the head.

"War means sacrifice. It's not something to be taken lightly."

Rhaegar could guess what was running through Aemond's mind. The Targaryens were indeed powerful, with nine dragonriders in the family. But when it came to war, only a few could truly be counted on to fight.

Rhaegar and his Cannibal were at the forefront, followed by Aegon with Sunfyre, and their father with Vermithor. Then there were Daemon with Caraxes, and Rhaenys with Meleys. The rest were either too young or carried Velaryon names.

Holding his head where he was hit, Aemond asked, "What are you trying to say?"

"Targaryens are powerful not just because we have dragons, but because others don't," Rhaegar explained.

"But Valyria is gone. The only Dragonlord family left is Targaryen," Aemond retorted.

"Do you really think so?" Rhaegar asked, watching Aemond's reaction.

Aemond hesitated. "What's the problem?"

Rhaegar sighed, realizing the gaps in his brother's understanding. "Aemond, how many dragons are there on Dragonstone Island?"

Queen Alyssane had abolished the Lord's right to the first night, and over the centuries, many of the island's bastards had silver hair and purple eyes, marking them as Dragonseeds. These bastards far outnumbered the proper Targaryens, yet they weren't allowed to tame dragons without permission.

"The Dragonseeds can't tame dragons without permission, and Dragonmont is patrolled by Dragonkeepers," Aemond said.

"What if it's not a Targaryen dragon?" Rhaegar asked. "Valyria is gone, but its descendants are scattered across Essos. Do you know how many dragons the other fallen Dragonlord families might have?"

It wasn't that these descendants lacked the ability to tame dragons—they just didn't have the opportunity.

Aemond's eyes widened. "So, you're hunting wild dragons to prevent them from being tamed by exiled dragon families."

"Not just wild dragons," Rhaegar said seriously. "Any dragon, dragon egg, or even a fossilized dragon egg that falls into someone else's hands, I will ride Cannibal to retrieve."

"Have we lost any dragon eggs?" Aemond asked, recalling an old story.

Rhaegar nodded. "During the time of great-grandfather Jaehaerys, three Dreamfyre's dragon eggs were lost."

Back then, Dreamfyre's rider was Rhaena Targaryen. Her close friend Elissa had stolen Dreamfyre's dragon eggs, trading them for a ship and gold to start a life of seafaring adventure.

When Rhaena found out, she executed many Dragonkeepers and informed her brother Jaehaerys. He was furious and spent a fortune trying to recover the eggs, but they were never found.

Jaehaerys had warned that if any of the dragon eggs hatched, they would have to wage war against whoever possessed them.

"This matter should be pursued to the end," Aemond declared with conviction.

"Great-grandfather gave up on this pursuit in his later years, nearly seventy years ago now," Rhaegar replied softly.

Aemond, worried, said, "It usually takes a hundred years for a dragon egg to completely lose the possibility of hatching."

"Yes, but father seems to have long forgotten about that," Rhaegar responded, then added with a smile, "Remember my hobby of collecting and offering bounties for ancient relics?"

Aemond nodded, his disbelief evident.

Rhaegar blinked and affirmed, "I'm not only collecting ancient relics, I'm also offering bounties for any information about dragons."

"Really?" Aemond's eyes widened in astonishment, not realizing how serious his brother Rhaegar was about this.

Rhaegar patted Aemond's head and laughed. "Some time ago, I dispatched an intelligence organization in Volantis to receive news from Essos at any time."

Syrio's role was more than just monitoring Volantis; he was Rhaegar's eyes and ears on the other side of the Narrow Sea.

Beyond the hidden danger of the three dragon eggs, the relics of the Dragonlord families had given Rhaegar too much. He was determined to gather as much knowledge about the Dragonlord families as possible to enrich the Targaryen heritage.

Stunned and shocked, Aemond gazed at his elder brother, an inexplicable admiration shining in his eyes. Far away from the Red Keep's grudge, he saw his brother as powerful and full of wisdom, someone he could learn much from.

Rhaegar just smiled. Their father might only know how to organize banquets and martial arts competitions, leaving the ruling of the realm to the Small Council, but Rhaegar knew he had to make plans of his own.

...

The following day:

"Roar—"

"Roar..."

Two distinct dragon roars echoed over Dragonstone Island. Cannibal, black as charcoal, surged into the clouds, emitting a terrifying scream.

On the black iron saddle, Maris of the Four Storms sat at the center, with her sisters Ellyn and Floris huddled in her arms. All three were tightly fastened with chains for safety. In front of them, a black-robed Rhaegar sat straddling the ridge with his eyes closed, arms spread wide.

Having cleared out the nest of Sheepstealer, the brothers departed to return to King's Landing.

Trailing far behind Cannibal, the brown clay-colored Sheepstealer soared at a cautious distance. On its back, Aemond clung tightly to its chunky back scales, his mouth agape. Behind him, Cassandra held on for dear life, her arms wrapped around his waist and her head buried in a shriek of alarm.

Sheepstealer, a freshly tamed wild dragon, hadn't yet been fitted with a saddle. Aemond had repeatedly assured Cassandra it could be ridden directly, convincing her to join him in a daring dragon-riding escapade. Now, she regretted it, fearing she might wet her skirt in terror.

Setting out in the morning, the two dragons crossed Blackwater Bay by noon and soared over King's Landing.

"Roar—"

Cannibal circled the city, habitually roaring with its head held high, basking in the gaze of all below. Rhaegar smiled, announcing their return.

"Roar..."

Sheepstealer followed, its thieving eyes surveying the city with curiosity. It soared around the tall buildings, its wings stirring the air and causing the bronze bells of the towering church bell tower to chime.

"Sheepstealer, back to the Dragonpit!" Aemond commanded urgently, his face pale. Along the way, Sheepstealer had deliberately toyed with him, flying erratically and nearly throwing him off several times. He held on with all his might while Cassandra screamed in terror behind him.

The two dragons circled twice before slowly flying towards Rhaenys's Hill, landing at the grotto entrance at the back of the Dragonpit.

The front of the Dragonpit was the Great Hall; the back door led to the crypt hollowed out of the mountain.

Rhaegar helped the shivering Maris and her sisters off Cannibal's back, shaking his head. He had suggested they return to King's Landing by boat, but they insisted on experiencing the thrill of dragon riding. Cannibal, extremely fast, made the mid-air wind a challenge to endure. They fared better than expected.

Sheepstealer, another adult dragon, was not much slower and could keep pace with Cannibal, who was holding back.

Aemond slowly climbed down from Sheepstealer, carrying a frozen Cassandra on his back. The Dragonkeeper arrived at the sound, speaking High Valyrian to guide the dragons into the lair. Cannibal and Sheepstealer complied, barely acknowledging the Dragonkeeper.

Rhaegar watched with amusement, gaining a more objective understanding of wild dragons.

A lacquered white wheeled carriage approached the Dragonpit. "Vermithor, go forward..."

As the two dragons entered the pit, Dragonkeepers in rough cloth and linen tapped their bamboo staffs, leading a massive bronze beast forward. The carriage door opened, and out stepped Viserys, dressed in pitch-black splendor and wearing a crown.

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Alicent, dressed in a stunning green gown that accentuated her marvelous figure, gracefully stepped out next. Viserys, looking vibrant and full of smiles, assisted his wife as they walked hand in hand.

They were followed by the Hand of the King, Lyonel, who led a group of royal advisors who descended from the carriage one by one.

"Ohhh~" Rhaegar raised an eyebrow and stepped forward to greet them.

"Rhaegar, you rogue, you've finally decided to return," Viserys remarked half-jokingly.

Rhaegar laughed and asked, "Father, are you planning to travel by dragon?"

Seeing Vermithor released suggested more than a simple outing.

Viserys, adjusting his fine clothes and gently wrapping his arm around Alicent's waist, responded smugly, "I've been invited by Lord Walys of Maidenpool and decided to take Alicent to soak in the Jonquil's Pool."

"Soak in the pool?" Rhaegar questioned, eyeing the approaching royal advisers. "Lord Borros is dead, and Storm's End still needs your attention to settle the matter."

Taking a closer look at his father, he noticed not just a marked improvement but a vibrant transformation. Viserys, with his straightened posture, silver-golden hair flowing freely, and clean-shaven face, looked revitalized and energetic.

Viserys, beaming with happiness, explained, "I spoke with your aunt Rhaenys. Aemond is leading a team to escort the Four Storms back to Storm's End fortress. With Rhaenys's help, the heir and marriage matters are being handled."

The cause of Borros's death remained unresolved, and Lady Elenda left the investigation to her father, Royce Caron. The crucial issues were the marriage alliance between the Targaryen and Baratheon Houses and ensuring Cassandra, Borros's eldest daughter, inherited Storm's End Castle.

Rhaegar, taken aback, could only admire, "Aunt Rhaenys acts swiftly."

He had anticipated trouble at Storm's End, but it seemed matters were resolved quietly and efficiently.

"Of course," Viserys boasted, "back in the day, your aunt was known as The Queen Who Never Was. Her reputation was much greater than mine."

Viserys, clearly enjoying the moment, instructed, "I'll be leaving immediately and aim to be soaking in the pool by evening. The Small Council and King's Landing are in your hands."

"Father, you know I have a lot to handle in your absence..."

"Rhaegar, you are my eldest son, the Regent Heir of the Kingdom," Viserys interrupted firmly.

"Whatever happens in King's Landing during my absence is your responsibility. Don't say you can't manage."

Rhaegar frowned slightly, "It's about the defense of King's Landing and changes to the Small Council."

"Still, you are in full charge," Viserys insisted, showing little interest but offering encouragement.

Rhaegar felt a bit uneasy, glancing sideways at the royal advisers. Lyonel and the others remained silent.

"They will all assist you. You need to get familiar with these duties in advance," Viserys added, patting his eldest son's shoulder. Then, with a pleased look, he suddenly mentioned, "And stop wearing black robes all the time. You're the Heir. You should dress appropriately."

Turning to his wife, he said, "Alicent, call Terra."

Alicent softly called out, and a tall maid emerged from the carriage.

"Prince," the maid said respectfully, "a set of clothes has been prepared within the carriage."

Rhaegar, surprised, followed the maid into the carriage.

A few minutes later, Rhaegar changed from his black robe into a black tunic adorned with silver ornaments. His short silver-gold hair was smoothed back and tied into a low ponytail with a hair band.

Viserys, watching him, couldn't contain his pride. "Look at my boy, much more handsome than my complacent brother," he boasted. Having Rhaegar had shown him why Westeros nobles were so keen on having handsome, wise heirs. Just looking at Rhaegar lifted his spirits.

"Father, you don't have to go to so much trouble," Rhaegar said, feeling a bit awkward.

Despite his words, Rhaegar's noble demeanor made every movement seem natural. He looked good in everything, as Rhaenyra often attested. He preferred his black robes for their ease of care.

"Nonsense," Viserys said, smiling. "An heir should look the part. Clothes make the man, just as saddles make the horse."

With a wave of his hand, Viserys dismissed Rhaegar. "Go on, now. It's your father's turn to enjoy life."

He wrapped his arm around Alicent's waist and strode towards Vermithor. Alicent looked uneasy and whispered, "Viserys, I really don't want to ride a dragon."

"Don't worry," Viserys reassured her. "Vermithor has a saddle. You'll be safe."

He ignored her protests, helping her onto the dragon's back.

"Roar!" Vermithor let out a low roar and flapped his massive wings, soaring into the air. Viserys' joyous laughter echoed faintly as they flew.

Rhaegar watched with a frown. "It seems my ascension to the Iron Throne has been delayed by another ten years," he joked to Lyonel.

Lyonel smiled. "That's good news. The maester said the king's wounds are no longer inflamed and just need some painkillers."

"Indeed," Rhaegar agreed. He suspected dragon riding had helped heal his father more than expected, perhaps due to a change in mindset.

Lyonel spoke up, "Prince, it's time to depart. The men you requested from Harrenhal are waiting at the Dragon Gate."

"Let's go then," Rhaegar nodded. He noticed Aemond and the Four Storms nearby. "Aemond, should we take them back to the Red Keep? The Baratheon ladies don't look well."

Aemond responded casually, "No need. Ser Steffon from the Kingsguard will pick us up soon."

Rhaegar glanced at the pale Cassandra, who was being supported by her sisters. "Are you sure?"

Aemond, unperturbed, replied, "No problem. I'll take care of them."

Rhaegar stared into his brother's eyes, searching for any sign of insincerity. Aemond's gaze remained steady.

After a moment, Rhaegar said, "Make sure to manage everything well. If there's any issue, contact Dragonpit Maester Maynard."

With that, Rhaegar boarded the carriage and departed with his advisors.

As the carriage rolled away, Aemond turned to the Four Storms huddled together. Maris, comforting her eldest sister Cassandra, whispered, "We should have gone with Prince Rhaegar."

"Didn't I say Ser Stephen will be here soon?" Aemond's tone was flat.

Maris, frustrated, tried to console her sister. They had already lost Prince Aegon as a potential match and couldn't afford to upset the more promising Aemond.

Aemond squatted, resting his chin on his hands. "Rest for a while. There's some big news coming."

"What news?" Maris asked, suspecting it might be about Aemond's choice of a betrothed.

Aemond shook his head gently. "Trust me, you don't want to know. Enjoy the peace while it lasts."

...

The carriage emerged from the Rhaenys's Hill, following a straight path toward the towering Dragon Gate, which soon loomed into view. The gate, adorned with a giant carving of a dragon in flight, stood open wide enough for two carriages to pass side by side.

Swish... Swish...

A group of soldiers in black helmets and armor, holding spears and shields, marched through the gate. At a glance, they resembled the Unsullied from Astapor. The soldiers, moving in neat, uniform ranks, numbered in the thousands.

Leading the soldiers were three high-mounted riders, each distinctively dressed. As the wheeled palace pulled up to the street, Rhaegar lifted the curtains, silently admiring the scene.

"Prince, are these the Fearless you've trained to follow the Unsullied?" Otto inquired, sitting up straight.

Rhaegar nodded. "This is the initial batch. There are still two thousand left to garrison Harrenhal."

His time in Harrenhal hadn't been just for repairs. Harrenhal's vast fertile lands in the Riverlands provided an ample pool of recruits. Rhaegar had selected thousands of 13 to 16-year-old boys from poor families with at least one living parent and more than one child. These conditions ensured loyalty and bravery in battle.

After recruiting a thousand men, it became challenging to find suitable soldiers from the civilians in Harrenhal. Rhaegar then turned his attention to the flea dens of King's Landing, where countless destitute children could be found.

Boys of the right age were selected for training, while girls were either assigned as maids in Harrenhal or sent to the Mushroom Set Caravan for handicraft work.

As long as they were hardworking, they were guaranteed shelter and food. When Flea Bottom ran out of recruits, Rhaegar began taking in strong young slaves and war orphans from the crownlands and the Vale. These recruits were loyal, eager to train, and competent fighters.

Otto, absorbing Rhaegar's explanation, remained silent but contemplative. Three thousand armored soldiers represented a formidable force anywhere.

Turning to Lyonel, Rhaegar instructed, "Lord Lyonel, I've purchased an area on the Street of Steel large enough for three thousand soldiers. You'll oversee the construction of a barracks there. One thousand Fearless will serve as the garrison for King's Landing."

With a population exceeding hundreds of thousands, the city's law and order were notoriously chaotic. The existing garrison of two thousand Gold Cloaks was insufficient. Even with the addition of the Dragonkeepers from the Dragonpit and the Kingsguard from the Red Keep, more was needed. The Gold Cloaks camped on Silk Street in the east, so the new garrison on Steel Street in the west would help secure the city from both sides, protecting the Red Keep.

Lyonel nodded. "Prince, I know that area. It's just west of the Alchemists' Guild."

"Exactly," Rhaegar mused. "Since the wildfire incident at the Battle of Harrenhal, many charlatans in the city claim to be Alchemists. The Fearless can keep an eye on them."

With arrangements for the Fearless in place, Rhaegar glanced back at the soldiers on the street. The three leading riders caught his eye. Two were clad in armor, riding confidently. The third, in rough linen, had curly brown hair and a pale face. On his shoulders perched a white falcon and a black crow.

Rhaegar's lips curled into a smile. "Tormund, you're hopeless on a horse. Join us in the carriage."

Chapter 325: Master of Whisperers

Tormund glanced back from his horse with an involuntary smile. Dismounting smoothly, he walked straight to the spacious carriage.

Rhaegar opened the carriage door and asked, "How are things at Harrenhal?"

"Not bad. The construction is nearly complete. Maester Tru has gone to Oldtown with a letter of recommendation," Tormund replied crisply as he stepped onto the short stool provided by the coachman.

Upon entering the carriage, Tormund was struck by the lavishness of the interior. He looked around at the circle of royal advisers and greeted them politely, "I hope my presence hasn't disturbed you, my lords."

"A young man who understands manners," Lyman remarked, nodding gently while nibbling on a cookie and sipping his tea.

Tormund felt a pair of dim old eyes scrutinizing him. Becoming a member of the Small Council meant even an old man with gray hair had significant influence.

This scene did not escape Rhaegar's notice. He poured two cups of sweet fruit wine. Tormund, still standing at the entrance, had to stoop slightly due to the low ceiling, maintaining a polite smile.

Lyonel, Otto, and Jasper observed him critically, assuming he was one of the Heir's close friends, not yet worthy of direct communication with them.

The sound of wine being poured drew their attention. Rhaegar placed one of the glasses with a thud in front of Lyonel. The carriage was spacious, and the royal advisers sat casually. Rhaegar sat on a soft cushion to the left, with the impeccably dressed Otto to his right, and the nervous Jasper further in. Lyman, a highly respected elder, sat alone in a soft corner next to Jasper. Hand of the King Lyonel sat across from Rhaegar.

Lyonel's eyes sharpened as he noticed the glass of wine placed near him. Rhaegar feigned surprise and gestured to the seat next to Lyonel, saying, "What are you waiting for? Sit next to Lord Lyonel."

"Thank you, Prince," Tormund said, raising an eyebrow. He took his seat gracefully, picked up the wine, and took a light sip.

Rhaegar smiled, raising his own glass in a toast. The two young men drank together, completely disregarding the opinions of the royal advisers.

Lyonel's brows furrowed as he shifted in his seat, his expression growing serious. Letting a young man sit beside him and sharing a drink with the Heir suggested a significant gesture. It implied that Tormund might be considered equal to him, the Hand of the King, in the future.

The political significance of this move did not escape the notice of the seasoned royal advisers.

Without waiting for Lyonel to speak, Lyman wiped cookie crumbs from his mouth and asked knowingly, "Prince, you haven't introduced this...young man."

Rhaegar put down his wine, glanced around at the royal advisers, and laughed softly. "Tormund, my best friend since childhood. He's the bastard son of Lord Bartimos of Claw Isle and a Skinchanger."

"A bastard son and a rare Skinchanger?" Lyman remarked, noticing the white falcon and black raven on Tormund's shoulders. In Westeros, bastards were frowned upon, and Skinchangers, with their supernatural powers, were often seen as dangerous.

It is rumored that there are many skinchangers among the wildlings beyond the Wall in the north.

King Jaehaerys had also ridden Vermithor alongside the Night's Watch and defeated an army of wildlings made up of giants and skinchangers.

"It's true," Tormund said calmly. "My father doesn't care if I live or die, so it's best you regard me as a commoner."

"I recall you once had only a white falcon?" Lyonel asked politely. The two had known each other since the Harrenhal exchanges.

In recent years, Tormund managed the Mushroom Set, and he's known as the White Falcon kept by the Heir.

Rhaegar also looked at Tormund with some curiosity.

Skinchangers could usually only possess one animal, and Tormund was no different.

Tormund nodded, explaining, "A few days ago, I took over Maester Tru's ravens, and I unknowingly bonded with one of them."

"That's good news," Rhaegar said thoughtfully, considering the recent increase in magic power triggered by the red comet.

Otto interjected seriously, "Prince, this Skinchanger is your spokesperson in the Riverlands. What are your plans for transferring him to King's Landing?"

Rhaegar didn't hesitate. "The death of Lord Borros is too strange. The royal family and Storm's End Castle haven't found any leads. The Iron Throne lacks sufficient intelligence."

"Prince," Lyonel began, "the king runs King's Landing's intelligence and has never extended beyond the royal domain."

Rhaegar smiled, "Lord Lyonel, I don't question your ability. Your contributions are clear."

Lyonel's face eased. "Then you want to re-establish a network of spiders?"

"No," Rhaegar shook his head. "I want to reactivate the position of Master of Whisperers, specializing in intelligence for the Iron Throne."

Lyonel was astonished. "Prince, the Master of Whisperers sits on the Small Council. It's a controversial position."

"Too much disturbing intelligence can corrupt a lord's impartiality," Lyman added.

It's been over seventy years since they had a Master of Whisperers. The last was under Maegor I and was his mistress, known as Tyanna of Pentos, and committed heinous crimes.

Rhaegar's face was solemn. "Father has entrusted me with the regency. The Master of Whisperers must be reactivated. This isn't up for debate."

"Prince..." Lyman began to protest.

"Lord Lyman," Rhaegar interrupted, "You don't need to worry, the Master of Whisperers will only oversee sinister activities."

Turning to Tormund, he announced, "I now appoint Tormund as Master of Whisperers, with a seat on the Small Council."

The royal advisors exchanged glances, stunned into silence; the king used to consult them on all matters, but the king had only been gone a day, and already the heir was making significant changes.

Tormund, feeling the tension, smiled awkwardly. "My lords, we will be colleagues from now on."

For a moment, dead silence hung in the air.

Otto shook his head, a faint smile playing on his lips, and broke the ice. "I've heard about you. You participated in the Second Battle of the Stepstones."

"Yes, one must serve one's realm in many ways," Tormund replied frankly. He extended his hand with a warm smile, "Lord Otto, you are a loyal and good adviser. I have long considered you a friend."

Interestingly, Tormund extended his left hand, while his right hand gently stroked the white falcon perched on his shoulder.

Otto's eyes narrowed, and his smile grew more calculated. He was a right-handed man, known for writing and working predominantly with his right hand. However, few knew that in his youth, he had trained himself to use both hands equally to better facilitate his scholarly pursuits.

"Is something wrong?" Tormund asked, his facial features soft and his smile seemingly innocent.

Otto stared coldly at him, losing all interest in continuing the conversation. The so-called long-time friendship was likely just a cover for Tormund's Skinchanger abilities, which had probably been used to monitor him for years.

The atmosphere grew tense as the new master and the old master struggled to connect.

Rhaegar paid little attention to the awkward exchange and promptly ordered the carriage driver, "Return to the Red Keep!"

He remembered Rhaenyra's advice about his lack of roots in the Small Council. As he grew older and expanded his influence, he aimed to reverse this situation.

Master of Ships Tyland was no less cunning than Otto. After the Battle of the Stepstones, Tyland's claims to glory were stripped away, leaving him out of the Small Council for three years. During this time, Rhaegar honed his skills.

Grand Maester Mellos was a sycophant who adjusted his loyalty based on the prevailing winds. Rhaegar was just biding his time to remove him.

To dilute the power of the Small Council, Rhaegar had also created the position of Master of Dragons to strengthen the Targaryen House sense of unity.

Now, as the Regent, Rhaegar was determined to pick up the pieces. The appointment of a new Master of Whisperers was just the beginning.

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About half an hour later, the carriage pulled into the gates of the Red Keep.

Three silver-armored, white-robed Kingsguards stood in a line, greeting them respectfully.

Rhaegar was the first to step down from the carriage, his gaze directed towards the gates. There, alongside two young knights on warhorses, stood Grey Worm, his expression solemn, flanked by ten Unsullied with upright postures.

"Prince..."

The two knights dismounted, removing their helmets to reveal familiar faces: Lord of Stone Mill, Robb Rivers, and Lord of Raventree Hall, Samwell Blackwood.

Rhaegar greeted them warmly before turning to Grey Worm. "How many Unsullied captains remain in the army?"

"Ten," Grey Worm replied succinctly.

Rhaegar pondered for a moment and nodded. He commanded over four hundred Unsullied, primarily his personal guards, with a small contingent assigned as basic commanders in the Fearless Legion. Ten Unsullied captains were sufficient to manage a thousand Fearless.

Grey Worm continued, "Three hundred Unsullied remain in Harrenhal. Two thousand Fearless are managed by my lieutenants, Vandel and Red Worm."

Rhaegar patted his shoulder, showing his trust, before turning his attention to the three Kingsguards. The Unsullied's loyalty was unquestionable, and he had great confidence in Grey Worm's leadership.

As the royal advisers disembarked from the carriage and headed to their quarters, Rhaegar softly said, "Lord Lyonel, wait a moment. I have something to discuss with you in private."

Lyonel was slightly taken aback but stood aside with Tormund in silence.

The three Kingsguards approached, bowing respectfully. "Prince."

Rhaegar smiled and nodded to each of them. The Kingsguard was the King's private guard and held the highest honor. Erryk Cargyll had been promoted to Commander of the Kingsguard and was assigned to guard the King, while his brother, Arryk Cargyll, was assigned to guard the Queen, Alicent.

With the king traveling to Maidenpool, the Cargyll brothers had led the guard of honor two days in advance, explaining their absence from the Red Keep.

Chapter 326: Trial of Larys

In addition to the Cargyll brothers, there were four other current members of the Kingsguard.

Ser Steffon Darklyn had gone to greet Aemond and the Four Storms, likely at the Dragonpit at the moment. Ser Steffon hailed from the Darklyn House of the Crownlands and was the uncle of the Lord of Duskendale.

Having served as a Kingsguard for many years, his thinning brown curls and narrow eye corners gave him an aged appearance. He was known for his hardworking nature and a strong sense of justice, traits that Rhaegar deeply admired.

Present before Rhaegar were the three remaining Kingsguard members:

Ser Lorent Marbrand, from House Marbrand of Ashemark of the Westerlands, stood tall and bald with a resolute face. Known for his strict demeanor and sharp swordsmanship, he was a figure of discipline.

Ser Rickard Thorne, from a small family in the Crownlands, had a lean build, thick eyebrows, and a pugnacious aura. His martial prowess was matched by his rough yet generous personality.

Ser Willis Fell of Felwood in the Stormlands was a typical Stormland man—strong, rugged, and with keen, piercing eyes. He was a loner, not inclined to much communication.

Rhaegar was less familiar with these three Kingsguards, their interactions having been minimal.

"Ser Lorent, please summon the commander of the royal guard," Rhaegar requested, choosing Lorent for his impeccable demeanor.

"Yes, Prince," Lorent responded solemnly.

As Lorent left, Rhaegar glanced at Robb and Samwell, a flicker of thought crossing his eyes. Ever since Criston Cole had stepped down as Commander of the Kingsguard, there had been a vacancy among the seven main Kingsguard, and his father had been delaying the selection.

There was a suspicion among the council that the king hoped for Cole's return, but after a few proposals, the topic had been set aside.

Lorent soon returned, accompanied by a handsome young man with a disheveled cloak.

"Greetings, Prince," the young man said, the smell of wine evident on his breath.

Rhaegar's lips curled into a smile. "You're on duty today, aren't you?"

"I..."

"He organized his subordinates for a drinking session and was just pulled out by me," Lorent interjected, his contempt clear.

Rhaegar couldn't help but smile, nodding as he said, "Very well, as a commander of the royal guard, you really set a fine example."

Stepping back, he casually clapped his hands.

Swish—

With a swift motion, Robb, who had been waiting nearby, drew his sword and stepped forward, decapitating the handsome young man with a single, clean stroke. The headless body collapsed to the ground, blood spurting from the severed neck.

Lyonel and the three Kingsguard onlookers were stunned, not expecting such decisive action from the Heir.

Rhaegar bent down, retrieved a badge depicting a sword-crossed shield from the corpse's chest, and tossed it to Robb with disdain. "Inform Lord Roland that his nephew died defending the Red Keep from thieves, and that Lord Robb of Stone Mill is now the commander of the royal escort."

Lord Roland Westerling, the Lord of Crag in the West, was Jason Lannister's father-in-law. His cousin, the former Kingsguard Commander Harold Westerling, had recommended his nephew for the position.

Rhaegar waved dismissively and called Samwell to stand before the three Kingsguard. "The Kingsguard is short one man. I recommend three candidates, and he is one of them."

Lorent frowned with concern. "To serve in the Kingsguard, one must give up their fiefs, titles, and cannot have heirs."

He knew Samwell, the young lord of Raventree Hall from the prominent Blackwood House of the Riverlands.

Rhaegar remained silent, patting Samwell on the shoulder.

Samwell spoke earnestly, "My son is already two years old and can be cared for by my sister. If I am chosen for the Kingsguard, I will be honored to take the oath."

Rhaegar continued, "Joffrey Grafton of Gulltown and Ser Willam Royce of Runestone are also my recommended candidates. They will arrive at the Red Keep for the selection process overseen by the Small Council."

The implication was clear: the selection would be fair, with no favoritism. Rhaegar did not expect all three to be chosen for the Kingsguard; they could serve him best in their own territories.

Leaving Robb and Samwell behind, Rhaegar departed with Tormund, Lyonel, and Grey Worm. Before leaving, he reminded Robb, "Carefully select the members of the Royal Guard and expand the number from three hundred to five hundred."

The Royal Guard, originally a ceremonial and patrol force, had gradually evolved, incorporating more than a hundred Dragonkeepers over time. With Rhaegar in King's Landing, it was time for necessary reforms.

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Godswood Forest

Rhaegar stood with his hands behind his back, gazing at the crimson leaves of the ancient godswood tree. Lyonel and Tormund waited patiently beside him, flanking him on either side.

Moments later, the back door of the Maegor's Holdfast swung open, and two Unsullied soldiers emerged, dragging a staggering figure between them.

Lyonel turned, his eyes widening in shock. "Larys?"

Larys, his curly hair disheveled and his feet dragging in oversized boots, was being roughly manhandled by the Unsullied.

Lyonel looked at Rhaegar in disbelief. "Prince, what crime has Larys committed to warrant this treatment?"

Rhaegar turned, his expression imploring. "Lord Lyonel, you really noticed nothing?"

"Larys is an Inquisitor!" Lyonel protested, his voice rising. "What offense could he have committed?"

Grey Worm and the Unsullied had formed a perimeter around the Godswood, ensuring their conversation remained private.

"Lord Lyonel, let's discuss this calmly," Tormund interjected, glancing at the Unsullied. "You wouldn't want this to become public knowledge."

Realization dawned on Lyonel's face as he understood the gravity of the situation.

The Unsullied dragged Larys to the base of the weirwood and threw him to the ground like a ragdoll.

Larys fell with a thud, a bleeding bruise on his mouth. He tried to rise but was kicked back down by the Unsullied.

"Ah! ..." Larys groaned in agony, curling up on the ground.

Rhaegar looked at him coldly. "Larys, you must know why you're here."

Larys, beads of sweat on his forehead, stammered, "I'm sorry, Prince. I'm not good at guessing riddles."

"Borros Baratheon's death was no accident," Rhaegar said icily. "You had a significant hand in it."

Before Larys could respond, Lyonel's face went pale, and he began to protest. "Prince ..."

Rhaegar cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Lord Lyonel, I have evidence."

He signaled for the Unsullied to come forward, their presence adding weight to his words.

Clattering...

An Unsullied soldier emptied a sack, spilling an assortment of bottles and jars across the ground.

Rhaegar picked up a glass bottle containing a purple potion, his voice deep and authoritative.

"Sweetsleep, a sedative potion produced by Lys' Specialties. A single drop can calm a raging bull."

Larys hung his head low, his voice subdued. "I'm an Inquisitor. The sedative is for keeping prisoners under control during interrogations."

"A plausible excuse," Rhaegar replied indifferently. He then picked up a porcelain vial filled with a creamy ointment. "This one is from Myr, typically used by brothel clients to prolong their encounters. However, it can suffocate when applied to the throat."

"Prince, these potions are meant to aid in interrogations," Larys insisted, attempting to maintain his innocence.

Rhaegar's voice turned methodical. "Lady Elenda's letter describes Lord Borros's death in a manner similar to my grandfather, Prince Baelon."

Larys's eyes widened, and he recoiled slightly.

"Coincidentally, I've seen a similar death," Rhaegar continued, his gaze piercing. "At the end of the Battle of the Stepstones, Ser Vaemond of House Velaryon died of bloating, caused by the Tears of Lys, a poison used by the Triarchy."

Few poisons in the world could kill so discreetly, and the Tears of Lys had long been infamous.

"Lord Borros died from the Tears of Lys, and I had nothing to do with it," Larys croaked, his eyes avoiding Rhaegar's.

"The potions here are non-toxic and not enough to convict you," Rhaegar admitted. "But how do you explain the extensive smuggling dealings with Myr, Lys, Pentos, and other places?"

Larys's face darkened as if recalling something incriminating.

Tormund pulled out a slip of paper and began to read. "Larys Strong, you have repeatedly engaged in smuggling over several years... You have privately interrogated and tortured death row inmates to

death... You bought children from Flea Bottom to use as informants and invested in an underground fighting ring, exploiting children's to curry favor with certain kind of adults."

Rhaegar turned to Lyonel, whose face was grim. "Smuggling, lynching, murder, and child trafficking—are these crimes deserving of hanging or beheading?"

Larys was known for his dark heart and cruel methods. Even if they couldn't prove he had murdered Borros, there was enough evidence to ensure his execution.

Rhaegar didn't need proof of Larys's guilt. In King's Landing, many "lords" were equally corrupt; few were truly clean.

"Larys, you bastard! What heinous acts have you committed behind my back?" Lyonel exploded, stepping forward and kicking his son in the chest, his voice a furious roar.

Chapter 327: Turn Aegon Into a Girl?

Lyonel lived up to his Strong surname, his bloated figure bursting with tremendous force as he delivered a powerful kick.

With a sickening crack, Larys crumpled to the ground, his body landing with a lightness that belied the force behind the blow.

"Cough... cough..." Larys's face turned as white as a sheet, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Disloyal son, how many sins have you committed? Did you have anything to do with Lord Borros's death?" Lyonel wasn't done yet. He grabbed Larys by the collar, lifting his second son with one hand, his eyes cold and bloodshot with fury.

Lyonel was on the brink of exploding with anger. As the Hand of the King, his second son's lawbreaking was a direct affront to House Strong.

Crack! Crack! Lyonel slapped Larys hard, shaking him violently. "You've shamed your role as a royal inquisitor! How can you stand up to the King's trust?"

He wanted to question if his son had ever considered the family's honor but doubted the conscience of someone who had committed so many crimes.

"Ahem, I was just doing a job for someone. What crime could I have committed?" Larys coughed up blood, his eyes dark and defiant.

Even now, he refused to acknowledge his guilt. In his mind, everything he did was forced upon him.

Lyonel's face darkened as he released his grip, disappointed. "Larys, when did your heart rot and stink?"

He had expected his son to confess and beg for forgiveness. Instead, Larys played the victim.

"Oh, if you could look me in the eye, with your wisdom, you should have seen this end coming," Larys laughed bitterly.

"Seven hells!" Lyonel sighed in pain. "Prince, Larys has committed a felony. How do you wish to proceed?"

He had to redeem his house's honor.

Rhaegar watched, his expression serious. "The law will judge him."

Larys's existing charges were enough to warrant execution many times over.

"Will it be referred to the Small Council for trial?" Lyonel asked ruefully.

Rhaegar shook his head. "There's no need. The reason I called you here today is to deal with him discreetly and preserve the honor of the royal family and House Strong."

Lyonel nodded, defeated. "Thank you, Prince."

He understood the necessity of handling Larys privately to protect the family's reputation.

Larys coughed up a mouthful of bloody phlegm and laughed miserably, "Can I apply for a trial by combat?"

"What do you think?" Rhaegar replied indifferently.

Larys turned his head to his father, his eyes pleading like a chastised child.

Lyonel grimaced and clenched his teeth. "Don't even think about it. No one will fight for you, least of all Harwin."

He knew his second son's intentions. Harwin, his eldest, was the strongest and could potentially win a trial by combat.

At that moment, Rhaegar signaled to Grey Worm and silently turned away.

Grey Worm approached, raising his spear with a steely expression.

"Wait, I have one more thing to say," Larys stammered, struggling to back away.

Rhaegar gazed out over the lush canopy of the Godswood, ignoring him.

He had no interest in the pleas of a dying man.

As Grey Worm drew closer, spear aimed at his heart, Larys's voice wavered, "Prince, some things are like broken glass. I'm just the one picking up the pieces, but broken glass is always broken."

He was stating the truth; he was a conspirator, but there had to be an opportunity for him to act.

Rhaegar remained silent.

Grey Worm stepped closer, his spear ready for the kill. "Farewell."

"No, no, no..." Larys shuddered and swallowed. "I don't want to die yet. I'm applying for Brother of the Night's Watch."

Lyonel stepped in and grabbed Grey Worm's spear. "Prince, every prisoner has the right to go to the Wall to atone for his sins."

He softened at the critical moment.

Rhaegar turned and looked at Larys' limp foot. "It will be difficult for you to survive even if you reach the Wall."

"Then please cut off my limp."

Larys' eyes closed tightly, his voice depressed. "It dragged me down for the first half of my life. At least let me be free of it for the second half."

Rhaegar watched him, his mind racing. To be fair, he wanted to kill him right now. But Lyonel's pleading eyes offered a chance for loyalty.

"Hold him."

Rhaegar unclasped Truefyre at his waist, gripping the hilt of his keeled sword, and handed the ebony scabbard to Lyonel.

"Prince?" Lyonel held the scabbard, puzzled.

Swish—

Rhaegar drew his sword violently, the blade shining with a silky ebony light.

He swung down at Larys's limp leg.

Crack...

The sound of breaking bones echoed, and Larys couldn't suppress a miserable scream. His calf was severed cleanly from the patella.

Rhaegar twirled his sword, shaking off the blood, and said indifferently, "Bandage him up, and select a group of criminals to escort him to the Wall."

With that, Rhaegar handed Truefyre to Tormund and turned to leave.

Larys could still serve a purpose; he would ensure he died reasonably along the way.

Grey Worm nodded and ordered two Unsullied to drag the wailing Larys away.

Lyonel's face was ashen as he fell to his knees before the weirwood, praying to the old gods.

...

Meanwhile

Inside one of the Red Keep's bedrooms, the girls cried out in grief.

Outside the door, Aemond lowered his eyes and walked away in silence.

The news of Borros' death finally reached the Four Storms. They huddled together, breaking down in tears.

Aemond had no interest in comforting them; he had business to attend to.

Dismissing his squire, Aemond exited the Maegor's Holdfast alone and made his way to the stables.

In the hayloft where horse manure was piled up, two tattered, thin men waited nervously.

"Have you thought it over?" Aemond scrutinized them.

The two men nodded repeatedly, fawning. "All at your command, Prince."

"Follow me."

Without further ado, Aemond avoided the sight of bystanders and led the two men into the Red Keep.

...

On the Other Side

Aegon lay in his bedchamber, panting. Under the thin quilt, he was unclothed, cradling a plump woman in his arms.

He had spent the night at a brothel on Silk Street and had brought a prostitute back through a secret passage to continue his debauchery.

Click-click...

As noon approached, the room's door knob gently turned from the outside.

Two ugly-looking men sneaked into the room, approaching the drunken boy on the bed.

"Gulp..."

One of the men swallowed, his triangular eyes revealing a ferocious light.

Raising his head, he exchanged a glance with his companion, their eyes filled with the desire for money.

Together, they raised their hands and brought them down forcefully.

"Ooooooooo..."

Aegon shrieked and struggled, suddenly realizing that his hands were tied to the bed with twine, and his mouth was covered by a large, dirty hand.

"Ah..."

The whore woke up to the sound and was about to scream when her mouth was covered. A trembling voice whispered, "Be good and obey, it will better for everyone that way."

The whore nodded in fear and closed her eyes, not daring to look away.

One man ripped the sheet, gagged her, and threw her to the floor.

"Who are you and what do you want!?"

Aegon screamed indistinctly through his gag.

Bang—

The door to the room slammed heavily, drawing everyone's attention.

Aegon struggled to see a bemused Aemond standing in the doorway.

"Run, go get the guards to save me..."

Aegon's eyes erupted with hope as he cried out wildly in excitement.

With a gentle pace, Aemond calmly said, "Aegon, you owe me an apology, and I told you I would make you pay."

Aegon froze at his words, giving up his struggle, and stared incredulously at Aemond.

Suddenly, he realized that this brother was unfamiliar to him.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm about to leave, and we need to finish this before I go."

Aemond's face was expressionless as he sat on the edge of the bed.

The Four Storms knew of their father's death, and once the saddle was ready for Sheepstealer, he would have to travel to Storm's End to finalize the marriage contract.

Aegon struggled to his feet, glaring at his brother, a muffled whimper escaping his covered mouth. The curses were clear despite the gag.

"Remove your hands, I need to hear what he's saying," Aemond said, ignoring the man covering Aegon's mouth, his tone a poor imitation of Rhaegar's.

As the dirty hand moved away, Aegon took a deep breath and cursed, "Aemond, if you dare to mess with me, I'll break your legs!"

"Aegon, you really don't get it," Aemond replied calmly. He waved his hand, and the two men holding Aegon acted swiftly, pulling the thin quilt off his face and pinning his legs apart.

"Bastard, let go of me! What do you want?" Aegon shouted, kicking furiously.

Aemond's eyes were icy as he silently drew a cold, gleaming dagger from his waist. "Apologize, or I'll chop off one of your legs," he whispered, pressing the dagger against Aegon's crotch.

"No!!!" Aegon screamed in terror, the cold blade against his skin making him freeze in place, too scared to move.

Aemond ignored his brother's pleas, circling the dagger menacingly. "Aegon, sometimes I envy you. Mother always gives you the best."

"Aemond, let me go, and I'll forget this ever happened!" Aegon pleaded, his voice trembling.

Aemond's eyes darkened as he poked the dagger slightly. "Rhaenyra has Rhaegar, mother left Helaena to you, and Daeron and I are stuck into marrying other women."

"I don't want to marry that idiot! You can have her!" Aegon's heart pounded, sensing the seriousness in Aemond's voice.

Shaking his head, Aemond's voice was low, "Aegon, do you think it'll be better if I turn you into a girl?"

Turn him into a girl? Damn it, the other party really wanted to cut off his little brother.

Aegon stiffened, cold sweat pouring out as he realized Aemond was serious. "Have you lost your mind?"

Aemond's gaze hardened, and the dagger came down.

"No! I was wrong, I apologize!" Aegon screamed, closing his eyes and begging frantically.

Aegon was so frightened that he hastily closed his eyes and begged for forgiveness with his mouth open.

He couldn't lose his little brother, any more than the Targaryens could lose their dragons.

The sharp blade stabbed into the bed beside Aegon, not him. Aegon fainted from the shock.

Aemond laughed maniacally, pulling the dagger out and watching as snow-white feathers drifted from the cut bed. "That's all the guts you've got, dear brother!"

He wasn't actually insane; he knew that cutting off Aegon's manhood wouldn't turn him into a girl. Even if it did, Aemond had no interest in marrying a sister with a beer belly.

After laughing for a while, his stomach hurting, Aemond collapsed onto the bed, waving dismissively at the two men. "Get out. I'll hide the money bag in the stables."

"Thank you for your generosity, Prince," the men said, eager to collect their reward.

Aemond lay back, resting his head on Aegon's lap, savoring the sweet feeling of revenge.

Chapter 328: Young Dragons Hatchlings – Moondancer and Morning

Creak-

The door to the room closed from the outside. Aemond walked briskly down the hall, a smug look on his face.

Aegon had woken up, but instead of screaming in pain or cursing as expected, he sat quietly against the bed, lost in some inexplicable contemplation.

Bored with the lack of reaction, Aemond decided to slip out and head for the Dragonpit.

As for possible consequences, would there be any punishment? Aemond's footsteps slowed momentarily as he looked back with disdain. He thought to himself, "I have dragons, and my father and mother aren't in King's Landing. Who can come and punish me?"

...

"Kid, you think you can escape? Obediently accept your punishment!"

The corner of Rhaegar's mouth curled into a cold smile, his tone full of menace.

The sun had not yet set, and the fiery clouds of dusk painted the sky like summer saffron, creating a dramatic backdrop for the moment.

Aemond, with a forlorn expression, stared dazedly at his older brother. He hadn't even managed to slip out of the Red Keep before being captured by the arriving Kingsguard.

"Teaching Aegon a lesson and running to the Dragonpit for refuge—are you underestimating me?" Rhaegar folded his arms across his chest and stared at his younger brother, who was hanging upside down from the gallows.

Three new gallows stood in the front garden of the Red Keep, side by side. It was a gathering place, bustling with people, and a group of onlookers whispered about the situation.

Aemond's face was pale, his feet tied with rope and his body hanging in the air between two stiff corpses in tattered clothes.

Rhaegar leaned in and cupped Aemond's chin, turning his face towards each of the corpses. "Look at them. They're dead because of you. How does that feel?"

"It's a shame I have no one to spend my hard-earned bag of gold dragons on," Aemond muttered, his face flushing with embarrassment and regret over his lost money bag.

Smack—

Rhaegar slapped him on the head. "Your money bag and the gold in it are confiscated," he declared.

"Aegon snitched?" Aemond winced in pain.

"It wasn't him. If it were, you wouldn't even have made it to the secret passage."

Rhaegar shook his head, gripping Aemond's chin firmly. "Teaching Aegon a lesson is one thing. I'd even enjoy seeing you knock his sword away and pin him down with your fists."

Aemond stayed silent, eyes wide.

Smack—

Another slap. "But you're a coward. You hired two brutes to sneak up on Aegon, resorting to disgraceful tactics."

Rhaegar's disappointment was palpable. He couldn't believe that Aemond would have the audacity to scheme in the Red Keep and buy his way out of trouble.

"I... oooo..." Aemond tried to speak, but a piece of rag torn from a corpse was shoved into his mouth.

Rhaegar stood and wiped his hands in disgust. "Prince, what should be done?" Lorent, the Kingsguard, stood ready, his bald head and piercing eyes a perfect match.

Rhaegar shoved Aemond, spinning him in the air. "Hang him until this time tomorrow. Give him water at intervals."

"Oooh, I have to pee..." Aemond flailed, mumbling through the gag.

Lorent looked to Rhaegar for guidance.

Rhaegar rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Water isn't necessary. He can take care of it himself."

...

Time flew by, and a week passed.

In the meeting hall of the Maegor's Holdfast, Rhaegar sat at the head of the table, dressed in plain white, diligently filling out a list with a feather quill.

The table, emitting a pleasant woody fragrance, had a round porcelain plate in its center, holding six stone balls of different colors, indicating a recently concluded meeting involving six people.

Tap... Tap...

Rhythmic footsteps echoed from the corridor, and a delicate figure appeared at the open door.

"Rhaegar, the meeting is over."

Rhaenyra leaned on the doorframe, her tone carrying a hint of dissatisfaction. She wore a black corseted dress robe, delicate light makeup, and her soft silver hair was pulled back, giving her a noble and competent demeanor.

Rhaegar paused his writing, ruffling the silver-gold hair covering his eyes, and playfully said, "Believe me, I'm not staying here by choice."

"So, official duties tied your hands and feet and refused to let you travel with me on a dragon?" Rhaenyra grimaced, glaring at Steffon and Lorent, who were guarding the doorway.

The two Kingsguard nodded in unison, knowing their place and silently retreating.

Without the presence of outsiders, Rhaenyra's anger flared. She approached aggressively, "Rhaegar, don't you realize we haven't seen each other for four days?"

"Uh..."

Rhaegar blinked, innocently replying, "But I feel like you've been by my side."

"Cut the crap!"

Rhaenyra glared at him, casually picking up a few pieces of unsealed letter paper on the table and skimming through them. Though she wasn't skilled in governance, she feared becoming irrelevant if she didn't help her brother.

Rhaegar continued writing, a slight smile on his lips, "No need to look, that one is a letter from the Oldtown Citadel. They're electing a new Grand Maester."

With the death of Mellos, the court needed a new Grand Maester.

"You just talk a lot." Rhaenyra gritted her teeth and stomped on his foot.

Rhaegar grunted in pain and obediently shut up.

Rhaenyra rolled her eyes and continued reading the letter. The Citadel's election list had Orwyle as the top candidate, followed by several knowledgeable old-timers. Additionally, to make amends for Mellos's dereliction, the Citadel proposed appointing a young maester as the history recorder, splitting some of the Grand Maester's authority.

Rhaenyra frowned, puzzled, "A separate recorder? Why does that feel odd?"

Without looking up, Rhaegar responded, "The Citadel fears our family's dragons. Orwyle won't obey them; it's just a pretext."

The clumsy tactic was infuriating. If the Citadel weren't so influential and essential to the nobles of Westeros, Rhaegar would have ridden Cannibal and incinerated it with Dragonfire.

Rhaenyra raised her eyes in surprise, a flicker of admiration in them. She had to admit, their father's foresight wasn't wrong; Rhaegar had always been more politically astute than her.

Seemingly thinking of something amusing, Rhaenyra pursed her lips and snickered, switching to another letter. Traveling by dragon might be difficult, so she decided to stay and assist with political affairs.

A glance at the sender revealed the signature: "Syrio Friar."

Rhaegar swished his pen and said, "The letter confirms that Daemon is indeed plundering ships in the Stepstones Islands and is suspected of trying to provoke a war."

After a moment of thought, he added, "Look at the next one. It's from a red priestess of Volantis, describing the legend of the Red Comet. She requests permission to cross the Narrow Sea to spread the beliefs of R'hllor in Westeros."

He vaguely guessed Daemon's intention to use the war to seize territory beyond the Narrow Sea. It wasn't a bad idea, but the timing was crucial. He would advise his father to warn their uncle when time allowed.

The red priestess's letter had some intriguing points. It clarified that the red meteor, known as the Red Comet, could induce fluctuations in magical tides.

According to her, the comet appeared once every few hundred years. The last time it did, it was before the Doom. This time, its appearance was causing unstable magical tides, sometimes raging, sometimes calm.

The priestess advised him to prepare and to accept the faith of R'hllor, suggesting that kingship and divinity should work together to handle the impending unknown.

Rhaenyra, intrigued, read the letter carefully, her violet eyes reflecting her concern. She didn't fully grasp terms like red comets and magical tides but knew that magic was tied to dragons. When magic was strong, dragons thrived; when it waned, dragons perished.

"We can't let R'hllor's faith spread in Westeros. It's too dangerous," Rhaenyra said, feeling uneasy.

"I refused her request but agreed that Syrio could bring her around Westeros," Rhaegar replied. He didn't trust the predictions of the red-robed priest or the knowledge of the tides from a lesser-learned red priestess. However, discussions could lead to valuable exchanges of knowledge about magical tides.

"Well done." Rhaenyra smiled approvingly.

Rhaegar laughed and closed the last page of his list, exclaiming, "The last one!"

He pushed his chair back with a creak, leaned back lazily, and asked casually, "How's Aemond?"

"He left this morning. He was waiting for you to see him off, not realizing that someone had been buried in his office," Rhaenyra replied, picking up the list she had just filled out and gloating.

Rhaegar nodded, propping his legs onto the conference table and closing his eyes in feigned sleep. Aemond had chosen Cassandra to be engaged to and had officially set out to escort his fiancée back to Storm's End.

Rhaenyra looked at the list and read aloud, "Reclamation of wasteland within the Crownlands: allocate three hundred plough oxen and one thousand wooden plows..."

After a moment, she remarked, "Wasn't three thousand acres of wasteland reclaimed last year to support over a thousand tenants?"

"The treasury draws down once; it can't just be for three thousand acres. It has to be followed up year by year," Rhaegar explained. There was much wasteland within the Crownlands, especially around the mountains and lakes near King's Landing.

Master of Civil Affairs Otto had led the effort, gathering more than 2,000 workers from Flea Bottom to cultivate the land. A considerable amount of money and supplies had been allocated from the treasury for this purpose.

Fortunately, the results were promising, and the crown had added three thousand acres of medium fields to sustain a labor force of over a thousand people.

Rhaegar decided to continue this initiative, opening up more land for farming and relocating the underclass that had accumulated in King's Landing.

Rhaenyra frowned slightly and whispered, "There was no food left over from the previous year. It was all fed to the reclaimers, and the treasury can't make ends meet."

"Self-sufficiency is quite good," Rhaegar replied confidently. "Look at the long term. After three to five years, the royal family will have tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of acres of grain-producing fields."

The land and climate of the king's territory were favorable. With 100,000 acres of land, enough food could be produced to feed an army of 5,000 men.

Rhaegar was jolted from his dozing state by a warm kiss on his cheek. Before he could react, a pair of firm thighs, wrapped in tight black pants, straddled his waist, pinning him effortlessly.

He looked up to see Rhaenyra's stunning face, her smile both playful and inviting. Rhaegar straightened his posture, his eyes lighting up with anticipation.

"Father is too cruel to you, leaving you here while he enjoys himself," Rhaenyra teased, her long hair cascading down her back as she leaned in closer.

Rhaegar brushed aside a stray lock of her hair and replied, "Father is giving me time to learn my duties, but he's certainly having too much fun."

He understood his father's intentions. After a tour in Maidenpool, his father had taken Alicent on dragonback to Harrenhal, reportedly spending three days indulging in the hot springs on the Isle of Faces. While Rhaegar was swamped with responsibilities, he couldn't help but feel a pang of envy.

Rhaenyra stole another quick kiss, this time on the corner of his lips, leaving Rhaegar relishing the affectionate gesture. Her beautiful eyes sparkled as she leaned in even closer and whispered, "You have to make time for me today."

"With pleasure," Rhaegar replied, his voice smooth and magnetic. He wrapped his arms around her slender waist as their faces drew closer, their reflections merging in the glazed window beside them.

Knock knock...

A sudden, insistent knock on the door interrupted the moment. A little girl's excited voice followed, "Princess, my dragon egg has hatched!"

Two dark-skinned girls burst into the hall, one cradling a dragon egg. The intimate scene between Rhaegar and Rhaenyra was quickly disrupted as they pulled apart, leaving a lingering trace of their closeness.

"Next time, don't mention Helaena. Your two foster daughters have impeccable timing," Rhaegar muttered, his mesmerized eyes clearing as he glanced at the girls.

"Let go!" Rhaenyra snapped, her cheeks flushed with a mix of anger and embarrassment. She tried to dismount from Rhaegar's lap, but his hands held her in place.

"Rhaegar," she warned, her eyes flashing.

Rhaegar simply smiled provocatively, ignoring her.

Rhaenyra sighed, then turned to the girls with a forced smile, "Your dragon eggs hatched?"

Baela and Rhaena stood at the table, exchanging curious glances at their cousin and foster mother.

Baela eagerly nodded, holding up a light green dragon egg with cracks revealing a pinkish-white membrane. Through the membrane, a small shadow squirmed, struggling to break free.

Suddenly, a tiny pale green head poked through, blinking its amber eyes as it took in its surroundings. Under the watchful gaze of the room, the young dragon wriggled out of its shell, revealing light green scales, delicate horn crowns, and moon-white wing membranes.

"Roar~~" The young dragon let out its first, tentative roar, perched on top of Baela's head.

Baela beamed with joy, gently cradling the hatchling and announcing, "My dragon hatched! I'm naming it Moondancer."

Chapter 329: Prologue to the Tourney

June marked the beginning of summer. The Riverlands enjoyed a comfortable and pleasant climate, with the warm sun hanging in the blue sky and green grass spreading over the fertile soil.

At Harrenhal, in the Flowstone Yard, five towering towers enclosed several magnificent palaces, their ground paved with marble-colored gravel. This exotic stone courtyard was specially designed to house the Targaryen dragons.

"Roar..."

Inside a white stone palace, nestled beside a broken bridge over flowing water, a young dragon bellowed in fury. The dragon had cobalt blue scales, orange-red scales on its jaws extending to its belly, and claws and teeth like copper foil. It was larger than a horse.

One of the young dragon's claws was shackled to the floor with a seven or eight-meter-long chain. The palace covered a large area, enough to accommodate a dozen young dragons of the same size scurrying about. On each side of the palace, two Dragonkeepers in coarse linen held bamboo staffs.

The young dragon roared and flapped its wings, struggling and spewing cobalt blue Dragonfire in all directions.

"Aim at the dragon's neck and release the arrows!" a cold voice ordered. Hundreds of arrows split into two groups, targeting the frantically struggling young dragon.

"Tessarion, dodge," a child's voice rang out, thick with excitement.

"Roar..." Tessarion roared, lifting his head adorned with slender horns and crowns. A mouthful of Dragonfire surged forth, burning most of the arrows. The remaining arrows clinked harmlessly against Tessarion's cobalt-blue scaled neck.

The arrows were thick and blunt, tipped with sharp stones that could not pierce the dragon's scales, causing minimal damage. Feeling the pain, Tessarion tensed all his muscles, straining to break free from the chains, but to no avail.

A clap echoed through the palace as Rhaegar stepped out from behind a circular stone pillar and called out, "Take a break, today's training is over."

"Yeah!" a childish cheer erupted from Tessarion's back as a small tin helmet wobbled on the luxurious saddle.

Rhaegar smiled and closed the ancient, yellowed book he had been reading. Over the past few months, his appearance and demeanor had changed slightly.

His short, silver-gold hair had grown to shoulder length, tied back with a hairband, allowing the silky strands to fall naturally. His complexion had shifted from the pallor of childhood to a noble milky white, enhancing his vivid violet eyes and red lips. Most notably, his dark circles had finally disappeared.

He wore a white shirt paired with a black skirt embroidered with dragon patterns and a carved three-headed red dragon jade belt at his waist. Having wielded power for some time, he exuded an easy-going, yet dignified demeanor, with a confident smile ever-present.

The nobles of King's Landing and the surrounding regions had come to respect this young heir.

"Brother, Tessarion is great, isn't he?" called Daeron, the small figure clattering as he ran towards Rhaegar after being unchained from the dragon.

"Great, but you'll control him even better next time," Rhaegar replied, removing Daeron's helmet to reveal his flushed, sweaty face.

They had been training according to the ancient Targaryen system: the rider mounted the dragon, the chains controlled its movements, and the dragon was trained to dodge while under fire from arrows and spears.

As the day's training concluded, Grey Worm, dressed in black armor, approached from outside. Behind him, hundreds of Unsullied packed up their bows and arrows.

"Prince, the noble 'my lords' are almost here," Grey Worm reported sternly.

Rhaegar helped Daeron remove his armor, correcting him with a smile, "Not 'my lords', that term is just lord."

"My lord?" Grey Worm repeated in his broken Common Tongue.

Maester Tru, who had been teaching him, was no longer around, so Grey Worm's language skills were still lacking.

Once Daeron was dressed in his silver and white garments, Rhaegar laughed softly, "Come, let's go greet the lords of Westeros."

...

Harrenhal, the front gates.

The towering black stone walls loomed dozens of feet high, adorned with blackened dragon carvings on each side of the battlements. Below, ten large stone throwers stood ready. The cast steel gates creaked open slowly, revealing the iron-clad, solid wood doors within.

"When will they arrive?" Daeron asked, slumping against the parapet, his large eyes scanning the horizon.

Rhaegar stood with his hands behind his back atop the wide city walls, his gaze fixed on the vast expanse of wilderness beyond. Harrenhal's dominion was immense, encompassing hundreds of miles in every direction, including the entirety of God's Eye Lake.

"Prince, they will arrive soon. My raven saw it," Tormund said calmly, his eyes white from using his warg abilities.

Tormund had changed significantly after several months as Master of Whisperers. He had shed his rough linen clothes for a set of black and white robes, and around his neck hung a Valyrian steel necklace adorned with ears on either side of a single eye.

This necklace, specially crafted by Rhaegar, symbolized his role as Spymaster, akin to the Hand of the King's palm breastpiece.

Tormund and Grey Worm stood behind Rhaegar, flanking him on either side. A thousand black-armored Unsullied holding spears and round shields lined the city walls in an imposing formation.

Two enormous three-headed red dragon banners hung from the battlements, and knights and squires gathered at the city gate in anticipation.

Suddenly, a deep, resonant horn blew with a powerful rhythm.

On the main road from the west side of the Isle of Faces, a long, winding line of chariots and soldiers approached Harrenhal, stretching as far as the eye could see. High-flying flags were faintly visible in the distance: Sky-blue falcons, the Golden Roses, and Grey Direwolves.

Seeing the familiar banners, Rhaegar's lips curved into a smile. "Tormund, make sure my father and the others at the Isle of Faces are informed," he said cheerfully.

"Yes, Prince," Tormund replied, his eyes returning to normal.

...

By noon, a team of flag-bearing knights escorted a procession of carriages into Harrenhal.

As the largest castle on the continent, if not the world, Harrenhal covered an astonishing expanse. A mile from the imposing Tower of Ghosts lay the stables, an open-air enclosure with spacious fences capable of holding thousands of warhorses. A designated greeting area was situated just behind the gates.

Nobles from across the land stepped out of their carriages, their elegant attire unable to conceal the weariness from their long journey. Despite the royal family's efforts to provide accommodations along the way, the travelers showed signs of fatigue.

As the Heir, Rhaegar had the duty of welcoming the guests.

"Prince, I'm grateful I can still attend this tournament despite my age," said the Old Lord Grover Tully of Riverrun, his face rosy as he led his bannermen forward.

Rhaegar accepted the greeting with a hearty laugh. "I believe you have many years left in you, perhaps to reach the age of King Jaehaerys I."

"Haha, let's hope so."

During a lull in the greetings, the Knight of the Vale, bearing the banner of a sky-blue falcon soaring against a white moon, approached.

Rhaegar glanced sideways and immediately noticed a tall figure among the knights.

"Prince Rhaegar."

Jeyne's eyes sparkled with joy, her gentle voice filled with the delight of reunion.

It was clear she had dressed carefully for the occasion. Her long chestnut hair cascaded over her shoulders, a pale yellow dress accentuated her delicate figure, and light makeup enhanced her refined features.

"Jeyne," Rhaegar greeted, his face lighting up. He restrained his emotions and nodded. "A tough journey, I imagine."

"It was fine. It's a shame Lord Yorbert couldn't come."

Jeyne's brown eyes lingered on Rhaegar, not wanting to miss a moment.

The last time they had seen each other was at the beginning of the year in the Eyrie. Rhaegar had been preoccupied with political affairs for the past six months and couldn't visit the Vale.

"Lord Yorbert's health is deteriorating," Jessamyn added. Her light red curly hair and long blue dress stood out brightly.

Rhaegar turned to see Jessamyn, along with Skylar and the bannermen—Gerold Royce, Joffrey Grafton, and others.

Many were young and middle-aged women, naturally gathered around Jeyne. These were survivors of the Black Wedding who had inherited titles and territories, forming a semi-public regime under Jeyne's leadership.

Through the Motherhouse of Maris' convent in Gulltown, they had established a power structure that challenged the traditional male-dominated regime. Rhaegar had witnessed the fierce determination of the Valley's internal council of women.

"Welcome to Harrenhal," Rhaegar said courteously, not underestimating them for being women. "I have a warm feast prepared for you."

At that moment, a group of silver-armored knights bearing a golden rose banner approached with great pomp. Their armor and weapons were the finest among all the nobles' retinues.

The knights formed two rows, parting to reveal a verdant, delicate figure.

It was a young girl with the pride of a rose. Her light green silk gown highlighted her tall, well-proportioned curves. Soft brown hair draped over her bare shoulders, her skin as white and tender as milk. Her features were delicate and charming, epitomizing exquisite beauty.

The only daughter of the Lord of Highgarden, Margaery Tyrell, approached Rhaegar with a warm smile. "Highgarden sends its sincere greetings to you, Prince Rhaegar," she said softly.

Turning to Jeyne, her eyes sparkled with excitement. "Lady Jeyne, I've long wanted to visit you. It's an honor to finally meet."

Margaery's demeanor was so warm it seemed she might pull Jeyne into an embrace. Jeyne responded with a gentle smile, "It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Lady Margaery."

However, after exchanging pleasantries, Jeyne stepped back to stand beside Rhaegar. With the male heir of Highgarden unexpectedly deceased and old Tyrell mourning his only remaining son, Margaery's intentions were clear, and Jeyne chose to avoid getting entangled in the delicate situation.

Understanding the undercurrents between the two women, Rhaegar intervened with a welcoming smile. "Please, come inside. The squire has prepared a sumptuous banquet."

"Thank you for your generosity," Margaery replied playfully, lifting her foot to proceed.

At that moment, a deep, resonant dragon roar echoed through the sky, capturing the attention of all the nobles. A bronze dragon soared through the thin white clouds, its massive form casting a dark shadow over Harrenhal's lofty walls.

Close behind, a light blue dragon carrying a young girl with silver-golden, slightly curly hair swooped down against the walls, disappearing into the castle's interior in an instant.

Simultaneously, a muffled dragon roar emanated from the shattered garden, exuding a strong sense of dominance that reverberated in everyone's ears. Dreamfyre, in a bad temper, swept through with a gust of wind, lifting the skirts of the onlookers.

"Oof!" Margaery slipped and fell into Rhaegar's arms.

"Careful, Lady Margaery," Rhaegar said evenly, guiding her back to Jeyne's side and taking a step back himself. A dragon and eagle were enough for him; he had no desire to be pricked by a golden rose.

Soon, an increasing procession of knights and carriages entered the gates. Among them was Jason Lannister, resplendent in his finery, accompanied by Ormund Hightower.

Under the banner of the Direwolf, a middle-aged black-haired man on a pitch-black warhorse led the procession. Beside him rode a handsome young man with black hair, dark eyes, and a resolute expression.

Chapter 330: Young Dragon Morning Deficiency

Rhaegar glanced over, noting the typical Northern Stark features of the man approaching.

All the bannermen came to greet him, and soon it was the turn of the Stark House.

Knights of the North, wrapped in thick clothing, flanked the entourage. The dark-haired middle-aged man stepped forward, his voice low and respectful. "The North salutes you, Prince Rhaegar."

"The people of the North are welcome to participate in this tournament, Lord Bennard," Rhaegar responded with a gentle nod, though his tone remained distant.

Bennard Stark, the sibling brother of the former Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, Rickon Stark, was now the Regent of Winterfell. Feeling the prince's cool demeanor, Bennard maintained his composure, reflecting the typical Stark stoicism, and respectfully withdrew.

Next, the Stark teenager approached. He had gleaming black eyes, shoulder-length dark curly hair, and wore a slightly worn black frock coat lined with ferret skin. Two meters away from Rhaegar, the teenager knelt and respectfully lowered his head. "Cregan Stark sends his reverent greetings to you and hopes that you will not be disturbed by the cold."

Rhaegar looked down at him and solemnly replied, "Accept your greetings, Lord Cregan."

Cregan Stark, only thirteen years old, was the current Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. When Cregan rose after the salute, Rhaegar noted the heroic spirit in his eyes and took the initiative

to speak. "I heard the sad news about Lord Rickon. Forgive me for not being able to attend the funeral in person."

Cregan, despite his youth, stood tall and composed, his dark eyes deep and his curly hair draped over his shoulders. His physique was already formidable for his age, with callused hands indicative of rigorous training. Responding to Rhaegar's condolences, Cregan said calmly, "As long as you keep his loyalty in mind, my father would never blame you for your absence."

His response was dignified and measured, reflecting the meticulous nature of the Stark House.

Rhaegar admired the unassuming young Lord and couldn't help but compare him to Elmo Tully, who was accompanying the elder Tully. The contrast between the two heirs was stark—one exuding maturity and resilience, the other lacking substance.

Patting Cregan's solid shoulder, Rhaegar turned to Bennard, who stood nearby. "Next time, tell the Lord of Winterfell to salute me first. I remember that the Starks are a House that follows tradition."

Bennard was momentarily taken aback, a flash of dismay crossing his eyes before he replied, "Yes, Prince."

Rhaegar signaled for Cregan to retire and continued to receive the other bannermen. He understood Cregan's precarious situation, with his power being undermined by his regent uncle. Unlike Jeyne, who had managed to assert her authority, Cregan was still struggling to find his footing.

Sensing Rhaegar's goodwill, Cregan tactfully pretended not to notice, silently stepping back to make way for others.

The city gates bustled with a steady stream of carriages. Among them, two teams of knights bearing banners with a stag and a blue seahorse respectively, approached, heralding the arrival of more distinguished guests.

Another dragon roar echoed through the sky as an ungainly brown clay-colored dragon soared over Harrenhal, circling above the massive fortress.

"Rhaegar, I'm back!"

Aemond called out jubilantly as he jumped from his carriage, leaving the curtains fluttering behind him. Dressed in silky silver robes adorned with gold and silver ornaments, Aemond's pride was evident.

Ignoring the four Cassandra sisters who were still disembarking, Aemond strode forward with an air of grandeur. Cassandra frowned slightly, wanting to call out to him, but hesitated and remained silent.

The sisters stepped out, assisting their mother, Lady Elenda, who stood regally beside them.

Under the banner of the silver seahorse, the Sea Snake Corlys and Rhaenys arrived hand in hand, followed by their eldest son, Laenor, and Celine Celtigar. Over the past few months, Rhaenys had been at Storm's End, meticulously organizing Aemond and Cassandra's engagement, thus resolving a major issue for the royal family.

Seeing the flamboyant Aemond, Rhaegar grabbed him by the neck and teased, "Good boy, dressed so fancy. You don't seem to care about that bag of gold dragons."

"My fiancée helped me dress up," Aemond shrugged, his eyes gleaming with mockery.

Rhaegar, sensing that the mockery was not directed at him, glanced at Lady Elenda and her daughters. Strangely, Royce Caron was absent, replaced by two burly men.

One was a tall, obese man with rough features and short black hair, bearing a resemblance to Borros Baratheon, but older, probably about Borros' age. The other was in his twenties, tall and stocky, with thick eyebrows, large eyes, and an air of arrogance reminiscent of Borros.

Rhaegar guessed that these two were probably Borros' bastard brothers or sons.

Lady Elenda approached, her voice magnetic, "House Baratheon greets you, honorable Prince Rhaegar."

"I look forward to your participation, ma'am," Rhaegar replied politely.

The Four Storms also saluted, followed by the Baratheon bannermen. This was a highlight.

Except for Cassandra, who joined Aemond, the other three sisters stood by Lady Elenda. The two presumed bastards stood alone, ignored by Lady Elenda and her daughters.

Two great nobles, wearing the insignia of House Swann and House Dondarrion, stood beside the bastards, ignoring Lady Elenda and her daughters.

Rhaegar noticed the nobles of the Swann House of Stonehelm and the Dondarrion House of Blackhaven. "Interesting, they are both famous surnames in the Stormlands as well," he thought, his expression unchanged, already drawing conclusions.

The reception continued until a large carriage arrived bearing the three-headed red dragon banner.

King Viserys stepped out, hand in hand with Queen Alicent. Viserys, looking well, walked slowly, smiling and greeting courtiers. Alicent, her face rosy and free of worry, warmly entertained the ladies.

Seeing everything well in hand, Rhaegar's purple eyes flashed with relief as he prepared to slip away.

As he took a step back, Alicent called out, "Rhaegar, there are too many guests. Can you call Rhaenyra to help me?"

Rhaegar pursed his lips, hesitant. "She... I'll try," he replied.

Alicent, sensing his discomfort, sighed and waved him off, no longer pressing the matter.

Relieved, Rhaegar smiled, chatted briefly with a group of advisors, and quietly slipped away from the crowd.

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Kingspyre Tower

Rhaegar slipped away from the noisy crowd and made his way back through the gravel garden to his residence.

Clang... clang...

The sound of clashing swords echoed from the sandy clearing outside Kingspyre Tower.

Aegon, bare-chested and wielding a hand-and-a-half sword, was locked in a fierce duel with Arryk Cargyll, who wore silver armor and a white robe, his expression solemn and focused.

"Ha!..." Aegon gritted his teeth, swinging his sword relentlessly, thrusting forward with determination.

Arryk remained calm, parrying each blow with ease.

As Rhaegar passed, he called out without breaking stride, "Keep your steps steady. Don't fight like a cripple."

Aegon's face darkened at the comment. He widened his stance, bent his knees, and swung his sword with renewed speed and precision.

After being chastised by Aemond half a month ago, Aegon had suddenly rekindled his interest in swordplay.

Viserys and Alicent were both pleased to see that their son had regained his motivation and was no longer aimless.

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Entering Kingspyre Tower, Rhaegar ascended in a manually operated winch cage. Given that Harrenhal's five main towers were exceptionally tall, it took at least half an hour to travel up or down. The winch cage was an invaluable tool for such a task.

On the top floor of the tower, in a room reserved for lords, Lorent, a member of the Kingsguard, stood watch in front of the solid wood door.

"How is Rhaenyra?" Rhaegar inquired softly, as if afraid of disturbing those inside.

Lorent lowered his eyes and whispered, "The princess is awake, but it's the same old story."

Rhaegar nodded, giving Lorent a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Creak—

As he pushed open the door, the sweet aroma of desserts filled his nostrils. Rhaenyra sat on her knees on the red carpet, her silky silver hair cascading casually down her back. She wore only a light white silk nightgown.

In front of her was a small table crowded with an array of desserts, including cream cakes and seven-gill eel pies. When Rhaegar entered, she was holding a piece of pie in one hand and a bottle of summer red in the other, stuffing her mouth with little regard for decorum.

Her movements were so exaggerated that one strap of her nightgown had slipped off, revealing a hint of her pale skin. Her legs were folded beneath her, and the hem of her gown barely covered the tops of her thighs.

At the sight, Rhaegar felt a headache coming on. He didn't know where to begin persuading her.

"Roar..."

A shrill dragon roar emanated from the side.

By the wall at the entrance of the room, twin little girls wearing small white dresses crouched side by side, each with a young dragon lying in their arms.

Both girls had long silver-gold hair and inherited their mother Laena's beauty, with delicate and lovely features. Baela had a darker complexion, leaning towards the light black of their grandfather, the Sea Snake Corlys, with round violet eyes.

Rhaena had a lighter complexion, similar to their mother Laena's general olive coloring, with a hint of fangs.

Rhaegar closed the door and smiled. "How are you both doing?"

"Uh, fine," the twins nodded in unison, their pigtails bobbing.

"Roar..."

A young green dragon lay in Baela's arms, its vertical pupils glaring at the newcomer. This was Moondancer, hatched from a dragon egg a few months ago. The newly hatched dragon had grown quickly, already the size of a large dog, and the crown of horns on its head was beginning to show promise.

Like her sister, Rhaena had a baby dragon in her arms, but this one was in a very different condition. Rhaegar leaned down to examine it. The young dragon had pale pink scales, black horn crowns, and wing membranes of a monotonous moon white color. It was as beautiful as a butterfly, earning the name Morning.

Unfortunately, Morning had an ill fate. Hatched the night after Moondancer, the two young dragons were like twins. However, while Moondancer thrived and grew rapidly, Morning seemed born with a deficiency and remained sickly, barely growing to the size of a house cat.

At this moment, Morning lay weakly in Rhaena's arms, its tiny dragon head gently arching. Rhaegar stroked Rhaena's head and asked softly, "Is Morning okay?"

"She's okay. She ate a little bit of roasted lamb today," Rhaena replied naively, rubbing her small hands against Morning's spine, her eyes reflecting a deep melancholy.

While her sister's hatchling was healthy and strong, hers seemed fragile, as if it might die at any moment. She was filled with both pity and worry for the young dragon she had hatched herself.