

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction based on the ASOIAF universe. All recognisable characters, plots, and settings are the exclusive property of GRRM; I make no claim to ownership.

Edited by: Bub3loka

Year 129 After Aegon's Conquest

The Rogue Prince

This was not how he expected his day to go, truth be told. Normally, Daemon would rejoice to have a break from the dull tedium of Dragonstone, but seeing his daughters return to the castle frightened and shaken three hours after they had given Ser Alfred Broome the slip made his blood boil.

Getting the crux of the story out of his sobbing fifteen-year-old twins turned surprisingly difficult, considering each word out of their mouths was more unbelievable and confusing than the last. Some were outright queer, such as pelicans attacking their assailants just at the right time. Rhaenyra had already tossed Ser Alfred Broome in the dungeons for his failure and probably planned to have him either flogged, exiled or even hanged after a short trial. Daemon was not of a mind to object. After all, the Crown Princess of the Seven Kingdoms could not tolerate incompetence.

The only thing that remained was verifying what had actually happened, as Rhaenyra quickly sent a dozen knights to search the area in question, but he did not wait for them to return and opted to check for himself. To Daemon's surprise, he did find five crippled Velaryon knights and their squire piled by a rocky shore, their moans of pain audible even from above.

Finding the Northern bastard fisherman wasn't hard, for he was in his house, a well-off cottage near Ashcove.

The moment the Prince laid his eyes on Jon Snow, he knew matters weren't as simple as Ser Robert Quince had said—a victory merely won by clever tricks. All the lauded knights in Dragonstone had agreed that ambushes, throwing rocks, sneak attacks and diversions were not something a skilled warrior would resort to.

Alas, a thousand bold claims and hundreds of dismissive remarks could hardly compare to seeing a man in the flesh.

To him, it was plain obvious that the Northman was not just a warrior, but a dangerous one. After tens of tourneys, his time as Lord Commander of the City Watch, and years spent fighting in the Stepstones, Daemon prided himself on having a good eye for warriors, and the man before him was one without a shred of doubt. Even Jon Snow's stride was done with ruthless precision that spoke of surviving many battles, and his eyes were sharp and unyielding despite facing Caraxes for the first time. His tall, lean body was built for combat and endurance and had not yet been marked by the passage of time or overindulgence in vices.

Jon Snow was a savage and ruthless man, judging by the crippled state of Rhogar Velaryon and his mute brothers. They were crippled, but not one of them had been killed—the blows that had shattered their joints had been levied with measured precision, making it a deliberate act of violence rather than a fit of rage.

Curiously, despite having the classical colouring of the First Men, there was a trace of something else in him. Of a certain finesse and delicate grace absent in the Royces, the Bellmores, and the other noble houses proud of their First Men heritage. Jon Snow's frame lacked the burliness and the shaggy look the Northmen were infamous for, and his scarred face was probably handsome enough to easily sway a maiden's heart. Even his dark locks resting over his shoulder looked almost delicate, lacking any coarseness, and would not be out of place on a comely maiden rather than a savage looking warrior.

Worse, Jon Snow looked *exactly* like that boy in his nightmares, where he had gotten Rhea Royce with a child. It was as if someone had ripped that terrible dream from his mind and placed it before him in the flesh. If he squinted a little, he could imagine him like an older version of Jacaerys, if without the pug nose. Finally and most damning was his pale white skin, unblemished by the sun's kiss despite being one to live and toil outdoors. The Blood of old Valyria did not tan as the Andals and the First Men did.

Daemon would have even considered the Northern bastard one of his get if he had ever lain with a Northern maiden. But he hadn't. He couldn't have, for Daemon remembered most women he bedded, and he preferred those with the Blood of Old Valyria, even when cavorting around the brothels, not the rough, ungainly appearance of the First Men. There had been a few moments of weakness where he had indulged in whatever was available, but none of the women he bedded had been from the North.

Was this one of his brother's rare dalliances instead?

It would fit. The Snow before him was just the right age to have been conceived after Aemma had died but before Viserys had wedded the Hightower harlot. It was known that his brother loved his balls and tourneys; it would be effortless for the king to bed a maiden or three in secret. Daemon had seen one such occasion with his own eyes.

As he was deep in thought, the bastard quietly observed him the same way one would take the measure of a foe. Jon Snow certainly couldn't be accused of cowardice if he looked so blatantly ready to fight a dragonrider and his dragon while half-naked and wielding a blunted tourney sword. The silvery scars that suspiciously looked like stab wounds dotting his chest were the most eye-catching thing about him.

Almost all of them looked lethal, but perhaps they were merely surface wounds. Or perhaps the gods favoured the bastard, letting him live after a close brush with death.

Daemon dismounted Caraxes and lazily sauntered towards the house where Jon Snow stood waiting, his face unreadable. Truth be told, after seeing the fate of the Silent Five, he would have been far wrier of approaching Snow, but Daemon had prepared himself. Clad in steel from head to toe with Dark Sister on his hip and Caraxes behind his back, he had nothing to fear from an unarmoured warrior, no matter how skilled.

"I assume you're the man who saved my precious daughters?" Daemon testily broke the silence.

The Northern bastard certainly held himself with the pride of the Blood of the Dragon if spiced by a tinge of cold Northern stubbornness.

“Aye, Your Grace. But your dragon ate my goat,” Jon Snow said stubbornly instead of a greeting. “Are you going to reimburse me for that?”

Daemon snorted at the audacity but loosened the strings of his pouch and threw the man a golden dragon, which was deftly snatched from the air. “There. Happy now?”

“Nay. One dragon is too few. Do you know how expensive goats are these days?”

The man was clearly testing his patience. Jon Snow was firm and proud, and his thinly veiled disrespect toed offence.

“A dragon for a sheep?” Daemon scoffed. “Do you think me a fool? Even in the Vale, a sheep would cost a handful of silver stags.”

“The Vale has plenty of sheep, while Dragonstone has few goats, so they’d naturally be more expensive,” Snow countered calmly. “Besides, it’s been over a decade since you have graced the Vale with a visit. Or perhaps a man like you has never heard of things like debasement of currency? Do you think your private war in the Stepstones came at no cost to the realm?”

Contrary to the slander that Hightower spread about him, Daemon knew the matter of ruling and had heard Beesbury drone about the debasement of currency a few times too many to ever forget. He merely considered such trivialities beneath him. After all, that was what quartermasters and copper counters were for.

The Prince narrowed his eyes. “You’re surprisingly well-informed for a Northern bastard.” But Daemon had not forgotten the bastard had saved his daughters, and he knew how to be generous when the occasion called for it. “Very well. How much do you say this goat costs, then?”

“Ten gold dragons.” The bastard didn’t even hesitate as he reached out an empty hand.

Daemon’s lips quirked with amusement. He wordlessly took nine more dragons and deftly threw them at the bastard at once. Jon Snow didn’t blink as he casually caught all of them before they hit the ground.

“Quite impressive reflexes, Snow. One would think you were a coin-catcher, not a warrior.” Daemon rubbed his chin. “If the master of coin knew goats had grown so precious, he would have hoarded them all long ago. Perhaps I ought to let Beesbury know so he stops fretting about the Crown’s spending, for he had been doing it wrong this whole time—wealth and fortune lie in rearing goats.”

Jon Snow chuckled before quickly shaking his head. “Perhaps you should, Your Grace. But you’ve yet to tell me what brings you to my humble abode.”

It had not escaped Daemon’s attention that the surly bastard had yet to invite him inside his house. He had yet to offer Guest Right, as was the tradition. Even now, despite talking, Jon Snow didn’t trust him and seemed ready to fight, judging by his hand resting over the tourney sword’s hilt.

The bastard was as mad as one could be. He possessed daring in spades, precisely in the way Daemon imagined his grown sons would be. The prince almost liked the bastard. Almost. A pity he was a Northman, and the more he looked, the more evident the blood of the First Men shone through.

Caraxes chose that moment to lunge forward and snatch another goat from the enclosure, roasting it in his mouth in one go with another belch of fire. Under the crunching sounds of bone, tendon, and flesh being shattered, Daemon guffawed at the ticked-off bastard glaring at his dragon as if it were a thieving wild dog rather than the majestic ruler of the skies. Still, Daemon wordlessly threw another handful of gold at him; he felt strangely generous today. Once again, each coin was skilfully caught before dropping to the ground, yet Jon Snow's steely grey eyes had not left Daemon for a heartbeat.

"I am here to thank you and to warn you, bastard. I am only doing this because my daughters begged clemency for your head. The five knights you crippled are done for, but they are the nephews of the Sea Snake, and you should know the law. You had no right to do what you did—even if it saved my daughters."

Jon Snow laughed. It was a cold, callous sound unbefitting of a man in his early twenties. "It seems you value the lives of your daughters less than the support of Corlys Velaryon."

"Why you impudent—" Daemon's roar died on his lips as he saw the bastard was as cool as ice. The Northman undeniably had a talent for provoking people and was testing him. He wanted to know how much Daemon treasured his daughters. Sighing, the prince shook his head and continued, "It is not I who writes the laws, Snow, but my brother the king. A raven has been sent to High Tide to inform Corlys Velaryon of the happenstance, and he is not a man a bastard like you could afford to offend." Daemon tilted his head. "But I am a generous man. I have an offer for you."

"An offer?" Snow echoed suspiciously. "Let's hear it, then."

"I will shield you from Lord Velaryon's wrath, Snow. The Northmen's loyalty is famous, and I need a loyal and skilled man to be my eldest son's sworn shield. Swear your sword to me and become my man, and when the Sea Snake comes demanding justice for his nephews, I will state that you crippled his nephews under my orders."

One could never have enough men of daring and skill like the Northern bastard in his employ. Ruthless, cunning, and clearly sharp of wit, judging by how he was abreast with the situation of the Seven Kingdoms, the Northerner was a man Daemon wanted by his side.

"You honour me, Prince Daemon, but I'm afraid I must decline," Jon Snow said, his words now surprisingly honest and polite. "I'm quite terrible at following orders, and I am bound to disappoint you sooner rather than later. 'Tis why I decided to become a fisherman, Your Grace."

Daemon's lips curled. Just the right amount of firmness mixed with deference so he wouldn't feel slighted by the rejection. It was deliberate, too, judging by his almost offensive remarks earlier. A *cunning* provocateur rather than a reckless daredevil.

“You sure are bold, bastard,” he acknowledged. “But let it be known that Daemon Targaryen treasures his daughters, for my offer still stands. Or you could try to slip away now—it will be another day or two before Corlys arrives, and my wife agrees to bar any ships leaving Dragonstone once they fail to apprehend you. Make your way to Essos and live your life there.”

For the first time, Jon Snow looked at him with something akin to respect as he inclined his head. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“May we never cross paths again, Jon Snow, for I suspect it will not be on good terms.”

Shaking his head, Daemon returned to Caraxes and mounted the Blood Wyrm. “Soves!”

The next morning, the Sea Snake arrived in Dragonstone, a storm brewing in his eyes. Coming with a third of the Velaryon fleet in tow and Meleys’ presence in the skies meant he would not be easily placated today. The urgency and show of strength of his arrival spoke volumes about the disgruntlement and anger hidden by the usually calm facade. The wealthiest man in the Seven Kingdoms and the husband of a dragonrider was not an ally Rhaenyra could ignore, and he was welcomed in the Chamber of the Painted Table along with his wife.

Daemon knew the old snake all too well. Corlys Velaryon was infamous for being intractable to the point of being obstinate. At seventy-six years old, Corlys was old, yet his face, tanned by decades of sailing that overcame even his Valyrian features, still retained a vigour absent in men half his age. His back was straight, shoulders squared, and his gait steady; the only sign of frustration was the flexing of his fingers, as if he were trying to grasp a swordhilt that was not there.

His face was stony as he listened to Rhaenyra’s explanation of events. The squire, Lennard of Claw Hill, had sung loudly without any need for torture. The plans of the Silent Five were damning—either taming the unclaimed dragons or stealing wild dragon eggs and later staking a claim on Driftmark through Baela and Rhaena when the opportunity presented itself. A terribly bold plan that would have come dangerously close to working if not for Jon Snow’s presence.

“Abduction, coercion, and attempting to usurp my rule and steal my dragons,” his wife finished, eyes stone cold. Her belly had grown heavy with another babe. Daemon hoped for a daughter this time. “I will be in my right to hang your nephews like common brigands, and none could gainsay my judgement, Lord Velaryon. Not even my father or Otto Hightower.”

The Sea Snake was proud, not foolish.

“They’re still my nephews, even if they strayed so badly,” Corlys offered tightly, his pale beard and moustache twitching as if the words tasted sour on his tongue. “Give them the mercy of a swift beheading, at least.”

“I planned to have them drawn and quartered like the traitors they are,” Rhaenyra said coldly, not backing down. “Have you no shame, Corlys? It’s your granddaughters who were threatened!”

“Aye, and for that, Malentine and his brothers shall pay with their lives,” the Sea Snake agreed, his voice steely. “But they’re still my flesh and blood, and their father died in my service. This is the least I could do to honour him.”

There was a hint of warning in his voice.

“Very well,” the Princess of Dragonstone allowed at last, tilting her head. “They’ll lose their heads tomorrow at dawn. Are you satisfied, Corlys?”

The Velaryon lord looked anything but satisfied, yet still nodded stiffly.

“One more thing. I want the head of that Northern bastard, too.”

“Quite callous,” Daemon noted. “He saved my daughters, you know. Shouldn’t he be rewarded instead of punished?”

Corlys scoffed. “You ask why? You? He humiliated my nephews instead of killing them in battle. Joints smashed beyond repair, and even Maester Gerardys is helpless before such affliction—a fate worse than death. I could have forgiven it if he had been a knight or a noble, but he wasn’t. The Snow should have known not to attack his betters. Striking a blow, let alone crippling, against knights and those of noble blood is a dire offence, enough to have him hanged. I doubt he’s even a noble bastard but a mummer posing as one, seeing as he doesn’t name his parents. You know our laws, Daemon, Rhaenyra. I am in the right here.”

Daemon could hear the threat in the voice here, and judging by the way Rhaenyra was gripping the armrests of her chair so hard that the knuckles were white, so could she. The infamous stubbornness of the Sea Snake had reared its ugly head once again, and even his wife didn’t seem eager to wrangle with him on the matter.

He didn’t need to voice his threats either; Rhaenyra and Daemon were well aware of the leverage the Sea Snake held. Corlys could withhold the flow of gold and trade through Dragonstone, and if word came out that there was a disagreement between Driftmark and Dragonstone, the strength of the Blacks would waver, and many undecided lords would look to the Greens.

Corlys might have been in the right, but the Princess of Dragonstone wasn’t easily pushed around.

“With this, it makes six Velaryons that have defied me and mine, Corlys.” Rhaenyra’s voice had grown dangerously low. “To me, it appears that you cover your inability to rein in your own family and want others to pay for it, while punishing me and mine. You know that Alicent and her spawn will never entertain your ambitions. Are you so eager to punish not only me but your grandsons, Jacaerys and Lucerys? Or perhaps you have forgotten you’re a lord sworn to me, Corlys?”

“I have always been loyal, Princess!” Corlys stiffly bowed his head. “Have I ever let you doubt my loyalty when I have done right by you ever since you became the Princess of Dragonstone? But what would your supporters think if you fail to uphold the laws? Or perhaps you have failed to notice that Baela and Rhaena have fervently pleaded with you to not only spare the Northman but reward him greatly? The two of them are too close to some no-name bastard unsupervised for gods know how long.”

Rhaenyra's face grew dark. "What are you insinuating, Corlys?"

"I've heard Baela often slips out to wander around Dragonstone alone. Do you even know if my granddaughters still have their maidenheads intact?"

Daemon drew Dark Sister and snarled. "Careful with what your tongue says, Corlys, lest you wish to share something with your nephews." The sword's tip rested on Velaryon's neck, just a tiny push from piercing his jugular. "Think *very* carefully what comes out of your mouth next."

"Calm down, husband," Rhaenyra whispered, latching onto his left arm. Daemon reluctantly lowered Dark Sister but did not sheathe her. Then she straightened up, raising her voice. "Lord Velaryon merely speaks out of concern for me, his liege. Is that not so, Corlys?"

"Yes, Your Grace." The old lord bowed deeply, not looking as contrite as before. "I am glad we are of like mind."

"Are we?" Daemon asked, tilting his head. "Why does it seem that Corlys is trying to divide us out of pettiness? I can't help but wonder why he's called the *Snake*."

It was Rhaenys who spoke next.

"Your love of warriors and daring has clouded your mind, Daemon," she said, her tone soft as her fingers possessively raked at her husband's chest. "This is not a time to be divided over petty matters like some unknown bastard who might just be a spy for all we know. Otto Hightower and his daughter keep hoarding power, and their allies in King's Landing swell with each passing moon. Of course, we'll have to apprehend this Jon Snow and judge him according to the laws of the realm."

"Jon Snow might be a bastard, but he's a Stark bastard from what I heard," he pointed out. A part of Daemon wasn't sure why he was trying so hard. "Perhaps—"

"The Northmen will not break their vows for some distant cadet branch bastard nobody has heard of before," Rhaenyra said sharply. "Assuming he's truly who he claims to be. Husband, seize this Jon Snow and bring him to me. I'll be the judge of his crimes."

It was an order, and not one Daemon could refuse.

He schooled his face and nodded. "It shall be done."

At that moment, Daemon knew Jon Snow was doomed. After years of veiled insults and terrible wrangling in court with the Greens, the mere thought of having her precious sons slighted or possibly cuckolded elicited a visceral reaction in Rhaenyra. Daemon knew his wife intimately—she was like a vicious lioness when provoked and would do anything to remove any obstacles from their way. Of course, she wouldn't miss the chance to squeeze Corlys for some concessions before the trial.

Well, it could not be said that Jon Snow was not warned or given a chance. He certainly had ample time to leave Dragonstone if he had moved yesterday. Perhaps the bastard was already gone, already on a boat to Essos.

An hour later, Daemon had taken a hearty breakfast and was prepared to leave.

Of course, his daughters had somehow already heard about it and were already crowding their grandfather in the yard.

“Grandfather, we were so scared,” Rhaena sobbed out. “Surely, our saviour should be rewarded instead of hanged like some outlaw?”

Baela was by her side, nodding darkly. “They killed the pet monkey you gifted me, Grandfather. They struck him dead.”

His twin daughters had large circles under their puffy eyes. It seemed they had spent the night crying more than sleeping. Daemon wanted to reassure them, but couldn’t. Sooner or later, they would learn that tears and weeping did not solve problems in the Seven Kingdoms.

“I’ll gift you another one,” Corlys said, his lined face softening.

“But I don’t want another one,” she said stubbornly, gritting her teeth. “I want Jon back!”

“You named your pet monkey Jon?” The Velaryon Lord asked slowly, but Daemon noticed the flexing in his hand betraying his irritation again.

“Yep. After the man who saved us. Jon died trying to save me, too!”

Daemon shook his head inwardly; his daughter’s stubbornness wasn’t doing her saviour any favours.

“Calm down,” Corlys urged, his voice strained. “I know this has been a harrowing experience for you two. How about I take you to Driftmark to lighten up the mood for the coming week? Regardless, the trial is merely a formality. We’ll follow the laws of the realm to the letter.”

“Quite,” their grandmother said softly, shaking her head with exasperation. “Jon Snow will be judged fairly.”

Which boded poorly for the Northern bastard, considering the laws were against him, and he had no backing from the North. But his daughters were young and naive and did not know, quickly calming down at the reassurances. Perhaps it was for the best. They were almost women grown, and this would tear away the veil of innocence from their eyes, no matter how much he would love to protect it for much longer.

“Should the worst come to pass, he could always take the Black. Service in the Night’s Watch is a great honour, double so for those on the other side of the Neck,” Princess Rhaenys added sternly. “Don’t be too concerned with the fate of strangers who don’t even answer to you. Come now, Rhaena, Baela, it seems my lessons have not sunk in yet.”

Daemon was next fully armoured with the help of Jace and Luce, who were technically his squires—even if Rhaenys did not allow them to deal with the menial tasks befitting of servants. Even the squireship felt like half a farce, considering Ser Loreth Lansdale was in charge of their martial training. Despite being

a knight himself, Daemon cared not for the Andal tradition, but it was a useful title that won respect, and Rhaenyra was eager to have her sons earn any advantage they could.

“Shouldn’t you just send a band of knights and be done with it?” Lucerys asked curiously as he was strapping the gorget. “Isn’t a dragonrider too much to apprehend some Northern bastard, no matter how good?”

“Sending me speaks of the importance your mother places on this task,” Daemon explained absentmindedly. “Besides, I wouldn’t underestimate bastards if I were you. Their swords cut just as deep when you meet them on the battlefield.”

That got the two boys quiet as they sank deep in thought while toiling over the straps of his armour. The two Velaryon Princes had inherited their mother’s pride but were quick of wit and eagerly took to their lessons. Talented riders and swordsmen as well, unlike their supposed father, Laenor.

If not for their dragons and their names, nobody would have ever considered them the Blood of the Dragon. But these were matters Daemon did not like to dwell upon, for it would mean breaking bread with Hightowers.

Soon enough, he was armoured and sighed inwardly. He called for Caraxes and stroked his snout while whispering softly in High Valyrian to keep the dragon calm while the Dragonkeepers hastily saddled him.

Daemon took his sweet time to make a round around Dragonstone and enjoy the warm breeze before descending onto Jon Snow’s farm.

The bastard was sitting on a bench by the entrance like a statue, with a bared tourney sword resting on his knees, once more refusing Guest Rights. Jon Snow had been waiting for him, this time clad in surprisingly well-made ringmail, covering what looked to be a grey padded jacket.

“You did not flee?” Daemon asked, torn halfway between irritation and admiration as he dismounted Caraxes.

“Nay,” was the curt answer. “If I were a man who ran from fighting, your daughters would still be with those knaves.”

Sharp-tongued as always.

“Very well, then. I am here under the command of Princess Rhaenyra of Dragonstone to arrest Jon Snow for the offence against the rightful order of the Seven Kingdoms by the crime of unlawfully brutalising men of high birth.” Daemon yawned, covering his irritation. This whole affair irked him deeply, but the time when he could act rashly against his closest supporters had long passed. “Say something, bastard. I gave you a way out and a chance to flee, yet you failed to heed my warnings.”

Jon Snow stood up and took a defensive stance, a shield in his left hand and that cumbersome-looking tourney blade clasped in his gloved fist.

"I always wondered how skilled the Rogue Prince is with a sword," he declared boldly. "Surely you do not mind a friendly spar with me, Your Grace?"

Daemon drew Dark Sister and chuckled. "You could still swear yourself to me, bastard. Perhaps take the Black, or even try swimming to Essos—I would let you flee now if you do it." All he received in return for his witty jape was a face colder than the Mountains of the Moon in the swing of winter. "You are set on this folly? You would risk your life out of pride?"

"All men must die," Jon spoke, his voice full of steel. "Do you fear death, Prince Daemon? I do not. Living in vain is a far darker fate. Why wouldn't I fight you when such a sweet chance has fallen in my lap? Why wouldn't I test my mettle against a warrior of such renown as you? Even if I fall here, it's a death far better than most."

"Bold to the point of foolishness," Daemon said, shaking his head. But he couldn't help but admire the Northern bastard. "How about this—if I defeat you, you'll swear your sword to my service. I'll get you out of this mess."

"Even if it displeases your wife and the Sea Snake?" Snow asked, tilting his head in confusion.

Daemon let out a low laugh. "They will be unhappy, but they will swallow their bitterness sooner or later. I will claim I ordered you to attack Corlys' nephews, for they had gone mad with grief and rage over losing their tongues."

The bastard's face only grew colder.

"You are all cut of the same cloth—wielding laws when convenient and ignoring them otherwise." His words were filled with derision, but they were not false. "And what if I win?"

"*Lykiri*," Daemon commanded to Caraxes, and the Blood Wyrms stilled, his crimson eyes turning to watch on with interest. Sighing, the Prince strapped on his helmet. "Don't think too hard on it. I haven't lost a fight in years."

"Neither have I." Snow stepped forward in a fighting stance. "Let's see who the better sword is!"

No more words were said, and Daemon was already lunging. Dark Sister stabbed at the Northerner's belly, but Snow swatted it away with his shield, using the boss to meet the dragonsteel. The prince was forced to duck beneath the swooshing tourney blade and step back.

Jon Snow knew how to fight against Valyrian Steel swords. He did not give Daemon a chance to recover either. The tourney blade already struck at Daemon, forcing him to parry. The sheer strength of the blow rattled his wrist. The damned bastard was far stronger than his appearance would suggest—it was nearly as bad as fighting that brute Ser Alester Oakheart, the knight they called the Giant of Old Oak.

There was no time for contemplation as Jon Snow immediately pressed his attack like a hungry hound, looking for weakness. The tourney blade relentlessly aimed at his joints, head, and neck, but Daemon barely managed to fend it off. He was on the back foot and couldn't regain control over the fight, no

matter how much he tried. Within half a minute, he got struck in the shoulder, sending numb jolts of pain down his arm.

Reducing his time in the yard since little Viserys was born was coming to bite him back in the arse. Jon Snow was faster than him, stronger than him, and more skilled than him. His footwork was impeccable, and his blows were ruthless and precise.

'It shouldn't have been possible,' Daemon complained inwardly. Training and talent could only get you so far without experience and the baptism of bloodshed and death. The Rogue Prince hadn't struggled against Ser Criston Cole half as much in that fateful tourney all those years ago. A warrior only grew by overcoming foes, and Northmen infamously disdained attending tourneys. There hadn't been any wars or fighting in the North for decades, yet Jon Snow fought like a man who had gone through dozens of battlefields despite being so young.

Where did Jon Snow find the opponents to grow so skilful? What sort of men had he fought to become so fierce?

No matter what feints or tricks Daemon tried, they all failed. Jon Snow was as agile as a shadowcat and as cunning as a wolf. The bastard kept intercepting and deflecting his strikes before they could gain proper momentum, easily countering his every move. The tourney sword was thick and sturdy, more like a bludgeon of steel, as Dark Sister barely left a few marks across its length.

Within two minutes, Daemon was already winded by the exertion and heaving like an ox after pulling a cart for hours.

The Prince was irritated—he had failed to land a single blow. *Not even one.* Jon Snow's heater shield felt like a wall that could intercept everything in the rare moments Daemon managed to counter-attack. The damned thing was sturdy, too; Dark Sister had only cut through the surprisingly well-forged steel rim. Despite his lack of a helmet, the bastard's head felt like a well-fortified holdfast.

He hastily retreated, but Jon Snow was hot on his heels, dogging his every step. Daemon's stab was deftly caught with the shield, and the tourney blade struck his sword hand mercilessly. His already rattled hand lost strength at the force of the blow, and Dark Sister fell from his grip and to the ground as Jon Snow swiftly kicked it away.

The blunted tourney sword was pointed at his armoured neck, but Daemon knew he had lost despite being clad in full plate. And by the gods, defeat tasted bitter. He was tired, while the young bastard had barely broken a sweat. While not fully armoured, Daemon wasn't sure he could win a fight with his rondel against this foe.

"You've let yourself go, Your Grace," the bastard acknowledged as he lowered his sword.

It was true, Daemon reluctantly realised. Jon Snow had fought without a helmet and with a blunt tourney sword, yet made a fool out of him—in fact, his armour turned out redundant, for Daemon had failed even to scratch it! But strangely enough, he didn't feel angry about it. There was no gloating in those grey eyes, only a tinge of disappointment that hurt more than the strikes to his hand and shoulder.

If he were two decades younger, Daemon could have managed a win, even if he would have needed to work hard for the victory.

“I’d like to see how well you fight when you near fifty, bastard,” he bit out, but there was no heat in his words. He took off his gloves and started massaging his reddened wrist. Any more, and it would have been broken. The jolt of pain through his shoulder suggested a bruise that would last for weeks. “So you did win, and I’m a man of my word. Tell me, what do you want as a reward?”

“I have a servant here—Aethan. It would be enough if you make sure the Sea Snake and your wife don’t make needless trouble for him.”

“Consider it done. Only that?” Daemon tilted his head. “Some might have asked me to let them go. I would have, you know. I would spend the day flying around Dragonstone and return in the evening, claiming you were nowhere to be found.”

“If I wanted to run away, I would have. As for another favour... hold onto that sword for me, too, if you will, Your Grace.” Jon Snow brought over a plain-looking scabbard that had been resting by the bench. After a moment, Daemon hesitantly picked up the sword, blinking at the unique wolfhead pommel crowning the hilt. “I trust you won’t steal it.”

The Prince scoffed indignantly as he fastened the sword next to Dark Sister’s hilt. “As if I would resort to something so dastardly. Anyway, what are you going to do now, Snow? My wife won’t just let you go, and you indeed broke the law. Will you still refuse to swear yourself to me?”

“I’m going to Dragonstone to surrender myself for trial,” he declared with the same disinterested tone one would use to say water is wet.

Daemon blinked in confusion. “Do you have a death wish? The Sea Snake will not let you off.”

“It’s fine. I’d rather not run away from my problems.” Snow lazily stretched as he shrugged off his chainshirt and unstrapped the padded jacket, then discarded his breastplate and ringmail, leaving his bracers and greaves as his only armour. Grey eyes met purple as the bastard gave him a surprisingly warm grin. “I want to see the man who wants my head even after I saved his granddaughters. At worst, I’ll ask for a trial by battle or to take the Black. Even if I die, it’s fine, so long as I die on my feet. I’ll be going now.”

With a jaunty wave, Jon Snow turned to leave while humming a sorrowful tune without a single care in the world.

“Ooooooh, I am the last of the giants,

My people are gone from the earth.

The last of the great mountain...”

And just like that, Jon Snow’s lonely back disappeared over the fence, singing a song the Rogue Prince had never heard before.

It took Daemon a while to regain his bearings when a skittish old man came out of the house and hastily took the armour and the now-scarred tourney blade Jon Snow had left on the bench outside before returning inside the house.

Suddenly, something soft and warm splashed against his hair, breaking him from his stupor.

Daemon's hand absentmindedly reached for his hair, and the unpleasant stink of shit struck him like a bludgeon as he stared at the watery faecal running down his fingers. Birdshit.

A glance at the sky showed him a lone bird circling above. A pelican.

Swallowing the surge of rage, Daemon rushed up to Caraxes and, with a tug of his reins, he was already flying, chasing after the offending bird that was already fleeing towards the mountain.

He chased it for a short while until Caraxes squirmed under his legs when they arrived at the edge of a cliff, where a silvery behemoth was lazily lounging under the sun. And on Silverwing's horn, the pelican was perched, taunting Daemon with mocking squawks. His Grandmother's dragon wasn't irritated by the dastardly bird's presence. In fact, she seemed to welcome it. Or perhaps a behemoth like Silverwing did not care for something the size of a gnat that wouldn't even fill the gaps between her teeth.

When Caraxes cautiously neared, Vermithor crawled out of the nearby cave, letting out a rumbling, throating roar in warning.

Cursing everything, Daemon waited and waited, glaring at the pelican who seemed content to stay perched on Silverwing's horn. And the bloody dragon didn't show any signs of moving. He could hardly believe it, but by all accounts, it seemed both dragons were not only ignoring the flying rat but also protecting it. Daemon could order Caraxes to bathe the bird in fire, but Vermithor and Silverwing would definitely take it as an attack and retaliate.

It became a game of waiting and patience, but the dragons refused to move, as did the pelican. The silence stretched as the sun slowly crawled up the sky. By the time it reached the zenith, Daemon had calmed down, out of the ache in his bruised body more than anything else, and the stink reeking at his nose had become unbearable.

"Just you wait, you vermin. You might escape punishment today, but I'll get you eventually," he vowed as he wheeled Caraxes and headed back, but not before washing his hair in one of the abandoned wells near Ashcove.

In a fit of some divine irony, he was just in time to see the commotion after Jon Snow's arrival at the castle as a crowd of knights, men-at-arms, and servants had gathered in the courtyard to observe in silence.

"...and why should I grant you a trial by battle, Snow?" Rhaenyra's frosty voice echoed from afar as he landed. "You're neither noble of birth nor a knight to deserve such a right."

"You are the royal heir, yet you want to deny a man's right to defend his words? When word spreads that the man who saved the king's nieces was rewarded with death, nobody will dare to enter your service,

Your Grace,” Jon Snow spoke with the same bold confidence he had carried himself with earlier. “Unless you want to put forth witnesses who can claim otherwise, I don’t believe this trial to be just, so I would rather the gods decide.”

Loud whispers rippled through the courtyard, and at that moment, Daemon realised Jon Snow’s cunning. Rhaenyra’s hand was forced, and she had no choice but to accept or bring in Baela and Rhaena, who would doubtlessly speak in the bastard’s favour.

That did not mean she couldn’t play tricks of her own.

“Very well. I will bring a septon to preside over the rite, then.” His wife waved over the guardsmen. “Take him to the dungeons for now. You’ll get your trial in a fortnight, Snow.”

A part of Daemon couldn’t help but admire the carefree madness with which Jon Snow carried himself.

Rhaenyra did not fail to voice her displeasure in private later. “Why didn’t you deal with him before he could start this farce? You could have said he was resisting arrest and killed him, Daemon. One *Dracarys* and he would be nought but ashes.”

“He did save my daughters,” Daemon retorted coldly. Some days, he loved his wife, but by the gods, Rhaenyra Targaryen was not easy to get along with like Laena had been, especially when she had swelled with his child. But even without that, she did not know how to appreciate honour. Few women ever did. “Fret not. Snow declined my offer to swear his sword in my name, so I shall not interfere.”

The rest of the day was like a blur as all sorts of rumours swept through Dragonstone. Such as Corlys Velaryon bringing his best sword from his own retinue to represent him in the upcoming trial.

Daemon had nearly forgotten about the sword the bastard had entrusted him until the evening when he finally retreated to the privacy of his quarters. Perhaps it was a memento from a relative? A reward from his teacher? Spoils of war?

Unable to ignore the bout of gnawing curiosity, Daemon tugged the blade out of its sheath and cursed loudly when he saw the telltale dark, smoky ripples and razor-sharp edge that he was all too intimately familiar with.

The Red Keep

A bout of fever last moon had forced the king to spend most of his time abed. Recovery had been particularly slow, despite Grand Maester Orwyle’s best efforts. The king’s left hand had grown weaker and rigid, and his sight worsened, adding to the increasing list of ailments Viserys suffered, namely gout, aching joints, back pain, and difficulty breathing, which was caused by his significant girth.

But nobody could say Viserys was a man who shirked his duties. Once he felt well enough, he quickly returned to holding court, balls, feasts and attending the small council meetings.

Even after decades of ruling the Seven Kingdoms, Viserys Targaryen remained an amiable and open-handed man but was capable of great fury and stubbornness when challenged. When his Hand, Otto Hightower, came with an odd expression on his face bearing a message claiming his nieces were brutally attacked and their saviour arrested, he exploded.

“Does Corlys think me a fool?!” His thundering voice could be heard from outside the council chamber.

“Your Grace, the laws are clear—there’s a reason smallfolk can’t raise a hand against noblemen. It goes against the very structure of the kingdom! This Northern bastard cannot be considered nobility. His parents are unknown, and he could be some educated sellsword’s byblow,” Grand Maester Orwyle cautioned. “It could be some skilled mummer.”

“And you, Larys?” the king challenged. “Surely you have some knowledge of this... Jon Snow?”

“As you say, Your Grace. I have heard he’s the son of some very distant cadet branch of the Starks,” Larys Strong offered languidly. “He knows his letters and numbers, including High Valyrian, and had just arrived on Dragonstone a moon ago with enough gold to purchase a farm and hire two servants. His father perished before he was born, and his mother passed from birthing fever after having him...or so he claims.”

It was quite a specific array of information on someone quite unimportant. In fact, the master of whispers wouldn’t even know this much if not for the position of his spy.

“What sort of man is he?” Otto Hightower asked—he had been the man who had brought the news in question, still wearing a peculiar expression on his face. It was the first time the Hightower Hand had seen a pelican so close, let alone one so obedient.

“It’s hard to say. I know many things, but not everything, my lord Hand. But from what little I know, Snow looks like a former warrior turned recluse with a taste for fishing.” The master of whisper leaned forward. “I can find out more should you desire, Your Grace.”

“Was it those five slanderers who attacked my nieces this time?” Viserys asked darkly.

“So the letter claims,” Otto agreed. “Yet even if you pardon the Northman, his status wouldn’t change, Your Grace. Lord Velaryon is perfectly capable and willing to make the life of a destitute Northman with no backing hellish.”

“One would think the Sea Snake doesn’t care about his granddaughters at all.” An amused smile tugged at Larys Strong’s mouth. “This is still a family matter for House Velaryon. It’s Lord Corlys’ granddaughters and his nephews that were involved, in the end.”

“Baela and Rhaena are my family, too!” the king proclaimed. “I will not have a brave man be sacrificed for saving my nieces only to appease Corlys’ misplaced pride.”

“Let us not act hastily, Your Grace,” said Lyman Beesbury, the master of coin. “We do not know the credibility of this letter. It’s clearly not sent by Maester Gerardys. It could be some foolery meant to deceive us.”

“But if we dally along while we wait to investigate properly, Corlys can bury the brave Northman who saved His Grace’s nieces, if true,” Otto Hightower countered sternly. “While the law is clear, exceptions have been made precisely in such cases. Or else, why should our smallfolk help if they see brigands abducting our maidens or attacking our sons and cousins? Many a valorous tale of a farmer or hunter raised to prominence for such acts is aplenty.”

The silence that followed was almost oppressive as Viserys Targaryen clasped his meaty hands and contemplated with his eyes closed. The anger had drained out of the man, and the royal councillors waited until their liege made a ruling. For a long minute, Jon Snow’s fate hung in the balance of the king’s mind.

“I have decided,” Viserys announced, his purple eyes hardening. “Otto, you shall sail to Dragonstone at once, accompanied by Ser Rickard Thorne, to bring my decree.”

“And what will this decree be, Your Grace?”

“Should this... message you received be truthful, Jon Snow will be legitimised as Jon Stark and granted a royal pardon for any crimes he committed, along with ten thousand golden dragons in reward. Quickly now, time is of the essence!”

“Your Grace, I must object,” Beesbury urged. “We still do not know if this bastard, if he even exists, has any Stark blood at all. This might even offend the Lord of Winterfell.”

“The power to legitimise bastards is under royal purview,” Grand Maester Orwyle countered. “It is of no consequence whether Cregan Stark is displeased or not. But it might be prudent to grant him a knighthood where he could choose his own name instead—the status of a knight is certainly enough to shield him from Lord Corlys, and we wouldn’t insult House Stark.”

“I must object, my lords.” Ser Criston Cole’s voice echoed. “The man has not done anything noteworthy to be knighted—”

“Aside from saving His Grace’s nieces from the hands of five tried and true knights,” Larys Strong jabbed slyly. “Men have been knighted for less, Ser.”

“What say you, Otto?” Viserys prodded his Hand.

The Hand frowned for a moment. “A knighthood might be considered just as grave an insult to the bastard. No member of House Stark has accepted a knighthood in recorded history, including their baseborn. We can make him a petty lord or a master of a Masterly House in the style of the North, somewhere far away from the Sea Snake’s reach.”

“A knighthood is too paltry a reward for saving my nieces,” Viserys declared. “Write my words down, Otto, along with a full royal pardon. I will make that man a Stark and make him rich enough to want for nothing. I will handle any complaints from Lord Stark. But I will not grant him any lands, titles, or estates. Being a noble without lands shouldn’t raise much trouble for the prickly Northmen, and if they still grumble, then send some gifts to the Night’s Watch—that ought to brighten them up.”

“This...” The Grand Maester nervously wrung his hands. “Legitimising bastards of noble houses without the requests of their lords sets a dangerous precedent, Your Grace. And it’s something that cannot be taken back.”

“It’s just another Stark.” Viserys waved his plump hand dismissively. “The wolves of Winterfell have whole packs of cadet branches, no? What does this Jon Snow look like?”

“Tall, a warrior’s body, bearing scars of battle. Grey of eyes and dark of hair,” Larys Strong reported impassively. It was nearly impossible to glean the thoughts of the master of whispers. He held them close to his chest and seldom spoke, but when he did, it was done cleverly. “His mannerisms and speech imply education by a maester and being raised as a highborn, not some smallfolk. They say he’s well-versed in matters of heraldry, history, and the affairs of the realm.”

They all paused for a moment to digest those words. All the traits that the Clubfoot had listed were characteristic of bastards who were raised with care by their House.

“So his looks are just like Lord Rickon Stark and then Cregan Stark after him,” the king mused. “And no mere fisherman would be so talented—just knowing High Valyrian is proof!”

“But why go to such lengths for some unknown man, Your Grace?” asked Beesbury.

Viserys Targaryen paused, the royal jowls rustling as he scratched his meaty double chin.

“Helaena told me she dreamt of a great winged wolf, with fur as white as snow, tearing through five sea snakes trying to drown two young drakelings when I was bedridden, you know?” Viserys smiled. “She often dreams of the queerest things, but this must be a sign by the gods—the man is for sure from the line of Stark.”

The councillors swallowed their protests, then. They all knew that when the king’s mind was made up, he would not waver from his decision. No matter how reluctant, they could only accept the royal decisions and leverage them to their advantage.

“But, Your Grace. What if it was all a lie?” Beesbury asked in a last-ditch attempt. “What if Lord Otto reaches Dragonstone only to find all of this has been one terrible jest?”

“Then, Jon Snow will be flogged for slander and exiled from the realm. Council dismissed.”

Author’s Endnote:

Starring: Jon “I’ve run outta fucks to give” Snow. Viserys Targaryen is running on vibes yet again. And yes, I decided to use the F&B Viserys, because why not? I might add more flair/flavour description-wise later on, but I’m happy with the chapter. I know I’m sort of stretching disbelief, but I don’t particularly care, considering this is a crack fic, even if taken seriously.

As for why Jon Snow is taken through the legal wringer, he doesn't have anyone to vouch for him, and he knows this. He's technically a smallfolk, and smallfolk have very, very few rights, especially when pitted against nobility.