

G.O Thrones 181

Chapter 181: What Happens to Traitors

Rhaenyra entered the bedroom with a large tray filled with bread, sausages, and melons.

"Careful, no need to rush," Rhaegar gently reminded her. "How is Runestone?"

"You're already injured like this; focus on recuperating," Rhaenyra said, her eyes reflecting a touch of sadness, reluctant to elaborate further.

Arnold, the traitor, had colluded with the Mountain Clans, infiltrating Runestone through a hidden passage he discovered years ago. He had killed a wine waiter and poisoned the wine.

All the nobles of the Vale who drank at the banquet were killed, and the hall reeked of poisoned blood. The wedding ceremony had turned into a funeral. There was no greater tragedy than this.

Rhaegar, noting her demeanor, realized the situation in Runestone was dire. After a moment of silence, he began eating.

Even the Heir and the Lady of the Eyrie had barely survived an ambush. The defenseless nobles stood no chance.

After finishing his meal, Rhaegar wiped his mouth with a handkerchief and asked, "I heard someone screaming in agony this morning. Was it a captured member of the Mountain Clan?"

"It's Arnold," Rhaenyra said, lowering her head. She had seen him being tortured when she went to fetch food.

The Mountain Clan members who infiltrated Runestone had been killed on the spot. Arnold had been captured alive by Gerold and was now being tortured.

Rhaegar's expression grew somber as he grasped the full extent of the betrayal.

"Rhaenyra, find a wheelchair and push me out," he requested. He wanted to see Arnold himself and witness his suffering.

"You're seriously injured. The Maester said you need to rest for at least half a month," Rhaenyra insisted, her tone firm.

Rhaegar had been stabbed in the back, leaving a gaping wound. Even though it had been bandaged, there was still a risk of infection and inflammation. In the underdeveloped Westeros, an inflamed wound could mean death.

Ignoring her, Rhaegar supported himself with his right hand and slowly sat up. The serpent rune had healed part of his wound, making it manageable.

"Rhaegar! You're so stubborn," Rhaenyra exclaimed, rushing to support him, letting him lean into her arms.

"I'm fine; the flames give me strength," Rhaegar reassured her, feeling the soft touch of her back. He smiled confidently.

Rhaenyra, watching him closely, hesitated and then asked, "Did you... have fire burning on you yesterday?"

Rhaegar nuzzled her neck and laughed. "The Targaryen blood contains magic, and I tapped into it."

Among the forty Dragonlord families, the Targaryens were id to lower tier. They had few dragons and limited knowledge, offering little help to their descendants. Rhaegar's generation knew only dragon riding and had never seen magic.

Aegon the Conqueror may have known something, but he left behind only the Song of Ice and Fire. He didn't leave any valuable knowledge.

Rhaenyra, intrigued, gently ran her hand over Rhaegar's skin. "Can I learn?"

"Hardly," Rhaegar replied honestly.

His bloodline purity was only 5% initially. Even if it increased as he grew, it would be around 10% at most. Rhaenyra was 7 when she tamed a dragon, which is good, but her talent should be less than 40%. Becoming a Pyromancer is almost impossible.

Rhaenyra looked down, disappointed. She had hoped she could learn magic too.

"But," Rhaegar continued, changing his tone, "I found a new kind of magic. Once I'm familiar with it, I can teach you."

He was referring to runes. Learning and utilizing runes required two things: mental power and magic. The Targaryens had magic in their blood, and mental power depended on personal talent.

"Really?" Rhaenyra's eyes lit up with excitement.

Rhaegar smiled, rubbing his cheek against her neck. "Yes."

During the old Valyrian period, the Targaryens' magical inheritance included blood sorcery and pyromancy. This knowledge had been lost or never possessed by the Targaryens. Rune power would become the Targaryens' greatest reliance after dragons.

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At noon, Rhaenyra slowly pushed Rhaegar out of the castle, leaning on a wheelchair. The sunlight was bright and blinding, so Rhaegar raised his hand to shield his eyes and looked around.

In the front yard of the castle, a newly erected three-meter tall cross stood, with a bloodied figure tied to it.

"Prince!" The yard was crowded, and the bloodstained Gerold was the first to spot Rhaegar.

Gerold approached quickly, his face showing concern. "Prince, you're badly injured. This is not helping your recovery."

Rhaegar dismissed the worry with a wave. "Lord Gerold, is that Arnold?"

The figure on the cross was a chestnut-haired teenager, covered in whip marks and barely conscious.

"Yes, Prince," Gerold confirmed, his eyes filled with resentment.

"Find a healer to keep him alive," Rhaegar said calmly.

"Why!?" Gerold reacted sharply.

Rhaegar met his gaze steadily. "Have you heard of the Bolton House?"

"A large family in the North, often at war with the Starks," Gerold replied, puzzled.

"The Boltons have a cruel tradition," Rhaegar continued, his tone dark.

Gerold pondered this, understanding dawning slowly.

"Arnold's crimes are unforgivable. Don't let him die too quickly," Rhaegar commanded, tapping his fingers on the solid wood armrests of the wheelchair. "Flay him alive."

Gerold's face tightened, momentarily speechless.

"I'll give you three days," Rhaegar instructed coldly. "The first day, below the calf. The second day, below the thigh. The third day, below the neck."

He looked at Arnold's figure thoughtfully. "Remember to give him milk of the poppy."

Rhaegar didn't fully understand his own emotions as he spoke, but the stabbing pain in his belly and shoulder told him Arnold deserved this fate.

Gerold, visibly gulping, stepped back. He had planned to torture Arnold before hanging him, but he approved of the prince's more severe proposal. Gerold hurried off to relay the orders to the executioner.

"Rhaegar, flaying is forbidden," Rhaenyra whispered, holding onto the wheelchair. Even the Bolton House had banned flaying, and she didn't want Rhaegar to be known for cruelty.

"It doesn't matter." Rhaegar waved her off, indifferent. The rebellion of the Mountain Clans and certain Vale clans was irrelevant; he simply wanted Arnold to suffer. Perhaps it would serve as an example, but that was secondary.

When he faced the Mountain Clans alone, Rhaegar did not expect to survive. He only wanted to fight until the Cannibals returned, to at least ensure Rhaenyra's survival. But as arrows and spears pierced his body, Rhaegar's will to live grew. He wanted to live and kill those who had wronged him.

Arnold was the first, but not the last.

Suddenly, a horn sounded from the city walls, echoing across Runestone. A messenger shouted, "The Knights of the Vale have returned. Shall we open the gates?"

Chapter 182: Knights of the Vale – Capturing the Rebels

The sound of the horn startled all of Runestone.

Gerold quickly led his men to the walls, while a pale-faced Jeyne emerged from the castle, her spirits high despite her concern.

"Rhaegar, are you all right?" Jeyne asked, crouching beside the wheelchair with concern in her eyes.

"I'm fine," Rhaegar replied with a small smile. "My life is too precious for the Old and New Gods to take now."

Jeyne smiled and rested her head on his hand. "You have a hole in your stomach, but you're still full of talk."

Rhaenyra frowned slightly at their exchange but then diverted the conversation. "How's Jessamyn?"

Jeyne's smile faded, replaced by worry. "She had a sudden fever last night. The maester said it's a wound infection."

"Don't worry, she'll pull through," Rhaenyra reassured softly, her face changing to reflect her concern.

Jeyne forced a smile, clutching Rhaegar's hand on the armrest. He glanced at her and gently withdrew his hand.

The family flower is still not ready to be picked, and the wildflower is better left alone.

Rumble...

The gates of Runestone opened wide and hundreds of riders poured in. Gerold ordered the dismounted cavalymen to be entertained while the horses were taken to the stables to be fed. Then he led several young men in armor to the gate.

"Prince, this is William Royce, my cousin," Gerold introduced, pointing to a young man with short brown hair and a rugged face.

William knelt on one knee and greeted, "Greetings, Prince."

"Rise, Ser," Rhaegar commanded, scanning the bloodstained and battle-worn knight.

William rose, greeted Rhaenyra and Jeyne, and then addressed Jeyne's anxious question. "Where is Lord Yorbert?"

"Lord Yorbert is seriously injured and is in Longbow Hall," William replied, explaining the details of the battle.

Thousands of Mountain Clan members had plundered the Hunter House's territory at Longbow Hall.

With thousands of cavalry and 2,000 foot soldiers, Yorbert had initially won the battle easily, driving the Mountain Clans back into the mountains over half a month.

However, on the way back, the army was ambushed. Thousands of Mountain Clan members, including a Shadowcat and a three-meter-tall giant descendant, attacked.

Yorbert was nearly killed by the Shadowcat, resulting in heavy losses. Before falling unconscious, Yorbert had ordered William to return to Runestone with the remaining cavalry to protect the wedding party from further attacks.

As they talked, two figures emerged from the castle—Old Grimm and Joffrey of the Grafton House.

Rhaegar encouraged, "Joffrey, I heard that you killed two Mountain Clan members. Good job."

Joffrey blushed and puffed out his chest. "It's what I should do—defend the Vale and protect my family."

Joffrey and Lester's efforts in killing the infiltrating Mountain Clan members had been crucial. Without them, the gates of Runestone might have been secretly opened, and they wouldn't have held out until the Cannibal returned to help.

Old Grimm's face was stern. "Prince, my family's reinforcements will arrive soon, but I think the Mountain Clans won't dare to come back. It's more important to investigate the Vale thoroughly."

Colluding with the Mountain Clans, leading attacks on Longbow Hall and Runestone, and orchestrating the tragic Black Wedding—Arnold couldn't have done it alone. Someone must be supporting him from the shadows, looking to profit from the chaos.

Rhaegar smiled and said, "Lord Grimm, your insight is invaluable."

"I suggest we escort Lady Jeyne back to the Eyrie first and then mobilize the army," Old Grimm suggested sincerely. The Runestone had just been attacked and wasn't safe. As Lady of the Eyrie, Jeyne should sit on her own turf and use her power to plan.

Jeyne remained silent and looked at Rhaegar. With Yorbert gravely wounded and her loyal bannermen decimated, she trusted her cousin more than ever.

Rhaegar's mind was already made up. "No need! My dragons are on standby until we leave the Vale." Having suffered once, Cannibal would not stray far from him.

Turning to Gerold, Rhaegar asked, "Lord Gerold, who were the nobles who were supposed to attend the wedding but didn't?"

Loyal nobles had perished at the Black Wedding, so the traitors must be among those absent.

Gerold pondered. "House Shett of Gulltown and House Tollett of Grey Glen."

Jeyne added, "Gulltown's branch of House Arryn."

Old Grimm's eyes gleamed. "Gunthor Royce from Runestone didn't come either!"

The Royce House had many branches, and Gunthor, a second-generation cousin of Albert, was known for his love of banquets and tournaments, but he hadn't attended the Black Wedding.

"Very well, the rebels are clear," Rhaegar said, smiling. He turned to Joffrey. "Joffrey, I have a mission for you. Do you accept?"

"Always ready," Joffrey replied, though his eyes showed nervousness.

Rhaegar addressed William. "Organize your cavalry and take Joffrey to Gulltown."

William agreed without hesitation.

Rhaegar then instructed Old Grimm, "Write a letter of request for help, give it to your grandson. Have him lure Shett House and the influential members of the Arryn House branch to Runestone."

Old Grimm's face tightened. This mission was dangerous; revealing their intentions might provoke the other families to attack.

"Gulltown was originally Shett territory, wasn't it?" Rhaegar reminded.

Old Grimm weighed the pros and cons. "Joffrey will complete the mission, Your Grace." He understood Rhaegar's implication: the Shett House was finished. House Grafton would administer Gulltown long-term.

"Lord Gerold, you have a mission too," Rhaegar continued. "Bring in the traitors and conspirators from House Royce. Rhaenyra will use the dragons to force them out."

Rhaegar couldn't act himself, but Syrax would ensure the traitors were flushed out. Beyond the initial targets, other nobles and knights involved in the rebellion would be dealt with, leaving the rest to Jeyne.

"Yes, Prince!" Gerold was encouraged by the promise of dragon's support.

A sharp cry from above drew their attention. A white falcon flew over Runestone, and Rhaegar raised his hand, snapping his fingers and whistling. The falcon flew in, landing on his arm without fear.

Its pupils were white—Tormund's message. Rhaegar retrieved a slip of paper from its talons and read it.

"The Mountain Clans gathering place..."

The letter contained a detailed map of a certain vale in the Mountains of the Moon where the remaining Mountain Clans were gathered.

Chapter 183: Bronze Rune – King's Landing Changes

Rhaegar chuckled, shaking his head as he read the note. "Hehe, it's as if a pillow fell right into my lap."

He handed the note to Jeyne and the others. Tormund and Erryk had accidentally discovered the Mountain Clans' gathering place on their way to meet them. They had already positioned their troops nearby, awaiting Rhaegar's instructions.

Jeyne, excited by the news, said, "Rhaegar, if this letter is accurate, we can mobilize our forces and ambush the Mountain Clans."

The rebellion involved many tribes. Now that they knew where they were meeting, they could take them by surprise and wipe them out.

However, Old Grimm shook his head. "Prince, the marked place is in the mountains. Our current troops are limited, and fighting in the mountains and forests favors the mountain clans."

"My suggestion is to deal with the traitors first, and then deal with the mountain clans."

In his opinion, resolving the Shett House was the top priority. Besides, Runestone lacked enough troops, and with an unstable rear, victory would be difficult.

"Everyone, the traitors must be apprehended and the Mountain Clans must be wiped out," Rhaegar said firmly. "Bring the traitors to me within three days. After that, I will personally lead the Dragon to defeat the Mountain Clans."

Three days would be enough time for him to recover from his wounds.

"Rhaegar, your injuries..." Jeyne began, worried.

"Enough," Rhaegar interrupted, waving his hand. "The decision is made. Carry out your missions, and in three days, we will besiege the Mountain Clans."

He had spent enough time in the Vale. The Mountain Clans and the rebels would meet their end.

The group exchanged glances, and even Lady Jeyne, hesitant to defy Rhaegar's command, nodded in agreement.

"Very well, take me back, Rhaenyra," Rhaegar said, not wanting to waste time. He still needed to write back to Erryk.

Rhaenyra, surprise evident in her eyes, pushed him back toward the castle. As Rhaegar disappeared from view, he had unknowingly become the center of power, and his words were the law.

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Nightfall

Rhaegar lay in his bedroom, a faint green light flickering on his chest. The light traced a pattern, forming a strange rune.

Buzz-

As the rune completed, the green light coalesced into a ball, manipulated by an unseen force. Gradually, it formed a diamond-shaped dragon scale, about the size of a baby's fist. The scale hovered three inches above Rhaegar's chest.

With a thought, Rhaegar guided the scale to his heart, where it merged with his skin. The light faded, leaving behind an intricate green dragon scale pattern, like an elegant tattoo.

"Whew~~ the first bronze rune is finally complete," Rhaegar sighed in relief, raising a hand to touch the scale pattern on his chest.

He had meticulously carved the bronze rune, adjusting it to the shape of a dragon's scale and embedding it in his skin. Testing its effectiveness, he drew a dagger and slashed at the scale.

Buzz-

The green scale appeared, blocking the blade and preventing any damage to his flesh. Rhaegar's face lit up with joy.

"An excellent means of preserving one's life!" he exclaimed.

For now, there was only one bronze rune protecting his heart. But as he engraved more runes, they would eventually form a complete set of runic armor. Once complete, ordinary swords and knives would be powerless against him.

"Time to continue engraving," Rhaegar said with determination, stifling a yawn.

Creating bronze runes was more time-consuming and mentally taxing than he had expected. While the serpent rune was physically draining, the bronze runes were sapping his mental strength. In his current state, engraving three runes a day would significantly deplete his energy reserves.

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King's Landing

Recent events had set off a flurry of rumors throughout the city.

The former Hand of the King, Otto Hightower, had returned to King's Landing and rejoined the Small Council as Master of Civil Affairs.

Accompanying him was High Septon Madoc of the Church of the Seven, both of whom were welcomed by the King and Queen.

One of Otto's first initiatives was to help the orphanages and impoverished residents of King's Landing. High Septon Madoc provided manpower and led his congregation in distributing food and tending to the sick and wounded.

The city's poor expressed their gratitude for the Master of Civil Affairs generosity and praised the Church of the Seven.

Flea Bottom

A group of figures in black robes moved stealthily through the streets and alleys, using the cover of night. Two figures approached the entrance of a brightly lit brothel, hiding in the shadows.

"Are you sure about this, girl?" asked one of the black-robed figures, removing his hood to reveal brown curls and a confident smile.

The other figure lifted her hood, revealing the delicate face of a foreign young girl.

"I have a name, Sara," she responded calmly.

"It doesn't matter; *Valar morghulis* (*all men must die*)," Syrio replied with a chuckle, his eyes fixed on the girl.

Sara remained expressionless. "I no longer belong in that hellhole."

"That's right, you're in Westeros now, serving a heir," Syrio said, raising an eyebrow with a hint of regret.

"I am a failure. Please don't mention it again," Sara said coldly as she pulled her hood back up and headed toward the brothel's back door. "*Valar dohaeris* (*all men must serve*)."

Syrio watched her go, whispering, "A girl with talent."

Moments later, screams echoed from inside the brothel. Sara emerged from another corner, wiping a bloodstained dagger on her black robe. "Let's go. I cut the throat of that fat pig who abused the young."

"Very good," Syrio said with satisfaction, pulling his hood back on.

The two disappeared into a narrow alley, their presence vanishing into the darkness. By the next day, news of the High Septon's assassination in a brothel would spread throughout King's Landing. More shockingly, the assailants were revealed to be two children under ten—a boy and a girl.

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Three days later.

Runestone Castle, Vale.

A cross stood in the castle's front yard, lined with naked men and women. Their faces were ashen, and their previously pampered lives were evident from their oily hair and pale flesh.

Joffrey, now sporting a new scar on his face, stood in the courtyard, naming the captives.

"Ser Uther Shett, Lord Shett and his son John Shett from House Shett of Gulltown. Ser Avery Tollett from House Tollett of the Grey Glen. Ser Gunthor Royce..."

Behind Joffrey stood Gerold, Jeyne, and Old Grimm. It was a gathering to punish the rebels.

Clap, clap...

A burst of applause sounded as the castle door opened, revealing a tall figure. Rhaegar, his long hair tied back and clad in black armor, emerged.

With a slight smirk, he announced loudly, "My lords, thank you for waiting!"

Rhaegar looked much better than he had three days ago, though he remained pale with dark circles under his eyes.

"Roar!"

A dragon's roar echoed from the sky as a black dragon circled above Runestone, spewing ghostly green Dragonfire. It sensed its master's emotions and declared its presence in advance.

Chapter 184: Dragons Burning Everything

Striding before the gathered crowd, Rhaegar glanced at the rebels bound to the crosses. They were still alive, only suspended in their torment.

Some wept and begged for mercy, while an elderly man with black and white hair cursed.

Splat...

A long whip struck the cursing man, leaving a bloody scar on his flesh.

"Lord Gerold, are you ready?" Rhaegar asked, his face impassive, ignoring the miserable cries of the traitors. These rebels were kept alive for a public execution, to serve as a warning after the Mountain Clans had been dealt with.

"Prince, the soldiers will be ready to leave at dawn," Gerold replied respectfully, lowering his whip.

Rhaegar scanned the area, noting the absence of William Royce, who commanded the current force. "Guard the gate well; I'll be back soon," Rhaegar ordered, his tone serious as he walked out of the Runestone alone.

Roar...

Cannibal landed and crept outside the city gates, waiting. The gates opened and Rhaegar walked through with calm determination. In the distance lay the golden form of Syrax, with Rhaenyra, dressed in her dragon rider's armor, perched on her saddle.

Rhaegar mounted Cannibal, and he and Rhaenyra exchanged knowing smiles.

"Roar!"

The Cannibal spread its wings and took off, heading straight for the Mountains of the Moon. Syrax followed closely behind, roaring with excitement.

In the past two days, Syrax had burned down two small castles, and now there was an air of eager anticipation for the next bout of Dragonfire.

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South of the Mountains of the Moon, in a secluded vale, thousands of Mountain Clans tribe members had gathered and set up camp. Inside a large animal skin tent, a group of men adorned with bone jewelry argued heatedly.

"Two fire-breathing monsters incinerated our tribe's best warriors—over a thousand men!" one shouted.

"My tribe barely escaped. If I hadn't run so fast, I'd be ashes by now," another retorted.

"This so-called alliance is worthless. Those nobles are dead, but we lost almost our entire army!"

The arguments intensified. More than a dozen mountain clans had united, annexing smaller tribes and amassing tens of thousands of warriors.

Yet their attempt to capture Runestone had nearly led to their destruction. The fragile alliance was on the verge of collapse.

Outside the camp, Erryk and his men hid in the woods. Tormund lay in a clearing, his eyes glazed white as he surveyed the camp through the eyes of a white hawk.

"Ser, two groups of reinforcements have arrived," Tormund reported, his pupils returning to normal. He had seen the emblems of the arriving clans: a yellow burning tower and an orange base covered with gravel. They moved quickly toward the camp.

A gust of wind blew through the forest, casting shadows over their hiding place. Looking up, they saw a black dragon hovering above, surveying the camp below.

"Cannibal, Dracarys!" Rhaegar commanded, his voice unwavering. Without hesitation, the Cannibal dove low, green Dragonfire accumulating in its maw before erupting onto the camp.

Boom...

The dragonfire obliterated the arrow towers at the camp's entrance and spread through the screaming masses.

"Monsters! Fire-breathing monsters are attacking us!"

"Run!"

Panic gripped the Mountain Clans as they scattered in fear. Rhaegar, his expression cold as ice, commanded, "Cannibal, leave no one behind!"

The Cannibal roared, his dragonfire consuming tents and warriors alike as he glided back and forth across the camp.

"Roar..."

Syrax arrived, blocking the escape routes of the Mountain Clans. Rhaenyra, perched atop Syrax, her hair tied back and hands gripping the saddle, shouted, "Dracarys!"

In response to her High Valyrian command, Syrax roared and unleashed golden Dragonfire, sweeping over the fleeing clans.

Green and gold Dragonfire turned the mountainside into a tableau of blood and flame.

"Counterattack! Counterattack!" some tribal chiefs shouted, trying to rally their archers. But the dragons flew too high, their scales impervious to the arrows that fell short.

"Where is the witch? Bring her out!" a chief demanded, gripping the leader of the Stone Crow tribe in desperation. The witch, known for her fire magic, had united the clans with her prophecies.

Nearby, a woman in a red robe and ruby necklace, her beautiful face contorted with fear, hid by a campfire. Trembling, she watched the dragons above, urine running down her thighs. She had preached about the Lord of Light and swayed the chiefs with her pyromancy, but now, in the face of real dragons, her magic seemed weak.

"Lord of Light, please give me the strength to withstand the dragonfire," she prayed desperately, kneeling in the dirt, oblivious to her filthy condition.

Boom—

A surge of dragonfire swept through the camp, engulfing the red-robed sorceress. She screamed in agony, clinging to life as the intense heat seared her skin. Her ruby necklace glowed, shielding her for a moment before the flames moved on. Stripped of her robes, she collapsed naked and trembling in the mud.

The scene caught Rhaegar's attention. Rising from his saddle, he looked down in astonishment at the unharmed figure below. The naked woman had survived Cannibal's dragonfire - something he'd only seen once before.

"Is this witchcraft?" Rhaegar muttered, remembering the Flame Witch Erryk had mentioned in his letter.

"Kill! Destroy the Mountain Clans!" he commanded, refocusing on the battle. Armored soldiers rushed into the chaotic camp, sealing the exits and slaughtering the panicked clansmen. Rhaegar resumed his bombardment with Cannibal, intent on destroying the Mountain Clans for at least a century.

Whoosh!

A sharp arrow pierced the sky, hitting Cannibal's ebony scales with a crunch before splintering apart. Rhaegar glanced down and saw a towering figure - a fourteen-foot half-giant with a stern face.

"Another giant descendant," Rhaegar remarked, intrigued by the sight. Giants had once ruled Westeros, driven to near extinction by the First Men. To see a half-giant here, almost as tall as a full-blooded giant, was unexpected.

"Rhaegar, are you alright?" Rhaenyra's voice called out as she descended on Syrax.

"No! Don't burn him, Rhaenyra!" Rhaegar urgently stopped her. The half-giant intrigued him; he envisioned taming it and bringing it back to King's Landing as a formidable guard. What could be more impressive than a half-giant guard?

"Hmph, bad taste," Rhaenyra huffed, rolling her eyes before guiding Syrax away.

Chapter 185: Red Witch – Shadowcat

The battle continued into the evening, a one-sided massacre lit by the flames of two dragons. The entire camp was transformed into a sea of fire, filled with the screams and acrid smell of burning flesh.

Thousands of Mountain Clans tribe members perished, save for a few lucky souls who managed to escape.

"Cannibal, land!" Rhaegar commanded, guiding his dragon to the only remaining clearing, surrounded by flames and charred bodies.

"Rhaegar, we've captured the giant's descendant. What are you doing down there?" Rhaenyra's voice rang out. Syrax landed a few dozen meters away, its feet on a burning tent, eyes agitated as it stared at Cannibal.

Cannibal shifted and slumped to the ground with a contemptuous snort. Syrax, an inexperienced female dragon, was far too excited by the minor victory.

"Do not dismount!" Rhaegar shouted back, moving forward with one hand on Cannibal's body. He was searching for the naked woman who had survived the Dragonfire.

After becoming a Pyromancer, he had not yet mastered any magic or fire sorcery. Bathing in fire had given him immense power, but it was too exhausting and single-minded. He needed something more versatile.

Rhaenyra obeyed, remaining on Syrax's back, her eyes fixed on Rhaegar. The true power of a dragon rider was in the dragon itself; going down would compromise her safety.

Rhaegar scanned the burning ruins until he heard the faint murmur of a woman. Pulling aside a charred log, he stepped into the hot wreckage. There, crouched in a corner, was a naked woman with snow-white skin and a delicate figure. Her long black hair partially obscured her face, but Rhaegar could hear her praying to some god.

"What is your name?" he asked coldly, slowly approaching her.

The woman shivered, lifting her head timidly. Her sultry cheeks and captivating eyes drew him in as she softly spoke, "Myrcella."

Her voice was so enchanting, it felt like an invitation. Rhaegar's gaze drifted to her chest, and for a moment, he was mesmerized.

Noticing his interest, Myrcella's eyes sparkled as she proudly lifted her breasts. "My lord, do you want to do it?" she asked seductively.

"No," Rhaegar replied coldly. "Are you a Flame Witch?"

"Yes, my lord," Myrcella said, standing up and boldly walking towards him. "Bless the great Lord of Light, for guiding you to me."

Clang—

Rhaegar pressed Dragon Claw against her delicate neck, stopping her in her tracks. "You should be grateful that my sword is quick enough to sever your hand before it touches me," he taunted.

Even Rhaenyra, his dragon-riding partner, had never dared to approach him so boldly. This woman, who had likely lived a filthy life, dared to think she could touch him?

"Fool!" Myrcella's demeanor shifted as she quickly retreated, falling to the ground.

"Roar!" A black shadow darted around a corner, aiming for Rhaegar's neck. He caught the attack out of the corner of his eye and didn't flinch.

Buzz...

A layer of green scales covered his neck, deflecting the attack. Rhaegar turned to see a large black cat, the size of a leopard, its eyes blue and green. Baring its teeth, it tried to grasp his scales with its claws.

Pfft...

With a swift swing of Dragon Claw, Rhaegar decapitated the Shadowcat, its head rolling to the ground. Blood splattered across his face, frowning in disgust, he wiped it away with his sleeve.

Rhaegar glanced at the naked woman and spoke coldly, "You will suffer the same fate as this creature if you do not give me all your magic and spells." He gestured to the corpse of the Shadowcat.

This was no ordinary big cat, leopard, or tiger. The Shadowcat, native to the Mountains of the Moon, was a fierce predator. Much like a leopard, an adult Shadowcat could hunt down and kill large wild animals.

Cruel by nature, it preferred to strike in the dark. Rhaegar had heard rumors that these beasts were bred by witches among the Mountain Clans.

"I'm sorry," the woman stammered, almost paralyzed with fear as she looked at the dead Shadowcat. "I'm a follower of the Lord of Light, and I know nothing of witchcraft."

She really didn't know any magic. If she had, she would have infiltrated noble circles long ago to deceive the lords with her supposed powers.

"Alright, I believe you," Rhaegar sighed, admiring the woman's submissive posture as he slowly approached.

She quickly stopped crawling, spreading her legs and forcing a smile, trying to appear cooperative.

A flash of cold steel.

A section of her head and hair flew off, and a fountain of blood erupted. Rhaegar shielded himself from the blood with his hand and removed the ruby necklace from her headless body.

Looking down at her severed head, which still held a grotesque smile, Rhaegar murmured, "So confident, yet so fragile."

With a sense of finality, he kicked aside the corpse and walked out of the ruins, the ruby necklace clutched in his hand.

...

Nightfall

Runestone held a grand banquet to honor the victorious warriors. The rebels, now stripped and hanged from the castle walls, served as a grim reminder of their fate.

Inside the castle, the celebrations were subdued, the shadow of the Black Wedding still looming over the guests. Many noblewomen and their ladies remained upstairs with Jeyne, grateful to be safe but mourning the fathers and brothers who would never return.

Rhaegar sat at the head of the table in the first-floor hall, with only a few guests joining him. Old Grimm stood, raised his glass, and said solemnly, "Thank you, Prince, for bringing victory to the Vale and avenging the dead."

"To the brave and noble Rhaegar Targaryen," echoed through the hall as nobles, knights, and soldiers raised their glasses and chanted his name.

Rhaegar rose slowly and said, "To all of you!"

"To the prince," the hall responded in unison, drinking deeply from their cups. The wine had been carefully tested by servants to ensure its safety - a precaution that would likely become standard throughout the Vale.

Taking a sip, Rhaegar sat down and addressed Old Grimm, "Lord Grimm, I will return to King's Landing tomorrow. Please mobilize your fleet as soon as possible."

"Your gift to House Grafton will not be forgotten," Old Grimm replied warmly, showing the utmost respect. With the elimination of rival noble branches in Gulltown, his house's power was poised for unprecedented growth, making them crucial allies in supporting the Stepstones.

Rhaegar raised his glass in gratitude and fell silent. The Black Wedding had decimated half the Vale's nobility, and the recent rebellion had claimed even more lives. As the noble ladies returned to their families with the grim news, a significant redistribution of power within the Vale was inevitable.

"Rhaegar, your wounds are not yet healed. It's time to rest," Rhaenyra advised gently as she descended the stairs from the second floor.

Rhaegar smiled and replied, "Okay, I'll go back now."

His injuries had long since healed, thanks to the serpent rune. The bannermen were unaware that his bandages were only for show. Rhaenyra's arrival to call him away was a prearranged signal. He had no intention of staying at the banquet all night.

Chapter 186: Alicent and Daemon

Leaving behind the remaining bannermen, Rhaegar allowed Rhaenyra to lead him back to their bedroom.

As soon as they entered, Rhaenyra eagerly began, "Jeyne is rallying the noblewomen, promising two of them control over their families."

Rhaegar reclined on the bed, his reaction calm. "That was expected."

"Did Jeyne discuss this with you?" Rhaenyra scrutinized him, her gaze suspicious.

"Jeyne is smarter than you think," Rhaegar replied with a smirk. "The Arryn branch in Gulltown is failing apart, and Arnold is finished."

He continued, "Next she'll return to the Eyrie to rally other Arryn branches and comfort the victimized clans, thus securing a group of loyal followers."

The Black Wedding had indeed decimated many nobles, especially those who had either defied or ignored Jeyne's orders. With the traitors eliminated, the Vale's power structure was more malleable than ever. Lady Jeyne seized the opportunity to create a unified regime.

Though the nobles' leaders and heirs had perished, their knights and soldiers remained intact, ensuring that the Vale's overall strength would not be significantly diminished. With royal backing, Jeyne could emerge as the greatest beneficiary of the rebellion, if she can withstand the pressure.

Rhaenyra, shocked by this revelation, covered her mouth. "Are you suggesting that Jeyne might...?"

"Shh!" Rhaegar whispered, "Do not speculate. She faced danger with us."

In his opinion, Arnold's rebellion probably had Jeyne's subtle influence, but the severe consequences - the grave injury to Yorbert and the Black Wedding - were too high a price to pay. It was likely that Jeyne had underestimated the ruthlessness of Arnold and the Mountain Clans.

...

In another bedroom, Jessamyn lay on the bed, her face pale and still in a coma.

The door opened softly, and Jeyne walked in with gentle steps. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking at her friend's face and wiping the sweat from her brow with a handkerchief.

"Jessamyn, you must be strong and wake up," Jeyne whispered, lowering her eyes and taking one of Jessamyn's hands. "Yorbert is getting old, and I need you to help me carry the weight of this responsibility."

Jeyne had successfully gathered most of the noblewomen that evening. Gerold and the old Grimm had also pledged their loyalty to her. Soon she would secure her position as Lady of the Eyrie for a long time to come.

...

King's Landing

News of the assassination of the High Septon of the Faith of the Seven spread quickly throughout the city. Rumors were rampant, claiming that the High Septon had been molesting children in a brothel before his death.

It wasn't just the High Septon; over a dozen other high-ranking priests were found murdered in brothels, their throats slit and their genitals mutilated and stuffed into their mouths.

Within three days, the scandal had caused an uproar throughout the kingdom. The new Master of Civil Affairs, Otto Hightower, also came under scrutiny.

Investigations revealed that Otto had used treasury funds for charitable donations, dividing the money between buying food for the poor and donating it to the Faith of the Seven. Whether these rumors were true or not, Otto's reputation among the commoners was in tatters.

In the Red Keep, Alicent and Otto Hightower dined together in tense silence. Otto ate his steak calmly, seemingly unconcerned by the gossip swirling around him.

"Father, someone is trying to slander you. You'll be held accountable," Alicent said, frowning and barely touching her food.

"Don't worry," Otto replied, putting down his knife and fork and taking a sip of red wine. "I didn't take a single coin from the treasury. Lord Lyman can vouch for that."

While it was true that Otto had financial dealings with the High Septon, but the money came from the Hightower House, and not from the royal treasury. Back at the center of power, Otto was careful not to leave any loopholes for his enemies to exploit.

"But your associate was killed in a brothel, and there are scandals everywhere," Alicent said irritably. Even in the depths of the Red Keep, she had heard the sordid rumors about the High Septon.

"You are mistaken," Otto corrected. "We were comrades in King's Landing, not partners or allies." He laughed and shook his head. "Frankly, I didn't expect Madoc to be so foolish, but it doesn't matter now."

As the Master of Civil Affairs, Otto's primary task was to oversee King's Landing's street sanitation program. Helping the poor had merely been a tactic to gain favor with the populace. Now, he needed to gauge the true state of affairs in King's Landing.

"A group of assassins killed the High Septon and spread these scandals as a warning," Otto mused. "They're telling me not to overstep my bounds, or I'll meet the same fate."

Despite the dire situation, Otto was somewhat relieved. Madoc's death meant he could continue his work without the hindrance of a scandal-ridden partner.

"There is a bit of trouble," Otto murmured, contemplating the complexities of King's Landing's underground networks. "My old informants are too weak now. I need to build a new web of spies to understand what's truly happening in this city."

Otto resolved to reestablish his network and regain control, ensuring that he stayed informed and ahead of any threats.

Alicent lifted her head, gazing at her father with suspicion.

Otto leaned back in his chair and said gently, "You know who has a comprehensive intelligence network at their disposal."

"But..." Alicent began to protest, but Otto waved a hand to silence her. "Acquiring that network is crucial. We need more allies."

Without giving her a chance to refuse, Otto stood up and left the room.

Alicent watched her father's retreating back, her eyes filled with dissatisfaction. She clenched her fists tightly. After a moment, she slammed her hand on the table, straightened her dress, and stood up.

When she opened the door, a Kingsguard stood there, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Erryk.

Alicent adjusted her posture and took a deep breath. "Ser Arryk, accompany me to the dungeon."

"Yes, Your Grace," Arryk replied, following her without hesitation.

They soon reached the dungeon of the Red Keep. As Alicent entered, the prisoners leered and shouted vulgarities.

Arryk grabbed one of the prisoners by the hair and smashed his head against the iron bars until he fell unconscious.

Alicent looked away and whispered, "Thank you, Ser."

"That's my duty," Arryk replied, gripping the hilt of his sword as a warning to the other prisoners, who quickly retreated into the shadows.

"Ser, you can wait here," Alicent instructed as she moved deeper into the dungeon.

Arryk nodded and stood guard as Alicent moved on alone.

She stopped at a cell and peered through the iron bars at the inmate.

"Daemon, I know you can hear me," she said, addressing the white-haired man sitting on the edge of the bed.

Chapter 187: First Battle of the Stepstones Islands

"Daemon, don't play dumb," Alicent scolded impatiently after a long silence.

"Ugh, can't a man get some rest in his cell?" Daemon's magnetic voice finally replied as he slowly lifted his head.

Even in the dungeon, Daemon's handsome face and royal demeanor remained intact, though his long, messy hair and slightly crooked nose - thanks to a mediocre job by the maester - marred his appearance.

He scanned Alicent up and down, teasing, "A private meeting with a prisoner at night? The Queen is quite bold."

"Shut your mouth, unless you want filth in your meals from now on," Alicent snapped, her face contorted with anger.

"Fine, you rule my brother's court, you win," Daemon shrugged, dropping his mocking tone. He knew Alicent well - her threats were usually empty. After a moment's pause, he asked casually, "What do you want from me?"

"Do you want to go out?" Alicent clasped her hands together, her eyes fixed on him.

"What?" Daemon frowned, suspicion flickering in his eyes.

"There is an unknown force in King's Landing," Alicent said bluntly. "I need your men. I'll release you in exchange."

"Are you offering to seduce my brother and help me escape?" Daemon chuckled.

"Does it matter? Getting out is enough," Alicent replied.

"No! I'm not as stupid as you think," Daemon scoffed. "Alicent, you haven't changed. Your intentions are still written all over your face."

Struggling to maintain her composure, Alicent continued, "Don't you want to get out? I doubt you'd choose this dungeon over your wife and daughter."

"Whether I go out or not is none of your concern," Daemon replied indifferently. "Your husband, my brother, degrades me every day, yet here you are."

Alicent was momentarily stunned, shifting uncomfortably. Daemon approached the iron bars, smiling faintly. "My brother's favorite child rides the Dragon to gather allies, and my brother, exhausted both physically and mentally, takes it out by cursing me."

"I didn't know you had such a fetish," Alicent scoffed.

"Mock all you want. You're not a Targaryen; you'll never understand our bond," Daemon said seriously. "My brother should have beheaded me the day I was arrested, but he didn't. He still loves me, and my nephews and nieces know it. That's why no one forced him to execute me."

"And is that why you plan to continue rotting in this dungeon?" Alicent challenged.

Alicent, uninterested in hearing more about Daemon's so-called brotherhood, interrupted him sharply. "You're pathetic. You only see what you want to see. No wonder you're being manipulated."

Daemon's voice remained calm. "My brother comes down here every few days to scold me. I know what he means."

"He wants me to admit my mistakes, make amends, be forgiven."

Daemon had plenty of opportunities to escape. On the ship to King's Landing, Laena had asked him what he wanted. But Daemon didn't want to return to exile.

He was a pure Targaryen prince, a descendant of Baelon Targaryen The Brave. He gambled on his brother Viserys's reluctance to kill him.

His grudge against his nephew had almost settled after a rainy night seven years ago. He had deliberately shown his face on Driftmark to gauge his nephew's attitude, but he hadn't expected to be beaten and left in a sorry state. Even Caraxes had been nearly torn to pieces. Still, his nephew left the decision to his father.

Alicent's face grew increasingly grim. "Trying to walk out of your cell with honor, after trying to murder the Heir, is a pure fantasy."

"The Heir's heart is much broader than yours," Daemon countered, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "No, yours isn't small either. One hand can't grasp it."

"How dare you! I am the Queen!" Alicent exploded, her anger palpable.

Daemon remained unfazed, replying sarcastically, "You haven't grown up at all. I remember what you said at first..."

"Stop. I am your niece's best friend," Daemon said, unable to hide his mockery.

"Daemon! You are an animal!" Alicent spat in anger. "You won't even let Rhaenyra go."

"Watch your wording. I didn't defile Rhaenyra," Daemon frowned. "I tried, but I almost got my dick kicked off."

The pain still lingered, a reminder of that encounter.

"You're still a tyrant and a brute!" Alicent cursed.

"Whatever you say, I don't care." Daemon resumed his nonchalant attitude and turned back to his bed. He had to get back to his family and didn't want to get involved with Alicent. Their last collaboration had ended badly.

Alicent's face was like frost, her chest heaving with anger. She had come to recruit him, but had only been mocked and humiliated.

"Daemon, you can rot in your cell!"

With one last angry scream, Alicent stormed out, unwilling to spend another moment in the stinking dungeon.

Daemon snorted, dismissing her as a foolish woman.

...

Meanwhile, on Bloodstone Island, a dim light flickered under the dark night sky from a cluster of bonfires. Soldiers were busy dragging stones and wood to build a watchtower.

Ooooooooo~~

A horn sounded, causing the soldiers to stop what they were doing and quickly put on their armor. More than a dozen three-masted sailing ships appeared on the horizon, each teeming with Triarchy pirates brandishing their blades.

As the horn continued to sound, a warship bearing a seahorse flag sailed forth to confront the pirate ships.

"All hands on deck, draw your bows!" The commanding voice of the Sea Snake echoed, rallying his soldiers. They swiftly readied their longbows, aiming at the approaching pirates.

"Lower the ramming horns and move forward at full speed!" The pirate commander ordered, their savage nature clear.

"Release the fire arrows!" The Sea Snake commanded as the two fleets drew closer. Soldiers shot flaming arrows, raining them down upon the pirate ships.

Under this fiery assault, the pirates of the Triarchy suffered heavy casualties, their screams of pain piercing the night. Yet, their commander remained unharmed, urging them forward.

Boom!

The ships collided with a resounding crash, their ramming horns splintering each other's bows.

"Kill! Take back the Stepstones!" The pirate leader shouted. The Triarchy pirates hurled chains, latched onto the enemy ships, and swarmed aboard.

"Man, kill them all!" A Sea Snake in silver armor roared, leaping into the fray and decapitating a pirate with a single stroke of his sword.

The battle was fierce and chaotic.

"Roar..." A dragon's cry resounded through the night as a light silver-gray dragon soared above Bloodstone Island.

"Dracarys!" Laenor, riding the dragon Seasmoke, commanded from above.

"Roar!" Seasmoke responded, swooping down with agility and unleashing torrents of orange dragonfire. The pirate ships erupted in flames, and the pirates, caught in the inferno, screamed in terror as they leapt into the sea to escape the flames.

Chapter 188: Tyland and the Sea Snake's Charge

At dawn the next day, the aftermath of the previous night's battle on Bloodstone Island was grim. Wrecked ships and debris floated on the sea, smoke lingering in the air. Corpses littered the beach, their blood staining the sand and attracting fish and shrimp to feast on the remains.

"Ah!..." A scream echoed through the area as the sound of hammering nails filled the air. Rows of wooden posts had been erected along the beach, each bearing a captured pirate of the Triarchy, left to the mercy of the tides and sea creatures.

"Roar..." The light silver-gray dragon Seasmoke appeared on the horizon, soared, and then landed gracefully on the island.

"Father, the remaining pirates have escaped to Gray Gallows Island," Laenor reported, dismounting from Seasmoke and approaching the blood-soaked Sea Snake.

After a night of relentless fighting, the Sea Snake, visibly exhausted, responded with a numb voice, "Send the fleet on patrol. Don't act rashly."

The pirates of the Triarchy were experts in guerrilla warfare, constantly harassing the kingdom's forces to prevent them from establishing firm defenses. This had been their sixth night attack in recent times.

"Father, the fleet from White Harbor will arrive tomorrow. We'll soon be out of this mess." Laenor handed over a note, a hint of excitement in his voice. He had longed for a significant battle to prove his worth and bring honor to his house, hoping to silence the rumors about his despised sexual orientation.

The Sea Snake took the note, his stern expression softening slightly. At that moment, Tyland Lannister arrived with a guard, his face urgent.

"Lord Corlys, I must speak with you about the problem of attrition," Tyland said quickly. As the Adviser of Maritime Affairs, he was responsible for the logistics and supplies of the Stepstones campaign.

The Sea Snake squinted at Tyland, replying dismissively, "Lord Tyland, war is all about money and supplies. There's not much to discuss."

Tyland persisted, pointing to the wreckage in the sea, "The fortifications were destroyed again last night, and the casualties are mounting. Building forts in the face of constant harassment will only increase the kingdom's financial burden. We should eliminate the pirates first and then build the walls."

The Sea Snake's sole focus on naval command often clashed with Tyland, who had to manage both the logistics and the progress of the defensive fortifications. Seeing resources rapidly depleted for minimal progress was unacceptable to him.

"Lord Tyland, do not be upset. We are not the only ones suffering," Laenor interjected diplomatically. "The pirates of the Triarchy have also suffered heavy losses, losing nearly ten warships. We have the advantage."

Tyland shook his head. "The Triarchy has three wealthy trading city-states behind them. They can easily replace warships and hire mercenaries. Our resources are limited."

As a Lannister, Tyland's innate financial acumen made him acutely aware of the economic disparities. The Triarchy's control of the Stepstones meant they could levy high taxes and intercept ships, further enriching themselves.

"Enough, Lord Tyland," the Sea Snake interrupted impatiently. "There is no fairness in war. We must wait for the kingdom's support. Rest assured, I am more sensitive to our losses than you!"

He discarded the note and walked away. Tyland, stung by the rebuke, turned red and green before picking up the note and leaving.

Watching them depart, Laenor stood there, caught in a dilemma, and let out a deep sigh.

...

Runestone.

Rhaegar woke up slowly, his sleepy eyes fluttering open. Across the room, Rhaenyra stood before the dressing table, adjusting her skirt and admiring the Valyrian steel necklace around her neck. Since receiving the necklace, she hadn't wanted to take it off for even a moment.

"You're awake, Rhaegar," Rhaenyra greeted happily, catching his reflection in the mirror.

"Good morning, Rhaenyra," Rhaegar replied, sitting up and rubbing his long, messy hair.

"Come on, get up. I'll tell Jeyne not to prepare for the farewell party. We'll leave right away."

Rhaenyra walked over to the bed and pulled him up, hastily helping him with his clothes.

"I'll do it myself; I'm not a child anymore," Rhaegar protested, struggling as the collar of his shirt caught on his ears.

"Oh, adults don't beg for milk?" Rhaenyra teased, curling her lips into a mischievous smile.

"Ahem..." Rhaegar coughed, trying to hide his embarrassment, and resignedly accepted her assistance.

An hour later.

After a hurried breakfast, the siblings said their goodbyes and mounted their dragons. With a roar, Cannibal and Syrax took flight, leaving Runestone Castle behind.

In the castle's front yard, Jeyne, Gerold, Old Grimm, and others watched them depart.

"Lady Jeyne, we should also be on our way," Erryk said respectfully, clad in his silver armor and white robe.

With the rebellion quelled, it was time for Jeyne to return to the Eyrie. At her request, Rhaegar had left Erryk and 500 Dragonkeepers to serve as her guards. This also provided an opportunity to sell transported goods and establish a trade route from the Crownlands to the Vale.

"No problem, Ser," Jeyne replied with a faint smile. She pulled a note from her sleeve and handed it to Gerold.

At Gerold's questioning look, she said, "Send a raven to deliver the letter to King's Landing."

Gerold nodded and turned to find the maester.

"Come along, Ser," Jeyne said, her smile widening. The letter expressed her gratitude to the crown and set a date for her visit to King's Landing. She also hoped to receive an honorary knighthood for Rhaegar.

Having secured the benefits of backing the royal family, Jeyne knew exactly the attitude she needed to display.

...

Evening, King's Landing.

"Roar..."

A pitch-black dragon soared through the sky above King's Landing like a meteor, its roar echoing throughout the city. The mighty roar caught the attention of countless residents. Nobles and commoners alike raised their heads, knowing that the appearance of the black dragon could only mean one thing:

The heir has returned!

"Roar..."

Cannibal circled King's Landing twice, releasing green flames that showed off the fierce dragon's formidable power. Moments later, the dragon descended to the Red Keep and landed gracefully in the spacious courtyard.

Rhaegar leapt from Cannibal's back and shouted, "Jump down boldly, I'll catch you."

"You'd better catch me," Rhaenyra replied, rising nervously from her saddle.

With a reassuring smile, Rhaegar held out his arms. Rhaenyra jumped, and he caught her with ease, spinning her around twice in a joyous embrace.

Syrax had been too slow, so when they left the Vale, Rhaegar had suggested they both ride Cannibal to shorten their journey.

"Haha, you've caught me where it hurts," Rhaenyra laughed, playfully slapping Rhaegar on the shoulder.

"Well, let's get going. Father's waiting," Rhaegar said, taking her hand and leading her towards the castle.

"Wait."

Chapter 189: The Strange Wounds Caused by the Iron Throne

Rhaenyra suddenly stopped, her smile fading as she turned away.

"What's wrong?" Rhaegar asked, concerned.

"Nothing, just... turn around first," Rhaenyra replied, her ears turning red as she awkwardly covered her chest with both hands.

"Did you bump into something?" Rhaegar asked, moving closer in curiosity.

"Rhaegar, you're too close," Rhaenyra said, her expression a mix of embarrassment and annoyance.

Rhaegar blinked, clearly confused. "I don't understand."

Rhaenyra glared at him. "It's your fault, I'm flustered."

With that, she kicked him lightly and walked towards the castle alone, leaving Rhaegar puzzled and wondering what he had done wrong.

...

The Banquet Hall

Viserys leaned back in his chair, his eyes full of anticipation. Musicians played soft tunes on either side of the hall, and a small dwarf, dressed as a pirate with a large head, performed comically.

The sound of footsteps approaching from around the corner drew the attention of everyone in the room.

Viserys looked up and immediately became excited. "Rhaegar, Rhaenyra!"

"Father!" they both exclaimed.

Now dressed in their formal black garments, Rhaenyra and Rhaegar stepped forward hand in hand.

"My children, how was your trip to the Vale?" Viserys asked, rising to greet them with a smile.

The siblings exchanged a brief glance. Rhaenyra smiled softly and spread her hands. "Yes. The Mountain Clans were stopped and the fleet from Gulltown was sent to the Stepstones."

"Excellent. I've been worried about you both," Viserys said, visibly relieved. He stepped forward and hugged his daughter, then looked his eldest son up and down, ensuring he was unharmed.

Rhaegar smiled, placing his hands in front of his belly, although hidden beneath his clothes were two scars, one on his stomach and one on the back of his waist.

"Oh ho ho, look at this beautiful lady! The Pirate Mushroom sends his regards," a shrill child's voice suddenly interrupted. The dwarf playing the pirate, known as Mushroom, trotted up.

Halfway to them, Mushroom dropped to his knees and slid comically to a stop before the trio.

Viserys chuckled. "Mushroom is a good fiddler, always up for a good time."

Rhaenyra, amused, beckoned him over. "Mushroom, got anything new to tell us?"

"Sure, Princess," Mushroom said, nimbly climbing up and approaching Rhaenyra. Holding his large belly, he muttered with an obsessive face, "Your beauty, Princess, is the most novel and beautiful thing in the world."

"Haha, I knew you'd say that," Rhaenyra said, amused by the dwarf's flattery.

With two nobles favoring him, Mushroom felt extremely pleased with himself. He then turned his gaze to Rhaegar, pretending to be intoxicated. "Handsome prince, your trip to the Vale must have been full of passion. How many noble ladies did you capture?"

Rhaegar looked down at him, curling his mouth into a smirk.

Mushroom tried to maintain his flattery, but before he could continue, Rhaegar kicked him in the face, knocking him to the ground. "Don't talk nonsense in front of me."

Rhaenyra frowned slightly but led Rhaegar forward, stepping over Mushroom.

"Rhaegar, Mushroom meant well," Rhaenyra said, glancing back at the dwarf sprawled on the floor.

Rhaegar's frown deepened. "If he wasn't a source of amusement for you and father, he would have been thrown into the Dragonpit and fed to the dragons."

He had no patience for bootlickers, especially those like Mushroom who thrived on spreading rumors and gossip. These characters were only capable of flattering and making fools of themselves, wandering among the rich and powerful for no real purpose.

Rhaenyra couldn't argue with him and had Mushroom taken away.

As the day waned, Viserys sent word to Alicent to prepare a reception for his children.

...

Nightfall.

In the king's bedchamber, Viserys sat on the edge of the bed, painstakingly removing his shirt, revealing the wounds covering his body.

"Ha, aren't these wounds a sight?" he grimaced in pain as his clothes rubbed against the cuts, looking to his son, Rhaegar, for reassurance.

Rhaegar stood behind him, silent, a thousand words stuck in his throat.

Memories flooded back of his father's injuries, including the loss of two fingers to the Iron Throne when he was young. His father had always hidden his pain, shielding him from the severity of his wounds.

Now faced with the truth, Rhaegar struggled to maintain composure. "No, you've endured these wounds with the resilience of a true warrior," he said, reaching out to touch his father's weathered skin.

Viserys shook his head, chuckling softly. "No need for flattery, son. I know these wounds are not pretty."

He knew it from the strain in his relationship with Alicent. Despite her silence, he felt her resistance and rejection, otherwise she wouldn't be so dry, even after they had spent so much time together at night.

Rhaegar's smile faded as he sat beside his father. "I will help heal your wounds and restore your health," he vowed solemnly, extending his hand and invoking the "Bridled Serpent" rune.

A serpent emerged from the black smoke, slithering into Viserys's wounds. With each passing moment, the serpent grew slightly larger and more agile, consuming the black smoke that lingered in the wounds.

But one wound, near his vertebrae, stubbornly resisted healing, emitting a foul odor. Despite the serpent's efforts, a trace of black smoke persisted.

Confusion clouded Rhaegar's eyes as he observed the stubborn wound. It was then that he noticed something remarkable—the wound was not only healing but regenerating, leaving behind only a delicate bloodstain.

Yet, the black smoke lingered, refusing to dissipate entirely.

Viserys sighed in relief, feeling the burden of his injuries lift. "What's troubling you, Rhaegar?" he inquired, sensing his son's hesitation.

Rhaegar hesitated before responding, "It's nothing, Father."

Despite the serpent's efforts, the wounds, regardless of severity, remained coated in a thin layer of black smoke, resisting complete healing. The cuts persisted.

Chapter 190: Helaena and Daeron

Rhaegar stared at the remaining bloodstains, deep in thought.

Over the years, many maesters had treated his father, but the results were minimal. The serpent rune had extraordinary properties, but the wound couldn't be completely eradicated.

"It's strange!" he muttered to himself.

"Rhaegar, I feel the pain easing," Viserys said, groaning with relief as the runic serpent disappeared. He turned around with a smile.

By the Seven Gods! The pain that had built up over the years was almost gone. He felt a decade younger.

"Really? That's good!" Rhaegar forced a smile, genuinely happy for his father.

Viserys, noticing his eldest son's concern, touched the wound on his back. There was no rotting flesh or sticky pus—just a faint thread of fresh blood leaking from a small cut.

Viserys's face changed slightly, his eyes flashing with surprise. His eldest son had said the wound would fully recover. Something had gone wrong.

"The wound has healed, and the pain has subsided. I'm already satisfied," Viserys said, not wanting Rhaegar to worry. "What I said is also true."

Rhaegar hung his head, whispering, "I'm sorry, father. The treatment will need to be regular."

He wasn't sure why the wound hadn't fully healed. But it was better to ease his father's pain than let the wound rot.

"That's good, isn't it?" Viserys said warmly, patting Rhaegar's shoulder.

Rhaegar forced another smile, his heart heavy with disappointment. He had searched for a cure for his father, including a looking for marsh marigolds at Crackclaw Point. But they were too rare to find in ordinary swamps, and the largest swamps were too dangerous even for Cannibal.

The serpent rune was supposed to cure the wound, but something had gone wrong.

Viserys pondered for a moment, then smiled bitterly. "It is said that the Iron Throne chooses its masters. Perhaps I'm not a good choice, which is why I'm cursed by it."

Starting from Aegon the Conqueror, similar incidents hadn't happened to Aenys, Maegor, or Jaehaerys. Viserys could only attribute his suffering to not being good enough for his position.

"No! You're a good king. You've made no mistakes," Rhaegar argued. His father didn't deserve this punishment. Compared to the weak Aenys and the cruel Maegor, Viserys was a good king. He was loved, the kingdom was at peace, and the people could eat.

Throughout the history of Westeros, such monarchs were rare.

"The gods don't make a man rich because he doesn't make mistakes. I should not lie to myself," Viserys said, relieved. "Don't worry too much about your father. I'm not that fragile."

He had endured the pain for more than a decade and now felt relief.

"Rhaegar, tell me about your trip to the Vale, including where you got your new magical abilities," Viserys said, holding his son's shoulders.

When Rhaegar told him about the rune, Viserys hadn't believed his claim that everything had gone smoothly. Learning magic suddenly wasn't normal.

"Father..." Touched by his father's optimism, Rhaegar slowly recounted his experiences in the Vale. He spoke of the mountain clans and the ambush.

Viserys listened attentively, smiling on the outside but squeezing his son's shoulders harder and harder. Even with Rhaegar's feats, he could sense the danger.

...

Three Days Later

The Dragonpit

"Roar..."

A powerful dragon's roar echoed through the Dragonpit as a light blue dragon spewed fire, scorching a goat to a half-cooked state.

"Dreamfyre, eat the goat!" a young girl's clear voice commanded.

Dreamfyre stretched its neck, stamped its feet, and spread its wings wide. Helaena, her eyes wide with anticipation, watched from the protection of the dragon keeper.

Over the past few days, Dreamfyre had gone from rejecting her presence to listening to her commands. Today, it had even roasted the goat on her orders, filling Helaena with the hope of successfully taming the dragon.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre roared again, flapped its wings, and climbed up the wall of the Dragonpit, flicking its tail proudly. Just because it had roasted a goat didn't mean it had to follow the orders of a small girl.

Seeing Dreamfyre's indifferent behavior, Helaena's big round eyes showed disappointment, and she tugged at the hem of her white dress.

"Sister, Tessarion listened to my command."

A childish voice came from the other side. Helaena turned to see a little boy with short silver-blond hair and a face full of baby fat. The boy, around four or five years old, had bright purple eyes.

"Daeron, you did it?" Helaena asked in surprise, walking towards her brother.

Next to Daeron stood a dejected Aemond. Dressed in green, Aemond stood behind his younger brother, his eyes full of envy and reluctance.

There were only two untamed dragons in the Dragonpit. Helaena, being the oldest, was given the chance to tame Dreamfyre alone. Aemond and Daeron, on the other hand, were both trying to bond with Tessarion.

Surprisingly, Tessarion had taken a liking to Daeron. The haughty blue dragon would not attack Daeron and even obeyed his command to breathe fire.

On the open-air plaza of the Dragonpit

Rhaenyra looked down at the commotion below and remarked, "Tessarion has recognized Daeron. It looks like it will soon be tamed."

"Yes, our youngest brother is a genius," Rhaegar replied, hugging Rhaenyra from behind and resting his cheek against hers.

Rhaenyra tilted her head and laughed. "Daeron is about to break your record of taming a dragon at the age of six."

"That's not a record," Rhaegar said thoughtfully. "But Daeron is a good match for Tesseract. He is a true Targaryen."

Having awakened his own bloodline, Rhaegar was very concerned about his family's lineage. He and Rhaenyra had successfully tamed their dragons at the ages of six and seven, far earlier than the usual fifteen years old or so. He believed this was due in part to their pure bloodline.

After chatting for a while, Rhaenyra broke away from his embrace and said, "Lord Lyonel is returning to King's Landing today, so I have to help Alicent prepare for the banquet."

"Hard work," Rhaegar complimented her.

"If you really cared about me, you would help me," Rhaenyra teased, cupping Rhaegar's cheeks in her hands and kissing his forehead.

Rhaegar smiled and teased back, "Even if you bought me, I wouldn't help decorate the banquet."

He had other things to do.

"Hmph, don't get your hopes up," Rhaenyra said with a soft snort, turning to walk into the staircase.

"Princess!" she heard a voice at the corner. She bumped into Maynard and Syrio, who were walking up the stairs. They greeted her respectfully.

Rhaenyra nodded lightly and brushed past them.