

G.O Thrones 201

Chapter 201: Jeyne's Temptation

"Rhaenyra!" Viserys murmured, beads of sweat forming on his forehead as he watched the scene unfold.

Amidst the lively music, many dancing partners began to flirt with each other.

"Ohhhh!" Jeyne whimpered as Rhaegar stepped on her foot again. He remained expressionless, not even bothering to apologize this time.

"Don't rush, dance with your heart," Jeyne said, forcing a smile despite the discomfort.

Rhaegar's movements were stiff. One hand held Jeyne's waist while the other awkwardly guided her back. His steps were disorganized, lacking the agility he displayed in battle.

His forehead was deeply furrowed, almost forming a permanent crease. All he wanted was for the music to stop so he could return to his unfinished plate of red grapes.

"Rhaegar!" Rhaenyra's cool voice cut through the air.

Rhaegar and Jeyne turned to her at the same time.

"Jeyne, perhaps you should find another partner," Rhaenyra said, stepping between them and pulling Rhaegar behind her, her gaze fixed on Jeyne.

Meeting her gaze, Jeyne felt the hostility and took a step back.

Rhaenyra placed Rhaegar's hands on her waist and said with a forced smile, "If you want to learn to dance, I'll teach you."

"Forget it," Rhaegar muttered, recognizing her anger and not wanting to provoke her further. Stepping on two ladies in one evening was bad enough.

After a moment's hesitation, Jeyne also suggested, "Rhaenyra, why don't we get some rest?"

"Shut up!" Rhaenyra snapped. She grabbed a waiter's tray, pointed to a glass of red wine, and threatened, "If you say another word, I'll spill that wine on your white dress."

Jeyne, startled, covered her mouth and backed away.

At that moment, Rhaenyra resembled a fierce lioness protecting her cub, radiating an intimidating aura. Jeyne wisely decided to leave the dance floor.

Rhaenyra turned her attention to Rhaegar and scolded him, "Useless!"

Rhaegar looked innocent, not daring to speak back. Despite his bravery on the battlefield, he feared Rhaenyra in this mood.

Rhaenyra wrapped her arms around his waist, forcing him to hold her as well. "Dance," she ordered, "if you step on me, I'll cut off your toes."

"Okay, okay, just calm down," Rhaegar whispered, trying to calm her down. He moved carefully, trying his best to follow her lead.

...

As Jeyne walked out of the dancing crowd, her heart pounded with a mix of nervousness and excitement. For a moment, she felt intimidated by Rhaenyra, realizing that her actions were akin to a thief caught in the act.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Jeyne smoothed her thoughts and looked towards the king on his throne. With no progress made with Rhaegar, she decided to start with a more pragmatic approach.

"Your Grace, may I request to join the Small Council to aid in governance?" she asked, approaching Viserys with an air of elegance.

She had subtly broached the topic of a potential marriage to Rhaegar, as Alicent had suggested. Though neither party had explicitly committed to it, the implicit exchange of meanings left the possibility open. Even if it didn't work out, no harm would come to either side.

Viserys, watching his eldest son dance awkwardly, smiled brightly. "No problem. You can learn a lot at the Small Council meetings," he agreed, allowing Jeyne to stay in King's Landing.

This was a small step towards the potential marriage, depending on Rhaegar's feelings for Jeyne.

Unlike Rhaenyra, Rhaegar didn't need a powerful background to marry. Viserys wanted to respect his son's personal wishes.

Jeyne took a seat, her eyes landing on Alicent beside Viserys. Rhaenyra's initial indifference to her dancing with Rhaegar had changed, suggesting someone's influence was behind it.

Alicent leaned close to her husband. "Viserys, the children are grown. They should be prepared for marriage."

Viserys looked pensive. "I promised Rhaenyra she could choose her own marriage."

"You know I'm talking about Rhaegar and Aegon," Alicent insisted. "Both boys are of age. It's time to find good matches."

"I recall your uncle's family has a daughter with plans to marry into the royal family?" Viserys assumed Alicent had family interests at heart.

"No, there are many girls in Westeros waiting to marry, not just from my family," Alicent said, leaning closer. "How about Aegon marrying Jeyne?"

Viserys froze in shock, then burst into laughter. "Hahaha, you're such a joker, Alicent!"

He glanced at the demure Jeyne, then at Aegon, who was sipping mulled wine in a corner. The idea of marrying the Warden of the East to his second son was ridiculous, even more so than naming Rhaenyra as his heir.

Alicent's face darkened at her husband's mockery. "What about Rhaegar's marriage to Jeyne?" she pressed.

"Is the joke over?" Viserys dodged the question, glancing at Jeyne.

Sensing the tension, Jeyne stood abruptly. "Since I cannot drink, I will take my leave."

"Take care, Lady Jeyne," Viserys replied politely.

Jeyne smiled as she watched Rhaegar leave the dance floor and the banquet hall. She hadn't heard Alicent's last words, but according to their agreement, Alicent was supposed to help with the proposal. She should have avoided such a scene.

...

The dance ended, and Rhaegar returned to his seat, finally able to catch his breath. He silently vowed never to be coaxed into dancing again, especially with the lingering threat of Rhaenyra chopping off his toes.

As if sensing his thoughts, Rhaenyra glanced at him with a scowl.

"Uh... I'm tired. I'll go back to rest now," Rhaegar said, unable to bear her look any longer as he stood up reluctantly. He still had to deal with the peace envoy from Dorne and needed to gather his strength.

"Get some rest," Rhaenyra reminded him gently, watching his retreating figure disappear around the corner.

...

The dimly lit hallway was faintly illuminated by the oil lamps mounted on the walls. Rhaegar walked slowly, reflecting on the events of the banquet and arriving at a conclusion: Jeyne had come for him.

"Rhaegar," a voice called from behind him. Jeyne stood in front of a door, looking at him with a mixture of anguish and hope.

Rhaegar's eyes held a questioning look as he met her gaze.

"There's a rat in the room, a big one," she said weakly, pointing at the door. A trace of fear flickered across her face. "The guards are all in the hall. Can you check for me?"

Rhaegar's eyes flickered with skepticism as he analyzed her request. After spending a month with Laenor, he had learned a few things.

For example, Laenor had once mentioned that men would sometimes lure beautiful women into their rooms by claiming that there was a fire-breathing dragon inside. Laenor had successfully bedded several men that way.

After a moment of silence, watching the disappointment in Jeyne's eyes, Rhaegar sighed. "You win, I go in."

After all, Jeyne was a guest and of his grandfather's bloodline. To ignore her would be rude.

The Red Keep did indeed have a rat problem. The pest were so rampant that they sometimes slept in people's arms. Rhaegar himself had been scratched by a rat as a boy.

"Thank you," Jeyne said, quickly stepping aside to let him enter.

Rhaegar glanced around the dimly lit room with only the fireplace flickering. He stepped inside and lit the tallow candles that hung on the walls.

"Where's the rat?" he asked, scanning the room.

Jeyne didn't answer. Instead, the door slammed behind him.

Rhaegar's ears twitched, and he immediately turned around. A soft body pressed against him, arms wrapping tightly around his waist.

Just as he was about to speak, warm lips met his, and a tongue pried open his mouth. Rhaegar's mind buzzed, and his eyes widened in shock.

In his line of sight were Jeyne's flushed cheeks. She radiated not only her usual noble elegance but also a newfound charm and allure.

Hot blood surged through him, and he didn't break away immediately. The passionate kiss lasted for a while before they slowly separated, their chests pressed together as they felt each other's heavy breathing.

Jeyne blushed, her hands trembling as she unbuttoned Rhaegar's coat. "Stay here tonight, okay?" she whispered.

Rhaegar grasped her hands, wrestling with his inner turmoil. He forced himself to remain rational. "You shouldn't waste your time on me," he said, trying to distance himself.

"Rhaegar, you're a thief," Jeyne pressed forward, her hands moving behind her back. "You saved me, and you stole my heart."

As she spoke, her white dress slipped, catching at her waist, revealing her snowy peaks.

The sight made Rhaegar's breath hitch, desire igniting in his eyes. It was blindingly white, rich, and generous.

Jeyne wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered passionately, "Rhaegar, stay tonight. The Vale and I are yours."

Relying on the hesitant King and the scheming Alicent had been a mistake. After seeing Rhaenyra's reaction, Jeyne decided to take matters into her own hands. She abandoned subtlety and struck first.

Rhaegar stared into Jeyne's eyes, seeing his reflection in her pupils. He admitted to himself that he was shamefully tempted. The offer of beauty and power was irresistible to many.

Jeyne's eyes held more desire than his. She was three years older than Rhaenyra and eleven years older than Rhaegar. In the past, she hadn't secured her position as Lady and had avoided speaking of marriage.

Jessamyn could soothe her lonely soul but not her body. She had been waiting for a suitable husband.

When Rhaegar was six years old, she saw the boy at an exchange meeting. Time passed, and Rhaegar grew up. She wanted him as her husband.

Seeing Rhaegar's silence, Jeyne stood on tiptoe, her red lips slightly parted, slowly moving closer.

"No!" At the critical moment, Rhaegar suddenly awoke. He pushed Jeyne away, leaving her shocked.

Rhaegar quickly took off his coat and draped it over her. "Thank you for your kindness, but I must remain true to myself."

With that, he swiftly pushed the door open and left. The door slammed shut behind him.

In the hallway, Rhaegar turned and bumped into a soft body.

Chapter 202: Heavy Rain and Dreams

"Yah!"

A familiar whimper reached his ears. Rhaegar instinctively scooped her up in his arms.

Lowering his head, he saw Rhaenyra's face, wide-eyed and panicked.

Rhaegar breathed heavily. "What are you doing here?"

"That's Jeyne's room," she said, pointing to the door behind him.

After her earlier outburst, Rhaenyra regretted her harsh words and wanted to make amends. She had seen Jeyne and Rhaegar enter the room together and followed them.

Hearing her question, Rhaegar grinned. "Yes, Jeyne's room. And yet, here I am."

"You—"

"Shh! Look at all the stupid things I've done for you," Rhaegar interrupted, holding her close to the door.

Through the wooden door, they could hear faint, suppressed sobbing.

Before Rhaenyra could react, Rhaegar swept her into a princess carry and said seriously, "You have to make it up to me!"

He quickly walked down the corridor, leaving Rhaenyra dumbfounded, clutching his sleeve.

...

Late at night, the Red Keep was brightly lit despite the chill wind and pouring rain. Stories unfolded in the downpour.

In the early morning, Rhaegar sat on the balcony and gazed through the rain-dampened window at the rainy curtains of King's Landing.

Rumbling...

Thunder echoed, and lightning instantly illuminated the dark, rainy night.

"Hoo~~"

Rhaegar blew gently on his hot tea and took a deep sip. The thunder outside sent a shiver down his spine.

On the nearby bed, a figure lay under a thin blanket. The person slept soundly, silver hair covering her cheeks, a small arm resting under her head.

Rhaegar gazed out the window, lost in thought.

There was a significant change in Rhaegar from just three hours ago. Though his appearance remained the same, he now exuded a different aura—more restrained, tolerant, and calm.

He had followed his heart, refused Jeyne's invitation, and stayed true to his principles.

Putting down his cup, Rhaegar moved to the bed. He gently lay down beside the sleeping figure, brushing aside the hair covering her cheeks.

Rhaenyra's cheeks were flushed, her eyelashes moist, her breathing steady.

Rhaegar sat on the edge of the bed, taking in the delicate scent of fresh incense and tea.

The night had been quiet, and his mind was at peace.

Before the age of three, he slept all day long while Rhaenyra sang him lullabies. After turning three, he was often alone, hoping for Rhaenyra's visits when she was in trouble.

Rhaegar's heart softened, and he whispered, "You're so irresistible, I don't want to part with you for a moment."

"Don't be greedy, Rhaegar..."

Rhaenyra seemed to hear him in her sleep, murmuring softly as she shifted positions.

Rhaegar smiled, watching her sleeping face.

His dragon's may be greedy, but he was not.

Dun dun dun dun..

Suddenly, there was a sharp knock on the door.

Rhaegar sat up quickly, reaching out to cover Rhaenyra's ears.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she awoke, her voice hoarse. "Rhaegar, is someone knocking?"

"I know, you don't have to get up."

Rhaegar pressed her shoulder gently and pulled the covers back over her.

As he walked to the door, he heard Helaena's terrified cries.

"Brother, open the door....."

"Helaena?"

Rhaegar froze at the sound, glancing down to check his attire. It was fine; he was wearing pajamas.

Opening the door, he saw Helaena, her face pale and eyes wide with fear.

Crunch!

The door opened a palm's width before Rhaegar could ask Helaena why she was crying. She squeezed through the crack like a loach and hurried into the room.

"Brother, it's thundering outside and Dayana is in the banquet hall!"

Without waiting for Rhaegar to answer, Helaena hugged him tightly, her words tumbling out between sobs.

Rhaegar quickly pieced the story together: Dayana, Helaena's maid, had been summoned by Alicent to assist in the banquet hall. With both Alicent and Dayana unavailable, and Helaena terrified of thunder, she had run to him for comfort.

Rhaegar sighed and gently rubbed her head. "Don't be afraid, you'll be a dragon rider in the future. How can you be afraid of thunder?"

Helaena had often run to his room during thunderstorms before. She was genuinely scared.

Rhaenyra, hearing the commotion, tried to sit up but felt weak. Frowning, she clutched the covers around her.

"Rhaegar, I'm not feeling well."

She wasn't just uncomfortable; she felt surprisingly embarrassed by Helaena's untimely arrival. She was tired and needed rest.

"Ahem, I'll take Helaena back," Rhaegar said, understanding her meaning. Rhaenyra needed to rest without any disturbances.

"I don't want to go. Mommy won't mind me tonight," Helaena said, her voice choking with tears. "Brother, I want to sleep with you."

"I'll take you to Aemond and Daeron. They can keep you company," Rhaegar suggested, not wanting Rhaenyra to be embarrassed.

Helaena let Rhaegar pick her up, biting her pink lips and looking at him pitifully. She was genuinely afraid of the thunder and hoped her brother would take her in.

"Don't look at me like that. You're a big girl now; you can't sleep with me," Rhaegar explained softly. They used to sleep together when they were little, but things had changed. He suspected Alicent didn't want Helaena getting too close to him.

Helaena curled up in his arms, her face buried in his chest. "But my sister is older than me, and she didn't leave."

"That's different."

"Rhaegar, let her stay!" Rhaenyra's voice cut off his defense.

Rhaegar looked back in surprise, wondering why she had changed her mind.

Rhaenyra, now wearing a nightgown, leaned back on the bed and beckoned. "Alicent's too busy to take care of her. Let her stay for the night."

She couldn't bear to see Helaena's sad face and didn't want her saying anything childish outside.

Rhaegar shrugged. "You're in charge tonight."

He carried Helaena to the bed and gently set her down. Helaena rolled into Rhaenyra's arms, gratefully saying, "Thank you, Sister."

Helaena recognized who had more influence and tried to curry favor. Rhaenyra's eyes were playful as she cupped Helaena's cheeks, kneading them gently.

Helaena's cheeks turned red, and she stammered, not daring to protest.

"Alright, don't bully her," Rhaegar intervened, helping Helaena escape Rhaenyra's playful grip.

"Hmph, I'll sleep with her in my arms. You can sleep on the floor," Rhaenyra said, her eyes full of warning.

Rhaegar smiled helplessly and fetched two new quilts—one for the sisters on the bed and one for himself on the floor.

King's Landing, being a coastal city, always had a damp climate. Helaena's eyes were heavy with exhaustion. Lying in Rhaenyra's embrace, she quickly fell into a deep, peaceful sleep, clutching her sister like a soft, comforting bear.

...

At the same time, on the Stepstones:

The wind howled, though there was no heavy rain. Dozens of warships drifted on the sea, their sails bearing the sigils of three red dragons, seahorses, and forked mermaids.

In the cabin of one of the ships flying the three red dragons' banner, several figures huddled around a sand table, plotting their next move.

Tyland, Cole, Vaemond, and the heir to the Manderly House of White Harbor, Medrick Manderly, were among them.

Tyland pointed to a specific spot on the sand table, his voice charged with excitement. "According to our scouts, the pirates of the Triarchy are hiding on this deserted island. We can sneak over under the cover of darkness and catch them by surprise."

Medrick Manderly, rugged and loud, chimed in, "That's right! Let's strike the Triarchy and forget about defense!"

"Medrick, watch your language!" Vaemond warned, lifting his head.

Medrick's enthusiasm did not offend Tyland, who interjected, "Don't be nervous, Vaemond. Medrick means no harm. Lord Corlys has been overly cautious, and his delay is costing us. We need to take decisive action to repel the Triarchy."

Vaemond snorted, folding his hands behind his back. Though he respected his brother Corlys, his presence on this ship indicated his disagreement with the Sea Snake's strategy.

House Velaryon had sacrificed too much in this war, losing ships, sailors, and soldiers in great numbers. Vaemond was here to secure the future of his house and win the war, not to let time slip away.

Seeing Vaemond's internal conflict, Tyland straightened up and said confidently, "Ser Vaemond, we have the King's support, White Harbor's fleet, and a portion of Velaryon's ships. A night attack on the Triarchy's garrison will surely succeed."

Cole remained silent, his eyes glittering with determination as he clutched the hilt of his sword. Tyland's words had moved him.

He longed for the glory of war and the honor of returning to King's Landing victorious.

"My scouts confirm that the forces of the Triarchy are gathered here. This plan is feasible," Vaemond said solemnly. "With forty-three ships, five thousand soldiers, and plenty of arrows and oil, we stand a good chance."

Having accompanied his brother on numerous voyages and participated in the last battle of the Stepstones, Vaemond was well versed in battlefield command and naval combat. He believed his tactical skills rivaled his brother's.

Tyland took a deep breath, his expression firm. "Then it's settled. Tonight we will attack the Triarchy's camp under cover of darkness. A swift end to this war is our best course of action."

With Tyland's strategic advice and Vaemond's naval expertise, backed by their formidable fleet, victory seemed within reach.

"Haha, I can't wait to see my father's face when we crush the Triarchy's pirates," Medrick Manderly laughed, slapping his round belly.

...

Bloodstone Island.

A messenger, frantic and out of breath, demanded to see the Sea Snake, who was roused from his slumber and quickly summoned the man.

Terrified, the messenger relayed the urgent news: Tyland and the others had left the island by boat and were nowhere to be found.

"Fools! How dare they disobey orders and venture out on their own!" the Sea Snake bellowed, his face darkening with anger.

He had access to the same intelligence as Tyland and Vaemond. The prospect of ambushing the Triarchy's pirate stronghold was undeniably tempting, but the rewards were fraught with peril.

Enraged, the Sea Snake's expression grew even grimmer. He shouted, "Prepare the army immediately! War is upon us!"

Chapter 203: Shocking Bad News

The next day.

Morning sunlight streamed into the bedroom, casting a soft glow.

Rhaenyra sat on the balcony, wrapped in a loose nightgown. She held a steaming cup of tea, gazing serenely at the scene outside. The weather in King's Landing was exceptionally clear after the heavy rain, the garden alive with swaying fish beams and chirping birds.

Turning back, she saw Rhaegar sleeping soundly on the carpet, a small white ball nestled on his chest. A tender smile graced her lips as she sipped her tea, unaware of the troubled expression creasing his brow.

Rhaegar was trapped in a vivid dream.

Dark clouds swirled and a fierce wind drove sheets of rain. The sky was darkened, plunging the world into chaos. A sharp dragon roar pierced the air as a young, green-scaled dragon emerged from the storm, wings flapping wildly.

On the dragon's back was a small saddle occupied by a young boy, perhaps seven or eight years old. Rhaegar's vision zoomed in, drawn by an inexplicable urgency.

The boy had short, silver-blond hair, pale purple eyes, and a face that was both handsome and childlike. Recognition struck Rhaegar; the boy looked almost exactly like he had at that age. The resemblance was uncanny, a near mirror image of his childhood self.

Compelled to understand, Rhaegar's attention fixed on the boy.

In the midst of the storm, the boy bravely faced the elements. His short hair whipped about, his clothes soaked, the rain stinging his face. He struggled to keep his eyes open against the deluge.

"Run!" the boy cried, wiping the rain from his face. He seemed to call the young dragon by name, but the sound was lost to Rhaegar.

The young dragon roared in panic, battling the torrential rain as it flew.

Rumble...

After a flash of lightning and a roar of thunder, a huge shadow loomed over the boy and his dragon. The shadow, many times larger than the young dragon, completely enveloped them.

The boy noticed the huge shadow above them, and his face turned pale with fear. He urged the young dragon to fly faster.

Suddenly, a jagged reef appeared ahead. The boy skillfully steered the dragon into the reef, avoiding the giant pursuer.

Moments later, the young dragon emerged from the reef. The sky cleared, the wind and rain stopped, and thin clouds drifted by.

The young dragon soared above the clouds, having finally lost his pursuer.

The boy sighed with relief, a triumphant smile spreading across his face.

But then...

"ROAR!!!"

A deafening dragon roar echoed as a colossal green dragon burst from beneath the clouds. It grabbed the young dragon's neck in its jaws and crushed it with a sickening crunch.

The young dragon uttered one last agonized scream before his headless body plummeted through the clouds and into the sea.

The boy, chained to the dragon, fell beside it.

"No!"

Rhaegar's heart pounded as he cried out, his voice breaking the dream's fragile hold.

The dreamscape began to collapse. Rhaegar tried desperately to hold on to it, but it slipped away.

As the [Dream Vision] faded, he caught a last glimpse of the green dragon. Its body was massive and powerful, its scales thick and impenetrable. On its back sat a silver-haired man, his face obscured, but his wild laughter echoing in Rhaegar's ears.

Then the dream shattered.

Rhaegar jerked awake, his eyes snapping open.

"Rhaegar, you're awake?"

Rhaenyra's voice reached him instantly.

"Rhaenyra..." Rhaegar turned to face her, a hint of panic in his eyes. He vividly remembered the dream, the boy who looked so much like him meeting a tragic end.

"Shh! She's still sleeping, don't wake her," Rhaenyra whispered, pointing to his chest.

Rhaegar looked down.

Helaena was curled up on his chest, sound asleep.

"I had a nightmare again," Rhaegar murmured, carefully sitting up while holding Helaena.

Helaena stirred slightly, her face flushed and her lips moving in a sleepy murmur.

Rhaenyra knelt beside him, concern in her eyes. "What dream did you have? You're drenched in sweat."

"Yes..." Rhaegar began, but hesitated. He looked at Rhaenyra, her eyes warm and attentive as she gently wiped away his sweat.

"Nothing, just a nightmare, something like Maegor's kinslaying," Rhaegar said vaguely, holding Helaena close as he slowly got to his feet. He didn't want to share the gruesome details of his dream.

"Never mind, you can tell me when you're ready," Rhaenyra said softly, not pushing him any further.

Rhaegar often had nightmares, many of which he kept to himself.

He smiled apologetically, his heart still pounding. He laid Helaena gently on the bed and covered her with a blanket.

"Let's get going. We have to meet the Dornish envoy today," Rhaenyra reminded him, opening the wardrobe and pulling out one of Rhaegar's usual outfits.

Rhaegar hugged her from behind. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"Where?" Rhaenyra gave him an annoyed look, holding up the red strapless dress she had hastily discarded the night before.

Rhaegar grinned sheepishly, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and amusement.

...

The sun was just rising.

Rhaegar had barely finished dressing when a frantic knock came at the door.

"Prince, something big has happened!"

Erryk's urgent voice called out, "The ravens have brought dire news—the Stepstones Islands have fallen!"

"What!?"

Rhaegar exclaimed in shock, throwing open the door.

Erryk stood there, his expression grave. "The Stepstones Islands are in chaos. Lord Corlys is seriously injured. The King has summoned you to an emergency council meeting."

"Hurry!" Rhaegar shouted, clenching his fists as he rushed out the door.

His mind raced with questions. How could this have happened? Was the Sea Snake losing his mind? He had only been away for a day and a night, and already everything had gone wrong.

Rhaegar sprinted to the council chamber.

Erryk opened the door for him, and Rhaegar stepped inside.

The room was full of people—King Viserys, Lyonel Strong, Otto Hightower, and several other lords. Seated among them was Jeyne Arryn.

Though she had changed into a simple dress and her long chestnut hair was tied up in a braid, her eyes were red and swollen from crying.

Rhaegar ignored the scene and asked urgently, "Lords, what exactly has happened?"

The Battle of the Stepstones had been ongoing for a long time and had stabilized for a month. How could it have suddenly turned into a disaster?

"Rhaegar, sit down first. We are still discussing the situation," Viserys said gravely, gripping a cup tightly.

Rhaegar scanned the room, took his seat, and placed the stone marker from the tray in front of him.

Jeyne, seated next to him, gave him a small, reassuring smile.

Lyonel Strong stood first, holding a letter. "Last night, Lord Tyland Lannister, in conjunction with Vaemond Velaryon, Medrick Manderly, and Ser Criston Cole, conspired to raid the Triarchy pirate stronghold."

"It was an ambush. The Triarchy pirates had set a trap for them."

"Lord Corlys tried to stop them but ultimately had to lead his troops in support."

Lyonel's face grew grim as he continued, "Our warships lost more than half their number, and seven thousand soldiers were killed. Medrick Manderly died, and Corlys Velaryon was gravely injured and is now unconscious."

To make matters worse, Bloodstone Island's defenses collapsed, allowing the Triarchy pirates to plunder it. The remaining forces have retreated to Grey Gallows and are trying to hold the line.

The chamber fell silent.

The loss of ships and soldiers was devastating, but the potential death of Sea Snake, the navy's commander, left the forces leaderless.

Viserys slammed his fist on the table, shouting angrily, "Where are the dragons? There were supposed to be two dragons at the Stepstones!"

"Your Grace, please remain calm," Lyonel urged. "According to the reports, the night was too dark, and the Triarchy pirates had prepared a large number of scorpion crossbows."

Princess Rhaenys and her son, Ser Laenor, were heavily constrained, making it difficult for the dragons to be effective."

From the letter, it was clear that if not for the dragons destroying more than a dozen pirate ships and breaking the encirclement, Tyland and the Sea Snake might have been killed.

"Foolishness! Sheer idiocy!" Viserys roared. "Tyland dared to mobilize the army without authorization—this is a capital offense against military rules!"

To mobilize the army without orders was tantamount to rebellion. What infuriated Viserys even more was that Vaemon and the others had recklessly followed Tyland's lead.

Grand Maester Mellos spoke slowly, "Your Grace, the situation at the Stepstones is critical. We must devise a strategy to deal with it."

"I know that!" Viserys snapped, his voice echoing in the hall. He turned to Lyonel, "Dismiss Tyland from his post as Master of Ships and summon him back to King's Landing for judgment!"

Viserys seethed with anger at the Lannister's incompetence. He had hoped Tyland would prove wiser than his arrogant brother, but he had nearly brought the kingdom to ruin.

"Father, please calm yourself," Rhaegar interjected, rubbing his face in frustration. "Lord Lyonel, how many troops do we have left?"

The damage was done, and they couldn't change the past. They needed to address the crisis at hand before seeking retribution.

Lyonel answered, "According to the reports, only remnants of the fleets from the Crownlands, House Velaryon, and House Manderly of White Harbor remain."

"The fleets from Oldtown, Arbor Island, and Gulltown retain some strength, with a combined total of fifty ships and three thousand eight hundred soldiers."

Rhaegar pressed further, "How are our supplies?"

Lyonel sighed heavily, "There is little left after the Triarchy pirates' plunder."

The pirates had stripped the lands bare, leaving nothing but devastation in their wake.

Rhaegar closed his eyes, his mind racing. They faced a dire situation - limited troops, dwindling supplies, and the ever-present threat of the Triarchy.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes and addressed the council, "Lords, we must redeploy our remaining forces and transport supplies to the Stepstones. We cannot afford to lose this war."

Turning to Lyonel, he asked, "How many more soldiers can we muster from the Crownlands and the Riverlands?"

Those regions were closest to King's Landing, and reinforcements and supplies could be transported quickly.

Chapter 204: Making Things Happen

After analyzing the situation, Rhaegar proposed a strategic adjustment.

He immediately sent ravens to redeploy troops from the Crownlands and the Riverlands. The remaining ships in King's Landing were loaded with supplies and sent to Driftmark for transport to the Stepstones.

"We'll need to transport some supplies immediately," Rhaegar mused. "I'll assign 800 Dragonkeepers from the Dragonpit to escort them."

From King's Landing to Driftmark and then to the Stepstones, the journey would take at least three days. Factoring in the time for loading supplies and deploying soldiers, it would stretch even longer. The troops on the Stepstones couldn't afford to wait; they needed immediate support.

"Prince, the Triarchy pirates have taken over Bloodstone Island and may intercept our transport ships in the Narrow Sea," Lyonel pointed out.

Rhaegar remained calm. "It's alright. I'll ride the dragon and escort the supplies myself."

With Meleys and Sea Smoke still guarding Grey Gallows, he didn't need to rush there immediately. Ensuring the safe transport of supplies was crucial. If the supply line was cut, the battle for the Stepstones would be lost.

The tension in the hall eased as the plan took shape.

Viserys' face lightened, and he waved his hand. "Lyonel, do as Rhaegar says."

The king had been in a state of panic, consumed with anger towards Tyland and the others. Rhaegar's organized plan was exactly what he needed.

"Yes, Your Grace," Lyonel said, and hurried out of the hall.

Grand Maester Mellos also stood and left to release the ravens and deliver the messages.

Seeing them go, Rhaegar added, "Father, this battle is significant. I suggest sending Aegon with his dragon to Grey Gallows to bolster our defenses."

Another dragon would greatly strengthen their position. At this critical moment, he couldn't worry about family affections - Aegon had to act.

Viserys agreed, "Very well, I will inform him immediately."

Aegon had been drinking heavily the previous night and was likely still hungover, but there was no time to waste.

Having said all that needed to be said, Rhaegar offered his resignation. "Father, I will go and gather the Dragonkeepers."

"Go ahead. Lord Lyman will prepare the supplies and cargo ships," Viserys replied.

Rhaegar rose quickly, his impatience evident.

Jeyne, who had been quietly observing, also got up. "Farewell," she said, following Rhaegar out.

...

Rhaegar descended the stairs and left the Red Keep, his mind racing with worry. The near-total destruction of the royal fleet was a significant blow, and he worried about the fate of the Second Sons he had recently supported, all of whom were elite knights.

He hurried to the Dragonpit and found Maynard, instructing him to gather the Dragonkeepers.

The standard force consisted of 1,000 men, but Rhaegar also assembled 200 additional free folk from Crackclaw Point, totaling 1,200. He assigned 800 of these guards for the mission, leaving 400 to protect the Dragonpit.

As Rhaegar addressed the guards, Jeyne entered the Dragonpit, escorted by Vale knights. Seeing her filled him with mixed emotions, especially guilt for rejecting her the previous night.

Jeyne, with her noble status and outstanding beauty, had humbled herself for him. He feared the rejection would breed resentment.

"Rhaegar, are you okay?" Jeyne's voice was filled with concern as she approached him.

Rhaegar's eyes showed surprise and suspicion at her behavior.

"What are you afraid of? I'm still me, I haven't changed physically or mentally," she reassured him with a smile. "Even though you left me last night, I still want to be your wife and love you."

"Jeyne, you should go back and rest," Rhaegar said, pulling away gently, trying to convince her.

Jeyne stepped forward and gripped his hand, her knuckles white with tension. "I was in a hurry last night; I don't blame you."

Rhaegar looked at her clenched hand, noting the tension. "It's good you can forgive me. One must always follow one's heart."

"No! I will not forgive you; I will remember this for the rest of my life," Jeyne declared, closing the gap between them. "I love you, and I don't mind that you make your own choices, but it embarrasses me."

"Do you want me to apologize?" Rhaegar asked, stepping back.

"Don't apologize; you didn't do anything wrong," Jeyne said, surprisingly open-minded. "And I don't feel sorry either, at least I haven't betrayed Rhaenyra yet."

Rhaegar blinked, recognizing Jeyne's unusual psychological state.

"Rhaegar, your strategic thinking at the meeting was impressive," she continued with a smile. "I asked the Grand Maester to send a message to Runestone. The Royce House has a small harbor that can support additional troops."

"Runestone has suffered significant losses. Can they still provide troops?" Rhaegar asked, concerned.

"Don't worry," Jeyne said confidently. "Most of the wealth collected from the Shett and Arryn branches will compensate Runestone, enough to cover their losses."

"Thank you," Rhaegar said, genuinely grateful.

"You and I don't need to say thank you. You know what I'm asking for," Jeyne replied, her eyes filled with ambiguous intent.

Suddenly, she changed the subject, looking around the Dragonpit. "Where are the dragons? I heard there are still young dragons. Can we see them?"

Caught off guard, Rhaegar summoned a Dragonkeeper and spoke in High Valyrian, "Bring Stormcloud, and watch over the men and dragons."

Turning to Jeyne, he said, "I have other matters to attend to. There is a young dragon for you to see." He then mobilized the 800 Dragonkeepers and left the Dragonpit.

Jeyne watched Rhaegar lead the Dragonkeepers away, a slight smile playing on her lips.

...

Noon.

Three large cargo ships anchored at the River Gate port, and sailors and Dragonkeepers boarded them one by one. As the last of the crew climbed aboard, the ships set sail.

A gust of wind filled the sails as the Cannibal, a formidable dragon, flapped its wings and soared toward Blackwater Bay.

Before the Cannibal's departure, Aegon had been dragged out of bed by Viserys and forced to ride Sunfyre to the Stepstones.

Two days later, on the Narrow Sea.

Three ships sailed slowly, mere specks in the vast expanse of the sea. They were passing close to the Cape Wrath in the Stormlands when a sudden change occurred.

Five medium-sized warships approached, their sails emblazoned with three-headed monsters. They were manned by well-armed mercenaries from the Triarchy.

"Full speed ahead, hijack the cargo ships!" the leader of the mercenaries commanded in rough Valyrian.

The warships closed in on the cargo ships, which couldn't turn in time to escape. The lighter, faster mercenary ships quickly caught up.

Just as the warships lowered their ramming horns to engage, a dragon roar echoed across the sky.

"Roar!"

Ghostly green dragonfire descended, engulfing one of the warships in flames. Heart-wrenching screams filled the air as the ship and its crew were incinerated.

Panic spread among the remaining mercenaries as the Cannibal swooped down and unleashed dragonfire on another warship.

"Scorpion crossbows! Ready the scorpion crossbows!" the mercenary captain shouted.

But Cannibal gave them no chance. It unleashed another torrent of dragonfire, reducing the ship to a blazing wreck.

The last two ships, also set ablaze, scattered their surviving crew into the sea. Desperation drove the mercenaries to abandon ship, knowing they couldn't match the dragon's might.

"Enough, Cannibal!" Rhaegar commanded from the dragon's back, halting the assault.

The Cannibal descended, allowing Rhaegar to address the mercenaries on the final ship.

"Roll back to your lairs and tell your masters that once the kingdom's supplies are secure, our army will fight you in half a month," Rhaegar declared.

The terrified mercenaries stared at the dark dragon, paralyzed with fear.

"Roar!"

The Cannibal's roar, accompanied by a stench of sulfur, swept over the ship.

"Do you hear me clearly?" Rhaegar yelled.

"Yes, we'll inform our masters truthfully," the ship's commander replied, trembling.

"Then get lost!" Rhaegar's voice was icy, and the Cannibal's eyes bore into the warship.

The mercenaries hastily turned their ship and fled.

As the warship disappeared over the horizon, Rhaegar surveyed the three cargo ships.

The lead ship was packed with Dragonkeepers. Tormund, a skinchanger, lay motionless in the lap of a four-meter-tall giant.

Rhaegar had brought his most crucial skinchanger to monitor enemy movements. The half-giant Porus, clad in armor, was a formidable presence, a killing machine on the battlefield. Too often, though, he had been used for his father's amusement.

Tormund twitched, his pupils returning to normal. "Prince, why let that ship of mercenaries go?" he asked weakly.

Porus echoed the question in his booming voice.

"Patience," Rhaegar replied. "The battlefield is ever-changing."

...

The next afternoon, three cargo ships arrived at Grey Gallows Island.

The soldiers on the island had been starving for three days and were desperate for food. As soon as the freighters docked, supplies were unloaded, and fires were quickly lit to cook.

Cannibal landed on the island, and Rhaegar dismounted from the dragon's back. A crowd immediately gathered around him.

"Rhaegar, when will the kingdom's support arrive?" Rhaenys asked, her voice tinged with exhaustion and anxiety. "The Triarchy has been watching from the coast."

The soldiers had endured three days of hunger following a disastrous defeat and subsequent stranding on Grey Gallows Island. It was a testament to their discipline and the presence of three dragons that they hadn't mutinied.

"Aunt, I have a bold plan," Rhaegar said, his eyes gleaming with determination.

Chapter 205: Dorn's Wedding Proposal

Rhaenys was stunned, her face showing disappointment. She sighed, "Let's discuss this in the tent."

She didn't believe any plan could reverse their dire situation. She assumed the kingdom's support would be delayed further.

Rhaegar understood her doubts and chose not to explain in front of the crowd.

As they walked, Rhaenys recounted the details of their defeat. Tyland and his men were surrounded by the pirates of the Triarchy and suffered heavy casualties. The Sea Snake brought reinforcements but was overwhelmed. The enemy had prepared hundreds of scorpion crossbows on their ships and along the shore, severely limiting Meleys and Sea Smoke.

During the battle, the Sea Snake was gravely injured and remains unconscious in a feverish state within his tent.

When they entered the makeshift tent, all the realm's commanders were present. Vaemond, with his arm in a sling, and Cole, now in ordinary armor, were among them. Laenor and Aegon were absent, patrolling on dragons to prevent a surprise attack by the Triarchy.

As Rhaegar walked into the tent, everyone stood and stared at him. With the Sea Snake seriously injured and Tyland in custody, the army needed a strong leader.

"Prince... Prince..." The commanders murmured, saluting him.

"The matter is urgent, there's no need for formalities," Rhaegar said, his eyes sweeping over the gathered men.

Cole quickly approached and fell to his knees. Under Rhaegar's cold gaze, he spoke with despair, "Prince, I have sinned without pardon. I am no longer worthy of wearing the white cloak."

"It's good that you understand," Rhaegar replied icily. "My father trusted you to command the king's army. You, a soldier by birth and former commander of the Kingsguard, knew the law and yet caused the deaths of thousands."

"After I return to King's Landing, I will voluntarily confess and atone for my sins," Cole said, his voice hard yet defeated, his head bowed.

He had not only committed a grave crime but also tarnished the honor of the white cloak, losing the dignity of a Kingsguard.

"Take care of yourself," Rhaegar said, stepping around him and walking towards the table.

Rhaenys followed, her gaze cold and disdainful towards Cole. A Kingsguard who couldn't keep his oath was unworthy of his silver armor and white robes.

Rhaegar approached the table and stood as he began to speak. "Lords, we are at a disadvantage in this battle for the Stepstones Islands. We must regain our strength."

A solemn middle-aged man with a breastplate emblazoned with a deep purple grape on a blue background spoke up. "What do you have in mind, Prince?" This was Spike Redwyne of House Redwyne of the Arbor.

Rhaegar valued his input and said, "Given the current situation, I have formulated a plan that I will lay out with full authority."

"What is it?" Spike Redwyne asked suspiciously.

"Now is not the time to reveal all the details," Rhaegar explained. "The feasibility of the plan requires going with the flow and being patient."

"So what do we do in the meantime? We can't just wait," Spike pressed, frowning sternly.

The Redwyne House commanded one of the strongest fleets in the Bay. In Westeros, only the Velaryon and Celtigar fleets were stronger.

Rhaegar pondered for a moment before saying, "I need a bait."

Everyone in the room exchanged glances. Finally, Bartimos Celtigar spoke. "Prince, what are the requirements for this bait?"

The Celtigar House had long been loyal to House Targaryen, second only to House Velaryon. At the beginning of the War for the Stepstones, Bartimos had led his troops to aid the cause.

Rhaegar replied, "Since it is a bait, it must be prepared to die at any time."

Bartimos was stunned. The war had already inflicted heavy casualties on all the families. Acting as bait meant risking complete loss of the fleet.

Kneeling on the ground, Cole suddenly raised his head and shouted, "I'll go! I'll be the bait!"

Rhaegar turned to look at him silently.

"Let me go, Prince," Cole said, trembling with excitement. "I don't want to be hanged or sent to the Wall. Please, let me atone for my sins and perform my last duty for the kingdom by dying on the battlefield!"

Cole still held hopes for the glory of the Kingsguard. He didn't want to die in disgrace but preferred a knight's death.

Rhaegar looked at him, his mind racing.

Bartimos leaned forward and whispered to Rhaegar, "Prince, why not give Ser Criston a chance? Having someone willing to die as bait is better than choosing from among us."

Upon hearing this, Rhaegar glanced at Bartimos and then said with a sneer, "Good. Cole, you will take on this task."

The discussion reached a conclusion. Rhaegar fell silent, listening to the analysis of the battle situation from those present. The tumultuous Battle of the Stepstones gripped everyone's hearts.

...

The Red Keep, King's Landing

Inside the throne room, the advisers of the Small Council were all present. Viserys wore a golden crown and sat atop the Iron Throne.

"Ser Setyl Dayne of Starfall, messenger of Prince Martell of Dorne," announced a member of the Kingsguard as the large doors swung open.

A tall young man in yellow robes with dark hair and sun-kissed skin walked into the hall. He was the envoy from Dorne.

Originally, Rhaegar was supposed to host this meeting, but now Viserys attended in person.

Lyonel Strong, standing beside the king, announced in a booming voice, "You stand before King Viserys I of House Targaryen, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm."

This formal introduction, laden with titles, seemed to catch Setyl Dayne off guard. He stepped forward, bowing slightly. "Prince Qoren Martell sends his greetings and wishes for peace, Your Grace."

"Rude! You should kneel and bow before the King!" Lyonel's face darkened, his voice sharp with rebuke.

Setyl's eyes narrowed slightly as he stood his ground. "Dornishmen do not kneel."

"How dare you!" Lyonel roared, ready to escalate the confrontation.

Viserys raised a hand to calm him. "Enough, Lyonel," he said, his voice measured. "Why have you come, messenger of Dorne?"

Lyonel, clearly displeased, fell silent. He had hoped to make an example of the Dornish envoy, harboring a deep-seated dislike for Dorne due to the history of conflict between their houses.

Setyl composed himself, his face regaining its solemnity. "Prince Qoren is weary of war and seeks to negotiate peace."

Viserys's expression turned skeptical. "Oh, is that so? After supporting the Triarchy's invasion of the Stepstones multiple times, Qoren suddenly understands the value of peace?"

In the last Battle of the Stepstones, Qoren had led his forces against the alliance of Daemon and Corlys. Although he did not personally appear in the latest conflict, Dornish soldiers were present on the battlefield. Now, in the midst of another conflict, Qoren was asking for peace.

It's obvious he doesn't give a damn about the authority of the Targaryens and has bad intentions.

Setyl said, "Your Grace, war only brings harm to both sides. Prince Qoren is a man of honor, and I would not have risked my life to come here otherwise."

The relationship between the Targaryens and the Dornish was tense. Dornishmen entering the realm faced rejection and hostility from the local populace. If word of the Dornish emissary's presence spread, many bannermen would call for their execution.

Viserys asked, "The Iron Throne has always sought peace. Has Qoren decided to withdraw his troops?"

"Yes, Prince Qoren has decided to do just that," Setyl confirmed. "However, to ensure lasting peace between our realms, the Prince has a request."

"Peace offered by Dorne? What right do you have to ask something from the Iron Throne?" Lyonel interjected sharply, his skepticism evident. He understood the potential dangers of Dorne's peace offer. If Viserys agreed, the Dornish could make unreasonable demands.

Viserys, growing impatient, interrupted, "What does Qoren want?"

Setyl glanced triumphantly at Lyonel before replying, "Prince Qoren's consort has been dead for many years. He would like to request a Targaryen princess for marriage, to solidify peace between our two sides."

"Don't even think about it!" a harsh voice immediately objected.

Viserys turned to see Rhaenyra's icy expression. Among those present in the hall were not only royal advisers but also Rhaenyra, Alicent, and Jeyne Arryn. The Princess of Dragonstone, the Queen, and the Lady of the Eyrie were fully qualified to attend the session with the Dornish emissary.

Alicent's face also darkened, and she nervously fidgeted with her fingers. Setyl, unfazed by the rebuke, surveyed Rhaenyra and asked, "Is this silver-haired lady the Princess?"

"That's right," Rhaenyra replied haughtily, dressed in black finery. "I am the First Princess of Viserys I, the Princess of Dragonstone, and on behalf of the kingdom, I refuse Dorne's request for a marriage."

Setyl frowned slightly and turned back to Viserys. "Your Grace, can your daughter make such a decision on behalf of the King?"

Viserys ignored him and met Rhaenyra's complex gaze. He had promised Rhaenyra he would not interfere with her marriage. After a moment of hesitation, Viserys said, "She is my daughter, and I respect her decision. She will not enter into any union."

Viserys was determined not to marry Rhaenyra. He remembered his promise to her and was aware of his eldest son's feelings. If Rhaenyra were married, Rhaegar's return to King's Landing could cause considerable unrest.

Setyl, realizing the implications, asked cautiously, "Your Grace, if I remember correctly, you have two daughters?"

"Viserys!" Alicent gasped, her agitation obvious.

The other daughter was hers, of course.

"Calm yourself, Alicent," Viserys said, reassuring his wife with a gentle smile.

Chapter 206: The Commanders Show Their Loyalty

Nightfall.

The Red Keep, Queen's residence.

Alicent sat at the round table, staring straight ahead. Across from her was Otto Hightower, the Master of Civil Affairs. Plates of untouched food lay before them.

"Father, you have to help me," Alicent began, her voice laden with sorrow. "Prince Martell has asked for a princess in marriage, and I can't give Helaena away."

"Don't worry. Viserys hasn't agreed yet, the matter isn't settled," Otto replied calmly.

"But you know he's weighing the pros and cons," Alicent fretted. "Viserys will surely send Helaena to Dorne for the sake of peace."

"And what's wrong with that? Prince Qoren is wealthy and powerful. Helaena won't be mistreated," Otto said, his gaze unwavering.

Alicent, worried for her children, grew more agitated. "Father, Dorne is at odds with the kingdom. The people there are ruthless. I can't watch Helaena thrown into such a dangerous situation!"

Though Aegon was her primary concern, Helaena was her only daughter—her daughter who resembled her, who grew up mentally ill and subjected to gossip. The thought of such a young girl being sent to Dorne by marriage was unthinkable.

Otto frowned slightly, his tone bland, "Calm down, Alicent. Don't let panic cloud your judgment."

"How can I be calm when my daughter's fate is in his hands?" Alicent rose, her eyes reddening with emotion. "Ten years ago, Viserys would have married Rhaenyra to Dorne. Do you think he cares about Helaena?"

Otto was silent, knowing exactly what his daughter meant. There was a time when Rhaenyra's marriages were out of her hands. Before the First War for the Stepstones, Viserys had considered marrying Rhaenyra to Qoren to keep the peace with Dorne.

After a moment, Otto spoke, "You have more than one child. If Helaena can bring peace to the kingdom, she might secure the support of the Martells for you."

As a politician, Otto valued profit over affection. To him, trading a girl for the support of the Martells outweighed her personal value.

"Father, do you realize what you're saying?" Alicent's face was stunned, her eyes full of disbelief.

Otto sighed, "Alicent, you've always worried about your children's future. Helaena marrying the Prince of Dorne makes her the Dornish heiress, maximizing the return to our family."

"No! Don't even think about it!" Alicent raged, utterly disappointed in her indifferent father. "You said the same thing to me and sent me to Viserys's room. He doesn't love me. He only sees his late wife and her children. I'm just a tool for bearing children, an old mother running the Red Keep!"

Her eyes were red as she spoke. Her life had become unbearable. She didn't want her daughter to suffer the same fate—hated and disregarded.

Otto watched his daughter calmly, letting her vent. After a while, Alicent, gasping for breath, said dazedly, "If you won't help me, I'll find another way."

With that, she quickly left the room. Otto remained silent, lost in his thoughts.

...

Alicent climbed the stairs to a secluded loft.

Creak...

The door to the attic opened, revealing the room inside.

Larys Strong, smartly dressed, sat in one of the two solid wood chairs, scepter in hand. He looked at Alicent with a smile, clearly having waited for her for some time.

...

Grey Gallows Island, Central Tent.

Inside the tent, a group of high-ranking officials were engaged in a heated debate.

"We should defend the island to the death and focus on preventing a sneak attack from the Triarchy."

"Nonsense! How many men do we have? It's not enough to mount a proper defense. We should launch a night attack and take them by surprise."

The two men arguing were Spike Redwyne of the Arbor and Borros Baratheon of the Stormlands.

Borros, who had been driven from his home and joined the army after his father, Lord Boremund, disowned him, had brought 2,000 soldiers and 10 ships - a significant reinforcement for the king's army.

"Silence, my lords!" Robb Rivers, leader of the Second Sons, tried to intervene as the argument grew more heated.

"Silence, my ass. I'm in the middle of an important discussion, you bastard!" Borros snapped, his temper flaring.

Robb's face turned red and he fell silent, humiliated.

Rhaegar, sitting at the head of the table, glared at Borros and tapped the table. "Lord Borros, be quiet for a moment!"

"Lord, we are discussing the war situation. Not even the king can silence a battlefield commander," Borros replied scornfully.

Bang...

Rhaegar slammed the table down and stood up, shouting, "I said silence, Lord Borros!"

He glared at Borros with a fierce gaze, his body radiating a formidable presence. Years spent in the Cannibal's company had imbued him with an intimidating aura.

Borros glared back, ready to retort, but Rhaegar's intense gaze silenced him. The knot in his throat moved as he swallowed hard, finally grunting in reluctant compliance.

The others in the tent, who shared a general disdain for Borros, calmed down as well. They were relieved to see the prince put him in his place.

Rhaenys spoke up to break the tension, frowning. "Rhaegar, what do you propose?"

"Yes, when do your plans begin, Prince?" Bartimos Celtigar chimed in, shifting the focus back to strategy.

Rhaegar withdrew his gaze and returned to the sand table. "My lords, it is time for the plan to begin."

All eyes were on him, waiting for his explanation.

Rhaegar continued, "In about two days, the Triarchy will definitely make a big move. Our first task is to reorganize our military equipment and wait patiently for material support."

"Oh, who doesn't know that?" Borros sneered.

Rhaegar glanced at him without paying much attention. "I sent Cole to the Broken Arm to attract Dornish troops. Has he departed yet?"

Robb responded quickly, "He left this evening."

"Very well." Rhaegar said.

Borros interjected, "Prince, you said Cole was the bait. Now that he's gone, what should we do?"

"Get the army ready and stand by," Rhaegar said seriously.

Borros laughed disdainfully. "This is the same nonsense every day. If we want to defend Grey Gallows Island or launch a sneak attack on the Triarchy, what's the point of just reorganizing the army?"

"Lord Borros, watch your words. You are in the presence of the heir to the kingdom!" Robb was the first to stand up and rebuke him.

"Shut the fuck up, bastard!" Borros, enraged, opened his mouth to curse.

Robb wanted to argue, but Rhaegar held him down with one hand, stopping him.

"Prince?" Robb hesitated.

Rhaegar waved his hand and faced the thick-necked, red-faced Borros. "The Navy Commander and the Master of Ships are both gone. Who is in charge on the island?"

Borros glared and replied coldly, "In terms of status, naturally the Prince is the highest authority."

The most honorable person present was Princess Rhaenys, followed by Bartimos Celtigar, the Lord of Claw Isle. The rest, including Borros, were of second rank or knights.

Hearing Borros' answer, Rhaegar let out an "Oh" and tilted his head. "Since I am the highest authority, I said to be ready at all times. Do you wish to disobey me?"

As he spoke, his hand moved to Dragon Claw hilt at his waist.

"Of course not..." Borros started to argue, but Rhaenys cut him off.

"Shut up, Borros!" Rhaenys warned, her eyes fierce. "Remember your father's advice to choose your words carefully!"

Her mind was sharp and she caught Rhaegar's movement instantly. She knew Borros was being made an example of.

Borros simmered with fury, a knot of unspoken words tightening his throat. Rhaegar, his gaze as cold as a serpent's, met Borros's defiance. "Spit it out, then," Rhaegar's voice was a razor's edge, daring Borros to a challenge.

Borros' anger turned to fear, his throat tightening as he realized Rhaegar's intention while holding the hilt of his sword. A cold sweat broke out and his defiance faded.

"He's going to kill me!" Borros thought, swallowing hard.

Suddenly, the tent flap lifted and Laenor rushed in. "Cousin, the Kingdom of the Three Daughters has sent additional troops to garrison Bloodstone Island!"

Rhaegar glanced at him, but remained focused.

With Laenor's intrusion, the tense atmosphere eased slightly. Rhaenys, quick-witted, kicked Borros in the leg socket.

With a thud, Borros fell forward, kneeling before Rhaegar.

Rhaegar looked down at him like a judge.

Fear filled Borros's heart, and he gave up his pride. Trembling, he said, "Prince, your words are the golden rule, and the Stormlands obey your commands!"

Bartimos quickly echoed, "As the Prince commands!"

The scene was shocking, and everyone felt as if they were in an ice cellar.

With one person starting the pledge, others followed.

"At the prince's command..."

Spike Redwyne and several commanders knelt on one knee, offering their loyalty.

Regardless of Rhaegar's reasoning, his tough stance and determination were enough to earn their loyalty.

As he looked at his kneeling bannermen, Rhaegar's icy expression melted into a laugh. "Lord Borros was only joking. Why are you all kneeling?"

He laughed as if it were just a jest.

Borros shivered, forcing a smile onto his face.

The others, though unsure, joined in the laughter. The tent echoed with loud, enthusiastic laughter.

"Hahaha..."

Chapter 207: The Dragons Appearance

King's Landing, a chamber.

"Alicent, I can't help you with this request," Jeyne said, leaning back in her chair with a look of regret.

Across from her, Alicent frowned in dissatisfaction. "You said that in a man's world, we women must unite."

"Dorne's request for a marriage alliance is a matter for the king to decide. I cannot intervene," Jeyne replied, her tone firm but sympathetic.

"Viserys will marry Helaena to Dorne, and I must act before he agrees," Alicent pleaded. "I have only one daughter, and I cannot abandon her."

Jeyne's demeanor remained unchanged. "My influence lies in the Vale, not King's Landing. Here, I have no power."

She understood the dangers of arranged marriages for women all too well, which is why she remained unmarried at 24. But when it came to the political maneuvering of the realm, the king had the final say, and she was powerless.

Realizing Jeyne wouldn't help, Alicent's expression hardened. "Jeyne, don't forget our agreement. I've been advocating for you to Viserys."

Jeyne's face showed a flicker of irritation. "I didn't see any results from your so-called advocacy. I approached Rhaegar myself, and I was rejected. I can't even imagine how he perceives me now."

"Viserys is considering your union just as he is Helaena's," Alicent retorted, her tone turning cold and threatening. "Jeyne, I am the queen. While I may struggle to make something happen, it's easy for me to ruin it."

Jeyne's face darkened. "Threats won't change the fact that I have no power here."

The greatest humiliation of her life was being rejected by Rhaegar. But even before that, She was the Lady of the Eyrie. How could she give in to threats?

Alicent stood up, looking down at Jeyne. "Our partnership ends the moment I leave this room."

"Feel free," Jeyne replied, her red lips barely moving, her indifference clear.

Alicent snorted and strode out. Just as she was about to close the door, Jeyne's voice stopped her.

"I can't help you, but think about who can influence the king's decisions and who you can turn to for help."

"No need to remind me," Alicent snapped, pushing the door shut and leaving.

Once outside, Alicent regained her composure, adjusting her makeup as she walked towards Rhaenyra's quarters. She understood Jeyne's hint. Who in the entire kingdom could sway Viserys' decisions? There was only one answer: Rhaegar. And who could influence Rhaegar? Rhaenyra.

Alicent had known her course of action even before she entered Jeyne's room. Larys Strong had provided her with the perfect plan. First, approach Jeyne for help. Regardless of the outcome, the attempt would underscore Helaena's importance. Though she had threatened Jeyne, it was a necessary tactic to secure her warning.

Now, it was time to find Rhaenyra and plead her case. With this in mind, Alicent approached Rhaenyra's door and knocked.

Knock, knock, knock...

"Rhaenyra, I need to speak with you," Alicent called out, her voice filled with sadness, her expression transformed to one of desperation.

...

Tyrosh, In a luxurious garden.

A group of middle-aged men, each dressed in elaborate clothes and sporting different hair colors, gathered here.

A dark-skinned, red-haired old man in a brocade robe sat in a pavilion, holding a young girl in his arms.

Inside the pavilion, a group of unruly young men in leather armor sat on either side, each holding a beautiful woman in his arms.

Opposite the brocade-robed old man stood a young man with silver-gold curls and blue eyes.

The young man spoke, "Archon Graghas, the battle for the Stepstones is going well, and the Triarchy is about to win."

The brocade-robed Archon drooped his eyelids and smiled, "That blonde-haired Lannister is truly a fool, just by spreading some half-truths and half-lies. He fell for it."

"That's right, that Sea Snake nearly died, and Westeros's army is likely in disarray," laughed a young Myrman with black curly hair and olive skin.

The Triarchy, also known as the Kingdom of the Three Daughters, consists of the free-trading city-states of Tyrosh, Myr, and Lys. The ruler of Tyrosh is called the Archon, which is the title of the old man in the brocade robe. The unruly youths are mercenaries, one of Tyrosh's specialties.

Myr is governed by a council of magister, and one of the Myr youths present is a governor's representative. Lys has an elective political structure with a elected political official called the First Magister.

The young man with silver-blond curls who spoke first is Drazenko Rogare, the younger brother of the First Magister of Lys, Lysandro Rogare. The Rogare family is one of the largest in Lys and operates the Rogare Bank, which rivals the Iron Bank of Braavos in wealth.

Drazenko Rogare said, "The War for the Stepstones is not yet over. The Targaryen prince is still gathering supplies and troops, intending to retake the Bloodstone Isles."

"A brat new to the battlefield is not worth mentioning, except for his dragon," the brocade-robed Archon waved dismissively, showing great disdain for the so-called prince.

If Daemon Targaryen had ridden Caraxes and led an army to battle the Stepstones, he would have been more cautious. But a young Targaryen who spent his days on Dragonstone, unable even to detect scouts in his garden? How dare he claim he will fight to the death in half a month's time? It's a joke.

The young man from Myr took out a letter and reminded, "My Lords, we have a new message from the front. The army on Grey Gallows Island is short of supplies and urgently needs replenishment."

"What are the movements of the other side?" the brocade-robed elder asked.

The Myrish youth replied, "The four dragons have been taking turns bombarding Bloodstone Island. Our people are hiding in caves and have suffered minimal damage."

"They're just relying on their dragons to show off!" the brocade-robed old man grunted, clearly disgusted with the dragons.

The young Myrish man continued, "According to our intelligence, a large number of cargo ships will depart from Driftmark to Grey Gallows Island in two days. We can intercept them."

"The other side has dragons. They won't just stand by and watch us destroy the cargo ships," Drazenko Rogare objected.

"Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't. But these are not normal times," the Myrish youth said confidently. "Our scouts have reported that Grey Gallows Island has reorganized its army and is preparing to launch a counterattack against Bloodstone Island soon."

"We can attack from the east to draw the enemy's main force and use this time to destroy their supply lines," the brocade-robed old man agreed. "It's feasible. If we cut off their supplies, the army on Grey Gallows Island will be unable to break through."

When Bloodstone Island was recaptured, the mercenaries looted all the supplies. The remnants of Westeros's army now rely on supplies from the rear. By destroying these supply lines in advance, the enemy will starve without a decisive battle.

"We can also invade the Gullet and plunder Driftmark. It's a rich place," the Myrish youth suggested greedily.

Drazenko Rogare frowned. "Laena Velaryon guards Driftmark. She controls the largest and oldest dragon, Vhagar."

"What's to fear? If our armies come ashore to pillage, will the dragons destroy the whole island?" the Myrish youth retorted proudly.

Dragons are indeed powerful in battle, but they are not omnipotent. He didn't believe a dragonrider would destroy their own land so easily.

After some discussion, the brocade-robed old man made a decision. He formulated a plan, "Two days from now, Bloodstone Island will send a small army to attack Grey Gallows Island to attract the dragons' attention."

"Our main force will use ships to plunder the supply lines, and depending on the situation, decide whether to invade Driftmark. First, we must cut off the enemy's supplies."

Upon hearing this, the Myrish youth and Drazenko Rogare pondered for a moment. Finally, the Rogare nodded in agreement.

...

Time flew by, and two days had passed.

In the Narrow Sea, near a island, a dozen large cargo ships sailed steadily towards the Stone Islands. The fleet advanced slowly, eventually reaching the area of the Cape of Wrath.

"Attack!"

Warships bearing the symbols of the Triarchy approached from the distance. The lookout on one of the cargo ships spotted the incoming vessels and shouted, "Enemy! Turn around!"

The helmsman panicked and tried to steer the ship to safety, but it was too late. The warships, with their superior speed, quickly closed in and surrounded the cargo ships.

The watchman counted the number of enemy ships—there were more than sixty.

"Lower the ramming horns and charge!" the Triarchy commander ordered.

The warships surged forward, their thick ramming horns crashing into the cargo ships. Both fleets came to a halt as the warships rammed into their targets.

"Board and fight!" the commander yelled, drawing his scimitar. He led the Triarchy pirates as they boarded the cargo ships, using the ramming horns and chains to climb aboard.

Soon, the pirates had surrounded the dozen cargo ships, boarding them one after another and starting to slaughter and loot.

A strange scene unfolded. Before the pirates could board, the helmsmen and sailors on the cargo ships jumped into the sea, abandoning their vessels in a desperate bid to escape.

The pirates, undeterred, stormed the cargo holds to search for loot. To their shock, they found it empty. This was true for almost all the cargo ships.

Only one ship had a group of soldiers waiting inside. Cole led the charge, wielding a morningstar, and shouted, "Kill all the pirates of the Triarchy!"

Behind him, fewer than a hundred soldiers fought fiercely against the pirates, showing no fear.

Realizing something was amiss, the Triarchy commander shouted, "Retreat! This is a trap! Hurry back to support Bloodstone Island!"

His heart pounded as he looked at the empty cargo ships. The enemy had no substantial supplies. The scouts' reports had been false.

But his retreat orders were drowned out by a thunderous roar.

"Roar !!!"

A dragon's roar echoed across the sea, striking fear into the hearts of the pirates. Four dragons appeared in the sky: the charcoal-black Cannibal, the blood-red Meleys, the golden Sunfyre, and the light silver-gray Seasmoke.

Rhaegar, riding the Cannibal, looked down at the Triarchy fleet and commanded, "Dracarys!"

With a deafening roar, Cannibal was the first to unleash a torrent of ghostly green dragonfire upon the fleet. Rhaenys, Aegon, and Laenor followed, their dragons spewing flames in various hues.

In an instant, the four dragons circled over the Triarchy fleet, engulfing it in a blaze of colorful, destructive fire.

Chapter 208: New Title "Young Dragonlord"

Boom...

A torrent of dragonfire bombarded the Triarchy's warships, creating pillars of flame and thunderous explosions.

"Cannibal, attack that ship first!" Rhaegar commanded, his eyes cold and focused on the warship where the Triarchy commander stood. This warship had been the first to ram a cargo ship, and its pirates were now battling Cole and his men.

"Roar..."

Cannibal flapped its wings and flew towards the warship. The Triarchy commander, noticing the dragon's approach, shouted in terror, "No! Abandon ship!"

The dragon's power was no joke. A single breath of dragonfire could spell doom for everyone aboard.

Boom!

Cannibal glided over, spraying green dragonfire onto the warship, instantly igniting the mast and armor. The Triarchy commander barely had time to scream before he was engulfed in the flames, reduced to a charred corpse.

Below, Cole was locked in a fierce battle, his morningstar crushing pirate after pirate. Blood splattered over his head and face, but he fought on, driven by the need to atone for his sins. He had commanded the dozen cargo ships that served as bait, luring the Triarchy pirates into this trap.

Above, four dragons circled the pirate fleet, raining destruction on the ships.

"Hahaha, burn them all!" Aegon laughed wildly, amused by the carnage as he rode Sunfyre.

Having been idled in King's Landing and Grey Gallows Island, this first battle felt like a triumphant release for him.

"Aegon, maintain altitude and finish them quickly!" Rhaenys, flying on Meleys, admonished sternly.

After incinerating over ten ships, the pirates finally retaliated with scorpion crossbows. Steel-tipped bolts were launched skyward, targeting the dragons.

But their efforts were futile. One dragon might be vulnerable to a barrage of crossbow bolts, but four dragons were an insurmountable force. The scorpion crossbows were reloaded too slowly to match the dragons' onslaught, and the fleet was soon engulfed in flames.

Within minutes, the battle was over. The one-sided assault had obliterated thousands of pirates. Rhaegar, looking as composed as ever, shouted, "Quickly now, head to Bloodstone Island for support!"

"No problem!" Rhaenys responded, driving Meleys forward.

Aegon glanced at his brother, urging Sunfyre to unleash more dragonfire with greater speed. Laenor, equally agitated, rode Seasmoke alongside Sunfyre.

Rhaegar focused on methodically burning each pirate ship. A few days earlier, he had released the pirate ship with a plan in mind. By reorganizing the army and creating the illusion of an attack on Bloodstone Island, he had deliberately leaked information about the cargo ship carrying supplies, baiting the enemy into intercepting it. The Triarchy, encouraged by recent victories, had taken the bait.

Cole and his cargo ships had acted as bait, drawing in the bulk of the Triarchy's fleet. Rhaegar, Rhaenys, and the others had waited in ambush, their dragons ready to wreak havoc.

This was only the halfway point of their plan.

...

Bloodstone Island.

A fleet of over twenty ships approached, bearing flags adorned with three red dragons, seahorses, and purple grapes on a blue background.

"Attack!" Vaemond shouted as he donned his armor and gripped his scimitar.

The warships quickly reached the waters surrounding Bloodstone Island. As they stopped, small boats were lowered into the water, allowing soldiers to disembark and row to shore.

Bloodstone Island's fortifications had been rebuilt, but the patrolling pirates were surprised by the sudden attack and sounded their horns.

Thunk!

An arrow pierced the throat of one of the patrol pirates, silencing him. From a few hundred meters away, Robb of the Riverlands, known as "Red Robb," retrieved his longbow and urged his brothers of the Second Sons to row faster.

During the Battle of the Riverlands, Robb had made a name for himself as the best archer in the region.

Moments later, dozens of small boats reached the shore. Robb led the charge, followed closely by the 800 Dragonkeepers.

"Kill!" Robb yelled as they stormed the beach, with soldiers from The Arbor and Claw Isle right behind them. Many of these soldiers bore the blood of recent battles on their armor, having fought off a small band of pirates before reaching Bloodstone Island.

The smaller pirate force was no match for the advancing army and was quickly overwhelmed.

"Charge! Reclaim Bloodstone Island!" Spike Redwyne bellowed, slashing through the lightly defended pirates with his sword.

The main force of Bloodstone Island had been dispatched to Cape Wrath to intercept the supposed supply ships. Meanwhile, half of the remaining troops had attacked Grey Gallows Island, only to be slaughtered by the king's army. Consequently, the island's defenses were at their weakest.

Hundreds of pirates emerged from their caves, ready to fight to the death, but they faced thousands of well-equipped soldiers from the king's forces. The disparity in numbers was insurmountable.

Within half an hour, the beach was littered with the bodies of pirates who had fallen without much delay.

Under the officers' command, the soldiers reorganized the battlefield and began to rebuild the fortifications.

Vaemon, dragging an injured arm, climbed to the watchtower and replanted the three-headed red dragon flag, signifying the recapture of Bloodstone Island.

"Roar..."

A deep dragon roar echoed through the sky as the Cannibal's pitch-black silhouette emerged above. Rhaegar cast a glance over the battlefield below, confident that Bloodstone Island had been secured.

Robb, carrying his longbow, shouted up to the sky, "Prince, the plan is going well!"

The Cannibal descended slowly, and Rhaegar slid down the dragon's back.

"How are the casualties? Do we have enough supplies on Bloodstone Island?" Rhaegar asked, his expression steady, focusing on the critical points.

He was the orchestrator of this operation. From devising the strategy and spreading false information to rallying the people and commanding the dragons, he had led every step. The main force of the Triarchy had been incinerated at Cape Wrath, leaving Bloodstone Island's defenses vulnerable.

Vaemon and his forces had led a full-scale assault, reclaiming the island. The supplies they discovered were crucial for sustaining their army.

Robb replied cheerfully, "The supplies are intact in the air-raid shelters. The Triarchy pirates, who are mostly mercenaries, hadn't had time to sell off the plundered goods yet."

Hearing this, Rhaegar's tense expression relaxed, and a smile crept onto his face. "Excellent. With Bloodstone Island secured, the Triarchy won't pose a significant threat anymore."

In their previous attempt to seize Bloodstone Island, the Triarchy had faced devastating losses when Rhaegar's dragon burned dozens of their warships. Now, with their main force decimated at Cape Wrath, even the wealth of the three city-states couldn't withstand such consecutive heavy blows. Internal disputes over these losses would further weaken them.

As they conversed, Vaemond and other commanders gathered around. Rhaegar scanned their faces, drew Dragon Claw, raised it high, and shouted, "Did you all enjoy the battle?"

He had controlled the battle's outcome, shouldering the responsibility for potential failure and basking in the glory of success. His words resonated with the commanders, who looked at him with admiration and respect.

Vaemond's dark face revealed a mix of emotions, his eyes especially intense. He slowly knelt, raising his scimitar above his head, and declared in a deep voice, "Prince, you are worthy of the title of King's Heir. House Velaryon pays tribute to you!"

...

The commanders fell to their knees, raising their weapons above their heads, all eyes fixed on Rhaegar. His long silver-gold hair, striking purple eyes, handsome face, and cold demeanor combined with the resolute yet youthful features created a powerful image.

A single thought surfaced in everyone's mind: Perhaps, this is a true Dragonlord.

Suddenly, someone shouted, "Young Dragonlord!"

The cry stirred the crowd, and soon, the commanders joined in, their voices rising in unison.

"Young Dragonlord..."

"Young Dragonlord..."

The chants reverberated across the beach, reaching the ears of the soldiers who were clearing the battlefield. The call of "Young Dragonlord" spread like wildfire, passed from one soldier to another.

In an instant, the words "Young Dragonlord" echoed over Bloodstone Island, resonating for miles.

...

Nightfall

At the top of a mountain on Bloodstone Island, Rhaegar sat on the edge of the cliff and gazed at the four dragons hovering over the island.

"Prince, the report on armaments and supplies is as follows: enough for the entire army for a year," Robb said, holding a detailed list of the island's inventory.

"Understood, Robb," Rhaegar replied, his mind clearly elsewhere.

Robb nodded and stood silently.

Rhaegar closed his eyes and lay down, feeling the salty sea breeze on his face. The slight furrow in his brow hinted at the thoughts weighing on his mind.

"Young Dragonlord..." he murmured, shaking his head with a slight smile.

He liked the title; it fit his status perfectly. But he didn't like the implications. The title "Young Dragonlord" was royal, much like his father, Viserys, was called "Young King". With his father still in his prime, Rhaegar felt it would be disrespectful to assume such a title now. In the wrong ears, it could be twisted into something malicious.

"I hope Father's heart is big enough to ignore petty whispers," Rhaegar sighed. He took comfort in the fact that his father had always shown him a special kind of love, a bond stronger than any title could strain.

Suddenly he heard strong, dull footsteps approaching.

"Prince, there is a letter from King's Landing, stamped with the seal of the Princess of Dragonstone," came Tormund's soft voice.

Rhaegar opened his eyes and turned around. The half giant Porus was standing at the edge of the cliff, carrying the pale Tormund on his shoulder.

Rhaegar laughed, "Tormund, you have quite the knack for finding a ride!"

"Porus is not a mount; Porus is Tormund's friend," the half-giant Poru replied, his voice dull but firm.

"Sorry, Porus," Rhaegar apologized, soothing the big man's feelings.

Tormund tapped Porus on the shoulder, signaling him to let him down.

He liked the big guy. It was good to keep him safe when he warged into the Falcon.

Tormund handed Rhaegar an unopened letter. Rhaegar took it, noting the red clay seal, and tore it open.

The seal bore Rhaenyra's mark, making it genuine. "Could it be that something has happened in King's Landing again?" Rhaegar wondered anxiously as he began to read.

With the tumult of recent months, he had come to expect the worst from each letter. As he read the small script, his expression darkened.

"Envoy of Dorne... Union..." he read aloud softly, his voice dropping lower and lower as he squinted at the words. By the end, he had crushed the letter into a ball.

Chapter 209: Alicent's Bitter Plea

When Rhaegar raised his head, his expression was dark and solemn.

"Prince, has something happened in King's Landing?" Robb asked, his voice tinged with concern.

Rhaegar's tone turned sarcastic. "Dorne has meddled in the War for the Stepstones and now has the audacity to send a marriage proposal to my father."

At the beginning of the war, the realm had sent envoys to Dorne to make peace with Qoren Martell. The Dornish had evaded and even imprisoned the kingdom's envoys. It wasn't until Dorne's forces attacked Bloodstone Island alongside the Triarchy that the envoys were released.

Now, in the midst of the battle, Qoren sends a proposal of marriage. According to the letter, the Dornish envoy arrived in King's Landing just as Tyland and the Kingdom's forces were defeated and Bloodstone Island was lost. This was clearly an attempt to humiliate the realm.

"Qoren Martell, you double-crossing rat," Rhaegar spat, tearing the letter to shreds and scattering the pieces in the wind.

"Prince, are you going back to King's Landing?" Tormund asked quietly.

Rhaegar nodded. "Yes, I must return. I'll talk to Aunt Rhaenys first."

The victory at the Stepstones meant they had to transport the remains of the fallen soldiers back to King's Landing. The Sea Snake was gravely injured and needed immediate care at Driftmark.

Having said that, he walked down the cliff.

...

A few days earlier

The Red Keep, King's Landing

Alicent knocked on Rhaenyra's door.

"Come in," came Rhaenyra's voice from inside.

Alicent entered, her face beaming with anticipation. Inside, Rhaenyra sat at her dressing table, gently combing her long, loose hair. Helaena was at a nearby table, fiddling with a dragon sculpture.

"Mother?" Helaena said, surprised to see Alicent.

Alicent, equally surprised, asked, "Helaena, what are you doing here?"

Rhaenyra looked at Alicent, a hint of annoyance in her tone. "When she's not with me, she's hiding somewhere, playing with bugs."

Ever since Rhaegar had arranged for Helaena to stay with Rhaenyra one night, the young girl had been a constant presence. Rhaenyra tolerated her, let her be.

Alicent smiled awkwardly, understanding. "Helaena, your sister and I need to talk. Go to your room and rest."

"Yes, Mother," Helaena said obediently. She put down the dragon sculpture and reluctantly left the room.

Silence filled the room as Rhaenyra hunched her shoulders and ruffled her hair. "Say what you must. I'll be going to bed soon."

She ran her fingers through her silky hair, content. Rhaegar loved the smell of her hair and often complimented its texture, so she took great care of it.

Gathering her courage, Alicent said nervously, "Rhaenyra, I need your help."

Rhaenyra continued to comb her hair, her expression flat. "I know what you're going to say, but I can't help you."

Alicent had arrived late, and Rhaenyra knew her purpose. But with her own marriage prospects in play, she was in no position to help Helaena.

"Rhaenyra, you can help me. Only you can help me," Alicent pleaded, lowering her head. "Your father cares most about you and Rhaegar. If you support Helaena, he will reject the marriage proposal."

Rhaenyra's brows furrowed. "Alicent, our relationship is complicated enough without involving Rhaegar."

Rhaegar, her brother and soulmate, was leading an army for their family's honor and the kingdom's safety. Rhaenyra didn't want any events to affect him, not even slightly.

"Rhaenyra, you know how damaging a marriage to Dorne would be. Helaena is only nine; she won't survive it," Alicent wept, appealing emotionally. "Helaena is closest to Rhaegar. He dotes on her."

Alicent vividly remembered when Rhaegar, at six, fiercely protected Helaena on their way to Dragonstone Island, even fighting Aegon for her.

At the time, she had only seen Aegon's tears and blamed Rhaegar, but Helaena later revealed the truth. Alicent had never forgotten about it.

Rhaenyra looked at Alicent with indifference, unmoved.

Of course, she knew that Rhaegar favored Helaena. That was precisely why she disliked Helaena.

Yes, she didn't like Helaena.

Helaena shared the same Dreamer gift as Rhaegar, a gift that Rhaenyra lacked. Rhaenyra felt overshadowed by Helaena's talents, especially since Rhaegar often praised Helaena in front of her, sometimes even comparing the two.

It was only for Rhaegar's sake that she tolerated Helaena more than her other siblings.

Alicent's heart sank when she saw Rhaenyra's unchanged demeanor. She had hoped that allowing Helaena to stay in Rhaenyra's room would have fostered a better relationship between the two sisters. But Rhaenyra's cold response suggested otherwise.

Alicent closed her eyes and sighed deeply, recalling Larys's advice on seeking help. When she reopened her eyes, she had wiped away her tears and approached Rhaenyra.

"Is there anything else you want to say?" Rhaenyra asked calmly, her dislike for Alicent evident. They were no longer teenage friends who shared everything; they were now bitter stepmother and stepdaughter.

Without a word, Alicent walked over to Rhaenyra and slowly knelt down.

"What do you mean by that?" Rhaenyra said in disbelief.

Alicent placed her hand on Rhaenyra's leg, looking up at her with sincerity. "Rhaenyra, help me, and I'll make it up to you."

Rhaenyra's voice dripped with disdain. "What can you do to make it up to me? I've already got the best."

She had fought for her freedom after losing her heir status, and Rhaegar, who had grown up under her care, held her in his heart and eyes. She couldn't think of anything else she needed.

"I will give up unrealistic ideas," Alicent said. "When the Battle of Stepstones is over, I will ask your father to partition Aegon away from King's Landing. Aemond and Daeron too—they will never stay in King's Landing to get in your and Rhaegar's way."

Rhaenyra's eyes twinkled, but she refused, "No need. They would never threaten Rhaegar."

There was something in her heart, but she didn't trust Alicent enough to believe she would follow through. After all, Alicent had once climbed into her own father's bed behind her back.

"Rhaenyra, give me some trust. All I want is to protect my children, and there will be no more green in King's Landing," Alicent pleaded, grabbing Rhaenyra's hand.

Rhaenyra glanced at Alicent's green dress. If Alicent truly intended to dissolve and quit the race, she wouldn't have worn green to this meeting.

Alicent noticed the glance and abruptly reacted. She reached for a pair of scissors from the dresser and began cutting at the sleeves and corners of her dress.

"Enough, don't play games with me here," Rhaenyra shuddered, stopping her.

"Hightower is a family name that speaks of honor, and I'm not going to entertain any more illusions," Alicent said, dropping the scissors. She then removed a folded page from her sleeve.

Rhaenyra's eyes widened at the inexplicably familiar page. She took it and unfolded it, revealing the words and illustrations inside.

It described the marriage between Nymeria and her first husband, Mors Martell. There was even an illustration of the wedding scene.

It was the missing page from the Voyage of the Ten Thousand Ships.

Rhaenyra stared unblinkingly at the page, her voice tinged with disbelief. "You still have this page?"

This was from before she was named heir. Her mother was still alive, and Rhaegar hadn't even been born yet. She and Alicent had shared a book, a relic of their once close friendship. Alicent had always struggled to remember what she read, so Rhaenyra, in moments of frustration, had torn out pages to reinforce Alicent's memory.

Thirteen years had passed since then.

Rhaenyra rubbed the page with a reassuring frown. "When I look at this page, it seems like it was yesterday."

Alicent's eyes reddened as she choked out, "Rhaenyra, I know you hate me, and I've done many things wrong to you. But I had no choice. I was a victim of my family."

Rhaenyra shifted her gaze from the page to Alicent.

"In my heart, you've always been a good friend, just like this page I've kept." Alicent clutched Rhaenyra's hand, her voice laden with genuine emotion. "Help my daughter. Don't let her repeat my life."

Rhaenyra pursed her lips, her gaze falling back to the page in her hand. After a moment of contemplation, she softly said, "Let me think about it. You can go now."

"Rhaenyra..." Alicent began to plead.

"Out!" Rhaenyra interrupted, her tone intensifying. She wanted to preserve the image of the best friend she once had, not taint it with the present's bitterness.

"Fine, take your time," Alicent conceded, standing up and walking out of the bedroom one step at a time.

The door closed with a bang.

Alicent leaned against the door, taking a deep breath to ease the shame and powerlessness that spread through her body.

Inside the bedroom, Rhaenyra held the page, scrutinizing it over and over again.

Half a minute later, Rhaenyra sighed, set down the page, and took out a pen and paper. She wasn't doing this for Alicent or even for Helaena. She was reminiscing about the beauty of the past.

...

Time moved forward.

Two days later, on the Narrow Sea, several large ships drifted, their sails adorned with three red dragons and seahorses.

At the door of one of the ship's cabins, Rhaegar and Rhaenys spoke softly.

"Aunt, has Lord Corlys not recovered yet?" Rhaegar asked.

Rhaenys shook her head and sighed. "The fever is high, and the doctor said it's an inflammation of the wound."

"Don't worry too much. Lord Corlys is strong; he will get better," Rhaegar gently reassured her. "I will come back to see him later."

Rhaenys nodded and turned to walk into the cabin. How could she not be worried? She and her husband had shared children and decades of life together. In this era of poor medical care, high fever and wound inflammation were often fatal.

Rhaegar turned away, deep in thought. He considered whether to use the serpent rune to treat Corlys.

Chapter 210: Tyland's Allegiance

Leaving the upper cabin, Rhaegar made his way down to the cargo bay. As he walked down the narrow corridor, the painful cries of wounded soldiers echoed around him.

The Battle of Bloodstone Island was over, and the Triarchy had been dealt a heavy blow. Rhaegar planned to return to King's Landing to confront the Dornish emissary and send additional troops to bolster the defenses of the Stepstones.

The Triarchy now faced two options: either the three free-trading city-states would abandon their interests, ending the War for the Stepstones, or they would stage a desperate counterattack. In either case, Rhaegar knew the Stepstones needed to be solidly incorporated into the Targaryen Dynasty's territory to prevent future troubles.

Creak...

Rhaegar reached the end of the corridor and pushed open a closed hatch. As the door swung open, dust and the stench of alcohol wafted out. Holding his breath, he opened the door wider to let the smell dissipate.

The cabin was cramped, barely wider than a man's arm span. It was dark and filthy, with no windows or vents. Against one wall was a rough wooden bed, and on its edge sat a scruffy man with curly blond hair.

"Tyland, is there anything you want to say?" Rhaegar asked, his tone firm.

The man didn't respond, his eyes staring blankly at the stained floorboards. This was Tyland Lannister, the disgraced commander of the Battle of Bloodstone Island.

Rhaegar's gaze lingered on Tyland, filled with a mixture of pity and frustration. The once-handsome man, known for his well-kept curly blonde hair and extraordinary looks, was now a shadow of his former self. His hair was a tangled mess, his bloodstained clothes unchanged, and he reeked of decay.

The stench in the cabin had almost dissipated when Rhaegar stepped inside. "Lift your head and look at me," he commanded, his voice resolute.

Tyland's body trembled at the sound. Slowly, he raised his head, his eyes still glazed over.

Splat—

Rhaegar's hand connected with Tyland's face, the slap echoing in the small cabin. "Snap out of it," Rhaegar chided. "It's not time to hang you yet."

"Prince..." Tyland muttered, the pain bringing a flicker of awareness back to his eyes. He recognized Rhaegar, his expression a mix of fear and shame.

Rhaegar spoke faintly, "Good. It seems you have not been broken yet."

Tyland opened his mouth, his dry throat burning, and swallowed to moisten it. After coughing for a moment, he finally said, "Prince, what brings you here?"

He lowered his eyes, unable to meet Rhaegar's. His decisions had led to thousands of troops being lost at sea and the once secure Bloodstone Island falling to the enemy. Though he survived under the protection of his soldiers, his spirit was broken that night. Guilt, self-reproach, and a deep sense of failure weighed heavily on him.

Seeing Tyland's defeated expression, Rhaegar frowned. "Do you want to die or live?"

Tyland froze for a moment, then smiled bitterly. "Who wants to die when they can live?"

He had misplayed his hand and now faced dismissal and trial upon his return to King's Landing. The best he could hope for was banishment to the Night's Watch.

Swish—

Rhaegar drew his sword, the tip pressing against Tyland's throat. "If you want to die, throw yourself on the sword," he said coldly. "I'll assume you were too afraid to commit suicide."

His voice then shifted to a scolding tone. "If you want to live, regain your composure. Stop acting like a scorned woman."

Tyland looked down at the cold blade and felt a chill run through him. He was still afraid of death.

"Prince, I've lost my standing as a royal advisor. I'm of no more value than before," Tyland said, his voice small. "But if you could plead with His Grace, perhaps I could avoid a worse fate."

Despite his earlier despair, Tyland wasn't ready to die. He was still young, unmarried, and without children. Given a chance, he wanted to live.

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow. "What would you do in King's Landing? Who there could tolerate you?"

Tyland was the main culprit behind the defeat at Bloodstone Island. Even if he escaped death, his life in King's Landing would be unbearable. The Lannister brothers were despised; Jason Lannister for his arrogance, and Tyland for his recent failure.

Tyland's eyes filled with confusion. "If not King's Landing, where should I go?"

He couldn't return to Casterly Rock. That was his brother's domain, and he had no place there.

"To the Stormlands, to my Prince's Palace," Rhaegar declared, sheathing his sword. "The palace is under construction. Go there to oversee the work and establish connections with Highgarden and Blackhaven along the way."

Tyland hesitated, then asked in a shocked voice, "Is the kingdom preparing for war with Dorne?"

Rhaegar's Prince's Palace was in the Stormlands, north of Blackhaven. A steep mountain road from there led to Dorne—the Boneway. Sending Tyland to the Prince's Palace to liaise with the Tyrells of Highgarden and House Dondarrion of Blackhaven was a clear prelude to war with Dorne.

Rhaegar sighed, "Clever, you understand the situation well."

"But whether or not there will be war remains uncertain. Strengthening our defenses is prudent regardless."

Tyland had served as the Master of Ships for many years. He was astute enough to grasp the broader strategy with just a few clues.

Tyland rubbed his face and pushed back his messy hair. With newfound determination, he said, "If you can save my life, I am willing to go to the Prince's Palace and prepare for the possibility of war."

Though he might not be a warrior, his expertise in logistics and resource management was invaluable.

Seeing Tyland's willingness, Rhaegar was pleased. He said solemnly, "Perform well, and you'll secure your place in the future."

Tyland was not just any man; he had been a key advisor. Having him on their side was a significant political asset. It would be wasteful to see him executed or exiled to the Wall.

"Yes, Prince!" Tyland nodded vigorously, a renewed sense of purpose in his eyes.

With the conversation over, Rhaegar turned and left without a backward glance. The stench in the cabin was overwhelming, and he had endured it long enough.

...

Meanwhile, in King's Landing, within the Red Keep's Council Chamber, King Viserys sat in the main seat, flanked by his advisors Lyonel and Otto.

In the center of the hall, the Dornish emissary, Setyl Dayne, stood straight and respectfully inquired, "Your Grace, I wonder how you are considering the marriage proposal?"

After a few days, Setyl had returned to press for an answer.

Viserys glanced at his two advisors, hesitating. "It is a matter of great importance, and I will need more time to consider it."

Setyl persisted, "How much longer, exactly?"

"Watch your tone, Emissary of Dorne!" Lyonel's expression darkened as he rebuked Setyl. As the Hand of the King, he felt compelled to defend the King's dignity.

Unfazed, Setyl calmly responded, "I am merely requesting an update, Lord Hand of the King. There is no need for agitation."

"The matter of marriage is not one to be decided hastily," Lyonel countered. "The King will inform you once a decision is made."

Otto interjected diplomatically, "Envoy of Dorne, please be patient. His Grace is a benevolent ruler who wishes for peace."

Lyonel shot Otto a sidelong glance, his annoyance evident. The marriage had not yet been decided, and Otto's comment seemed premature.

Viserys knocked on the table to end the debate. "Enough. That will be all for today. The emissary from Dorne may leave."

He didn't want to prolong the argument. He hadn't yet made up his mind and had been troubled by the matter for days. Alicent had been pleading with him against the marriage of Helaena, while Rhaenyra had avoided him, expressing her strong opposition. Both his wife and daughter were against the idea, leaving him conflicted.

As the King spoke, Setyl had no choice but to comply and exited the hall.

Once he was gone, Lyonel spoke up immediately, "Your Grace, the Dornish are ambitious and even participated in the Battle of the Stepstones not long ago. Marrying into their ranks is not wise."

Lyonel was a firm man. He believed that the long-standing feud between the Kingdom and Dorne could not be resolved through marriage.

Otto, lowering his head, countered softly, "You can't say that. The front lines are strained. An alliance with Dorne through marriage would not only eliminate an enemy but also allow us to request Prince Qoren's support against the Triarchy."

"Prince Qoren has attacked the Kingdom in two consecutive Battles of the Stepstones. How can we rely on him?" Lyonel's anger was palpable, and he retorted loudly.

"The situation is changing," Otto argued. "The kingdom's forces have suffered defeats, and Qoren's marriage proposal is an opportunity to shift the balance."

Lyonel stood, his face red with fury. If they weren't in the presence of the King, he might have physically confronted Otto.

What a foolish notion. The losses are their own doing. Qoren's proposal is opportunistic, exploiting their current weakness. Agreeing to it would cost the support and respect of many.

"Alright, calm down!" Viserys interjected, seeing that his advisors were on the verge of a heated argument. He rubbed his temples, clearly frustrated.

Otto pulled a letter from his pocket, diverting the conversation. "Your Grace, this is a letter from the Stepstones. Please read it."

Viserys took the letter, opened it, and began to read. Normally, letters from the Ravens were delivered by Grand Maester Mellos, but Mellos' advanced age often resulted in Otto, who had a personal connection with him, handling the deliveries.

As Viserys read, his expression shifted from curiosity to excitement. His eyebrows lifted higher with each line.

"Your Grace, is there good news from the front?" Lyonel asked, noticing the King's sudden exuberance.

Viserys burst into laughter, handing the letter to Lyonel. "Yes, excellent news! My son devised a plan to lure the main forces of the Triarchy to Bloodstone Island, and with the help of four dragons, they burned it to the ground."

Lyonel scanned the letter quickly, his eyes widening. "Incredible! Bloodstone Island has been recaptured, and the Triarchy has been devastated!"

He slapped the letter onto the table in front of Otto, his chin lifted triumphantly. "Rhaegar has turned the tide. He's a true Targaryen genius!"

Viserys beamed with pride. Rhaegar has indeed proven himself. The last time had seen such a capable Targaryen was his stupid brother, Daemon.