

G.O Thrones 211

Chapter 211: Otto's Provocation

Three days later.

King's Landing, Mud Gate.

Several large ships docked at the harbor, and soldiers carried down one wounded comrade after another. Rhaegar stepped off the ship and immediately spotted a familiar figure.

"Rhaegar!" Rhaenyra called out, waving enthusiastically as she stood surrounded by guards, a bright smile lighting up her face.

Rhaegar's stern expression softened and he hurried toward her. Rhaenyra trotted to meet him, and through the crowd the two siblings embraced.

Rhaenyra wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him in admiration. "Rhaegar, you did it! You won a great battle."

"It's nothing," Rhaegar replied with a soft laugh, lowering his head to bury his face in her hair. Feeling the warmth of her embrace, his tense nerves finally began to relax.

Rhaenyra, her head resting against his cheek, patted his back gently. During his absence, she had worried incessantly, and now, she relished the relief of his safe return.

As they stood there, locked in a loving embrace, their guards formed a protective circle around them. Nearby, Alicent and Jeyne watched the reunion. Jeyne, hands behind her back, smiled warmly at the scene, showing no sign of jealousy or desire to interfere. Alicent, on the other hand, seemed anxious, her gaze fixed intently on Rhaegar.

After a while, Rhaegar pulled back slightly and acknowledged the onlookers. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his brows furrowed and his tone cold.

Jeyne stepped forward with a gracious smile. "Congratulations on your triumph, Rhaegar," she said, opening her arms to embrace both siblings.

Rhaegar sighed, a look of helplessness in his eyes. Rhaenyra, caught off guard by Jeyne's boldness, hesitated.

"You..." Rhaenyra began, but Alicent quickly intervened. "Rhaenyra, your father has prepared a banquet to celebrate. Let's return to the Red Keep."

"Alright," Rhaegar agreed, squeezing Rhaenyra's hand to calm her. Jeyne released her hold and gestured invitingly.

Rhaenyra shot Jeyne a glare but led Rhaegar towards the waiting carriage. The vehicle was prepared to take them back to the Red Keep, where a grand celebration awaited.

...

Noon.

The Red Keep hosted a grand banquet to celebrate the victory in the Stepstones Islands. Viserys drank heavily and couldn't stop smiling as he praised his eldest son's achievements.

Rhaegar ate some pastries before quietly slipping away from the festivities.

In the bathhouse, Rhaegar soaked in a steaming hot bath, enjoying the feel of gentle hands massaging him. After days spent on Bloodstone Island, strategizing and fighting, he was utterly exhausted.

As the warmth of the bath eased his fatigue, Rhaegar spoke drowsily, "Did Alicent ask you to send me a letter?"

Rhaenyra, sitting nearby, her voice tinged with regret, replied, "I didn't want to distract you."

"It doesn't matter," Rhaegar said, catching her hand as it moved across his chest. "I was already wary of the Dornish anyway."

He turned to the girl attending him. "Fetch more hot water, Skylar."

"Yes, Prince," she replied. The girl, with long curly brown hair and wheat-colored skin, stood and left to fill a kettle.

Rhaenyra, shifting from her perch, asked, "Is she the spy you planted in Riverrun?"

Rhaegar splashed the water and chuckled, "Don't be jealous. Skylar has been with me since I was six. She's loyal and hardworking."

"Who's jealous?" Rhaenyra blushed, quickly changing the subject. "Why is she back?"

"Old Tully's sons have resolved their conflict. There's no need to monitor them anymore," Rhaegar explained, a glint in his eyes. "The winds are changing, and I need all the loyal people I can gather."

Rhaenyra didn't grasp all the details, but she understood the kingdom was at war. As the heir, Rhaegar's preparations were necessary.

Skylar returned with the kettle, pouring the steaming water into the tub. Rhaegar moaned in comfort, leaning his head back against the edge.

"Hmph, you wash yourself. I'm going to my room," Rhaenyra said, flustered by Rhaegar's contented sounds. She fled, closing the door with a bang, as if venting her frustration.

Once she left, Skylar resumed massaging Rhaegar, her hands skilled and firm. "Princesses are very sensitive," she commented with a light smile.

"Yeah, not as thick-skinned as you," Rhaegar teased, relaxing further into her touch.

Skylar ignored the jab and reported, "I've settled all the advisers' families you asked me to bring back in the Dragonpit."

"Good," Rhaegar murmured, his eyes closing as sleepiness overtook him.

Skylar's hands moved skillfully from his head to his shoulders, chest, and stomach. Her touch brought a final wave of relaxation as Rhaegar groaned in satisfaction, his body finally at ease.

...

Nightfall.

Rhaegar woke from his deep sleep, refreshed, and changed into his long-prepared clothes. Exiting the bathroom, he hesitated for a moment in the hallway before deciding to head to his own bedroom. Skylar's skilled hands had rejuvenated him, and he didn't want to disturb Rhaenyra's rest.

When he reached his bedroom door, he pushed it open. The room was as neat as ever under the warm glow of candlelight. Closing the door behind him, Rhaegar turned and was startled by what he saw.

By the fireplace, a little girl in a white dress was crouching. He recognized her immediately.

"Helaena?" he asked in surprise.

The girl looked up, her face streaked with tears, and softly exclaimed, "Brother~~"

Rhaegar walked over and sat beside her. "Who made you cry? Why are you hiding in my room?"

"No one made me cry," Helaena replied, shaking her head. She hugged her legs, making herself as small as possible.

Rhaegar added two logs to the fireplace. "What did you hear?" he asked gently, knowing how fragile her heart was. She often found a place to hide when she was sad, but this was the first time she had come to his room.

"I heard Father and Mother arguing, very violently," Helaena whispered, her voice barely audible.

It was true; she had heard Viserys and Alicent arguing. Knowing her brother was coming back today, she had sought refuge in his room.

Rhaegar sighed and rubbed her hair. "Don't be afraid. It's normal for couples to quarrel."

"Will I marry the Prince of Dorne?" Helaena asked timidly, leaning her head against him. She knew what marriage meant and had heard stories about the Dornish people that scared her.

"No," Rhaegar reassured her gently. "Targaryens don't need to make such commitments. I will dismiss the Dornish emissary tomorrow."

"Really?" Helaena's eyes sparkled with hope as she looked up at her brother adoringly.

"Really," Rhaegar affirmed, cuddling her in his arms. "Brother is a big umbrella that will help you shelter from the wind and rain."

"Uh-huh," Helaena murmured, overwhelmed with emotion. She grabbed the corner of his coat and buried her head in his chest.

Rhaegar smiled and let her hold him. Soon, he felt the wetness of her tears soaking through his shirt.

He glanced down to comfort her, but to his surprise, she had fallen asleep. "She can really eat and sleep; no wonder she's so plump," Rhaegar thought with a smile.

Carefully, he carried Helaena to the bed and tucked her in. Her delicate features resembled Alicent's, but unlike her mother's slim figure, Helaena had a softness beneath her clothes.

After settling Helaena, Rhaegar shrugged and left the bedroom. He still needed to find his dear sister for some company tonight.

...

The next day.

After breakfast, Rhaenyra and Rhaegar emerged from their room together. At the door, they found Erryk waiting.

"Is Helaena up yet?" Rhaegar asked.

Erryk respectfully replied, "The little princess left early in the morning."

"To the Dragonpit?" Rhaegar guessed, knowing Helaena's reclusive nature.

Erryk shrugged, indicating he was unsure.

"Let's go," Rhaenyra said, taking Rhaegar's hand and raising an eyebrow.

Rhaegar nodded. His father wanted to discuss a marriage alliance and planned to have him meet the Dornish envoy. It felt like he was being used as a pawn.

...

The Throne Room.

Viserys sat on the Iron Throne with a smile on his face. Despite a hangover from the previous night, he woke up in good spirits.

In the center of the hall, a group of performers in elaborate costumes were putting on a show. Two rotund men pretended to be Triarchy pirates, while a tall, skinny man played the role of a Dornishman. In front of them were two comedic dwarfs.

One dwarf, dressed in a black dragon costume, crawled around on the floor. Mushroom, wearing a silver wig and holding a short, stubby wooden sword made to look like Dragon Claw, rode on the other dwarf's back, shouting, "Cannibal, charge!"

The dwarf beneath him yelped and crawled toward the thin man. Viserys watched in amusement, saying, "Mushroom, despite his simple mind, always manages to entertain."

"Yes, it's the jester's duty to amuse the king," Otto agreed with a smile, standing beneath the Iron Throne.

"Arrogant Dornish fool, taste my sword," Mushroom declared, as he swung his wooden sword at the performers, who squealed and fell to the ground, rolling around in mock pain.

"Haha, I, Rhaegar Targaryen, am the strongest. Rhaegar Targaryen is the strongest Dragon Rider," Mushroom proclaimed, raising his wooden sword high.

The performers knelt, kowtowing vigorously and begging, "Young Dragonlord, forgive us!"

"Do you still dare to violate our borders?" Mushroom demanded.

"Never, never," they cried.

"Get lost!" Mushroom commanded.

"Long live the Dragonlord! Long live the Dragonlord!" they chanted as Mushroom continued to ride the crawling dwarf.

Amid their shouts, Viserys suddenly paused. "Does the Young Dragonlord mean Rhaegar?" he asked.

Otto, watching the show, casually responded, "Yes, the prince defeated the Triarchy, earning the title from the troops."

"Young Dragonlord," Viserys mused, a gleam of pride in his eyes.

Realizing the king's mood had shifted, Mushroom quickly dismounted the dwarf and knelt. The other performers followed suit.

"Your Grace, even a mere title signifies the prince's extraordinary bravery," Otto said, waving off the performers.

"You're right, it's only a title," Viserys muttered. Then, smiling again, he added, "But Rhaegar is my eldest son. He deserves this title!"

Chapter 212: Helaena's Resolve

The sound of footsteps echoed as Rhaegar and Rhaenyra entered the Great Hall.

Viserys' eyes lit up as he beckoned, "Rhaegar, come to your father."

Rhaegar smiled and approached, catching a glimpse of Mushroom and the other performers as they hastily retreated.

Viserys' smile widened and he unconsciously placed his hands on the armrests of the Iron Throne. When his palm touched the sharp edge of a sword embedded in the throne, he winced in pain as a bloody gash appeared.

"Damn it!" Viserys hissed, sucking in a breath and shaking his hand in annoyance. In his haste, he had forgotten the treacherous edges of the throne.

"Father!" Rhaegar and Rhaenyra exclaimed, their faces filled with concern.

Rhaegar quickened his pace, ascending the steps to the Iron Throne. "Are you alright?" he asked, examining the wound.

The cut was small, but blood was already dripping steadily.

Viserys cupped his bleeding hand and forced a smile. "It's nothing. I'll have the Maester bandage it."

Rhaegar remained silent, troubled by the sight. His father's wounds never seemed to heal properly, a troubling sign of lingering illness.

Rhaenyra, quick to action, pulled out a cloth and threaded it through the dense swords beneath the throne. "Here, let me help," she said, offering the makeshift bandage.

Viserys shook his head with a weary laugh. "It's just a small wound, no need to fuss," he said, taking the handkerchief and pressing it against the cut. Despite his words, he felt a pang of vulnerability.

"Rhaegar, what do you think of Dorne's proposal?" Viserys asked, bringing the conversation back to more pressing matters.

"Father, I don't agree with it," Rhaegar replied, his voice steady. "Dorne shows no sincerity. They wage war on one hand and seek peace through marriage on the other."

Viserys sighed. "I understand. The kingdom and Dorne are on a collision course."

The conflict with the Triarchy, supported by Dorne, had only escalated tensions. Qoren's envoy seeking a marriage alliance seemed more a strategic maneuver than a genuine gesture of peace. If the Targaryens agreed, it might buy some time. If they refused, war was inevitable.

"I'll think about it," Viserys said, his voice heavy with resignation. He leaned back, pressing a hand to his forehead, burdened by the weight of his decisions.

...

A room in the Red Keep.

The window of the room creaked open, revealing a pair of large, dark-skinned hands holding a raven.

"Go, bring the news back to Sunspear," a deep voice whispered.

The hands released the bird, which flapped its wings and soared away from the Red Keep.

Setyl poked his head out, cautiously scanning the surroundings before closing the window. He had already heard about the defeat of the Triarchy and witnessed the stance of the Royal Court advisers. Most were firmly against any alliance with Dorne, effectively ending the marriage proposal. He needed to relay this news to Prince Qoren to help him make an informed decision.

Outside the Red Keep.

The raven flew steadily towards the Dornish domain, its path untroubled until a small stone shot up from the ground.

With a sharp thud, the stone struck one of the raven's wings.

"Gahhhh!" the raven cried, plummeting to the ground.

From the shadows emerged a man with brown curly hair and a sly smile—Syrio.

He approached the struggling bird, quickly retrieving the message capsule attached to its leg. "As I thought, you're carrying a message," he murmured.

Syrio pocketed the letter, then mercilessly broke the raven's neck and tossed the lifeless body into the moat.

...

Tyrosh, In a luxurious garden.

In a lofty pavilion surrounded by exotic flowers and plants, several individuals sat around a round table.

The Archon of Tyrosh, a brocade-robed old man, presided over the meeting. To his right sat a young Myrish man with black curly hair and olive skin. Beside him were three others: a tall, fat man with dark skin and expensive clothes, a tall, thin old man with blonde hair, and an ordinary young man with short black hair.

Across from them, Drazenko Rogare and his brother, Lysandro Rogare, both with silver hair and blue eyes, presented a facade of calm. Lysandro, with his kind face and gentle smile, looked like a young and talented philanthropist.

The old man in the brocade robe slammed his hand on the table, his face gloomy. "The mercenaries were wiped out, and we lost the Stepstones."

"It's all because you underestimated the enemy," the fat man from Myr growled, his anger palpable. "Dragonfire decimated our forces."

"The army is gone, we lost the war!" the thin old man from Myr growled, clutching his scepter tightly.

Drazenko's face was equally grim. "We need to decide our next move. Should we lay down and give up the Stepstones in disgrace?"

The room fell silent. The wealthy magnates bowed their heads, calculating their gains and losses. The last war had been disastrous for the Triarchy, resulting in heavy casualties and financial ruin for many.

The brocade-robed old man had assassinated the previous Archon and bribed officials to secure his own election. Similarly, the Myrish governors had seized power through ruthless means. Lysandro Rogare had been thrust into his position not out of desire but necessity—his immense wealth made him the only candidate the other affluent citizens of Lys trusted.

Now, all the people present were the losers of the previous conflict, aware of the severe repercussions of another loss. The free trade city-state's election system was unforgiving. Failure could mean political death, or worse.

They knew this well. The stakes were high, and the consequences of failure were dire.

"Fight! At this point in the war, we can't afford to back down," declared the dark-skinned fat man, slamming his fist on the table.

His family's assets were all tied up in the war effort; bankruptcy loomed if they failed.

The young Myrish man looked despondent. "How can we fight? The mercenaries are all dead, and no amount of money can hire more."

"We don't need mercenaries," Lysandro said calmly. "We can't rely on them, but we can turn to the Slaver's Bay."

"Buy slaves?" the fat man asked, his face darkening at the thought of spending more money.

"No, buy Unsullied," Lysandro clarified. "I've contacted the Great Master of Astapor. We can purchase 3,000 Unsullied, more than enough to handle Westeros' forces."

Slaver's Bay was home to three cities: Yunkai, Astapor, and Meereen, known for their vast slave markets. Astapor, in particular, was famed for its Unsullied, elite slave soldiers trained from boyhood to be emotionless, obedient, and deadly effective.

These soldiers were known for their discipline and combat prowess, famously having defeated 50,000 Dothraki riders with just 3,000 men.

The suggestion hung in the air as each man calculated the potential costs and benefits.

"The Unsullied are extremely expensive," the brocade-robed old man mused. "Even I would need to liquidate significant assets to afford 3,000 of them."

"Quality comes at a price," Lysandro said evenly. "We can share the cost."

The young Myrish man reluctantly interjected, "Against dragonfire, even the Unsullied are vulnerable."

There was no denying the dragon's power. In a direct confrontation, no number of soldiers could withstand the flames.

"After the Battle of Bloodstone Island, Westeros' forces don't exceed 5,000 men," Lysandro pointed out. "The Unsullied can take advantage of the night to land on the lightly defended Grey Gallows Island and use the terrain to prolong the conflict."

Lysandro knew that a direct battle against a dragon was folly. In the last Stepstones campaign, the Crabfeeder had used the terrain to delay the battle indefinitely, almost bringing Velaryon and Daemon Targaryen's forces to ruin.

"It's a sound strategy, but the Targaryens have several dragons. We're still at a disadvantage," the brocade-robed old man said, wary of the dragons.

Lysandro produced a letter and tossed it onto the table. "A personal letter from Qoren Martell. He's willing to send troops to help, threatening the Targaryen rear from the Prince's Pass."

"The Dornish love war," the brocade-robed old man considered. "We'll buy the Unsullied and enlist some mercenaries."

"What tactics should we use?" Lysandro inquired, not wanting to waste the costly soldiers.

"We'll have the mercenaries infiltrate Grey Gallows Island and wait for word from Dorne," the brocade-robed old man strategized. "If Dorne sends troops, we'll deploy the Unsullied. If not, the Unsullied will serve as our shield."

Securing their lives was the priority.

The others contemplated the plan and agreed. Some had enough wealth to survive a defeat; others were desperate enough to gamble everything.

The brocade-robed old man's plan, supported by Lysandro, balanced risk and reward, and was acceptable to all.

...

The Dragonpit, King's Landing.

A few Dragonkeepers, armed with sticks and whips, coaxed Dreamfyre out of the crypt, speaking in High Valyrian.

Dreamfyre moved slowly, her body gleaming like polished jasper, her long tail swaying gently.

"Dreamfyre, I'm here!" Helaena called out, standing on tiptoes.

Dreamfyre turned her head, her eyes locking onto the familiar figure of the little girl.

Today, Helaena looked different. Instead of her usual fluffy white dress, she wore a loose blue gown. Her gaze was firm as she approached the senior Dragonkeeper and spoke in rusty High Valyrian, "Saddle Dreamfyre."

"Princess, Dreamfyre is not yet tamed and cannot be ridden," the old Dragonkeeper cautioned humbly.

Helaena clenched her fists, her tone resolute. "I will tame Dreamfyre and saddle her."

She had left the Red Keep early in the morning, determined to tame Dreamfyre. Summoning enough courage had not been easy, and she could not let this opportunity slip away.

The elderly Dragonkeeper hesitated for a moment before bowing respectfully. "As you wish, Princess."

Chapter 213: Taming Dreamfyre

The sun rose higher, approaching noon.

The throne room.

Viserys sat on the Iron Throne, flanked by his royal advisers. Lyonel held a letter and read aloud, "The Bracken House has privately moved and secretly grazed in Blackwood territory at night..."

The letter was from the Tully House of Riverrun. A few days prior, the Blackwood and Bracken Houses had erupted in another conflict. Both sides had mobilized their soldiers, preparing for battle at their borders.

Old Lord Tully of Riverrun, alarmed by the escalation, had sent mediators and delivered the news to King's Landing.

Viserys, feeling overwhelmed, interrupted, "Just get to the point. Did they fight or not?"

He was baffled. The first ten years of his reign had been peaceful, but now chaos seemed constant. First, the Triarchy invaded the Stepstones. Then, the Mountain Clans rebelled in the Vale. Now, after barely repelling the Stepstones pirates, Dorne's intentions were uncertain, and the Riverlands were in turmoil. The young king was at his wit's end.

Lyonel paused, then hesitantly continued, "Yes, Your Grace, there was a fight. Both sides mobilized thousands of men, resulting in many dead and wounded."

"Damned fools!" Viserys cursed, angry. "I thought mediation had succeeded. They broke their word before the Stepstones battle even concluded!"

Lyonel, sweating, explained, "Your Grace, it was unavoidable. The families promised to cease hostilities and support the kingdom. But their hatred runs deep, passed down through generations."

Viserys fumed, "So what now? Should we send another mediator?"

Last time, Lyonel himself had mediated. Now, less than two months later, the houses were at war again.

Lyonel hesitated, then said helplessly, "We must continue to mediate. The Blackwoods and Brackens are major houses in the Riverlands, each commanding thousands of soldiers. The kingdom needs their support in the war."

Viserys' veins bulged with frustration. Both houses had suffered losses, making mediation increasingly difficult.

The hall was silent, tense.

Viserys' ragged breaths echoed, his frustration palpable. The royal advisers were silent, knowing the limits of their feudal system. In Westeros, nobles ruled their own lands. The king had little authority

to intervene in noble conflicts unless innocents were in danger. Mediation was the most he could offer, and even that depended on the nobles' willingness to cooperate.

Sending royal troops to quell unrest was impractical. Noble skirmishes, though disruptive, were part of their belief in the survival of the fittest. Strength and honor were paramount. Knights earned respect through prowess, not by keeping the peace.

How could knights rise without these conflicts? The nobles valued the law, but their interpretation was rooted in strength and honor, not the king's decrees.

Seeing their father's anger, Rhaenyra touched Rhaegar's hand and whispered, "Rhaegar, can you think of a solution?"

Rhaegar froze, his eyes wide and innocent. Did he look like a wise counselor? The battle for the Stepstones wasn't even finished, and he was still strategizing defenses for Bloodstone Island and Grey Gallows Island. The Dornish were lurking, and he had to stay vigilant. The Riverlands conflict wasn't on his radar.

Rhaenyra leaned closer and murmured, "Don't you have a lot of informants in the Riverlands?"

Rhaegar glanced up at his father on the throne, then whispered back, "Those who could be useful have already retreated to King's Landing. Even with spies, we can't control a feud between two great houses."

The enmity between the Blackwood and Bracken Houses was ancient. During the Heroic Era, the Blackwoods had ruled a kingdom in the Riverlands, with the Brackens as their bannermen. But as the Blackwoods fell from power, the Brackens rebelled, overthrowing their former liege and sowing a deep-seated feud.

Despite countless battles, reconciliations, and intermarriages over the millennia, their animosity persisted. Numerous lords had attempted to mediate, but the hostility remained unresolved.

Rhaenyra, well-versed in history, shot him a look that said, "What should we do then? Should I ride Syrax to mediate?"

Since Aegon the Conqueror established the Targaryen dynasty, Westeros's attitude towards House Targaryen had been ambivalent—sometimes close, sometimes distant; sometimes loyal, sometimes rebellious.

This wavering loyalty lasted until the late years of Jaehaerys I, when it began to stabilize. Viserys had inherited his grandfather's political legacy and ruled more peacefully. However, after years of relative calm, the nobles of Westeros were growing restless.

"It might be time for them to remember the power of Targaryen dragons," Rhaenyra suggested, raising an eyebrow.

Rhaegar sighed. "We can't use dragons to stop a noble feud," he said. "Unless we're prepared to annihilate one side completely."

Their whispered conversation caught Viserys's attention. He grunted and said, "Rhaegar, speak up. What are you discussing?"

Rhaenyra looked apologetically at her brother as Viserys's stern gaze turned on him.

Swallowing his anger, he allowed Rhaenyra to escape his wrath. After all, daughters were delicate creatures, a stark contrast to the son who would have to bear the brunt of his frustration.

Rhaegar scoffed, his gaze lingering on Rhaenyra's apologetic face. As he exited the audience chamber, he crossed his arms over his stomach, rendered speechless.

What option did he have? Perhaps mobilize the forces of Riverrun to placate the two warring houses?

After contemplating for a moment, Rhaegar spoke softly, "Father, the two houses can't be mediated directly. Why don't we ask Old Lord Tully to send troops to deter them?"

Despite the Tullys of Riverrun being somewhat ineffective, they were still the principal lords of the Riverlands. While their management of bannermen might be chaotic, their soldiers and military equipment were superior to any other nobles in the region.

Viserys rubbed his brow, clearly irritated. "That's so simple, I don't even need to ask you."

Every noble behaved like their ancestors, requiring careful handling. Offend them, and while they might not react openly, they would undoubtedly plot behind the scenes. His predecessors, Aenys I, Maegor I, and Jaehaerys I, had all faced this challenge, suffering from the machinations of the xenophobic native nobles.

Rhaegar shrugged and stepped back into line, his mind preoccupied with the issues in the Stepstones and Dorne. The Riverlands conflict seemed trivial by comparison.

Viserys had another outburst, leaving the royal advisors scrambling. In the end, Otto Hightower's suggestion was accepted. "Let the two houses fight for a while, then mediate once they're exhausted," he proposed.

Otto, a former Hand of the King, was adept at navigating such conflicts. His pragmatic approach appealed to Viserys. Delaying a problem was almost as good as solving it, as long as it didn't directly threaten the throne.

Rhaegar grimaced, realizing this solution merely postponed the inevitable. With the immediate issue resolved, Viserys adjourned the meeting. He had initially intended for Rhaegar to contact the Dornish emissary, but his foul mood led him to postpone the task for another day.

...

Dragonpit

"Roar..." Dreamfyre slumped to the ground, stretched its neck, yawned, and lazily wagged its tail.

"Dreamfyre, get up and fly me around," Helaena commanded, patting the dragon's spine.

The young princess, clad in a blue dress that matched Dreamfyre's scales, looked like an extension of the dragon itself. An elderly Dragonkeeper stood nervously in front of them, a half-man-tall saddle at his feet.

"Princess, please get off the dragon's back," he pleaded. Dreamfyre's temper was notoriously bad, and the Dragonkeeper couldn't get close enough to saddle it.

But Helaena, fueled by an unknown courage, had already climbed up Dreamfyre's side, using its wings for leverage. After a few stumbles, she succeeded.

Grabbing a piece of Dreamfyre's back scale, Helaena, her face flushed with effort, urged, "Dreamfyre, listen to me."

Yet, Dreamfyre remained indifferent. Unlike her with her mother, the dragon showed no signs of obedience to Helaena's commands.

"Roar..." Dreamfyre yawned again, closed its eyes, and seemed intent on sleeping.

Frustrated, Helaena pounded Dreamfyre's spine with her small fists, not realizing her hands were becoming red and swollen.

"Dreamfyre, just fly me around a bit and let them know I'm not to be messed with," she pleaded, tears forming in her eyes. Crawling to the top of Dreamfyre's head, she sniffled and continued, "My brother said I can become a dragon rider. I will tame you."

Her life had been a series of disappointments. People whispered that she was mentally ill. Her brother Aegon tormented or ignored her, and her sister Rhaenyra treated her harshly. Even her father, Viserys, seemed to care more for her siblings.

In her young heart, only Rhaegar cared and encouraged her. His belief in her was a rare source of strength.

"Dreamfyre, fly up for me, fly up!" Helaena stood, clutching a bent dragon horn, her eyes squeezed shut.

Pouring all her courage into that command, she sought to prove her worth, to show she was a true Targaryen like her siblings.

Snap.

Dreamfyre lifted its head and lashed its tail against the black stone floor, turning to look at the determined girl on its back. It sensed something new, something it hadn't felt since its last rider, Rhaena.

Slowly, Dreamfyre rose from the ground, its wings spreading wide. It flapped them twice, tentatively.

"Dreamfyre, fly!" Helaena's trembling voice called out again.

Clinging to the dragon's horn, eyes shut tight with fear, Helaena held on as Dreamfyre took flight. In that moment, she wasn't just a little girl; she was a dragon rider, a Targaryen proving her existence to the world.

Chapter 214: God's Eye Lake, Isle of Faces

Helaena's command was tinged with fear, her voice trembling, but her courage was undeniable in that moment.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre responded with a powerful roar, propelling itself forward on its hind legs and flapping its massive wings. The sudden gust of wind stirred the dust around them. With a few mighty strides, the dragon covered a significant distance.

The elderly Dragonkeeper, alarmed by the sudden movement, shouted to the other keepers at the entrance of the Dragonpit, "Open the gate!"

He had witnessed Targaryens taming dragons before and understood that he must not interfere with the bond forming between Helaena and Dreamfyre. Yet, he also knew that they couldn't allow Dreamfyre to wreak havoc inside the Dragonpit.

The Dragonkeepers, sensing the urgency, quickly obeyed and opened the massive gates.

Boom!

Dreamfyre surged forward, its wings fully extended, and with a powerful leap, it burst out of the confines where it had been imprisoned for decades.

"Roar!"

A mighty roar echoed throughout King's Landing as the azure-scaled dragon ascended into the sky, free once more.

"Dreamfyre, fly up!" Helaena, her eyes still tightly shut, repeated her command, unaware of their rapid ascent.

Dreamfyre unleashed a spectacular burst of blue and orange dragonfire, lighting up the sky like fireworks.

"Fly, Dreamfyre!" Helaena continued to shout, mistaking the dragonfire's heat for the fever of excitement.

"Roar..." Dreamfyre's roar carried a note of recognition. In its eyes, Helaena's courage mirrored that of its previous rider, Rhaena.

If only the dragon could express it, that feeling might be called "courage."

Soaring above King's Landing, Dreamfyre exhaled flames repeatedly, venting the frustration and sorrow it had accumulated over the years.

After circling the city for a while, Dreamfyre turned its gaze northwest. With a powerful flick of its wings, it surged out of King's Landing and into the clouds, carrying Helaena on an unforgettable flight.

...

The commotion caused by Dreamfyre's flight startled all of King's Landing.

Rhaegar was meeting with Syrio to examine an intercepted letter when he heard the dragon's roar. He looked out the window in amazement.

Through the glass he saw the massive blue dragon hovering over the city, spewing dragonfire.

"Dreamfyre!?" Rhaegar exclaimed, stunned to see the dragon out of the Dragonpit.

As Dreamfyre flew closer to the Red Keep, he noticed a small figure atop the dragon's head. With his sharp eyesight, Rhaegar realized it was Helaena.

"Oh no, she didn't even put on a saddle before getting on the dragon's back!" Panic seized Rhaegar. He immediately abandoned his meeting with Syrio and rushed out of the room.

Moments later, he pushed past the guards trying to stop him and dashed out of the Red Keep's gate.

"Roar !"

A deep dragon roar resonated from the depths of the Dragonpit. A dark shadow burst from the crypt and flew out through the still-open gate.

Cannibal, with its green eyes scanning below, soared high into the sky. Spotting its target, the dragon swooped down toward the Red Keep's gate.

Boom!

The dragon landed, sending up a cloud of smoke and dust.

"Cannibal, catch up with Dreamfyre!" Rhaegar shouted as he emerged from the swirling dust, quickly and nimbly climbing onto the dragon's back.

"Roar..."

Cannibal unfurled its wings and took off, demonstrating its agility.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side:

Dreamfyre soared through the clouds, roaring with excitement, celebrating its return to the sky.

"Dreamfyre, you're flying too fast," Helaena called out, her voice tinged with nervousness. She had finally opened her eyes and was looking down at the billowing clouds below, gripping Dreamfyre's horn tightly.

After the dragon had flown out of King's Landing, the moistness of the clouds had woken her. Now, Helaena's heart was a mix of excitement and fear. She wanted Dreamfyre to take her on a grand tour of the skies, but her hands and feet were numb, barely able to maintain her grip.

"Roar..." Dreamfyre let out a playful growl and shook its head, causing Helaena to clench her teeth in fright. Finally free from its confinement, Dreamfyre was determined to enjoy its flight.

Helaena, though afraid, was also filled with a newfound courage. Dreamfyre sensed this and, with a flash of pride in its eyes, sped up, showing off its agility with impressive maneuvers through the clouds. Despite decades of confinement, Dreamfyre moved with the grace and speed of a much younger dragon.

Helaena, however, was struggling. The dragon's rapid twists and turns made her dizzy and nauseous, but Dreamfyre showed no signs of slowing down.

"I'm not afraid. Brother said I can do it. I'll be fine," she whispered to herself, pressing her cheeks against the dragon's horn.

She hoped someone would realize she had been taken by Dreamfyre and come to her rescue. After about ten minutes, a gust of wind signaled another presence in the sky.

Helaena, drowsy from the flight, looked up to see a dark dragon shadow above her. The massive form of Cannibal loomed overhead, blocking out the sun.

"Helaena!" Rhaegar's voice rang out, calling her name.

"Brother... brother!" Helaena cried out in relief, spotting her brother's tall figure riding Cannibal.

"Hold on to the dragon's horn. Dreamfyre will be landing soon," Rhaegar shouted, his voice full of reassurance.

"Okay, brother," Helaena responded obediently, gripping the horn tighter, her light purple eyes fixed on Rhaegar.

Seeing his sister was safe, Rhaegar sighed with relief. He had feared she might fall from Dreamfyre's back. Dreamfyre was no ordinary young dragon; it was a full-grown dragon with a fierce temper, capable of causing great harm if not properly managed.

He remembered his own struggles trying to tame it, so he marveled at Helaena's bravery.

"Roar..."

At the sight of Cannibal, Dreamfyre was startled and roared shrilly, accelerating its flight. The massive dragon above was not to be trifled with. Cannibal's odor, a fishy scent mixed with the stench of dragon remains, filled the air.

Cannibal glared down at the blue dragon, its pupils flashing with disdain. It had abstained from dragon meat for years, but it still remembered the taste.

After about ten minutes, the two dragons lowered their altitude, revealing a large, wide lake below. The turquoise water rippled as a black swan swam by. In the center of the lake stood a lush, green island.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre roared excitedly, circling the lake. The sound echoed, sending the black swans into a panic. They flapped their wings and fled, causing a flurry of white splashes.

Dreamfyre skimmed low over the water, creating waves on the surface. Helaena looked around with curiosity, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings.

Finally, Dreamfyre landed on the island in the middle of the lake. Cannibal, hovering above, followed and landed nearby, its gaze eerily fixed on Dreamfyre.

Rhaegar quickly dismounted from Cannibal and ran toward Dreamfyre. "Helaena, come down here," he called.

As Dreamfyre drank from the lake, Helaena let go of its horns and stood up, trembling. Hearing her brother's call, she asked nervously, "Do I jump down?"

Rhaegar, taken aback by the question, smiled wryly. "Slide off the dragon's back. I'll catch you."

Helaena obediently climbed from Dreamfyre's head to its spine and slid down along its tail. Rhaegar stood ready below, catching her as she descended.

As soon as Helaena was in his arms, she wrapped herself around him like an octopus, tears streaming down her face. "Brother... wow, wow, wow..."

While she had managed to maintain some composure on Dreamfyre's back, the fear overwhelmed her once she was on the ground and she felt a tightness in her stomach.

Splat...

Rhaegar slapped her lightly on the buttocks and said, "Why are you crying? Riding a dragon in secret - do you know how dangerous that is?"

The scene of Helaena taming Dreamfyre reminded him of his own experiences with Cannibal. It was always the same: ride the dragon or risk falling to your death.

"I'm sorry... I know I was wrong," Helaena sniffled, not quite sure what she had done wrong, but admitting her guilt anyway. She had wanted to prove herself by taming the dragon, and she had succeeded, even if Dreamfyre wasn't completely obedient yet.

Seeing her so upset, Rhaegar's anger softened. He patted her gently on the back and encouraged her, "Don't cry. You have successfully ridden a dragon; you are already a dragon rider."

"Really?" Helaena asked, her eyes wide and tearful.

"Of course," Rhaegar nodded. "Dreamfyre recognizes you. From now on, you are its master."

"I'm awesome," Helaena whispered, trying to hold back her tears.

Rhaegar chuckled. "Yes, you are powerful. A true Targaryen."

"Well, I'm as powerful as you," Helaena said, nodding vigorously, her messy hair shaking around her face.

Rhaegar hugged her with one arm and gently brushed the hair from her face with the other, feeling a surge of pride. His little sister was growing up.

"Come down, I'll help you tie your hair," he said.

He set her down and gathered her thick, long hair, tying it back into a neat bun with a thin rope. Helaena squinted in enjoyment, then asked, "Brother, where are we?"

"God's Eye Lake, on the Isle of Faces," Rhaegar replied, surveying their surroundings.

Helaena blinked and pointed towards a distant structure, "Is that the Hand of the King's castle?"

Rhaegar looked in the direction she indicated. Through the dense vegetation, he could make out the ruins of a dark tower. He knew it was the largest castle in Westeros—Harrenhal.

Harrenhal had been built by Harren the Black, who spent 40 years constructing it, exhausting countless enslaved captives. Rumor had it that Harren mixed human blood with mud and ash to build the castle.

At the beginning of the Conquest, Harrenhal had just been completed. When Aegon the Conqueror attacked, Harren the Black hid inside with his children, believing the dragons couldn't breach his fortress. But Aegon flew over Harrenhal on Balerion, the Black Dread, and unleashed dragonfire hot enough to melt stone. The five towers of Harrenhal were incinerated, and Harren and his descendants were buried alive.

Over the past hundred years, Harrenhal had seen many owners. After Rhaena Targaryen's death, the castle was left uninhabited until Jaehaerys I gave it to House Strong. The current lord of Harrenhal was Lyonel Strong.

Chapter 215: Brothers, Walk Forward!

Rhaegar looked at the ruins of Harrenhal's towers and chuckled softly. "Yes, that's the Hand's castle. I've been a guest there a few times."

Harrenhal lay in the heart of the Riverlands, surrounded by fertile lands. Rhaegar had a good relationship with Lord Tully of Riverrun and occasionally stopped at Harrenhal to rest for the night.

"Will we be guests?" Helena asked quietly, tilting her head.

Rhaegar ruffled her hair and smiled. "Dreamfyre has caused quite a stir. We must return to King's Landing first."

"Oh," Helaena nodded, her large eyes still fixed on Harrenhal.

Harrenhal covered a vast area with five towering spires. Despite being partially melted by Balerion's fire, the towers were still taller than most castles. The siblings could see its outline clearly from the Isle of Faces.

"Fire!" Helena exclaimed suddenly, her expression distant.

Rhaegar, not yet sensing anything wrong, asked, "What?"

Helaena murmured, "The warhorses are charging."

"Helaena, can you hear me?" Rhaegar knelt and waved his hand in front of her eyes. He recognized this strange condition - Helaena often fell into prophetic trances.

She blinked twice and answered blankly, "Brother, I can hear you."

Rhaegar gently held her shoulders. "What did you just see?"

"I don't remember," she replied innocently, tilting her head in confusion.

Rhaegar hugged her tightly and whispered, "It's okay, just forget about it."

Helaena rested her chin on his shoulder and murmured an uncertain "Oh."

Over the years, Helaena's prophecies were usually quickly forgotten, probably a protective mechanism to shield her mind from overwhelming visions.

Lifting her up, Rhaegar said, "Let's get back to King's Landing."

Helaena nodded, unusually quiet. Dreamfyre, having drunk from the lake, rested on the shore, elegantly swishing its tail.

"Brother, I want to ride Dreamfyre," Helaena declared, staring wide-eyed at her dragon.

Rhaegar frowned. "Are you sure? Dreamfyre doesn't have a saddle yet."

"I won't fall off," Helaena said confidently, puffing out her small chest. She wanted to ride her dragon back to King's Landing and show everyone she was a true dragon rider.

"Alright, hold on to the back scales and communicate with Dreamfyre," Rhaegar advised, choosing to trust her.

All Targaryen children had to tame their dragons. A saddle was helpful but not essential. He remembered when he was six, riding Cannibal without a saddle all over the world.

"Brother, wait until I take off, then follow me."

Helaena broke free of Rhaegar's embrace and ran toward Dreamfyre.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre roared, its eyes fixed on its rider, waiting for her.

With nimble hands and feet, Helaena climbed onto the dragon's back, using one of its wings as a foothold.

"Dreamfyre, let's go," she commanded, her small face set with determination.

Dreamfyre flapped her wings vigorously and took to the air. But instead of heading back to King's Landing, she circled God's Eye Lake. After decades of confinement, Dreamfyre wanted to explore the familiar area where it had once lived.

Lying on the dragon's back, Helaena watched in frustration as Dreamfyre ignored her commands. Her cheeks puffed out in anger.

Below, Rhaegar mounted Cannibal, ready to intervene. It was normal for a newly tamed adult dragon to be disobedient after decades in captivity. Cannibal, too, seemed ready to help.

Suddenly, a fierce cry pierced the air.

"Dreamfyre, either listen to me or throw me in the lake!"

Rhaegar looked up in surprise. Helaena had climbed onto Dreamfyre's head, clutching the dragon's horns and shouting with determination. Her face was flushed with rage.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre turned sharply, almost throwing Helaena off. But instead of shrieking, Helaena shouted louder, "Dreamfyre, obey my command!"

She showed no fear, using her defiant spirit to assert control over the dragon.

"Roar..."

Reluctantly, Dreamfyre changed direction and flew toward King's Landing.

Helaena laughed and rubbed her face against the dragon's horn in triumph.

Rhaegar, witnessing this display of bravery, smiled. "Cannibal, let's follow them."

"Roar..."

Cannibal roared softly, its hind feet leaving distinctive marks on the ground as it spread its wings and took off.

For the first time, Rhaegar noticed that Cannibal had a habit of marking its territory, a trait he hadn't observed before.

...

King's Landing, Red Keep.

Alicent found her husband, her face etched with worry. "Viserys, Helaena was taken by that blue dragon."

Viserys embraced her, his voice soothing. "Don't worry, Helaena has been in contact with Dreamfyre. She may have successfully tamed the dragon."

"But that dragon has a violent temper. Rhaegar was hurt by it once," Alicent said, leaning into his arms, jittery. She wasn't a Targaryen by birth and had been educated in the Sept of Oldtown and the Faith of the Seven, which instilled in her an inexplicable fear of dragons.

"Rhaegar went after her. He will protect his sister," Viserys replied with a confident smile. He had faith in his eldest son's abilities. Cannibal, the black dragon, was so fierce that all the dragons in the Dragonpit feared it. Dreamfyre wouldn't dare defy Cannibal.

Alicent looked sad, her head buried in her husband's chest. She had broken with her father and now relied solely on Viserys in the vast city of King's Landing. The two of them cuddled as time slowly passed.

"Roar..."

Suddenly, a dragon's roar echoed across King's Landing, reverberating through half the city.

Alicent hastily broke from Viserys' embrace and looked out the window. The sky was a canvas of blue and white, with two dragons, one black and one blue, dancing between the clouds, chasing each other as if in a ballet.

Dreamfyre's eyes were filled with vigilance as it quickly swooped down, heading straight for the Dragonpit on the hill. Cannibal hovered overhead, casting a massive shadow over the ground.

"Bless the Seven Gods, my child has returned," Alicent whispered, clasping her hands in silent prayer.

That night, Viserys organized a feast to honor his youngest daughter's successful taming of a dragon.

...

The next day, a meeting convened in the Throne Room. The advisers of the Small Council were present, along with Queen Alicent and Lady Jeyne. Rhaegar and his siblings—Helaena, Aemond, and Daeron—were also present.

The Small Council, led by Lyonel Strong, stood on the left side of the hall. Rhaegar and Rhaenyra, accompanied by their siblings, stood on the right. Alicent and Jeyne stood beside Rhaenyra.

When everyone was assembled, the Kingsguard, Ser Steffon Darklyn, announced loudly, "An audience with the envoy of Dorne!"

As the doors opened, Ser Setyl Dayne strode into the hall. He first looked at Viserys on the Iron Throne and bowed respectfully, "Your Grace."

Then he bowed slightly to Alicent, "Your Grace," though his eyes darted toward the children surrounding Rhaegar. Helaena bit her lower lip, her gaze sharp and wary. Aemond, looking timid, stood protectively in front of his sister. Daeron, the youngest, peeked curiously from behind Rhaegar.

Viserys, watching the scene from the throne, felt both pleased and remorseful at the unity of his children. He cleared his throat and said, "Lyonel, make the announcement."

"Yes, Your Grace." Lyonel straightened his posture, his round belly protruding, and declared proudly, "Envoy, the king refuses to marry the princess."

Setyl frowned. "Why? A marriage would bring peace and benefit both sides."

"Princess Helena successfully tamed her dragon yesterday and expressed to His Grace that she does not wish to marry in a land as far away as Dorne," Lyonel explained, glancing at the envoy. "His Grace is a forgiving and merciful monarch. The princess will remain in King's Landing, enjoying the care of her parents and brothers."

This was the reasoning Rhaegar had devised on Helaena's behalf. A Targaryen with a dragon was far more valuable than one without. Helaena's success in taming Dreamfyre had greatly increased her worth. If she didn't want to marry, she could simply ride her dragon away, and no one could stop her.

Setyl's face darkened. "Marriage is an important matter between two lands. How can it be changed for personal reasons?"

The Targaryens had two princesses. If the eldest princess was too high-ranking to marry and the youngest too young to marry, where did that leave Dorne? Would this not insult Prince Qoren Martell?

Rhaegar stepped forward with a smile. "Envoy, I heard that Prince Qoren has a daughter?"

Setyl's eyes flickered. "Yes, Princess Aliandra is just three years old."

"What a wonderful name. She will surely be a beauty in the future," Rhaegar praised before changing his tone. "If Prince Qoren is sincere about the marriage, he could marry his daughter to a Targaryen, facilitating the union between our houses."

"But Prince, Princess Aliandra is only three years old!" Setyl objected.

"It doesn't matter," Rhaegar said. "We can arrange an engagement now and marry when she's old enough."

Setyl sneered. "You're already thirteen. Can you really wait ten years?"

Rhaegar remained indifferent. "Princess Arianne is young enough to be a perfect match for one of my brothers."

With that, he pulled the confused Aemond and Daeron, who was hiding behind him, and pushed them forward.

"Brother... brother..." Aemond's face flushed red with embarrassment. He hadn't expected to be thrust into the spotlight.

Rhaegar squinted at him and said sternly, "Straighten your back. Show your royal demeanor to the envoy. You might have the chance to marry a Dornish princess."

Aemond, his face bitter, obediently lifted his chest and head, not daring to defy his elder brother.

Rhaegar ignored his reluctance. Younger siblings were there to be used when necessary. With Aegon sent to Stepstones, Aemond and Daeron had to be put to good use. They were all political assets created for him by his "good" stepmother, Alicent.

Chapter 216: Sister and Brother Mutual Understanding

Setyl glared at the two young Targaryens, his expression growing increasingly sour.

His mission was to secure a Targaryen princess for Prince Qoren, not to offer his own. Marrying Rhaegar Targaryen, the heir, would be acceptable, but marrying a lesser prince held no appeal. After a moment of thought, Setyl controlled his temper.

"Prince, Prince Qoren seeks a marriage alliance with a Targaryen princess, not to give away one of our own," Setyl explained.

"Oh?" Rhaegar feigned surprise. "Didn't you just say that marriage between two houses should not be hindered by personal factors?"

"Prince, Princess Aliandra has no intention of marrying at this time," Setyl replied. "When I left, Prince Qoren made no mention of such a proposal, so I cannot make that decision."

"No matter," Rhaegar replied, a hint of amusement in his voice. "We have time to discuss it. My younger brothers are of the right age and can afford to wait."

Daeron glanced at Rhaegar, understanding his older brother's intention to make things difficult for the envoy. He played along, puffing out his chest in mock seriousness.

Setyl's frustration was obvious. His already dark skin seemed to darken with anger. "If His Grace and the Prince have no intention of marrying in Dorne, I will report this to Prince Qoren."

Rhaegar's smile faded. "Who is truly unwilling to marry, I wonder? Surely, the envoy knows."

"The refusal of both Targaryen princesses is an insult to Prince Qoren!" Setyl retorted indignantly.

"Oh, really?" Rhaegar produced a letter from his sleeve, his expression turning cold.

Setyl froze, a sense of foreboding washing over him.

Rhaegar took the letter and approached him, his movements graceful yet scornful. "Shall I read this letter you sent to Sunspear for you?"

"What?" Setyl couldn't believe his ears. He snatched the letter and quickly scanned its contents. Recognizing his own words, his face turned pale.

With trembling hands, Setyl stammered, "You intercepted my raven?"

Viserys, having read the letter, spoke in a grave tone. "Envoy, both Qoren and you lack sincerity."

The letter contained trivial information, objections to the marriage, and disparaging remarks about Viserys himself.

The false veil of diplomacy lifted, and Setyl, now doubly nervous, tried to explain, "Forgive me, Your Grace, for my indiscretions. I truly came with the intent of forging a union."

"Silence, scheming Dornishman!" Lyonel Strong chided, his contempt undisguised.

Setyl's face darkened, and he felt the hostile gazes of those around him.

Otto Hightower, observing from the sidelines, frowned slightly. The arrogance of the Dornish envoy was surprising, even to him.

Master of Coin Lyman Beesbury stepped forward, his pale cheeks flushed with anger. "Your Grace, Prince Qoren is mocking the kingdom. It's shameless."

Lyman Beesbury was the lord of Honeyholt in the Reach, and naturally he had a low opinion of Dorn.

Grand Maester Mellos frowned. "Does Dorne seek to worsen relations with the kingdom by sending such an envoy?"

Viserys felt justified in his anger. "Dorne's envoy lacks sincerity. Expel him."

Steffon Darklyn, the Kingsguard, stepped forward to seize the panicked Setyl.

Setyl, though terrified, felt a slight relief. Expulsion was not the worst outcome.

But someone else disagreed. Rhaenyra and Rhaegar exchanged glances, both showing dissatisfaction.

Rhaegar's expression turned cold. "Whose territory do you think King's Landing is, where you can escape your misdeeds?"

"Prince, I meant no offense," Setyl pleaded.

"But you have offended," Rhaegar retorted, approaching him with a cold gaze.

Viserys, not wanting bloodshed, warned, "Rhaegar, he is an envoy. Just expel him."

"Father, the Dornish are our enemies. Mercy is unnecessary," Rhaegar replied, drawing his sword.

He looked at Aemond and Daeron. "Watch how Targaryen men solve problems. I'll only show you once."

Viserys shouted, "Rhaegar, what are you doing?!"

Rhaegar ignored him, signaling the guards to step back. "No! I am an envoy..." Setyl broke free and tried to run.

"When Dorne attacked the Stepstones, did you consider you might die?" Rhaegar whispered, swinging his sword and severing half of Setyl's head.

Setyl's mutilated corpse fell, splattering the ground with blood and filth.

Silence filled the Throne Room. Rhaegar's cold efficiency left a chilling impression on all present.

"Ah!..."

Alicent whimpered as the bloody scene unfolded, her face pale and stricken. Aemond and Daeron stood frozen, staring at their older brother Rhaegar in shock.

Rhaegar turned and wiped his blood-stained sword on his cloak. "Have you learned?" he asked coldly.

Aemond swallowed hard and looked at Rhaegar with a mixture of fear and admiration. Daeron, still young, closed his eyes in fear and grabbed Aemond's arm for support.

Rhaegar scanned his siblings, his gaze lingering on Helaena. Unlike the others, her eyes were wide with excitement and longing. She took a step closer to Rhaegar, oblivious to the bloodshed and without a trace of fear.

Deep down, she thought, "Indeed, dragons bring courage to people!"

The advisers of the Small Council were visibly shaken. They hadn't expected the Prince to kill so ruthlessly. Otto Hightower frowned deeply, lowering his head to hide his reaction. He saw shades of Daemon in Rhaegar—a resemblance he despised.

"Rhaegar, look what you've done!" Viserys rose in anger, pointing at the body lying in a pool of blood. "When two countries are at war, they don't kill envoys. Killing the messenger like this could provoke Qoren Martell!"

Rhaegar sheathed his sword, facing his father with a solemn expression. "Father, Dorne is involved in the Battle of the Stepstones. Conflict with the kingdom is inevitable."

Viserys rebuked him angrily, "Then you should have let the messenger return, not killed him in public!"

"The Dornish are not as honorable as we are," Rhaegar retorted, hanging his head as if chastised. The history of Dornish treachery was well known, with countless instances of ambassadors and captives being killed.

"You..." Viserys was momentarily speechless. Turning to the royal guards, he snapped, "Why don't you carry the body out? Are you waiting for it to dry?"

Steffon Darklyn, the Kingsguard, bowed his head in shame and hurried to remove the body.

"Dismissed!" Viserys, furious, stormed out of the hall. The others quickly followed, not wanting to incur his wrath.

Rhaegar shrugged, feeling no remorse. He had wanted to kill the Dornish envoy for a long time.

"Apologize to Father later," Rhaenyra whispered, taking his hand. She had played a role in the envoy's demise and knew it was wise to reconcile.

Rhaegar nodded, understanding the need to appease their father. Viserys was often fragile and prone to self-doubt.

Jeyne approached, taking Rhaegar's other arm. "How about saying goodbye and accompanying me to the Dragonpit? I quite like that young dragon called Stormcloud."

"Get off, Jeyne!" Rhaenyra hissed through gritted teeth, her eyes flashing with anger.

Jeyne smiled wryly, releasing Rhaegar and turning to take her friend's arm instead.

...

After lunch, Rhaegar approached his father to apologize, but Viserys scolded him harshly. Rhaegar took the rebuke stoically and left the room, seemingly unfazed. As he pushed open the door, he encountered Otto Hightower, dressed in green.

"Ser Otto, what is it?" Rhaegar asked, a note of suspicion in his voice.

Otto nodded and replied, "There are some matters regarding the street cleanup that need to be reported to His Grace."

"Street cleaning is not easy. Hard work, Ser Otto," Rhaegar said distractedly as he brushed past him.

The street-cleaning program was actually a matter that Rhaegar had proposed. Alicent had pushed heavily for her father, Otto, to oversee the project. The former Hand of the King had returned to King's Landing to serve as a advisor.

But a month had passed with little noticeable change in the city. The new Master of Civil Affairs would need to work harder.

As night fell, Otto emerged from the king's chambers. He and Viserys had had a long discussion about the management of the streets of King's Landing. It wasn't just about cleaning; it was about comprehensive management.

To accomplish the task, Otto had hired a group of poor men and paid them to do the work. Each day at dawn, these men, armed with shovels and dustpans, cleared the streets of excrement.

Wagons were then used to transport the waste out of the city for collective burial. This method, however, proved inadequate.

The people of King's Landing continued to relieve themselves in the streets every day. Moreover, after some people cleaned the streets, others would throw various types of garbage back into them, adding to the burden of the sanitation workers. Otto tried to persuade the citizens to stop littering, but his efforts were in vain.

He then enlisted the Gold Cloaks to enforce stricter regulations against public dumping, but this move backfired. The people reacted strongly, filled with criticism.

When the Gold Cloaks tried to enforce the rules, they were met with retaliation, including having feces and urine thrown at them. Otto, as the Master of Civil Affairs, was also harshly questioned, as if he had incited the wrath of both God and the people.

The people of King's Landing were adamant: "If there's no shit or piss in the street, there's no justice! How can we not relieve ourselves?"

This resistance led to Otto earning the derogatory nickname "Master of Shit and Piss." The moniker became particularly well-known in the chaotic area of Flea Bottom, underscoring the immense challenge Otto faced in attempting to improve the city's sanitation.

Chapter 217: Aegon's Defiance

Half a month later.

King's Landing, the old city gates.

Rhaegar stood at the gates and watched as a four-wheeled chariot rolled away, flanked by a group of well-equipped guards.

"Alas, there is no end to the chaos in the Riverlands. Mediation seems futile," Rhaegar sighed softly, then turned to leave.

Inside the carriage sat Lyonel Strong, Hand of the King. The ongoing feud between the Blackwood and Bracken Houses had only intensified, with several skirmishes involving armies of over a thousand men shattering the peace across half the Riverlands.

Lord Tully of Riverrun, unable to withstand the pressure, had once again requested royal intervention, leaving Viserys no choice but to send Lyonel.

...

Rhaegar strolled through the streets of King's Landing, heading towards the Dragonpit atop the Hill of Rhaenys. His route from the old city gates to the Riverlands led him through Silk Street, the busiest market in King's Landing, teeming with people.

As he walked through Silk Street, Rhaegar noticed a stark difference. The street, usually foul-smelling but relatively tidy, was now littered with filth.

The stench was overwhelming, especially in the sweltering July heat, with urine and feces baking in the sun. Rhaegar's sensitive senses could not bear the stench, causing him to quicken his pace.

Behind him, a Gold Cloak shouted, "Discharging filth in the streets is prohibited! Offenders will be heavily punished!"

The response was a cacophony of spitting and cursing from the disgruntled populace.

Rhaegar quickly deduced that Otto's policies were meeting fierce resistance.

"Wait a little longer," he muttered, swiftly leaving Silk Street.

...

At noon, under the scorching sun, Rhaegar descended the steps inside the Dragonpit. As he reached the bottom, he spotted Jeyne holding the young dragon, Stormcloud.

"Roar..." Stormcloud, still the size of a cat, perched on Jeyne's arm. His bright silver scales glistened as he peered out with his tiny head.

Jeyne smiled and tried to pet the baby dragon, but he playfully avoided her touch.

"Jeyne?" Rhaegar called, confused, his gaze shifting between her and the dragon.

Stormcloud was known for his bad temper and would not let anyone near him except Rhaegar. Even Rhaenyra couldn't get near him, and the dragonkeepers had to shackle one of his hind legs to keep him from flying around and wreaking havoc.

Jeyne turned at the sound of Rhaegar's voice and beamed, "Rhaegar, isn't he adorable?"

"Yes, it's amazing," Rhaegar said in amazement. "Stormcloud doesn't reject you."

Jeyne tilted her head thoughtfully, "He won't attack me, but he won't let me touch him either."

"Roar..." As soon as Stormcloud saw Rhaegar, he flapped his wings and staggered over to sit on Rhaegar's shoulder, nuzzling his cheek happily.

Rhaegar patted the young dragon's head and chuckled to Jeyne, "The little one is very fussy and a bit dangerous."

It was indeed rare for Jeyne, who wasn't a Targaryen, to be tolerated by Stormcloud. The Targaryens and the Arryns had intermarried for generations. Rhaegar's grandmother, Daella Targaryen, had married Lord Rodrik Arryn.

Their daughter, Aemma Arryn, married Viserys and gave birth to Rhaenyra and Rhaegar. Thus, Rhaegar and Jeyne were distant cousins, but her Targaryen blood was very diluted.

"Stormcloud is beautiful," Jeyne said, her eyes twinkling as she watched the dragon and Rhaegar. "I come to see him often."

Rhaegar avoided her gaze, feeling a shiver run down his spine.

"Prince, a message from the Stepstones!" Erryk called out, hurrying into the Dragonpit.

Rhaegar snapped to attention and met him halfway. "What's the situation?"

Erryk handed over an opened letter and said solemnly, "The Triarchy hired mercenaries and invaded Grey Gallows Island during the night."

The letter had passed through the hands of the Grand Maester and the King before reaching Rhaegar. He scanned it quickly.

The King's forces on the Stepstones Islands numbered over four thousand, primarily defending Bloodstone Island. Grey Gallows Island, lightly defended, had been recaptured by the Triarchy. Aegon and Laenor had attacked with their dragons, but the enemy hid in caves, refusing to engage.

Rhaegar slapped the letter against Erryk's chest. "I'll go to Bloodstone Island first and assess the situation."

Sensing his mood, Stormcloud panicked and leapt from his shoulder, flying away.

"Roar!" A deep, resonant roar echoed from the crypt as the Dragonpit gate opened.

Rhaegar stepped outside just as the Cannibal, his massive black dragon, emerged like a shadow. The dragon soared over Rhaegar's head before landing with a thud. Rhaegar swiftly climbed the dragon's ladder, mounted, and took off across Blackwater Bay.

...

Bloodstone Island

A dark shadow of a dragon flashed across the vast ocean and landed on the debris-strewn desert island.

"Cousin!" Laenor shouted, leading a crowd of commanders to meet Rhaegar as he dismounted from his dragon.

"Prince..." several others echoed, bowing slightly.

Rhaegar wasted no time. "Grey Gallows Island is lost. Have the Triarchy made any other moves?"

Laenor shook his head. "No, they remain hidden in the caves and refuse to come out."

"They're trying to use the crabfeeder's tactics," Rhaegar sneered, showing his disdain. It wasn't a clever strategy, but it had been surprisingly effective during the Island War. Although he didn't have a perfect solution, he needed to project confidence to maintain morale.

"Cousin, let's discuss this in the tent," Laenor suggested, leaning in to whisper, "Aegon's been in a foul mood lately, and House Manderly from White Harbor has sent someone to inquire."

"House Manderly?" Rhaegar frowned. Aegon was the least of his concerns—he'd always been lazy and was probably bored out of his mind, stuck on Bloodstone Island all day. The Manderlys, however, were crucial.

They controlled one of the five major ports in Westeros and were significant bannermen to the Starks in the North.

Early in the War for the Stepstones, Laenor had secured their support, bringing over a dozen ships and 1,400 soldiers. During the Battle of Bloodstone, the Manderly heir had conspired with Tyland and others, only to die amidst the chaos.

"We should go see them," Rhaegar said, sensing that the visitors likely brought bad news.

Inside the Tent

Upon entering the tent, Rhaegar immediately noticed three figures with distinctly different demeanors. Aegon, with an angry expression, sulked in the corner. An older, rotund man with needle-like white hair was speaking animatedly, his spittle flying. Opposite him sat Vaemon, his face dark and stiff.

The sound of Rhaegar's entrance drew their attention.

"Rhaegar..." Aegon's eyes lit up momentarily, but his joy quickly faded. He was determined to return to King's Landing and knew he had to reason with his elder brother today.

"Prince Rhaegar, you have finally arrived!"

The obese old man, Ser Wylton, glared at Rhaegar and approached menacingly.

"Ser Wylton, keep your distance!" Laenor stepped in front of him, placing a hand against his chest.

Rhaegar bypassed them, walked over to the conference table, and sat down. "Ser Wylton, what is your purpose here?" he asked, his voice calm but authoritative.

Laenor had briefed Rhaegar on the way. Wylton was the brother of the Lord of White Harbor and was here to seek justice for his deceased nephew.

"Prince, my nephew died for his kingdom. Where is the murderer who killed him?" Wylton's voice was loud and accusatory.

Rhaegar's face darkened. He slapped the table heavily. "Who sacrificed his life for the kingdom, and who is the murderer!" he bellowed.

Wylton, taken aback by Rhaegar's sudden outburst, softened his tone. "My nephew is dead..."

"I know your nephew is dead!" Rhaegar interrupted, his voice filled with fury. "He and his private army committed treason and died as they deserved."

Wylton stammered, "But he died on the battlefield..."

"Nonsense! If he hadn't died in battle, do you think I would have dismissed his charges so easily?" Rhaegar snapped. "Remember, his death was his own doing. There is no honor in it, and there is no murderer."

It was clear to Rhaegar that Wylton was here to cause trouble. The heir to White Harbor was dead, while the other conspirators, including Tyland, were alive. Wylton was here to challenge this imbalance.

Rhaegar called the guards at the entrance of the tent. "Drag Ser Wylton out and drive him to Bloodstone Island."

"Prince, I am here on behalf of House Manderly of White Harbor," Wyston protested, his face red with anger.

Rhaegar's voice was icy. "If your brother wishes to question me, let him come himself. The Targaryens will give him an explanation. Now, get out!"

The guards, members of the Second Sons, quickly acted. They restrained Wyston and carried him out of the tent as if he were livestock.

The storm passed as quickly as it had arisen. The commanders were left in stunned silence.

Rhaegar's sharp eyes scanned the room. "That was a minor interruption. Now, let's discuss the main issue."

"Yes, Prince..." The commanders, shaken from their stupor, hurriedly took their seats.

After months of war, Rhaegar had become increasingly decisive. As the heir and acting Commander of the Navy, he wielded considerable authority. Besides his father, Viserys, no one outranked him.

...

Nightfall

The negotiations concluded. The commanders agreed on a strategy of siege rather than direct assault. Patrol ships and dragons would encircle Grey Gallows Island, cutting off supplies.

The pirates, though well-provisioned, would eventually run out of fresh water. When that time came, they would be vulnerable to attack.

Rhaegar stepped out of the tent into the starry night.

"Rhaegar, I need to talk to you!" Aegon's voice called from behind.

Chapter 218: Triarchy's Provocation

Aegon's voice was full of resentment. He wore leather armor, his hair was a mess, and he held a defiant expression.

Rhaegar turned to face him, scanning him up and down. Despite Aegon's disheveled appearance, he couldn't help but notice that Alicent's genes were strong; she'd borne handsome children. Aegon, though shorter and slimmer than Rhaegar, had a wild, uninhibited demeanor.

Feeling Rhaegar's gaze, Aegon grew uneasy. His legs trembled, but he stretched his neck, eyes stubborn, determined to escape from this place.

Finally, Rhaegar approached him. Aegon's body shivered, tension mounting. He knew his request was unreasonable, and he braced himself for the expected reprimand.

Surprisingly, Rhaegar didn't get angry. Instead, he sighed and said gently, "You've lost weight and gotten a bit darker."

Aegon was taken aback. "What do you mean?" he asked, uncertain.

Rhaegar placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled. "After a month on the front lines, you're more of a man than ever."

"Hmph, nonsense," Aegon retorted, shrugging off his hand. "Don't think you can sweet-talk me. I'm going back to King's Landing, do you hear?"

"Go back to King's Landing? For what?" Rhaegar asked, his tone sharp. "To sleep, to cuddle a whore, or to play the fool for Father?"

Aegon's face flushed with anger. "I don't need you to tell me what to do! I'm going back, and no one cares what I do anyway."

"No! Aegon, you're my brother, not a waste," Rhaegar said, his gaze intense. "Your name is Targaryen. You are my brother, and no one can call you a waste."

Aegon was taken aback by Rhaegar's words. He hesitated. "That's so sappy. Do you think I'll believe it?"

Ever since he was a child, Aegon had lived in Rhaegar's shadow. Whenever he did something wrong, he would get a good beating. How could he believe Rhaegar now?

"Believe it or not, that's up to you," Rhaegar said, hands behind his back. "There's unrest in the Baylands, the Triarchy has invaded Grey Gallows Island, and Dorne's movements are unknown. Do you want to hide back in the arms of a whore at this time?"

Aegon lowered his head, unable to meet Rhaegar's eyes. "That's your responsibility. You're the Heir. What does it matter to me?"

Rhaegar's face turned cold. He slapped Aegon across the face, sending him stumbling. "You... you..."

Aegon's cheek reddened and swelled. He covered his face with one hand, pointing at Rhaegar with the other, but words failed him.

"Aegon, are you talking to me about responsibility?" Rhaegar grabbed his collar. "Remember, you are a Targaryen. You enjoy the honor of our name. Defend it with your life!"

Aegon, lifted like a rag doll, dared not speak. Rhaegar continued, "You are the only Targaryen man besides me and Father. You must shoulder the responsibility of defending our realm."

"And if I say no?" Aegon challenged, his defiance resurfacing.

"As you wish," Rhaegar said calmly, releasing him. "You can go back to King's Landing if you want to be a waste."

Rhaegar turned and walked away. Aegon fell to the ground, fists clenched. As Rhaegar continued, Aegon suddenly stood and shouted, "I won't leave! I have the name of the Conqueror. I'm not afraid of anything!"

Under the night sky, Rhaegar paused, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth. This was the effect he wanted. Alicent might covet the throne and have many children, but to Rhaegar, these younger siblings were not threats but assets.

Sometimes, a person's beliefs and actions are shaped by those who influence them. If Rhaegar wanted Aegon to stand, he would make him stand. The Targaryen line was too thin to afford a wasted life.

...

A month passed in the blink of an eye.

“Roar...”

The sound of dragons echoed across Bloodstone Island. Cannibal lay on the mountaintop, its eyes scanning the horizon and Sea Smoke rising in the distance.

Two dragons slowly descended, and Aegon and Laenor dismounted.

Rhaegar stood nearby, watching them. "What's the situation?" he asked.

Laenor shook his head, his expression grim.

Aegon spoke first, "The pirates took advantage of a weak night patrol, smuggled supplies, and sank one of our patrol ships."

Rhaegar nodded thoughtfully. The Triarchy had been lying low for some time. At night, smugglers in small boats had been sending supplies to Grey Gallows Island. Although the patrol ships intercepted and eliminated a few, the small boats' persistence had fostered a sense of complacency among the soldiers. Last night, several ships swiftly sank the patrol ships and moved supplies to the island. It was a defeat.

Just then, a soldier hurried over, reporting, "Prince, a small ship has arrived at Grey Gallows Island."

"How many men?" Rhaegar inquired.

"Just one," the soldier confirmed, "carrying a white flag. They've docked."

"Bring him to me," Rhaegar instructed.

"Yes, Prince," the soldier replied, retreating.

Moments later, two soldiers escorted a young man with dyed blonde hair, dressed in fine foreign garments.

Rhaegar glanced at him and asked, "What is your purpose here?"

"To declare war!" The young foreigner's arrogance was palpable, his Valyrian dialect heavily accented. His dyed hair marked him unmistakably as Tyroshi.

Rhaegar, Aegon, and Laenor exchanged amused glances and burst into laughter.

"A bunch of rats hiding in a cave dare to declare war?" Aegon sneered, slapping the young man across the face.

Since being on the battlefield, Aegon had seen all sorts of things. The Tyroshi youth, undeterred, held his head high. "In half a month, Dorne will send a fleet, and the Triarchy will dispatch their strongest warriors to reclaim the Stepstones Islands."

"Out of his mind," Aegon muttered.

The Tyroshi youth continued, "Evacuate Bloodstone Island, or you will be doomed!"

"Come on, then. I'm waiting to start a war with you," Rhaegar replied indifferently.

"You will die a silent death," the Tyroshi youth snarled, attempting to curse them.

"Enough..." A soldier stepped in, restraining him and pinning him to the ground.

Unexpectedly, the Tyroshi youth let out a pained grunt, his eyes bulging, body convulsing, and face turning red. Within moments, his neck went limp, and he collapsed, paralyzed.

Laenor reached out and felt the young man's nostrils. "He's breathless," he said gravely.

"Call the maester," Rhaegar commanded, steadying himself. He had never witnessed such a scene before.

The army's maester hurried over to examine the body. After half a minute, he concluded, "The deceased took poison in advance. Judging from the symptoms, it appears to be Strangler."

The maester's face was grave and horrified. There was nothing good about the Triarchy. The customs of its cities were deplorable, its order chaotic.

Besides slave trade and prostitution, poison was their third specialty. Among them, Strangler and Tears of Lys were the most notorious. Strangler was a powerful poison that could quickly suffocate a person.

Laenor's face turned pale with fear. "Cousin, pay attention to what he said before he died. The Triarchy might be planning to poison you."

The Targaryens had lost too many lives in the Battle of the Stepstones. Laenor's grandfather, Aemon Targaryen, had been assassinated in his tent by Myrish scouts. Rhaegar's grandfather, Baelor Targaryen, had died after suffering severe pains, suspected to be caused by poison, though there was no proof.

Aegon, too, was stunned. He looked at Rhaegar with trembling lips, "What do we do? Should we go back to King's Landing?"

It was his first encounter with such a ruthless use of human life as a warning.

"What are you afraid of? I'm not dead yet!" Rhaegar's voice was icy. "Be careful with your food and drink, and have guards follow you at all times."

Despite his brave words, only Rhaegar knew the worry he felt. He had no immunity against toxins. If he was poisoned, he would die like anyone else. The pressure weighed heavily on him.

After a moment of contemplation, determination hardened his eyes. He turned to the maester, "Follow me back to the tent. I have a message for the ravens."

"Yes, Prince," the maester replied, his worry evident.

The poisons from Lys were unparalleled in their lethality. The Triarchy had no boundaries. If something happened to the prince, it would be a significant blow to the kingdom.

By dusk, nine ravens flew out from Bloodstone Island, heading towards the continent of Essos.

Rhaegar climbed to the top of the mountain and approached the Cannibal. The dragon glanced at him and snorted. Rhaegar sat beside it, patting its dark scales. Looking at the distant horizon, his eyes turned cold. "If they want a fight, then we'll give them a painful one."

...

King's Landing

Inside the Council Hall

Viserys had called an emergency meeting. The chaos in the Riverlands had worsened. The Blackwoods and the Brackens were in open conflict, refusing mediation from both House Tully and the royal family.

The Brackens, in particular, had mobilized the peasants to join the war, sparking a widespread rebellion. The conflict had engulfed half the Riverlands, with thousands of peasants joining the uprising, looting and pillaging like a plague of locusts.

Viserys, filled with anger, demanded, "The Riverlands are in the grip of a farmers' rebellion. How do we deal with this?"

"What is the reaction of Riverrun?" Otto inquired, seizing the opportunity now that Lyonel was absent.

Viserys fumed, "Riverrun has deployed troops along the Red Fork, trying to manage the conflict between the Blackwoods and the Brackens."

"If Old Lord Tully can stop the two houses from warring, we only need to handle the farmers' uprising," Otto mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Why not send some troops from the Crownlands to participate in the counterinsurgency?"

"The Crownlands' forces are all tied up in the Stepstones. It's difficult to spare soldiers," Viserys countered.

"It won't take much," Otto suggested. "Just a thousand soldiers, led by a brave commander, would be enough to create a deterrent."

"Who would we send?" Viserys asked, now considering the proposal.

Otto pondered for a moment before replying, "Harwin Strong."

Chapter 219: The Dragon's Return to Essos

Nighttime

The Red Keep, Attic

Otto and Larys sat opposite each other, the dim light casting shadows on their faces.

"Harwin will depart tomorrow for the Riverlands to quell the rebellion," Otto said lightly, his eyes sharp as swords.

Larys smiled coyly. "Harwin the Breakbones—my brother's name carries weight."

"Are you sure?" Otto ignored Larys' insincerity, getting straight to the point.

"No problem," Larys replied, his eyes flashing. "My father and brother are quite capable; they won't disappoint."

"Once this is accomplished, the Grand Maester and I will recommend you as the new Master of Coin," Otto said, rising to leave.

He had never liked the second son of the Strong House. Larys reminded him of a rat that had crawled out of a dark sewer.

Larys, holding his cane, rested his chin on his hand, watching Otto's back with a smile.

...

Elsewhere in the Red Keep

Viserys had summoned Rhaenyra through the Kingsguard.

"Rhaenyra, there's been no news from the Stepstones. Return to Dragonstone and deploy the Royal Navy to patrol the Narrow Sea," he ordered, visibly exhausted by the successive bad news.

Rhaenyra was taken aback. "Father, the fleet has been patrolling the Narrow Sea, and the fleet at Driftmark has been contributing as well."

"The Seven Hells! My memory fails me," Viserys muttered, smacking his head. "What of Lord Corlys? I hear he is still ill."

"Yes, Aunt Rhaenys and Laena are watching over him day and night," Rhaenyra responded truthfully.

"There is a fleet patrolling the Narrow Sea, but King's Landing needs more reinforcement," Viserys muttered. "With Harwin transferred to the Riverlands, Otto will manage the City Watch for the time being."

"Otto!" Rhaenyra's heart tightened. Harwin had always been a staunch loyalist, and Otto taking command of the City Watch was a blow to her influence.

"Don't worry, Otto is Alicent's father and an old friend," Viserys reassured her. "The Red Keep still has the Kingsguard, three hundred strong."

The King's Guard had been newly bolstered, combining the original Red Keep guards with Rhaegar's newly appointed Dragonkeepers.

Rhaenyra calculated the situation. "The front line is still at war. How many more men can the king's army spare?"

"It's difficult. What we could spare has already been given to Harwin," Viserys replied, his headache worsening at the mention of the Riverlands. "Go and visit Lord Corlys on Driftmark when you have time," he added, pausing before emphasizing, "And your two adopted daughters."

He felt awkward mentioning them again; they were Daemon's children. Rhaenyra smiled and agreed, hiding her concerns.

...

Simultaneously

The Nine Free Cities of Essos

Nine letters from the Targaryen Dynasty arrived in the hands of the leaders of the nine Free Cities.

Tyrosh

Representatives of the Triarchy convened a meeting, first to discuss Dorne's refusal to send troops by sea, then to discuss poisoning - a controversial but effective solution.

An old man in brocade robes spoke first. "The Targaryen boys were terrorized today, and a false deadline was set to allow for a sneak attack. Three thousand Unsullied are waiting in the harbor."

Lysandro Rogare, playing with a whip, added, "The situation is delicate."

Several magisters in the room also held similar whips, their faces serious as they debated.

A servant hurried in and handed a letter to the brocade-clad old man. Soon, similar letters were delivered to Lysandro Rogare and another magister from Myr.

As they read, their expressions changed from curiosity to shock to anger.

"Arrogant! Does he want to start a war between two continents?" the old man shouted, crumpling the letter in anger.

Lysandro's face grew grave as he read:

"The Triarchy has invaded the Stepstones, plundered the Seven Kingdoms' people, and threatened to poison the heir to the Iron Throne.

Rhaegar Targaryen, eldest son of Viserys I and heir to the Iron Throne, writes to you:

Seven days from now, if the Triarchy does not withdraw from the Stepstones, we will march on Tyrosh.

Someone is trying to awaken the wrath of the sleeping dragon. So Targaryens will return it with blood and fire!"

The letter concluded with a flourish.

"The Targaryen brat wants to invade Tyrosh. Where does he get the nerve?" the old man fumed.

The Triarchy Council

Tyrosh and Lys are island nations across the sea from the mainland.

Lys is located near Volantis, on the Summer Sea.

Tyrosh, an island nation near the Disputed Lands, were particularly concerned.

"The letter should be spread throughout the Free Cities. We must seek allies quickly," Lysandro urged.

"Who will help us?" the brocade-robed old man replied. "Braavos is still at war with Pentos. Volantis wants us destroyed by the dragon. Qohor and Norvos are under siege by the Dothraki. Lorath is too far away and too poor to be of any help."

The Triarchy had been emboldened by its dominance in Essos, plundering ships and invading the Stepstones. Now they faced isolation.

Frustrated, Lysandro replied, "Dorne refused to send troops. If we don't unite the other city-states, we have no allies."

The representative from Myr, a dark, heavyset man, spoke. "The dragon's return to Essos affects more than just our three city-states. Braavos and others may reconsider."

Memories of Old Valyria's dragonlords still haunted the people of Essos. Perhaps some could be swayed to support them.

"Don't expect too much," Lysandro cautioned. "This might be the rash decision of a teenage prince. The King on the Iron Throne is weak. We should send a letter to dissuade him."

The Stepstones, situated in the Disputed Lands, belonged neither to Westeros nor Essos. Fighting there was one thing; a dragon landing in a Free City was another matter entirely.

"Good idea. I'll draft a letter immediately," the Myrish representative agreed, hurrying out with his whip.

Despite his outward fury, the brocade-robed old man was anxious. "Just in case, station the Unsullied in Tyrosh and set up scorpion crossbows in the harbor and on every tower."

Lysandro, recognizing Tyrosh's vulnerability as the likely first target, did not object.

...

Driftmark

In the darkness of the night, a massive figure broke through the clouds, revealing the crescent moon. Under its pale light, Cannibal, black as charcoal, glided silently, his green eyes surveying the island below.

On a familiar clearing, the dark green dragon Vaghar lay sleeping, eyes closed. Nearby, next to the beach, a scarlet dragon huddled among the gorse. Rhaegar recognized it immediately as Caraxes.

After the Dance of Dragons, Caraxes had been severely injured. His body was covered in scars, and one of his wings was torn. Unable to fly until his wings healed, the once mighty Blood Wym moved like a reptile.

Sensing Rhaegar's gaze, Caraxes twisted his slender body and dragged his damaged wing deeper into the gorse.

"Land, Cannibal," Rhaegar commanded, steering the dragon towards High Tide Castle.

Upon landing, he was greeted by Rhaenys and Laena, mother and daughter, who welcomed him warmly. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Rhaegar got straight to the point, discussing the Triarchy's declaration of war and his decision to attack Tyrosh.

"I'll fetch the baby," Laena said, her smile fading as she found an excuse to leave. Her special status as a daughter of House Velaryon and Daemon's wife made her wary of entangling herself in too many battles.

Rhaegar frowned, surprised by Laena's immediate retreat from involvement.

"Don't mind her. Say what you came for," Rhaenys said, her face stern.

"The most important element in attacking Tyrosh is our dragons. I need all three of Velaryon's dragons to participate," Rhaegar stated bluntly.

"No way!" Rhaenys replied sharply. "The Targaryen name is sensitive and cannot be associated with an invasion of Essos."

They were a family of Dragonlords. Over three hundred years ago, Old Valyria had conquered much of Essos. An invasion by Targaryen dragons could provoke a severe backlash from the entire Free Cities.

Anticipating her resistance, Rhaegar patiently explained, "The Triarchy is desperate. We only need to strike one city-state decisively to defeat them."

He had studied the situation in the Free Cities. Volantis had a grudge against the Triarchy, and the other cities were either in turmoil or struggling to defend themselves. The Triarchy could not count on allies.

"Rhaegar, your strategic vision is excellent, I won't deny that," Rhaenys said firmly. "But I won't help you, and your father won't approve of your decisions."

She knew her cousin well. The Battle of the Stepstones had already drained Viserys's courage and patience. Attacking the Triarchy and risking the wrath of the Free Cities was unwise.

Rhaegar pressed on, "The Triarchy is the greatest enemy of House Velaryon. Can't I take the risk to resist them?"

Rhaenys shook her head. "You represent not only yourself but the entire Seven Kingdoms. As the Master of Dragons, I oppose your risky behavior."

She sighed deeply. "I still have to care for Corlys, and Laena needs to feed the child. You are free to go."

"Aunt, this battle cannot be avoided!" Rhaegar's eyes flashed with determination as he turned and left.

He would return to King's Landing and seek his father's permission, and to prepare his armor for the inevitable conflict.

...

After Rhaegar left, Rhaenys found Laena, who was breastfeeding her child.

"You should agree to help him. It will redeem Daemon," Rhaenys suggested, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed.

Laena shook her head, a hint of shrewdness in her eyes. "The King still loves him. I don't want to make any extra effort."

Chapter 220: Prelude to the Massacre

The Next Day

Early the next morning, Rhaegar returned to the Red Keep to meet his father, who had just woken up. Rhaegar had arrived in King's Landing too late the previous night and had stayed at the Dragonpit.

At this time, Viserys was enjoying breakfast in his loose pajamas, while Grand Maester Mellos stood by, reading a letter aloud.

"If the Seven Kingdoms want to attack Essos, they will surely meet fierce resistance..."

Rhaegar arrived just in time to hear these words.

He knocked twice on the door and called out, "Father, I have urgent business to discuss."

"Come in, Rhaegar," Viserys responded, his voice tense.

Pushing the door open, Rhaegar saw his father holding a knife and fork, looking deeply troubled. The moment he saw Rhaegar, Viserys immediately questioned, "Who told you to declare war on Essos? Do you want to start a world war between the continents?"

Rhaegar sighed and explained, "Not Essos, Father. I declared war on the Triarchy, intending to strike Tyrosh directly."

"In the eyes of the world, it's all the same," Viserys snapped. "Invading Tyrosh will make all the Free Cities hostile to the Targaryens."

"I explained our reasons in my letter. The Triarchy started this chaos," Rhaegar argued. "They're using poison to threaten us. Is that not in the letter?"

He is not afraid of getting poisoned, but he would not tolerate such an underhanded threat.

"Poisoning?" Viserys was taken aback and looked to Mellos for confirmation.

Mellos skimmed through the letter and replied, "It's not mentioned. The letter focuses on the public opinion attack by the Triarchy."

Viserys put down his utensils and, with a mix of concern and anger, asked, "Rhaegar, has the Triarchy tried to poison you?"

Rhaegar, feeling his father's worry, replied, "Not yet. But I intend to eliminate the threat before it can harm us."

Viserys sighed with relief, then returned to the contents of the letter with renewed frustration. "The Battle of the Stepstones was costly. I cannot support expanding this conflict."

"Father, I've already sent the letters to the nine Free Cities," Rhaegar stated firmly. "If the Triarchy doesn't withdraw from the Stepstones by the deadline, I will counterattack."

The Stepstones had long been a thorn in the Targaryen Dynasty's side. Rhaegar's determination was not just for himself, but for the future stability of the realm.

Seeing the resolve in his son's eyes, Viserys felt a wave of helplessness. "This is my final warning: do not invade Essos, or I will strip you of your military command."

"Father, we have dragons and a capable army. There's no need to worry," Rhaegar countered, his voice rising with conviction. "We can end this conflict."

"I said no!" Viserys slammed his hand on the dining table, causing his silverware to clatter to the ground.

Rhaegar tilted his head back and closed his eyes, struggling to contain his frustration. After a moment, he shook his head and forced a smile. "Fine, I'll handle it myself."

He turned and walked out.

"Rhaegar, did you hear what I said?" Viserys shouted after him.

"Loud and clear," Rhaegar replied, his voice laced with disappointment, as he quickened his pace.

Viserys was about to yell again, but Rhaegar was already gone.

...

Rhaegar walked out of the room, sighing deeply, his hand running through his hair in frustration as he descended the stairs.

"Rhaegar, when did you get back?" came Jeyne's surprised voice from behind him.

He glanced back briefly. "Just now."

"Have the Stepstones stabilized?" Jeyne asked, her smile bright.

Rhaegar, in no mood for conversation, replied curtly, "I still have something to do. I'll leave now."

Before Jeyne could say more, Rhaegar turned and walked away, not looking back.

Watching his retreating figure, Jeyne tilted her head, murmuring to herself, "Why does he seem so troubled?"

Her keen senses picked up on Rhaegar's unease.

...

The Back Garden

Unconsciously, Rhaegar found himself among the thick beams of the fishwood. He muttered to himself, "I need to rally an armed force quickly." His mind raced, pondering potential supporters.

"Prince, good to see you again," a familiar voice interrupted his thoughts.

Rhaegar turned to see Larys sitting on a nearby pavilion fence, a fake smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "Larys, what do you want?" Rhaegar asked directly.

Larys, leaning on his scepter, approached with a limp. "As you know, those who have difficulty walking often hear the most interesting things," he said cryptically.

Rhaegar regarded him warily, aware of Larys's knack for gathering intelligence and weaving schemes. "Perhaps I can help with your problem," Larys offered, bowing humbly.

"Go on," Rhaegar prompted, his eyes narrowing with interest.

"The King abhors war and will never support your plans," Larys began. "To win a battle, you need both dragons and soldiers."

"I have only one dragon and very few soldiers," Rhaegar admitted. The forces stationed at the Stepstones were minimal, insufficient for a full-scale assault on the Triarchy.

Larys smiled. "King's Landing is a cauldron, full of hidden resources," he hinted, waiting for Rhaegar to inquire further. But Rhaegar simply gestured for him to continue, wary of appearing too eager.

Larys, slightly frustrated, continued, "Princess Rhaenyra commands a formidable force, rivaling your own."

"The royal fleet?" Rhaegar asked, frowning. The fleet funded by Dragonstone's taxes comprised a dozen warships and over a thousand men.

"More than that," Larys said, his smile widening. "There are two thousand Gold Cloaks in King's Landing, commanded by my brother, Harwin."

"So?" Rhaegar pressed.

"My brother has sworn unwavering loyalty to Princess Rhaenyra," Larys said, tapping his scepter rhythmically.

Rhaegar studied Larys in silence, then suddenly drew his sword, pressing the blade against Larys's neck. "I hear provocation in your words," he said icily.

King's Landing's own guardians, the Golden Cloaks, wouldn't be easily trespassed upon.

Also, Harwin, transferred to the Riverlands, he understood the actual situation from Maynard's report.

Larys's words were loaded. Was he trying to sow discord between him and Rhaenyra, or did he have a darker motive - to use a borrowed sword to eliminate Harwin?

Larys's smile faltered, his heartbeat quickening. "Prince, it's not a bad idea," he stammered.

"It's a terrible idea," Rhaegar retorted, not trusting Larys, who had ties to Alicent. He raised the sword, letting the cold flat of the blade tap Larys's cheek. "For the sake of Lord Lyonel, I'll let this slide. But next time, think before you speak."

Sheathing his sword, Rhaegar turned to leave. "Where are you going, Prince?" Larys called after him, touching his cheek.

"Dragonstone," Rhaegar replied, not looking back.

...

The sun gradually rose, casting its golden light over Dragonstone Island. A dark dragon shadow appeared in the sky, soaring above the castle.

"Land," Rhaegar commanded. The Cannibal obeyed, descending to the cliff edge by the castle.

Rhaegar dismounted and entered the castle, seeking out Rhaenyra. As he stepped inside the gates, he heard her voice.

"Rhaegar, what are you doing here?" Rhaenyra called from the handrail of the second-floor stairs, her eyes shining with surprise and delight. She had only returned to Dragonstone the previous day and was overjoyed to see her brother so soon.

...

As dusk fell, the two siblings sat together on the open-air terrace, gazing at the beautiful coastline. Rhaenyra nestled her head against Rhaegar's shoulder.

"Rhaegar, you should be more cautious," she murmured softly. "A counterattack is too dangerous."

"I have to go," Rhaegar replied, his eyes fixed on the setting sun, feeling its fading warmth.

Rhaenyra lifted her head, her voice filled with concern. "You're alone, and the royal fleet is under Father's command. I can't mobilize it."

"It's alright," Rhaegar said, shaking his head.

Determined, Rhaenyra clutched his sleeve. "I'll ride Syrax to help you."

Rhaegar gently squeezed her hand. "You have to stay here. If anything happens to me, you're the heir."

"Rhaegar! Don't talk like that," Rhaenyra said angrily. "Stop your plans and apologize to Father."

"It was just an analogy," Rhaegar replied, his forehead damp with sweat. "One of us has to stay with Father. You can't take the risk."

"I won't agree to you going into danger either!" Rhaenyra's eyes widened with defiance.

Rhaegar leaned closer, his voice softening. "Sister, you should support me."

"I just want to kick your ass," Rhaenyra retorted, her cheeks flushing slightly.

Rhaegar stood up, releasing her hand and taking a deep breath. "Don't worry, I have a complete plan, though it's a bit risky."

As he descended the stairs, he added, "I've arranged for a maid to assist you. She'll arrive shortly."

Ignoring Rhaenyra's protests, Rhaegar made his way to the east coast of Dragonstone Island. He was determined to find a strong ally for the battles ahead.

...

The sky blazed with fiery clouds as dusk settled over the land. Despite the late hour, the oppressive summer heat lingered, causing beads of sweat to form on those outside.

A dark dragon shadow flashed across the sky, stirring a cool breeze in its wake as Rhaegar returned to King's Landing. He was not there to reconsider his plans, but to mobilize his troops.

Upon reaching the Dragonpit, Rhaegar summoned Maynard. "Take all the Dragonkeepers with you. Ships are waiting in the harbor," he ordered. With no other troops available, the Dragonkeepers were his last resort.

Maynard accepted the mission, quickly rallying the Dragonkeepers. Just then, the gate of the Dragonpit creaked open.

"Rhaegar, you are really here," a familiar female voice called out.

Rhaegar turned to see Jeyne standing at the entrance, her eyes sparkling with concern.