

G.O Thrones 241

Chapter 241: Bracken's End

Time passed slowly, inching toward dusk.

On the hillside, Rhaegar lay on the soft grass, hands behind his head, staring up at the sky. Beside him, the Cannibal rested with forepaws on the ground, neck stretched, eyes closed. Both master and dragon were relaxed.

As the evening breeze tousled his hair, Rhaegar shook his head slightly, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. He watched the flaming clouds and the setting sun, waiting for it to disappear completely. This would mark the end of Bracken's last moments of peace and fear.

Then, he would ride the Cannibal and replicate Aegon the Conqueror's fiery destruction of Harrenhal. No castle, no matter how impregnable, could withstand dragonfire.

At the base of the hill, the armies stood ready. Syrax and Dreamfire lay prostrate, vigilantly watching the Cannibal. The dragon exuded a dense and terrifying aura, flames building within its chest.

"Sister, the sun is setting," Helaena said, her wide eyes fixed on the horizon.

Rhaenyra held her small hand, also gazing at the sunset. Rhaegar's declaration had spread throughout the army: Bracken's end would come at sunset.

Getting no response, Helaena shook her sister's hand and furrowed her brow. "Brother is not happy. We must help him."

Rhaenyra looked at her in surprise, taken aback by her sensitivity. After a moment of thought, she said seriously, "Rhaegar can handle it himself."

"Oh, okay," Helaena replied, frowning and kicking the grass at her feet.

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Stone Hedge

In the forest of the sacred trees, green fire blazed, accompanied by the faint screams of agony and the sound of burning flesh. Outside the forest, Tru trembled with fear and looked around nervously before sneaking back into the castle.

Inside the castle walls, chaos reigned. Soldiers frantically carried buckets of wildfire into the fortifications. One commander shouted, "Tell the civilians to sift the sand! The moving wildfire needs a bed of sand!"

Wildfire, an extremely unstable explosive, was stored in sealed wooden barrels lined with fine sand to prevent shaking and accidental explosions. Tru moved with small, furtive steps, his eyes darting around as he kept his hands hidden in his sleeves, wringing them anxiously.

Commanders and soldiers noticed the bear-like former maester. One commander asked with a sullen expression, "What are you doing here? You should be in the cellar making wildfire."

"No, the Lord told me to come," Tru stammered, lying.

The commander looked at him skeptically. "Why did the Lord call you for?"

"I am the maker of Wildfire. I'm here to help you move it efficiently," Tru replied, his voice shaking. "All you need to move it is sand, and there's no difference between coarse and fine sand," he added, lying down again.

Coarse sand, mixed with stones and dirt, did nothing to minimize the shaking. But the commanders and soldiers, ignorant of the intricacies of alchemy, accepted his explanation without question. They were soldiers, not alchemists, and they followed orders without thinking.

The commander pretended to think before agreeing. "Okay, let's use coarse sand. Have the civilians bring more."

Tru, his heart pounding, tiptoed away from the castle. He entered a hidden attic and found a secret compartment.

Click!

The compartment opened and a letter appeared. Tru read it:

"The Bracken House has been forced by a witch to turn their backs on their own beliefs and will be punished."

"I'm leaving. There's a secret passage in the stables..."

This letter, left by the old Citadel maester, had warned of impending disaster and provided an escape route. Tru quickly crumpled the letter into a ball, stuffed it into his mouth, and swallowed it.

He, too, was preparing to flee.

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Sunset.

The sky turned golden as the sun set, casting a final red glow over the horizon.

On the hillside, the Cannibal shook and spread its massive wings like a black curtain against the sky. Its neck stretched forward and its green pupils flashed with a fierce glow.

"It's time," Rhaegar murmured, pushing himself up from the grass and stretching his tired neck.

"Roar..." The Cannibal let out a low growl, prostrating itself for its rider. It was eager to unleash its fury on the city below.

"Good fellow, you are my companion for life," Rhaegar said, stroking the Cannibal's pitch-black scales with a smile as pure as a child's.

It was hard to imagine what the Targaryens would be without their dragons.

He climbed the soft ladder to the saddle and took a deep breath before yelling, "Cannibal, fly!"

"Roar..." The Cannibal roared again, lifting its wings and soaring high into the sky.

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The sun had completely set. The moon was hidden, and the stars were scarce, shrouding Stone Hedge in darkness.

"Keep your eyes open and be on the lookout for any enemies sneaking up on you!" barked the commander dressed as a knight, patrolling the battlements and scolding the soldiers.

The soldiers fell silent and patrolled their surroundings with torches. However, the darkness made it difficult to see beyond a limited area.

A taller soldier whispered to his companion, "Do you think the dragon will burn the lord?"

His companion rolled his eyes in disgust. "Before the dragon burns the lord, it will burn the likes of us first."

Fools, worrying about others.

Suddenly, the sound of flapping wings filled the air, causing the torches to flicker in the cool wind.

"Be alert! The dragon is coming!" the officer shouted, drawing his longsword.

The soldiers tensed, held their weapons tightly, and stood back to back, staring into the darkness.

But the sound seemed to come from nowhere, and the dragon was nowhere to be seen.

A drop of cold sweat trickled down one soldier's cheek as his body shook. He swallowed nervously. The waiting was agonizing.

"Listen, the sound's gone," one soldier said in surprise.

The others pricked up their ears, realizing that the sound was indeed gone.

"Maybe the dragon flew over the wall and ignored us," a soldier muttered hopefully.

The soldiers began to relax, thinking that this was a reasonable assumption.

Suddenly, a sharp teenage voice shouted, "Dracarys!!!"

The temperature in the air immediately rose.

"Roar..."

A muffled dragon roar echoed, followed by ghostly green dragonfire descending upon the battlements.

Boom...

The dragonfire engulfed the soldiers, turning the night sky an eerie green.

A large, blurry figure appeared in the night sky.

Above the Stone Hedge, the Cannibal's dark form slowly circled, spewing eerie green Dragonfire like mist and water.

"Ah!....."

"Release the wildfire, the dragon is attacking..."

"It's too late, run!"

On the wall, the Bracken soldiers screamed and wailed, writhing in the dragonfire.

Rhaegar, clad in black robes, rode on the dragon's back and surveyed the devastation below.

His lips moved slightly as he murmured, "Burn them all."

His words were cold and distant.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal roared, flapping its wings and circling the city walls, unleashing Dragonfire repeatedly.

Outside the city, three miles away.

Samwell and Robb watched and waited patiently. A green fire blazed brightly, growing steadily.

Samwell's eyes lit up as he shouted, "Charge! Surround Stone Hedge!"

"Charge!"

The soldiers rushed toward the Stone Hedge. Their mission was clear: block the gates and let no Bracken escape.

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Stone Hedge Castle.

The outer walls of the city were engulfed in flames, the soldiers' defenses useless as they were consumed by the dragonfire.

A short distance away, Amos watched in shock. The giant black dragon roamed the night sky, its dragonfire sweeping the city walls as effortlessly as a maid washing dishes.

Amos snapped out of his stupor and shouted angrily, "Bring out the wildfire and aim it at the dragon!"

He had anticipated that the soldiers in the outer city would not be able to stop the dragon. The flames were hidden, waiting for this moment.

The soldiers obeyed his command, carefully pulling out the wildfire and placing it on the stone-throwing carts.

"Release!"

With that command, a dozen stone-throwers fired in unison, aiming at the dragon in the night sky.

Boom Boom Boom...

The distance was too great; the wildfire missed and crashed into the outer city wall. The wildfire seemed to merge with the dragonfire, indistinguishable.

This caught Rhaegar's attention. With the help of the spreading fire, he saw the stone throwers positioned above and below the city. His eyes narrowed with understanding.

"Cannibal, attack the inner city!"

"Roar..."

The Cannibal stopped its Dragonfire attack, raised its wings, and flew toward the inner city, spewing fire at the stone throwers.

The speed of the dragonfire was far greater than the soldiers' attempts to start a wildfire. The intense heat caused the wildfire to detonate before it could even reach its target.

The next second...

A rumble...

Buckets of wildfire exploded, echoing through Stone Hedge City. Green flames shot into the sky.

"Ah! The wildfire exploded..."

"It's hot... Run away..."

The wildfire spread even more fiercely than the Cannibal's Dragonfire. In an instant, the walls of city were surrounded by blazing wildfire.

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow at the unexpected benefit. Amos had indeed been foolish to think he could use wildfire against a dragon. Wildfire, an unstable alchemical product, was no match for a dragon that controlled the skies.

The heat of the wildfire was unbearable, and the soldiers burned alive, screaming and writhing in agony.

After pondering for a moment, Rhaegar gave the order, "Cannibal, fly to the castle!

The sticky nature of the wildfire meant that once the city was surrounded, the people inside would never escape unscathed. He was going to the Bracken House castle to fulfill his promise.

Today the Bracken House bloodline would be over!

Cannibal flapped its wings, its pupils flashing with disgust at the wildfire, and flew away.

The dragon found the foul, putrid odor of the wildfire nauseating, a poor imitation of its own Dragonfire.

Chapter 242: The End of the Road

In the Inner City

Hiding in a stone-built chamber, covering his mouth and nose with one hand, Amos cried out in panic, "Where is the Red Witch?"

"I'm not sure, my lord. She seems to be performing rituals in the Godswood Forest," the knight replied, fear in his voice. "My lord, there are still many fires in the Ccity. We must flee quickly."

The recent explosion was only from a few barrels outside. If the fire spread, the rising temperatures would ignite the forest fires stored inside the city. At that point, everyone would be burned alive.

Amos looked desperate, grasping at straws. "Yes! There are still sacrifices. The Lord of Light will bless me!"

Shouting, he pulled a token from his pocket. "Come with me, there are secret passages. We can escape through them!"

As a member of the Bracken clan, Amos knew of the numerous tunnels his ancestors had dug beneath Stone Hedge Castle for just such an emergency.

As he led his men down the stairs, the temperature rose, the air thick with the stench of burning wildfire.

"My lord, the wildfire is still in the cellar," a soldier tending to the wildfire reported, rushing toward them.

Amos shoved him away and ran toward a secret side passageway, yelling, "Never mind that! I have to find the Red Witch first."

He firmly believed that once the Red Witch's ritual was complete, the Lord of Light would grant him the power to defeat the Targaryens and their dragon.

None of the remaining soldiers dared to handle the wildfire, so they followed Amos, fleeing through the secret passage.

Thousands of them moved noisily towards the escape route, a frantic procession.

In the cellar.

The cellar lay directly below them. As the soldiers' footsteps increased, the stone walls of the cellar shook.

Click...

Tiny bits of dirt shook loose and fell onto the sand-covered floor. Wooden shelves lined both sides of the cellar, neatly stacked with barrels of wildfire, cushioned by sand.

Knock, knock...

The footsteps of the fleeing soldiers grew louder, causing the cellar walls to shake slightly. Normally, this kind of shaking wouldn't be a problem. The barrels holding the wildfire were relatively stable, cushioned with fine sand to absorb vibrations.

However, half of the barrels were lined with coarse sand mixed with rocks and mud, creating an uneven cushion. As the shaking continued, the barrels bumped against the rocks and mud.

They were in danger of exploding.

Boom!

A barrel of wildfire suddenly exploded, setting off a chain reaction as the remaining barrels exploded. Green flames blossomed in unison, a deadly dance of destruction.

In the secret tunnel, separated by a mere wall, soldiers were still evacuating, packed tightly together. The explosion echoed.

Bang!

The tunnel erupted, wildfire spreading like a ravenous beast, consuming the entire passage.

"Ah... wildfire!"

"Don't touch me, it's burning!"

"My face..."

The narrow secret passage became an inferno, instantly engulfing hundreds of soldiers. Cries of despair and agony pierced the night.

Outside the Secret Passage

Amos, leading over 300 men, had already fled the inner city and huddled in a remote corner of the outer wall. They waited for more soldiers to appear, but a sudden heat wave swept through the passage.

Buzz!

A soldier halfway out was engulfed in the wildfire, his body lit like a human torch.

"Ah! Help me, help me..."

The flames consumed him and he fell back into the passage. The wildfire continued to rage, flames shooting over ten meters into the air. The searing heat wave knocked Amos and his men down.

"Run, run!"

Seeing the dire situation, Amos scrambled away from the exit, panic in his eyes.

Half an hour later

The wildfire's fury began to subside, and soldiers slowly climbed to their feet. Amos turned back, witnessing the fall of the inner city. Wildfire burned from the inside out, green flames reaching tens of meters high, turning Stone Hedge Castle into a giant torch. In the night, it was a beacon of ruin.

"It's over, there's no going back."

Amos stood frozen, murmuring in disbelief. The inner city had fallen, cutting off their retreat to the castle. They were trapped between the inner and outer cities.

"My lord, the only way out now is to break through," the Knight suggested, holding Amos's arm.

The Targaryen dragon was still circling in the night sky. Without an urgent escape plan, they would be reduced to ashes before dawn.

Amos gripped the token tightly, his knuckles white. "There's an ambush by the Blackwood family in the outer city."

"Better to fight and have a chance to escape," the Bracken Knight urged, seeing no other option.

Amos closed his eyes, fear shaking him. "All right, let's break out!"

"Lord Amos commands: open the gates and break through!"

The Bracken Knight's cry echoed, rallying the remnants. They moved to open the city gates and lower the drawbridge.

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Godswood Forest

The sacrificial wildfire gradually died out, leaving only ash and bone fragments on the ground. The Red Witch knelt before the remains, clasping her hands as she chanted, "Blessed be the Lord of Light..."

As she recited a series of fervent prayers, her youthful face began to age. In a few short breaths, she went from a vibrant woman in her twenties to an elderly crone, her face lined with deep wrinkles.

Unaware of the change, the Red Witch scooped up some of the ash and smeared it on her aged face, continuing to pray with intense devotion. The ashes spread evenly over her skin, covering her face and neck.

Then a miraculous transformation took place. The wrinkles disappeared, her skin became smooth, and she regained her youthful appearance, looking even younger than before, like a petite girl in her late teens.

"Haha, it worked," she laughed sharply, feeling the change. "The fancy priest didn't lie to me!"

Her laughter faded, replaced by a cautious look. "I have to get out of here."

Having achieved her goal, she knew it was time to save herself. As for her lover, Amos Bracken, he was nothing more than a foolish tool. Once used, he could be discarded.

Rising to her feet, she lifted the hem of her red gown and ran toward the castle.

After some time, the Red Witch, using the cover of night, reached the vicinity of the horse shed at the back of the castle.

Rustle...

A loud noise made her freeze. She quickly hid behind the edge of a well and peered out.

In the darkness of the porch, a tall, stocky figure emerged from the haystacks, clumsily brushing off the straw and hanging his head in despair. The Red Witch recognized him at once: the ex-maester, a dim-witted fatman with traces of giant blood.

An idea flashed in her eyes. She called out, "Who's there?"

"Roar..."

Instead of a human response, a muffled dragon roar answered her.

Whoosh-

The black dragon flapped its wings, creating gusts that scattered the straw on the shed as it hovered over the castle. On the dragon's back, Rhaegar frowned as he heard faint sounds below.

Looking down at the castle, he saw no lights, only an eerie silence.

"Cannibal, land," he commanded.

Rhaegar decided not to act rashly and burn the castle immediately. His mission had a purpose:

Take Stone Hedge Castle.

Wipe out the Bracken House.

Execute Amos Bracken.

Taking the city was the first priority. Stone Hedge was a valuable stronghold, a noble territory with significant worth. Securing it intact was far more beneficial than reducing it to ashes.

Boom!

Cannibal landed on the horse corridor, crushing several fragile haylofts beneath its feet.

As soon as he dismounted, Rhaegar spotted two figures hiding in the shadows of the porch.

"Come out, or my dragon will breathe Dragonfire!" he commanded, his voice deep and authoritative.

"Yes, honorable prince!"

Tall and round, Tru stumbled out and fell to his knees in the mud. His escape had been thwarted by Amos' orders to seal the secret passageway near the castle, trapping him.

The Red Witch stepped out hesitantly, trembling. Her wide eyes were fixed on the massive dragon, her legs weak with fear. She cursed her luck, knowing that her earlier scream had drawn the dragon's attention.

Rhaegar's brow furrowed in surprise as he observed the pair: a burly man in a gray robe with no maester's chain, and a red-robed witch, a demonic figure of beauty.

The Red Witch especially piqued his interest. She reminded him of another red-robed woman he had encountered in the Vale, one who had a Shadowcat as a companion and wielded strange powers.

With that in mind, Rhaegar pulled out a ruby necklace and addressed the Red Witch, "Do you recognize this?"

His tone was deceptively simple, meant to test her.

The Red Witch looked up tentatively, her eyes first on Rhaegar's handsome face, then on the necklace. When she saw the ruby, her eyes widened and she blurted out, "Flaming Red Heart!"

"So you recognize it," Rhaegar said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

The Red Witch's breathing quickened, her eyes filled with longing. "This gem is one of the heirlooms of the Temple of R'hllor, lost during the last Valyrian invasion of Lys."

R'hllor, the Lord of Light, was widely worshipped in the free cities, with one of the largest temples standing in Lys.

Rhaegar shook the necklace in curiosity. "What does it do? Immunity to fire?"

"No, no, no! That would be a waste," she replied, her voice trembling with excitement. "According to the High Priestess, the Flaming Red Heart allows the wearer to communicate with the gods and have their heart's desires fulfilled."

Rhaegar tossed the necklace at her feet. "Try it and see what it does," he said indifferently.

Cannibal, attuned to Rhaegar's thoughts, bristled, its dragon's maw pointed at the Red Witch, ready to unleash fire at a moment's notice.

The Red Witch, oblivious to the threat, crawled forward and grabbed the necklace, her eyes glued to the ruby.

"Great R'hllor, your faithful servant..." she prayed fervently, clutching the ruby in her hands.

But nothing happened. The ruby remained cold, and no miracle occurred.

"How can this be?" she muttered, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Growing impatient, Rhaegar demanded, "Did it work or not?"

Cannibal lowered its head, its fiery breath heating the air.

"Yes, it will," the Red Witch stammered, a chill running down her spine. Panicking, she added, "Perhaps it has been too long without a sacrifice, and it needs one to regain its power."

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What kind of sacrifice?"

Uncertain about the beliefs of foreign religions like R'hllor, he scrutinized her closely.

The Red Witch, seeing a potential ally in Rhaegar, tried to smile. "The sacrifice is—"

Suddenly, a sharp knife pierced her chest from behind, cutting her off mid-sentence. Blood flowed freely as her body froze in shock. She turned her head with great difficulty to see the frightened yet determined face of Tru, the disgraced maester.

With a final twitch, she collapsed to the ground, lifeless.

Rhaegar watched with quiet interest, having seen Tru's move but choosing not to intervene. The Red Witch's failure to demonstrate the ruby's power had rendered it useless.

After killing her, Tru dropped the dagger in fear, his stomach heaving with deep breaths. Trembling, he picked up the fallen ruby and held it out with both hands, his voice tinged with desperation.

"Honorable Prince, that woman was a liar. She killed many people."

Tru had been forced to act, unable to let the Red Witch deceive and possibly harm more people. He understood the danger she posed, especially if she gained influence over a royal heir.

Rhaegar, however, was only interested in the ruby's potential for fire magic. The Targaryens had no need for ritual—they commanded dragons.

Amused by the contrast between Tru's hulking physique and his gentle demeanor, Rhaegar asked, "Who are you, dressed like a maester?"

"Prince, my name is Tru," he replied, bowing his head respectfully. He explained his humble origins in the Riverlands and his brief time at the Citadel, where he had studied until a failed wildfire experiment led to his expulsion.

Rhaegar measured Tru carefully, impressed by his intellect despite his unassuming appearance.

"Where are the members of the Bracken House hiding?" he inquired.

"In the cellar of the castle," Tru replied eagerly. "There are many civilians in the castle, driven there by Lord Amos. I can gather some men and capture the Bracken House."

Rhaegar, intent on preserving the castle, agreed to Tru's plan. "Go ahead."

"Yes, lord," Tru replied, setting out to carry out his orders.

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Outside Stone Hedge Castle

The drawbridge lowered with a heavy thud, and Amos, flanked by his soldiers, fled with desperate speed. The outer walls were engulfed in dragonfire and wildfire; even a stray spark could mean certain death.

Under the cover of night, over 300 soldiers stumbled into the muddy grass, their path obscured by the darkness. Panic and confusion reigned as they struggled to find their way.

Ooooooooooooooooooooo...

The mournful note of a horn echoed across the open meadow.

Emerging from the night, 2,000 Blackwood soldiers advanced, their presence a grim reminder of the futility of flight.

Chapter 243: Exchange for Harrenhal

A sharp dragon roar pierced the night air. Orange and yellow Dragonfire, interwoven with the sky, cut through the darkness, raining down on the soldiers of the Bracken House.

"Ah!....."

"There's an ambush! Run away!"

The Dragonfire's intense heat and immense impact were irresistible. The already weakened Bracken soldiers were incinerated or scattered like dust.

On the ground, Samwell's army surged forward, crashing into the enemy ranks.

"Make this quick! Don't let any of them escape!"

Samwell's longsword swung with deadly precision, cutting down any soldier who dared to resist. His lean figure moved with lethal grace through the chaos.

Above, two dragons circled, their presence casting a grim shadow over the one-sided slaughter below. Two thousand Blackwood soldiers against three hundred Bracken men—victory was inevitable.

Twenty minutes later, the melee ended. Every Bracken soldier lay dead, with Samwell's men ensuring none were feigning death.

"Let go of me, Blackwood scum!"

Amos lay in a pool of blood, helpless and alone, struggling futilely against his captors.

"Amos, good to see you again!"

Samwell, eyes blazing with fury, kicked Amos in the stomach, sending him sprawling.

"Ah! Damn Blackwoods!" Amos screamed, clutching his stomach in agony.

Samwell, breathing heavily, grabbed Amos by the hair, pressing his longsword to his throat. "Amos, I killed your brother, and you won't get away with it!"

Amos's brother had been the last Lord of the Bracken family. To curry favor with Rhaenyra, he had provoked several Blackwood children. A teenage Samwell had slain him in a tournament.

"Little bastard, kill me if you dare," Amos spat, trying to salvage some dignity.

"You think you have a chance to live?" Samwell's grip tightened, ready to decapitate him.

"Wait, leave him for the prince," Robb interjected, grabbing Amos, who had resigned himself to death.

At the mention of Rhaegar, Samwell paused, his expression hardening. "It's too merciful to kill him with one stroke."

With a final kick to Amos's face, Samwell vented his rage.

The soldiers secured Amos to a flagpole, their grim procession heading toward the burning city of Stone Hedge. The feud between the Blackwoods and Brackens, as well as the personal vendettas, demanded more than a swift death.

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On the other side.

Tru gathered over a hundred civilians and stormed Bracken House's castle. After a chaotic smash and grab, more than ten nobles in fancy dress were dragged out.

"Get out of here, you scum!"

The peasants, filled with rage, hurled curses and assaulted the nobles with punches and kicks. They had been oppressed by the Brackens, and their hearts were full of fear and resentment. They wanted to burn the castle to the ground.

The members of Bracken House, gagged and helpless, could only plead for mercy, which earned them more beatings.

The Bracken House was utterly destroyed.

Rhaegar circled over the castle on his dragon, Cannibal, closing his eyes to the night wind. The Targaryen was true to his word: if he vowed to end a bloodline, he would follow through.

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Half a month later.

A high platform was set up in a busy marketplace. Lyonel, his arm in a sling, pointed to a crowd of people kneeling before him, fervently explaining their crimes.

"The Blackwood House waged a private war and disobeyed the King's orders..."

After a long proclamation, he announced the verdict: "Kellan Blackwood is deprived of his lordship and is sentenced to death by garroting."

Turning to Kellan, he asked aloud, "Prisoner, do you accept the sentence?"

"Yes, Lord Hand of the King," Kellan replied in a low voice. "But I do not wish to die immediately. Please allow me to don the black robe and guard the Great Wall."

The crowd watched expectantly. Lyonel nodded and granted the request. The Kingsguard draped a black robe over Kellan and led him away from the execution ground.

This decision was the result of long negotiations. Kellan pleaded guilty, and the Blackwoods ceded some territory near the Red Fork River. In exchange, Kellan was allowed to live, and his eldest son, Samwell, inherited the title and the land.

With the Blackwoods dealt with, the Brackens were next. Lyonel declared their sins: waging war, disobeying the king, murdering Lord Graves Tully, Lord Tully's heir, and defying the Hand of the King, Lyonel Strong.

The Bracken House was sentenced to death. Every man, woman, and child was beheaded, and their heads were thrown into the moat. Amos Bracken, the chief culprit, was stripped of his title and territory, his clothes torn from him, and he was whipped all the way to the Dragonpit.

On the journey, he was scorned by the common people and pelted with filth.

When he reached the Dragonpit, covered in grime, Cannibal awaited him. The dragon's flames burned him to ash.

The people of King's Landing knew of the Bracken House's rebellions and transgressions. They became the epitome of traitors.

Prince Rhaegar, who managed to put down the rebellion, was hailed as a hero by all.

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Red Keep.

In the bedroom, Rhaegar sat at a table, head down, writing furiously.

Knock, knock...

There was a soft knock at the door, followed by Rhaenyra's voice. "Rhaegar, I'm coming in."

She entered without waiting for an answer. Compared to half a month ago, Rhaenyra looked even more radiant. Her long silver-gold hair flowed smoothly, woven into a slender braid. She wore a fitted black dress that revealed her ankles, and a pair of exquisite red-bottomed high heels.

Rhaegar looked up at the sound of her voice, revealing dark circles under his eyes. He saw three blurry images of his sister.

Supporting his head with one hand, he said, "Rhaenyra, I'm dizzy."

"You are too tired. You should rest," she said, gently dragging her brother to the bed and laying him down, rubbing his head.

Rhaegar obediently closed his eyes and rested his head on his sister's smooth, white thighs, savoring the comfort. He hadn't had a moment's rest since breaking through the Stone Hedge. He had spent days placating the townspeople, dispersing the townsfolk at the gates, and holding back the remnants of Bracken's forces. For three days, he had extinguished the fires in the city, sent men to clear the ruins, and cleared the streets.

And that wasn't all.

Bracken, as a lord's house, had numerous subordinate families and knightly houses. Some needed to be punished, others accepted. Rhaegar had to oversee the Bracken vaults, granaries, and tax records, ensuring every detail was correct.

It was exhausting. "Rhaenyra, if I have to do this every day as king, I'd rather abdicate to you," Rhaegar said, lying as still as a corpse.

"You're the only one who works this hard," Rhaenyra said, tapping him affectionately on the nose.

These tasks shouldn't be left to the heir alone. There were advisors for that. But the House Bracken, with its ancient legacy, demanded careful handling. Rhaegar trusted no one else with it. Managing the money, the food, and the ownerless Stone Hedge required his watchful eye. Without him, local nobles might take advantage of the situation.

Checking finances and keeping records was the job of Lord Lyman Beesbury, the Master of Coin. But Lyman, old and inefficient, couldn't keep up. Needing the resources of Stone Hedge, Rhaegar took on the task. Had he done it alone, he might have collapsed from exhaustion. Fortunately, he had the help of his followers.

After resting for a while, Rhaegar's headache subsided. He rubbed his face against Rhaenyra's smooth thighs for comfort. This was how a prince should be treated. The corners of Rhaenyra's mouth turned up and her eyes flashed with triumph. Dressing up had been worth it.

Rhaegar, understanding her motives, still enjoyed the warmth. He was tired and dizzy, but not stupid.

Time passed quietly. Rhaenyra's eyes sparkled as she asked softly, "Rhaegar, you seem so attached to Stone Hedge. Do you have any ideas?"

Compared to the Blackwoods, who lost only a piece of territory, the Bracken House was utterly destroyed. Their direct lineage was executed, and their titles, castles, and territories returned to the crown.

Rhaegar sidled over, hugging her white thighs. "Yes, I want to find a territory for myself," he said.

"You're the heir, and the Prince's Palace is still under construction," Rhaenyra said suspiciously.

Rhaegar shook his head, saying no more. The Prince's Palace was just a residence with scarce territory, population, and resources. His true fiefdom should be Dragonstone, now given to Rhaenyra. He felt it was only right. However, he still needed a rich land for his fiefdom. The Riverlands were ideal: fertile, populous, and close to the crownlands.

Seeing his reluctance to speak, Rhaenyra pinched his cheek and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Rest now. There is a celebration banquet this evening."

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Nightfall.

Inside the Red Keep, the lights glowed brightly, illuminating the steady stream of guests. Viserys sat at the head of the table, smiling broadly as he accepted the flattery and toasts of his subjects.

The long-dormant royal family had destroyed an ancient house of the Riverlands in one fell swoop. No matter how much the nobles had despised the young king in the past, they now had to put aside their petty thoughts and show the respect due to his strong heir.

After the toasts, the feast began. Rhaegar and Lyonel sat on either side of Viserys.

Rhaegar was the first to speak. "Lord Lyonel, I have some business to discuss with you."

"Go ahead, Prince," Lyonel replied, holding a wine glass, his expression turning solemn.

Rhaegar hesitated, locking eyes with his father. Viserys broke into a smile and nodded. Father and son had discussed the matter beforehand and there was no problem.

With his father's support, Rhaegar said with a straight face, "Lord Lyonel, the Strong House served their kingdom faithfully, but Harrenhal was burned by the mob."

Leonor took a sip of mulled wine, troubled by the situation. Harrenhal had been badly damaged and it would cost a fortune to repair. He was already considering borrowing from the Iron Bank.

Seeing Lyonel's distress, Rhaegar smiled. "The castle at Stone Hedge is still intact. What do you think about using it as a replacement?"

Chapter 244: The First Melting of Black Dragonstone

A few days later.

In the Riverlands, at Harrenhal.

After half a month, the five towers were still dark, and smoke wafted from the remaining ruins of various buildings.

"Prince, are you sure the dragon... will work?" Lyonel asked, his face troubled, as he watched the Unsullied busily clearing the debris.

At the moment, the Unsullied were hauling pieces of rubble from the ruins and throwing them into a large pit about a man's height deep. Besides the rubble, the pit contained ashes pulled from the ruins and a dark, sticky pile of dragon dung.

Dragon dung differs from the feces of other creatures. It has a faint odor and fewer solid components. Being magical creatures, dragons' bodies are infused with flame elements. Once cows and sheep enter their stomachs, they are rapidly digested by potent gastric juices, leaving behind black slime that resembles unheated magma.

Rhaegar squatted at the edge of the deep pit, stroking his chin as he murmured, "It shouldn't be a problem."

He seemed to have thought of something. Waving to Grey Worm, who stood guard nearby, he hesitantly said, "There's a bit too much dragon dung. Have someone scoop out some."

"Yes, Prince," Grey Worm replied, calling for two Unsullied to scoop out the dragon droppings. A large ladle, about two meters long, reached into the pit and scooped up a hefty portion of dragon dung.

Rhaegar's eyes lit up. "Almost there."

According to his knowledge of the blood sorcery [Dragonstone], it was roughly the ratio of a small amount of dragon dung mixed with a large quantity of stones and mortar.

"Prince, using dragon dung to create black stone... I've never heard of it," Lyonel said helplessly.

Rhaegar replied thoughtfully, "Of course, it's not just dragon dung. Dragon scales, dragon blood, dragon bones, and even stones stained with dragonfire are all essential forging materials."

Dragonstone was an unorthodox magical artifact, and the melting process required a touch of magic. Dragons were high-level magical creatures, and each part of their body contained enough magical essence to melt Dragonstone. While dragon scales, blood, and bones were too precious, dragon dung was an abundant and inexpensive alternative.

In the lore of "Dragon Stone," the Dragonlords of Valyria had used dragon dung to build black stone wonders. It was sturdy, durable, and had no bad odor.

With the ingredients ready, the show was about to begin.

The Cannibal, hovering in the sky, slowly descended, scanning the deep pit with disdain. This was where the dragon dung came from.

Rhaegar stepped away from the pit, approached the Cannibal, and commanded, "Dracarys!"

"Roar..."

The Cannibal snorted, unleashing a torrent of dragonfire into the pit.

Zira...

Under the intense heat, the debris in the pit began to melt, mixing with the ashes and dragon droppings. Rhaegar placed both hands on the Cannibal's scales, closed his eyes, and murmured a low incantation.

Soon, the gurgling sound of boiling liquid emerged from the pit.

The Cannibal ceased his Dragonfire, and Rhaegar opened his eyes.

An Unsullied stepped forward to inspect the pit and exclaimed, "Prince, it seems to have worked."

Rhaegar, thrilled by the news, rushed forward to see for himself.

The materials in the pit had transformed into a bubbling black magma. The temperature of the magma was not extremely high, comparable to boiling water. There was no discernible odor.

"Quick, bring the molds," Rhaegar shouted, instructing for stone molds about a meter long and half a meter wide to be brought over.

The Unsullied used a large ladle to scoop the black magma and pour it into the molds. As they worked, Rhaegar noticed a key characteristic of the substance—it solidified rapidly. As soon as it was scooped out, white smoke began to rise from the ladle, and when poured into the stone trough, it quickly hardened into black dragon stone, fitting perfectly to the mold.

Rhaegar smiled, tapping on the surface of the black dragon stone.

Clang...

The sound was hard and solid, the material firm. Turning back to Lyonel, he raised an eyebrow triumphantly.

"How is it, my lord?"

Lyonel was too shocked to speak, his face a mix of awe and solemnity. Despite the magical element involved, witnessing this art in person was astonishing.

Lyonel raised his trembling hand and said excitedly, "This method truly deserves to be called the knowledge of Valyria! It's simply unheard of and unseen."

In Westeros, current construction techniques still relied on stonemasons and masons. Stonemasons shaped boulders, while masons mixed mortar from straw ash and yellow clay. This process was slow and labor-intensive; a single stonemason could work all day and carve only a few useful stones.

Black dragon stone required only stone, mortar, and dragon droppings, fused together in moments and molded into any desired shape.

Rhaegar's eyes sparkled with anticipation. "That's not all."

He instructed the Unsullied to scoop out another ladle of black magma and pour it onto the molded black dragon stone.

Zira...

When the black magma met the black dragon stone, a hot white smoke rose, quickly dissipating as the magma solidified and fused seamlessly with the stone. This demonstrated that black dragon stone could be formed using an infusion method rather than traditional construction techniques.

Lyonel looked stunned, nearly dropping his jaw in disbelief. It took him a moment to gather himself. Shaking his head, he chuckled, "Prince, no wonder you wanted to trade the intact Stone Hedge for Harrenhal."

Harrenhal had been burned to the ground, rendering it unfit for nobility. At a dinner party a few days prior, Lyonel had agreed to the exchange of territories. The Strongs would move to the former Bracken lands, inheriting Stone Hedge and most of its territory, while Harrenhal and its lands reverted to the Crown, with Rhaegar receiving the title of Lord for life.

Lyonel was pleased with the arrangement. Despite Harrenhal's ruin, Stone Hedge, although smaller and less strategically located, was an excellent choice. The territory and its people were richer than those under the Strong House.

Harrenhal held a significant position in Westeros, overseeing the Riverlands, defending the Vale, and the Northern Realm. However, its history was cursed, with none of its past lords meeting a good end. Lyonel was more than willing to exchange his family's land for Stone Hedge, reducing risks and reintegrating into the Riverlands' noble power.

With these considerations in mind, Lyonel said, "Prince, the Strong House will take over Stone Hedge, and Old Lord Tully and I will ensure the stone supply needed to rebuild Harrenhal."

Harrenhal's complex had been reduced to ruins, with only the five main towers and the city wall remaining intact. To smelt the black dragonstone, a steady supply of stone was required. This task was undertaken by the Tully and Strong Houses.

The Strong House, having traded prime land for the royal family, naturally needed to contribute. The Tullys, on the other hand, needed to compensate.

With the Blackwoods and Brackens at war and one openly rebelling, Old Tully, as Lord Paramount of the Trident and Lord of Riverrun, had nearly been captured by his own bannermen.

His title was spared only because the Tully House had lost its successor. While he had no great merits, he had endured much. Thus, Old Tully had to contribute a significant amount of stone to repair Harrenhal.

...

After the successful creation of black dragonstone, Rhaegar had more pressing matters to attend to.

Inside the Kingspyre Tower, Rhaegar took his seat at the high chair. Besides Lyonel, a few others joined him: Robb, Grey Worm, and Tru, the former maester.

"Robb," Rhaegar called out.

Robb knelt on one knee, his voice reverent, "Prince."

Rhaegar exchanged a glance with Lyonel before continuing, "Robb, you distinguished yourself in the battles on Stone Island and in the rebellion. I've asked my father for the recognition you deserve."

Robb's head lifted, his eyes full of excitement. He had already heard from Samwell, who had been made Lord of Raventree Hall, that the prince intended to honor him. It seemed that Rhaegar intended to make him a sworn knight, possibly paving the way for land and a castle of his own.

Lyonel cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the room. His eyes questioned Rhaegar, who nodded, allowing Lyonel to speak.

With Robb's eyes full of expectation, Lyonel solemnly announced, "By the King's will and royal decree, Robb Rivers is granted the title of Lord of Stone Mill."

"Lord!" Robb's hands shook in disbelief.

"That's right, Lord of Stone Mill," Rhaegar confirmed with a smile. "Don't worry, I'll fund the construction of your castle from my private coffers. You won't be living in a thatched cottage."

Robb's eyes welled with tears of gratitude. "Thank you, Your Grace, and thank you, Prince."

Though it was the lowest title of nobility, it was still a title - far above the status of a sworn knight. Stone Mill, a territory ceded by the Blackwoods, was fertile land on the north bank of the Red Fork River, ideal for farming and fishing.

"Now, it's not fitting for a man to cry," Rhaegar admonished gently. "With your new title, you can change your family name, design a family crest, and shed the identity of a bastard."

"Yes, Prince!" Robb nodded vigorously, holding back tears.

After the ceremony, Rhaegar signaled for Robb to take his leave. The appointment of Robb as a lord was both a reward for loyalty and a strategic move to win the support of other Second Sons.

Stone Mill's location between Blackwood and Strong territory also served as a buffer to prevent conflicts. Rhaegar had no fear of Robb's loyalty waning, as the territory's strategic position ensured a delicate balance of power.

Next, Rhaegar turned his attention to Grey Worm.

"Grey Worm," he called.

Grey Worm stepped forward, striking the ground with his spear in salute.

"Grey Worm, do you know how to train the Unsullied?" Rhaegar asked directly.

Grey Worm hesitated, unsure how to respond.

Rhaegar quickly clarified, "I mean the physical fitness and combat training of the Unsullied, without the need for erasing individuality or castration."

With a new territory, Rhaegar needed a strong armed force, and there were none better than the Unsullied.

Grey Worm breathed a sigh of relief. "It can be done, but there is an age limit. Training is most effective before the age of sixteen."

The Unsullied were trained from a young age, developing their unwavering discipline. Training older individuals, whose bodies and minds were already set, was far less effective.

"Don't worry," Rhaegar assured him. "I'll support you fully."

Among the freed slaves were many children and teenagers. Additionally, Flea Bottom was teeming with orphans and bastard children. There was no shortage of potential recruits for their new army.

Chapter 245: The Storm in King's Landing

After discussing the training program, Rhaegar outlined Grey Worm's new duties.

He tasked Grey Worm with relocating thousands of slaves from outside King's Landing to Harrenhal. Additionally, Grey Worm was to oversee the selection of new soldiers from Flea Bottom. True to his nature, Grey Worm was swift and efficient, leaving the hall immediately to begin his assignments.

Now, only Tru, the disgraced maester, remained. Rhaegar had not interacted much with him but knew Tru was an introverted and timid man. Despite his demeanor, Tru possessed an impressive array of knowledge, earning chains of Black Iron, Bronze, Silver, and the rare Valyrian Steel—signifying expertise in Ravenology, Astronomy, Medicine, and Magic and Occultism, respectively.

The Valyrian Steel link was particularly prestigious, awarded to only one in a hundred students. Tru's fascination with magic and the occult led him to secretly develop wildfire, resulting in his expulsion from the Citadel.

When Rhaegar inquired about his aspirations, Tru revealed he had no grand ambitions. Instead, he preferred a quiet life, focused on scientific research. His current goal was simply to find a stable place to live and work.

Recognizing Tru's potential, Rhaegar decided to utilize his talents. He assigned Tru to stay at Harrenhal, starting with the smelting of black dragonstone. Rhaegar handed over the necessary spells to Tru, trusting him with the task.

To motivate Tru further, Rhaegar made a solemn promise, "When Harrenhal and the Dragon's Nest are completed, I will write to the Hightower House and help you regain your position at the Citadel, restoring your status as a maester."

The Hightowers, who controlled Oldtown where the Citadel was located, would likely honor such a request. Helping a disgraced maester was a minor favor for them.

"Yes, Prince. I promise to complete the mission," Tru replied, his excitement palpable as his belly trembled.

For Tru, a commoner who had risen to become a maester, regaining his diploma was the highest honor. It was more important to him than anything else.

...

Nightfall

Bonfires blazed along the walls of Harrenhal, pushing back the encroaching darkness.

Rhaegar rode his dragon, Cannibal, towards the north shore of Lake God's Eye. The shore was illuminated by firelight, where a makeshift lumber mill had been set up. Strong laborers carried timber to the carpenters, their silhouettes flickering in the firelight.

"Come on, Cannibal," Rhaegar murmured, his gaze lingering on the bustling scene for a moment before he directed his dragon to take flight towards the Isle of Faces.

The Dragon's Nest had been a childhood dream of his. Now, the geothermal heat of the Isle of Faces made it the ideal location to bring this dream to life. However, transporting the necessary materials required ships.

The timber mill was the first step in this process, with plans for a shipyard and dock to follow. During the reign of Harren the Black, shipyards and docks had been constructed on the north shore of God's Eye, used to repel enemies approaching from both sides of the lake. These defenses had caused significant losses to Aegon the Conqueror's forces. But Rhaegar had no intention of building a navy. His sole aim was to secure ships for transporting materials to the Isle of Faces.

Cannibal soared over the expansive waters of Lake God's Eye, eventually descending above the Isle of Faces. With a powerful flap of its wings, the dragon landed gently. Rhaegar dismounted and made his way directly to the Hot Spring.

Over the past month, the Hot Spring had undergone a remarkable transformation. Once the size of a small basin, it had expanded to several meters in diameter. A fishbeam tree had been engulfed by the spring's range, its entire root system submerged, turning it into a tree in the water.

The spring's water was crystal clear, steaming with white vapor. The roots of the fishbeam tree clung to the ground, while the human-like face carved into its trunk twisted in a hauntingly beautiful manner.

"Ah, the underground temperature keeps rising. A dragon's nest here is definitely feasible," Rhaegar breathed out, taking off his clothes as he approached the hot spring.

With a splash, he jumped into the water, leaning against the tree's rhizome and closing his eyes in contentment.

"Ahhh..." he sighed, the hot water soothing his muscles as he stretched out his legs. The spring's heat was perfect for him, gradually lulling him into a drowsy state.

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King's Landing

The Red Keep, the King's Chambers

After a round of passionate exertion, the room was filled only with the sound of ragged breathing. Viserys lay on his back, chest heaving, too exhausted to open his eyes. He often found himself grateful to his eldest son, feeling as if his body were twenty years younger since the festering wounds had healed.

"Viserys, I've lost my voice. Get me a glass of water..." Alicent murmured, nestled in her husband's arms. Her skin, even more radiant than that of a young girl, flushed a delicate pink. Her voice was hoarse, a soft request escaping her lips.

Despite her distaste for her husband's often sullen demeanor, she couldn't ignore the feeling that she was destined to bear him five children.

"Drink slowly, Alicent," Viserys gasped, lovingly supporting her as he poured a glass of water and brought it to her lips.

Alicent drained the glass in one gulp, the tip of her tongue lingering around the rim.

Viserys watched, his heart swelling and his vigor returning.

"Viserys, there's something I want to talk to you about," Alicent said, her breathing steadying as she prepared to broach the subject.

Gathering her closer, Viserys replied contentedly, "Tell me."

He had sensed this conversation was imminent, given Alicent's initiation of it.

"The children are getting older, and I want you to think about their futures," Alicent began, her delicate face looking up at him imploringly. "Rhaegar, as the eldest, has the Prince's Palace and Harrenhal, and Rhaenyra has Dragonstone as a fiefdom. The other children have nothing."

Her fear was palpable. The first two heirs enjoyed the privileges of the court, while her children were left without.

Well, almost nothing. Aegon had been appointed as a commander at the Stepstones, but it wasn't enough.

Viserys lowered his eyes and tried to remain calm. Reason prevailed. He understood Alicent's concern and acknowledged the imbalance in the treatment of their children.

As a father, he had failed to be fair. As king, the balance was even more skewed.

Rhaenyra and Rhaegar were the offspring of his late wife Aemma Arryn and held a special place in his heart. Emotionally, they eclipsed his other children.

Rhaenyra's abdication as heir had been a significant sacrifice, one he had tried to make up for.

Rhaegar, the eldest son, was the heir to the kingdom. He was also the Targaryen dynasty's most capable heir at the moment.

At the age of thirteen, he had led a successful campaign against the Triarchy and crushed the rebellion in the Riverlands.

Such achievements marked him as one of the greatest prodigies in the history of House Targaryen. If he didn't die young or succumb to madness, he would undoubtedly be a brilliant ruler.

Viserys was willing to use all his resources to support such a promising pair of children.

Seeing his hesitation, Alicent reached out, rubbed his beard, and spoke softly, "Aegon's working hard in the Stepstones, and he's almost the same age as Rhaegar, isn't he?"

Helaena and her two young sons were too young to consider, leaving Aegon as the only viable son. Despite his usual profligacy and unruly behavior, Alicent didn't see Aegon as useless.

After all, both Viserys and Daemon had indulged in the pleasures of King's Landing's brothels in their youth and turned out reasonably well. Aegon, after all, had been to war and ridden a dragon.

In terms of ability, he was several times better than the heirs of many great families.

Viserys hesitated, thinking deeply. To him, Aegon didn't seem fit to be king. As a prince and lieutenant, he might be a better choice.

"Do you think Aegon deserves a feud?" Viserys asked directly, his eyes piercing.

Alicent's face lit up as she nodded gently.

Viserys rubbed his brow and sighed, "If you had told me earlier, I might have kept the Stepstones for him. As it is, the realm has no suitable castle for Aegon."

A fief was not easily granted. As a prince, Aegon needed a castle, a palace, and enough servants and lords to maintain royal dignity.

If there was no spare castle, he'd have to grant an undeveloped piece of land, requiring extensive work to make it livable. It seemed easier for Aegon to stay in King's Landing as a prince in leisure.

Alicent understood this and had a plan. Sitting up, she looked him in the eye and said seriously, "The Battle of the Stepstones is nearly over, and Aegon can remain there."

She always remembered Jeyne's analysis: the Stepstones were crucial, situated between two continents and a major shipping route. With the Triarchy in decline, the danger had significantly decreased.

With Aegon in the Stepstones, the treasury would naturally fund the construction of a fortress and maintain a strong presence. It was a perfect fiefdom.

Viserys was momentarily stunned. "The Stepstones!" he murmured.

It was a place rife with disputes, but he had someone in mind who was more suited for it. It could be a form of mutual compensation.

Alicent gently shook his shoulder and urged, "Viserys, what do you think?"

"It's a good suggestion. Let me think about it," Viserys replied, rolling over to cuddle his wife and closing his eyes.

Viserys was not a man of swift decisions but rather one prone to delay.

...

Flea Bottom

Inside a Brothel

Several black-robed figures entered the dimly lit brothel, moving quickly toward a secluded room on the second floor.

The door creaked open to reveal an elegant woman with a delicate figure, draped in a thin veil. She sat gracefully, exuding an air of quiet authority.

"White Worm, I've heard much about you," said the lead figure, lifting his hood to reveal Otto's stern face.

Mysaria placed her hands on her lap, her gaze unwavering. Her voice, both magnetic and hoarse, replied, "Lord Otto, your reputation precedes you as well."

Otto's reputation had suffered greatly as a result of the street-cleaning program, and his name had become synonymous with controversy throughout King's Landing.

"Heh, I'll take that as a compliment," Otto said, his eyes twinkling as he took a seat across from Mysaria.

Her expression remained unchanged, calm and impassive. "Lord Otto, what brings you here?" she asked.

"White Worm Mysaria, the most elusive figure in Flea Bottom, yet privy to the city's secrets," Otto began, his tone candid. "I need a spymaster. Will you work for me?"

"I'm afraid I cannot," Mysaria replied without hesitation. "I have my own allegiances."

Otto's eyes narrowed as he responded frankly, "Prince Daemon is in jail and won't be coming out anytime soon."

The upper echelons of the court knew that Mysaria had once been Daemon's mistress. In 105 AC, shortly after Queen Aemma Arryn died giving birth to Rhaegar, Daemon had famously referred to Rhaegar as the "Heir for a day" while celebrating in a brothel with Mysaria and others.

Mysaria had been pregnant with Daemon's child at the time, and he had been overjoyed, going so far as to find a dragon's egg to place in the cradle of his unborn child.

The egg had originally been intended for Rhaegar, and Rhaenyra had ridden Syrax to Dragonstone to retrieve it from Daemon. This incident had infuriated King Viserys, who valued the egg deeply. As a result, Viserys had not only banished Daemon from King's Landing but also ordered him to send Mysaria back to Lys.

Daemon, unable to withstand the pressure, had complied. Tragically, during her sea voyage, Mysaria's ship encountered a storm, resulting in the miscarriage of her unborn child. This incident had been a significant factor in the first major rift between Viserys and Daemon.

Chapter 246: Unexpected Poisoning

Late at Night

Otto, clad in black robes, left the brothel and entered the waiting carriage, protected by his guards.

"My lord, the White Worm is nothing more than a whore," the young servant who drove the carriage grumbled in obvious indignation.

Otto removed his hood, his eyes calm. "Even if she is a whore, she is a whore with skills," he said lightly.

"She barely acknowledges your goodwill and acts as if she's your equal," the young squire continued, still offended. As a member of the Hightower House, the nephew of Otto's cousin, he felt a sense of indignation at seeing his uncle bend over backwards for a prostitute.

Otto's gaze was deep, his tone measured. "Look at the long term. The White Maggot is just a minor player; the real focus is on the people behind her."

The Targaryen heirs were growing in number and influence, each one a potential player in the kingdom's future. Otto saw the need to plan for princely positions. Rhaegar's grant of Harrenhal had set a precedent, and the other heirs would soon make their moves. Preparing in advance was crucial for maintaining influence at court.

His nephew drove the carriage with a half-understood nod. As they neared the edge of Flea Bottom, a mocking voice sounded.

"Master of Piss and Shit, go eat shit!"

The young servant recoiled and looked around in shock.

Splat!

A bucket of feces and urine fell from above, splashing on the roof of the carriage.

"Who the hell did that?!" the squire yelled, drenched and furious, drawing his sword.

"Stop, don't make trouble," Otto ordered. "Hurry up and leave. The White Worm will take care of this."

Suppressing his anger, the young attendant gritted his teeth. "Yes, my lord."

He whipped the horse, speeding out of Flea Bottom, leaving behind the jeering crowd. Inside the carriage, Otto covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, his eyes sweeping over the soiled carport. Slowly, he closed his eyes.

King's Landing was a city filled with the stench of poverty and desperation. Refugees from all over the Seven Kingdoms flocked to the capital, hoping for a better life. This influx strained the city's security and exacerbated tensions between nobles and commoners.

As Master of Civil Affairs, Otto had taken on the responsibility of cleaning up the streets. His efforts had touched a nerve among the impoverished, leading to widespread resistance. After several failed attempts, he devised a localized approach.

The poor resisted the nobles' management, so he sought out individuals from their own ranks to lead them. The White Worm was a grassroots figure with notable talents, one of the main reasons he had gone to such lengths to bring her into his fold.

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The Next Day

Viserys lay in bed, contentedly cuddling his beautiful wife, lost in a dream he hated to leave. Alicent, resting on his arm, listened to his familiar snoring, her mind lost in thought. She had been awake all night, planning for the future of her children.

A knock at the door broke the morning silence. "Your Grace, an urgent report from Stepstones!" came Erryk's voice from the hall.

Alicent blinked, shaking herself from her reverie. She shook her husband gently, her voice hoarse from lack of sleep. "Viserys, there's a letter from Stepstones. Wake up."

Viserys groggily tried to sit up, only to find his right arm numb from his wife's weight. Alicent got up with a worried look on her face, slipped into her nightgown, and opened the door.

Erryk stood there, his expression grave. "Your Grace," he nodded.

"Come in, tell him what you have," Alicent said, stepping aside to let Erryk enter.

Erryk entered, his eyes averted out of respect. He presented a letter to the king, who was still struggling to fully wake up.

"All right, give it to me," Viserys muttered, taking the letter and tearing it open.

As he read the contents, his expression changed dramatically. "Vaemond Velaryon is dead!" he cried out in shock. "Vaemond is dead!"

Alicent's eyes widened. "Ser Vaemond?" she asked, equally surprised. Vaemond was the younger brother of Corlys Velaryon, the Sea Snake, and they were known to be very close.

Viserys nodded, his face grave. "The letter says Vaemon'd felt abdominal pains some time ago. At first, he didn't think much of it, but it kept getting worse. Two nights ago, he collapsed in agony, his abdomen swollen like a basin, and he died in terrible pain."

Alicent's mind raced. "What about Aegon? Is he alright?"

Viserys reassured her. "Aegon is fine. But Vaemon'd's death is strange. It doesn't seem like a natural illness."

The manner of Vaemon'd's death was eerily familiar to Viserys. His father, Baelon Targaryen, had died in a similar way after a hunting trip, his abdomen swelling painfully before his death.

Alicent gasped. "Could it be poison?"

"Possibly," Viserys said, his voice heavy. "There are many poisons in Lys. We can't rule it out."

He sighed deeply. "I heard that Lord Corlys has woken up. Vaemon'd's body will be returned to Driftmark for a funeral, and the royal family is expected to attend."

Alicent nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "I'll make the arrangements," she said, summoning a servant to notify Grand Maester Mellos and send ravens with the news.

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At the Same Time

Rhaegar awoke from his sleep after spending the night soaking in a hot spring. His eyes were still clouded with confusion as he emerged from the water.

"Roar..."

Sensing his awakening, the Cannibal, his dragon, rose from a nearby clearing and let out a low, rumbling growl.

Rhaegar stretched, feeling the wrinkled texture of his soaked skin. "I'm all cut up," he muttered, scratching at his long, wet hair. He pulled on his robes, mounted the dragon, and flew back to Harrenhal.

As soon as he landed, he saw the big, chubby Tru hurrying toward him.

"What happened?" Rhaegar asked, unable to suppress a chuckle at Tru's comically fast pace.

Panting heavily, Tru handed him a letter. "A message from Stepstones, Your Grace. I came to find you first."

Rhaegar's demeanor changed instantly. He grabbed the letter and read it quickly.

The letter was from Tormund, who had remained on Bloodstone Island. It detailed Vaemon'd's death and the circumstances surrounding it, suggesting that he had most likely been poisoned.

Crushing the letter into a ball, Rhaegar thrust it back at Tru and said urgently, "Oversee the work at Harrenhal. Get Robb to help you. I'll go back to King's Landing."

"Yes, Prince," Tru replied, catching the ball of paper and nodding vigorously.

Without another word, Rhaegar mounted the Cannibal and took off, flying back to King's Landing.

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Within the hour, the Cannibal had flown from Harrenhal back to King's Landing. Harrenhal's strategic location was vital-it blocked the nobles from the Riverlands and used the fast-flowing rivers of the Three Forks to keep the armies of the Vale and the North at bay. Most importantly, it was in close proximity to King's Landing.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal circled over King's Landing, roaring to announce its return. It landed in the Dragonpit, and Rhaegar dismounted, intending to head straight to the Red Keep.

"Prince, wait a moment."

A black-robed figure emerged from a shadowed corner, moving with a light step. Rhaegar turned to see Syrio, his trusted agent, whose fluffy brown curls peeked out from under his hood.

"Any rumors in King's Landing lately?" Rhaegar asked.

Syrio managed a group of skilled operatives who specialized in gathering intelligence in King's Landing.

"Indeed," Syrio replied with a smirk. "The high and mighty have been splattered with shit, thinking they can work with worms."

Rhaegar frowned. "Worm? Otto found someone to collaborate with?"

Syrio explained, "White Worm, also known as Mysaria, a prostitute from Lys and Prince Daemon's former mistress. She organizes the largest intelligence network in King's Landing, though her allegiances remain unclear."

Rhaegar's brow furrowed further. "Look into the White Worm."

"To stop Otto from working with her?" Syrio inquired.

Rhaegar shook his head. "No need. It's time for the King's Landing reorganization plan to be put on the agenda. Let Otto handle that. As for the White Worm... no matter how much information she gathers, she can't stand against true power struggles."

...

The Red Keep

Rhaegar walked into the Red Keep and ascended the stairs of Maegor's Holdfast. Around a corner, he encountered a slender, middle-aged man with a shaved head.

"Prince, can I help you?" the man asked.

"No, Lord Caswell," Rhaegar replied, sidestepping with a polite nod.

Lord Caswell, from the Caswell House of Bitterbridge in the Riverlands, loyal to House Tyrell, nodded slightly and made way.

Reaching the upper floors, Rhaegar headed to the King's chambers, where he found his father, Viserys, at breakfast.

"Father, Lord Vaemond has been killed."

Rhaegar used the word "killed" deliberately.

Viserys, cutting into sizzling mutton, chewed thoughtfully before replying, "I know. We'll be going to Driftmark soon for the funeral."

"I'm glad you know," Rhaegar said, noting his father's calm demeanor.

His stomach growled, reminding him he hadn't eaten. With a bitter smile, he moved a chair and joined his father at the dining table.

Chapter 247: King's Landing's Plan of Reconstruction

The table was laden with beef stew, roast lamb, cream cake, and a bottle of red wine with the cork pulled.

Rhaegar's appetite was immense. He grabbed a piece of beef and muttered, "Father, you eat so well this early in the morning?"

"I am a king, after all," Viserys said with a smile, taking a sip of wine. "With the burdens I carry, it is a small pleasure to indulge in good food."

He patted his rounded belly, a testament to his indulgence.

"You have a point," Rhaegar agreed, taking a large bite of food. Being king did have its perks, though he worried about his father's health with such a rich diet.

As they ate, father and son chatted, enjoying their little gathering. Halfway through the meal, Rhaegar pulled out a list and handed it to his father, who had just finished his wine.

"What's this?" Viserys leaned back in his chair and took the list.

"It's my plan for improving King's Landing," Rhaegar explained.

Intrigued, Viserys read the list:

1. Eliminate rats, deodorize, and seal complex secret passage entrances and exits in the Red Keep.
2. Repair and excavate King's Landing's sewers to facilitate proper sewage disposal.
3. Expand areas, repair public toilets, and hire septic workers and septic carts.
4. Organize Flea Bottom, take in a group of orphans, women, and children, and organize laborers for construction work.
5. Select land in the Crownlands and organize the poor to cultivate it, providing royal subsidies and tax relief.

Viserys frowned at the first three items, his expression complicated. "Rhaegar, your plan is ambitious. Otto has been trying to clean up the streets of King's Landing, but his efforts have been ineffective and have drawn criticism from the common folk."

"And last night a wagonload of filth was thrown at him," Viserys added, grimacing at the memory.

Rhaegar had anticipated his father's concern. "The key is sewers and public toilets. If we provide convenient facilities, people won't have to dump their waste in the streets."

The concept of public toilets was foreign to Viserys. Rhaegar continued, "Public toilets were an idea I saw in a dream. They fit our needs perfectly."

Much of Otto's failure stemmed from banning open defecation without providing an alternative. Building public toilets and hiring waste collectors would solve the problem. Though it seemed simple, it was a revolutionary proposal.

Viserys considered it carefully. With public toilets, people would have a proper place to dispose of their waste. Anyone caught defecating in the streets could then be properly punished.

"There's only one thing," Viserys thought.

Viserys hesitated. "Repairing the sewers, public toilets, and hiring workers will cost a considerable amount of money."

King's Landing had sewers, but they had long been neglected and were mostly clogged. Repairing the public toilets required funds for materials and labor. Hiring septic tank emptyers and haulers would further drain the treasury.

Rhaegar pointed to the remaining two suggestions, his tone thoughtful. "We could hire laborers from Flea Bottom to do the work in exchange for food."

People were dying of starvation and exposure every day in King's Landing. This food-for-work approach would save money and help the refugees—a win-win.

Viserys pondered. His eyes fell on the last suggestion, and he instinctively bristled. "Dividing the king's uncultivated land among the refugees..."

"I don't mean give it away," Rhaegar clarified. "We'd hire them to farm it. The Crown would provide tools and food, and the refugees would become tenants directly under the Crown, paying annual taxes."

This proposal wasn't far from the typical lord-and-peasant relationship. The Crownlands had plenty of wasteland and the Kingswood held untapped resources. Instead of letting it sit idle, turning it into productive farmland could stabilize tax revenue and eventually fill the royal coffers. Most importantly, it would alleviate overcrowding in King's Landing.

Viserys fell into deep thought, weighing the feasibility of the five plans. The War for the Stepstones had drained resources, and the construction of the Prince's Palace was another financial drain. Adding sewer repairs, the construction of public toilets, and land reclamation would further drain the treasury, even if it was currently full.

Rhaegar didn't press the issue. He finished his meal and left the palace quietly. His father was the king, and it was his decision to implement the new policies or not. Rhaegar offered his ideas without insisting. The Iron Throne would be his eventually, and he could implement the new policies then.

For now, his priority was to repair Harrenhal and build the Dragon's Nest.

...

Dawn.

Viserys emerged from his thoughts, feeling dazed and confused. He scanned the table; the servants had already cleared away the remains. At some point, Rhaegar had quietly left.

"Erryk," Viserys called, rubbing his tingling legs as he stood.

Creak...

The door opened and Erryk stood at attention. "Your Grace, what is your command?"

Viserys folded the list and combed his hair with his fingers, speaking calmly. "Go to the dungeon. I want to see that white-eyed wolf."

"Yes, Your Grace," Erryk replied, his face impassive as he respectfully stepped aside to make way.

Since Cole had been removed from his position as commander of the Kingsguard, Erryk and Arryk had risen quickly through the ranks. One specialized in defending the king, the other the queen. It wouldn't be long before one of the brothers would be named the new commander of the Kingsguard.

...

Dungeon.

The dimly lit environment reeked of stench, and the wails of prisoners echoed from the cages.

Erryk led the way with a torch in one hand, casting flickering shadows on the damp walls. Viserys followed behind, covering his nose and mouth with a handkerchief. He would not have set foot in this place if he hadn't needed to meet his uncooperative brother.

They walked deeper into the dungeon and came to a familiar cell.

"Brother, what brings you back here?" Daemon asked, sitting drowsily on the wooden bed, the shackles on his hands and feet clanking with every movement. It had been so long that he couldn't tell day from night and often lost track of time.

Viserys looked at him in disgust and handed him a list of plans. "Take a look at this and tell me if it's feasible."

"Hmph, do you take me for a counselor in custody?" Daemon snorted but still got up and took the list, examining it. Locked in the dungeon, he had realized that sometimes one has to bend to survive. The last time he had taunted Alicent, he found something foul in his food the next day. It had taken three days for the prison food to return to normal.

Viserys, in high spirits, did not care to argue. He kept his brother in the dungeon to be used when needed. There was a certain satisfaction in having him at his disposal.

Daemon rolled his eyes and scanned the list. "Repairing the gutter, cleaning the sewers..." he muttered, quickly losing interest. For him, these were trivial matters.

After a long pause, Viserys asked, "What do you think?"

"About what?" Daemon's head dropped and his voice grew longer.

"The new plan!" Viserys snapped. "Answer me honestly or you'll starve for another three days."

Daemon stared at the list, surprised. "You know?"

"Hmph, my own brother eating shit in the dungeon—do you think I don't know?" Viserys retorted sarcastically. "I don't care what Alicent said to you. Just don't mess with these crazy women."

"Oh, you don't," Daemon sighed, shaking his head.

"What do you know? Just answer the question!" Viserys was losing patience.

Daemon shook the list and adopted a more serious tone. "It's alright. The sewers in King's Landing do need cleaning, and building public toilets is a good idea." When he had been the commander of the City Watch, he had both loved and loathed patrolling the streets.

Apprehending criminals was thrilling, but the stench of King's Landing was unbearable. Every day, his boots stepped in a different kind of filth.

...

Viserys nodded in satisfaction and continued, "What about the last two points: employing civilians and encouraging the opening of land?"

"Who came up with this plan?" Daemon asked, sidestepping the question.

"Rhaegar's suggestion," Viserys replied honestly.

"Tsk, clever boy, full of possessiveness," Daemon smirked. He could see the implications of the plan: to clear out the excess population of the monarchy and eliminate the potential for civilian riots. Every generation of Targaryen kings had entertained this idea, but it was undoubtedly difficult to implement.

After thinking for a moment, Daemon banged the back of his head against the iron railing and murmured, "The plan is feasible and seamless." With a twinkle in his eye, he added, "Who will execute the plan?"

"Otto Hightower," Viserys said bluntly.

"Oh, good choice," Daemon sneered, baring his teeth and shrugging slightly. "This kind of drudgery where you'll be cursed for even suggesting it is perfect for Otto, that old bastard."

"Daemon, watch your language," Viserys warned, glaring at him. Like it or not, Otto was still his father-in-law.

"Che, you asked. I'm going back to sleep," Daemon retorted, throwing away the list and lying down on the wooden bed.

Viserys, seething with frustration, said through gritted teeth, "Daemon, don't you want to get out of here?"

"And how can I do that, as a sinner?" Daemon asked rhetorically, pulling the covers over his head.

"Hmph, think about it," Viserys grunted coldly, leaving the words, "Vaemond is dead."

With that, he walked out of the dungeon under Erryk's escort.

As the sound of footsteps gradually faded, the wooden bed in the cell creaked. Daemon lifted the covers, his eyes gradually regaining their brightness. Vaemond's death had introduced too many variables. It could be a prelude to war or the beginning of House Velaryon's decline. All he needed was the right opportunity to escape the cold, damp dungeon.

With that in mind, Daemon closed his eyes and muttered, "Brother, you and I are really connected by blood..."

Chapter 248: Sea Snake's Hatred

Seven days passed in a blur.

The three-masted ship, bearing the three red dragon flags, crossed Blackwater Bay and arrived at the harbor of Driftmark.

The harbor was not as bustling as usual; it felt eerily quiet. Apart from a few freighters, the only sound was the rustling of the tides washing the beach.

Rhaena, dressed in a white gown, waited at the harbor, her eyes fixed on the approaching royal ship.

A group of guards stepped onto the dock, forming two lines.

Alicent, in a green dress, was the first to appear, supporting a pale and weak Viserys.

"Slow down, we're on land now," Alicent gently urged, patting her husband on the back.

Viserys' seasickness had returned with a vengeance, and he had been vomiting profusely.

The king and queen led the way, with Rhaegar and his younger siblings following behind. To accommodate his father, Rhaegar had opted for the slower boat ride instead of flying on his dragon.

"Roar..."

The shadow of a dragon flashed across the sky, disturbing the other dragons and breaking the peaceful atmosphere.

Golden Syrax, Sunfyre, and the light silver-gray Seasmoke scattered at the sight of Cannibal's arrival.

Laena stepped forward to greet them, bowing respectfully. "Your Grace."

Viserys nodded, attempting to speak, but swallowed back his words as his throat tightened.

"He's a bit under the weather. We'll need the Maester to take a look at him later," Alicent said, forcing a smile and conveying her husband's condition.

Laena nodded in understanding and led the way ahead.

...

As they rode into High Tide in the carriage, the atmosphere inside the castle was even more somber.

When they entered the hall, many guests were already waiting.

Laena apologized, "Father is bedridden and Mother is attending to the guests. I'm the only one available to entertain you."

The Sea Snake had been seriously injured in the defeat at Bloodstone Island and had been recuperating on Driftmark. He had just awakened but suffered a high fever upon hearing of Vaemond's death and was in a fragile state.

Viserys, his seasickness eased somewhat, managed a weak smile. "It's no problem. Take me to Lord Corlys."

He needed to meet the master of the castle, of course.

"This way, Your Grace," Laena replied, and with Alicent's help, they assisted the king up the stairs.

Left aside, Rhaegar shrugged and addressed his younger siblings, "Move around freely, but don't wander off."

"Okay," Helaena replied first, taking Aemond and Daeron by the hands and heading towards the table laden with food.

Daeron, like a curious child, quickly freed himself from his sister's grip and scampered off.

Aemond, blushing slightly, allowed his sister to lead the way, following like a shadow.

Rhaegar didn't worry much. The different hair and eye colors of his siblings made them easily recognizable. In the relatively safe confines of Driftmark, there was no one who would dare bully them.

"Rhaegar!"

He turned at the sound of Rhaenyra's voice and saw her on the stairs leading to the second floor.

Rhaenyra had abandoned her usual luxurious style. She was wearing a simple, long, strapless black dress, devoid of her usual elaborate lace and jewelry. Her long hair was pulled back.

With a single glance, Rhaegar understood the reason for her attire.

"Rhaenyra, have you become a nanny?" he teased, noticing the swaddled babies she was holding.

Rhaenyra proudly lifted her chin and denied, "No! I have no milk. I am the adoptive mother of two babies."

After the celebration following the Riverlands rebellion, the siblings had parted ways for a while. Rhaenyra had flown to Driftmark to help with the children, keeping her promise to Laena.

Rhaegar climbed the steps and reached out to take one of the swaddled infants.

"Hmph, you know what you're doing," Rhaenyra said with a smile, clearly relieved to share the burden.

Rhaegar glanced down at the swaddled, dark-skinned baby girl, who squirmed and waved her tiny arms and legs. After a moment, he lost interest and leaned closer to Rhaenyra, whispering, "How is Lord Corlys?"

"Don't be mean," Rhaenyra replied, nudging him. "Lord Corlys is fine, but Laenor cried so much I couldn't handle it."

Laenor had gone to war with his uncle, survived the battle, but his uncle died from the aftermath. Realizing something was wrong had deeply shocked him.

As Rhaenyra spoke, Rhaegar's eyes flickered with thought.

Logically, if the Triarchy was targeting someone for assassination, it wouldn't have been Vaemond. Aegon and Laenor were more obvious choices. Yet, Vaemond was the one struck down.

He couldn't make sense of it.

Rhaenyra nudged him again and said quietly, "Don't dwell on it. The funeral is this afternoon."

"Okay," Rhaegar replied, his thoughts coming back to the present. "Find a nurse to feed the baby."

He walked up the stairs with a teasing smile.

...

Afternoon

The sea breeze blew gently, and the tide washed over the reef.

In the back garden of High Tide, on a flat, sea-facing cliff, guests gathered around a solid wood coffin carved with a human figure in the center.

Viserys and Alicent stood to the side with their children. Corlys, seated in a wheelchair with gauze around his neck, was pushed by Rhaenys, who was covered in a black veil.

When the hour arrived, Corlys ignored the advice of Rhaenys and chose to bury his brother himself.

In a dull, hoarse voice, he recited a eulogy:

"We meet this day at the Seat of the Sea to send Ser Vaemond of the House of Velaryon into the waters of Eternity, within the borders of the King of Mermaids. Forever under his protection in the years to come."

As the eulogy was recited line by line, the guards attached ropes to the coffin and slowly lowered it into the waters below the cliff.

With the most important part of the funeral now over, the guests dispersed, and the servants brought out food and wine for the farewell feast.

"Roar..."

A dragon's roar rang out as Syrax flapped its wings, hovering over the castle as if spreading its wings in farewell. Accompanying Syrax were Meleys, the Red Queen, and Seasmoke. On the mountaintop adjacent to the castle, a light blue dragon lounged lazily, flicking its tail. On the crags of the neighboring cliffs, Sunfyre stood on two feet, looking down proudly.

Cannibal and Vhagar were absent; their immense size left no suitable place for them to land.

Viserys took Alicent's hand and headed back to the castle with Corlys and Rhaenys. Laena found Rhaenyra and pulled her aside for a chat.

Rhaegar was left behind again, looking around helplessly. Laenor, looking mournful, drank wine after wine, accompanied by a handsome knight. Aegon drank his wine with equal fervor, his eyes lingering on the maids, occasionally slapping one on the backside.

With nothing else to do, Rhaegar stretched and found Helaena sitting on her knees in a corner, playing with a ball of thread. She closed her eyes, feigning sleep.

"Sister..."

Aemond ran from the distance with a smile on his face. Helaena immediately turned her head and put her index finger to her lips, reminding him, "Shhh! Keep your voice down."

She pointed to Rhaegar, who was sitting behind her, signaling Aemond to be quiet. Aemond froze, his hands stirring behind his back, and whispered, "Oh, okay."

Stealing a glance at his older brother, Rhaegar, there was more than a touch of jealousy in his eyes.

...

Beside the wine table, Laena held Rhaenyra's hand and smiled warmly. "Rhaenyra, thank you for preparing the dragon eggs for the children."

"It's my responsibility as their foster mother," Rhaenyra replied calmly.

"Thank you," Laena repeated, her eyes flashing with reluctance. She took a deep breath. "When the children turn one, they will be sent to Dragonstone or King's Landing, where you will raise them."

Adopting a child in these times was akin to taking a hostage—an agreement both parties had already accepted, yet it pained Laena to part with her children.

Rhaenyra, not yet a mother herself, couldn't fully grasp her friend's anguish but offered reassurance. "The children will grow up healthy in my care. Whether they become dragonriders or ladies, they will have the choice."

"I believe you," Laena responded with a bittersweet smile. Then she hesitated before asking, "What about Daemon? I haven't heard from him since leaving King's Landing."

Rhaenyra paused, then replied, "He's... managing. I don't know the details, but he's probably in the dungeon doing penance."

Both women exchanged a knowing smile at the word "penance." With Daemon's prideful nature, admitting fault or repenting was unlikely.

Laena squeezed Rhaenyra's hand slightly harder and pleaded, "Rhaenyra, on the children's first naming day, I want them to meet their father."

"You'll need to ask my father for that," Rhaenyra replied, narrowing her eyes.

Laena's sincerity was evident as she whispered, "I will seek His Grace's favor, but I need your help, for the sake of the children."

"I'll try. It's just one meeting; it shouldn't be a problem," Rhaenyra said, drawing back her hand, her voice cold.

"Thank you," Laena whispered gratefully.

...

High Tide, Driftwood Throne Hall.

Corlys sat in a wheelchair, his face etched with dismay. Beside him, Rhaenys looked on, her worry for her husband's health evident.

"Lord Corlys, I am deeply saddened by Ser Vaemond's passing. The kingdom will remember his dedication," Viserys said from the driftwood throne, his gaze steady on Corlys and Rhaenys.

Rhaenys stepped forward, her voice firm. "Cousin, you and I both know that Vaemond's death is not natural."

She had already begun an investigation and suspected the use of a notorious poison—Tears of Lys. Colorless and tasteless, it could be easily slipped into food, causing mild stomach discomfort at first, but worsening until it became lethal.

Viserys' smile faded. "The Triarchy suffered heavy losses. I expected retaliation, but not like this."

Rhaenys was about to speak when Corlys interrupted. "Your Grace, Vaemond died for the realm. His life's honor is intact. But the Triarchy is growing too bold, and the defenses of the Stepstones remain inadequate."

Viserys asked, "The mercenaries on Grey Gallows are retreating, and the army of the realm is stationed there. What more is needed?"

Corlys, his voice raspy but determined, replied, "To end this threat, we must build fortresses on Bloodstone Island and Grey Gallows Island. Constant vigilance is needed against the Triarchy's attacks."

This was a proposal Corlys had championed since becoming the navy commander.

"I will consider it carefully, Lord Corlys," Viserys said after a moment of silence.

His mind wandered to Alicent's idea of giving the land for Aegon and to Daemon languishing in the dungeon.

With that, the conversation ended and Viserys left High Tide.

Corlys watched him retreat, his eyes dark and uncertain, his fists clenched. The Velaryon House had sacrificed too much in the Stepstones War.

"Corlys, take it easy," Rhaenys urged, her concern palpable.

"I'm fine," Corlys replied, though his gaze remained fixed on the flickering candle flame. He murmured to himself, "The Triarchy will pay a more painful price, sooner or later!"

Chapter 249: Rhaegar's Changes

Time passed like a fleeting shadow.

The year was 121 AC.

On a bright spring morning, a golden dragon soared above the tranquil waters of the God's Eye Lake, its scales glistening in the sunlight.

"Roar..."

The dragon's roar echoed through the air as it gracefully maneuvered through the clouds, adjusting its wings to change direction.

In the center of God's Eye Lake lay the lush Isle of Faces, its appearance drastically transformed over the past three years.

On the island's northern side, a massive, dark structure dominated the landscape. Towering at 500 feet, it was neither fully a mountain nor entirely a tower, with four large openings that allowed the wind to howl through, creating a sound akin to a horn.

The golden dragon circled the formidable building before gliding towards the lake's northern shore. Its belly skimmed the shimmering surface, and its slender tail created ripples as it brushed through the water.

Harrenhal stood proudly nearby, its thick, steep walls newly repaired. Soldiers clad in black armor patrolled with disciplined precision.

A sudden gust of wind sent the soldiers reeling.

"Alert!"

They looked up to see the golden dragon flying over the city wall and into the castle grounds.

"At ease! It's the princess and her dragon."

The captain of the soldiers recognized the dragon and its rider and paid his respects before resuming his patrol.

...

In front of the Kingspyre Tower, where the "bear pit" once stood, young shoots pushed through the soil, and a dusting of snow adorned the lone willow tree.

On one wall of the tower, a spacious hut had been constructed, furnished with simple tables and stools. Inside, dozens of teenagers sat attentively, listening to a tall and stout teacher's lesson.

Clang, clang...

The sound of a zither echoed, a seemingly joyful tune tinged with melancholy. The source of the music was a stone pavilion nestled in the tower's corner. Inside, the melody was played by a young man with silver-blond hair cascading down his back. He sat on a red carpet, a harp in his lap, his fingers gently stroking the strings.

The young man's pale skin and strikingly handsome features were marred only by the dark circles under his deep purple eyes, giving him a slightly gloomy appearance.

"Black thread, dragon, rose..."

Intermittent murmurs of a girl accompanied the zither's music. Lying behind the young man was a girl with similarly silver-blond, slightly curly hair. She propped herself up on her hands, her legs swaying gently.

Hoo...

A massive golden dragon swooped over the castle courtyard, landing outside the pavilion. On its back, Rhaenyra, dressed in a long red gown with her hair pulled back, unfastened the chain around her waist and climbed down the soft ladder with nimble grace.

Jumping to the ground, Rhaenyra patted the dragon's golden scales and smiled, "Go play, Syrax."

"Roar..."

Syrax roared softly, nuzzling its rider before flapping its wings and taking off.

Above Harrenhal, two dragons—one black and one blue—circled slowly, chasing each other. Syrax joined them, adding to their frolic.

"Rhaegar, you won't even come to welcome me?"

Rhaenyra entered the pavilion, hands behind her back. She was as beautiful as ever, untouched by the passage of time.

Clang~~

The zither's melody stopped abruptly as delicate fingers calmed the trembling strings, soothing the unfinished melody.

The young man lifted his head, his eyes gleaming with mischief as he looked at Rhaenyra. "You and I have a relationship that needs no formalities, Sister," he said, deliberately emphasizing the last word.

Rhaenyra blushed and retorted, "You don't even know how to make a proper gesture?"

Half a year ago, Rhaegar had chosen to follow family tradition, solidifying an agreement in the presence of their father, Viserys. While they typically addressed each other by name, in private, they acknowledged their familial bond. For Rhaegar to use the term now suggested he was up to something.

"Rhaenyra, you just left the day before yesterday. Why are you back so soon?" Rhaegar asked, a puzzled smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Rhaenyra, now a foster mother to two girls and burdened with the affairs of King's Landing and Dragonstone, was always busy. Even if she came to Harrenhal to see him, it was never this frequent.

"Why else? I have a mission, of course," Rhaenyra replied, exasperation in her voice. "Rhaegar, you haven't been back to King's Landing in over six months. Father misses you very much."

Rhaegar's smile faded as he lowered his head, idly stroking the strings of his zither, his interest in conversation waning.

Three years ago, after Vaemond Velaryon's funeral, Rhaegar had returned to the capital, where Viserys frequently sought his company. They hadn't discussed monarchy reforms or the state of Harrenhal and the Dragon's Nest.

Instead, they clashed over two proposals regarding the Stepstones, with Rhaegar firmly opposed to his father's plans. Their disagreements escalated into a heated argument, resulting in a rift between them.

Rhaegar had left King's Landing for Harrenhal, dedicating himself to restoring the castle and constructing the a new Dragon's Nest.

"Rhaegar, you've been away from King's Landing too long. The realm needs a visible savior," Rhaenyra said, sitting beside him in the pavilion and gently trying to persuade him.

In the three years since, Rhaegar had barely returned to the capital, and rumors of a rift between the king and his heir were circulating among the court's advisors.

"Rhaenyra, are you afraid someone will seize power in my absence?" Rhaegar asked, his expression unreadable.

Though frustrated by his father's poor decisions, Rhaegar was not reckless. Despite his physical distance from King's Landing, his influence grew daily. From Harrenhal, he kept a watchful eye on Old Tully at Riverrun, using Tully as an intermediary to strengthen his ties with the lords of the Riverlands.

House Blackwood was the first to pledge allegiance, followed by other Riverland nobles. In the Vale, his long association with Jeyne, House Royce and House Grafton of Gulltown secured their unwavering support.

Through the ever-expanding Mushroom Set caravan, he maintained strong personal relationships with the nobles of the Crownlands and the Riverlands.

Rhaegar might not be visible in King's Landing, but his presence was felt throughout the Seven Kingdoms.

Rhaenyra looked deeply into Rhaegar's eyes and sighed. "In a few days it will be your naming day. Father is organizing a family feast and asked me to tell you that you must attend."

"You know I've never liked naming days since I was a child," Rhaegar muttered.

Rhaenyra moved closer, her voice softer. "Please go back. Father's been dreaming about you lately. Even Alicent has noticed."

Clang~~

Rhaegar strummed the strings of his zither, producing an abrupt, discordant sound. He had no desire to attend a family feast. Away from King's Landing and its political turmoil, he relished the freedom of his own domain.

After rebuilding Harrenhal Castle and adding a dragon's nest to the Isle of Faces, life was more than comfortable.

"Rhaegar..." Rhaenyra's face grew solemn, her initial softness giving way to firmness.

"Uh, what's wrong?" Helaena, startled by the sound, looked up blankly, her beautiful face framed by silver-blond hair.

Rhaenyra turned towards her. At twelve, Helaena had already experienced her first period, though she still had the appearance of an innocent, wide-eyed girl.

Her long, curly hair was tied into a bun, and she wore a goose down dress that highlighted her slender figure, inherited from Alicent. She sat on the red carpet, surrounded by carved stone toys and woolen balls, clutching a green thread and a dragon stone carving.

Rhaenyra sighed, shaking her head in resignation. "Nothing, Helaena. Carry on."

"Oh, okay." Helaena nodded obediently, then looked up again, confusion evident in her eyes.

"Sister, didn't you leave the day before yesterday?"

"I'm back," Rhaenyra replied, doubly annoyed.

Since Rhaegar's ascension, Helaena's behavior had become increasingly strange. Not only was she a prophet, but she also displayed a strange sense of disorientation.

Helaena simply said "oh" and lowered her head to play with the stone carving, minimizing her presence. She had been staying in Harrenhal for a few months, escaping the damp and cold winter climate of King's Landing. Here, she enjoyed the warmth and lack of restrictions.

Splat...

As they spoke, the dragonstone carving in Helaena's hand slipped and struck a red rose. The rose toppled, its petals wilting and losing their luster. Helaena, visibly upset, stared at the fallen carving, frustration etched on her face.

With Helaena momentarily silent, Rhaenyra resumed her plea. "Rhaegar, this is your sixteenth name day. You must return to King's Landing with me."

Her tone was firm, brooking no argument. In Westeros, a boy came of age at sixteen. Rhaegar, having reached that milestone, had to participate in the ceremony his father had arranged, whether he wanted to or not.

Rhaegar looked at her, his eyes flickering with indecision. Noticing his hesitation, Rhaenyra's eyes grew stern. She reached for the soft flesh at his waist, ready to assert her authority.

"Fine, fine, I'll go back with you," Rhaegar conceded, quickly intercepting her hand, a rueful smile on his lips.

Rhaenyra frowned, looking for confirmation. "Really?"

"Of course. A Targaryen keeps his word," Rhaegar assured her, a hint of certainty returning to his voice. Indeed, he had been away from King's Landing too long. Many responsibilities had been delayed, including his knighthood, which should have been conferred at thirteen.

"That's more like it," Rhaenyra murmured, her tone softening. She took the harp from his hands and set it on a nearby stand.

Rhaegar stretched, intending to stand and move. "Sit down; you're not leaving just yet," Rhaenyra instructed, pulling him back into her arms and leaning close. Three years had passed quickly, and Rhaegar had grown.

His once youthful face had matured, his height had increased, and his body had developed solid muscles. He had become the kind of man whose slender appearance concealed a muscular frame.

His handsome face was captivating, his deep eyes intense. Troubled by nightmares, he had taken up the harp under the guidance of a renowned teacher to calm his mind and soothe his nerves.

"What are your plans after the name day?" Rhaenyra's voice was soft, her chin resting on his shoulder, her red lips close to his ear.

The date was set. Rhaegar was an adult now, and momentous events loomed on the horizon.

"Father will probably arrange for us to tour the continent and visit various nobles," Rhaegar mused, inhaling the scent of her hair. "Once I'm officially knighted, everything will fall into place."

Chapter 250: Rhaegar's Influence

Night.

Kingspyre Tower, Hall of a Hundred Hearths.

The hall was cavernous and grand, with thirty-four hearths and a smooth stone floor. At a long table of solid wood, Rhaenyra, Helaena, and Rhaegar dined.

Nibbling on unseasonal fruits, Rhaenyra glanced around and muttered, "Every time I come here, it feels so exaggerated."

She kept her voice low, afraid the vastness of the hall would amplify it into an echo.

Harrenhal, a massive castle, had taken Black Harren over forty years to build. The scale of its great hall alone was almost beyond comprehension. Records claimed that the Hall of a Hundred Hearths was large enough to house an army.

"Harrenhal stands out for its size and sturdiness. You'll get used to it," Rhaegar said, smiling proudly.

The castle's restoration had advanced rapidly with the use of black dragonstone.

Aside from essential buildings such as courtyards, bathhouses, and stables, the five towers were of paramount importance.

After Balerion's burning, the towers had been twisted and deformed, their roofs scorched. Yet their walls remained thick, almost indestructible. The interiors were mostly intact, requiring only minor repairs. Rhaegar had the distorted exteriors stripped away and replaced with black dragonstone, creating new outer walls.

The tops of the towers were restored to their original heights and levels, and decorated with stone dragon carvings in the style of the Sea Dragon Tower on Dragonstone Island.

The Kingspyre Tower featured carvings of Cannibal, while the Widow's Tower, connected to it, was adorned with the likeness of Grey Ghost, a dragon that had moved from Dragonstone Island to Isle of Faces.

The Wailing Tower, with its storeroom and vast cellar, bore the symbol of Syrax, representing fertility. The Tower of Dread, linked to a rebuilt sept, had its spire carved with Dreamfyre, Helaena's dragon.

The Tower of Ghosts still had no dragon sculpture, as Aegon's Sunfyre was used to the last current generation of dragon masters of House Targaryen.

With the completion of these towers, Harrenhal's style was transformed forever. Once dark and devastated, it had become the grandest castle in Westeros.

To placate the Faith, Rhaegar rebuilt the sept, cut down the burned weirwood trees, and replaced them with ornamental trees, a project that took a year and a half. Consequently, some sections of Harrenhal's walls remained unfinished, still being repaired with black dragonstone.

Seeing Rhaegar's pride, Rhaenyra smiled genuinely and offered heartfelt praise. One major reason Rhaegar had not returned to King's Landing was the demanding construction schedule at Harrenhal, leaving him no time to spare.

"I'm full," Helaena said, putting down her knife and fork. Her cheeks were bulging and she took a sip of fruit wine to help with her full stomach.

Rhaegar chuckled softly. "Go to bed now, Helaena. We'll go back to King's Landing tomorrow."

"Uh-huh, good night, brother." Helaena hopped out of her chair and walked around the table to give Rhaegar a hug. Then, glancing at Rhaenyra, who was sipping red wine, she approached briskly and reached out for another hug. "Good night, sister."

With that, Helaena wiped her mouth and made her way up the stairs from the Great Hall. The Hall of a Hundred Hearths was huge, with two corridors and countless rooms branching off the stairs.

Once Helaena was gone, Rhaenyra turned back to Rhaegar. "Rhaegar, you and Jeyne..."

"She's fine. I saw her three months ago," Rhaegar replied, his demeanor relaxed, the awkwardness of the previous days gone. "She understands my decision. I'll explain everything to her when I get the chance."

"Good. It's important that you keep that in mind," Rhaenyra nodded, asking no further questions. Jeyne had been remarkably understanding, staying peacefully in the Vale and communicating only through ravens. Even though Rhaenyra couldn't fully accept what had happened, she admired Jeyne's tolerance.

When dinner was nearly finished, Rhaegar pulled out two letters. "Tyland wrote to me a few days ago about a severe drought in Dorne. Bands of mobs have started roaming the borders."

Rhaenyra took the papers, her expression growing serious. "It's not just Dorne that's having problems. The Tyrell House in Highgarden is also in trouble."

She continued, "Lord Tyrell is very old and has only one son, who has been weak and sickly since childhood. Recently, the heir contracted a cold and died in the Citadel. With no other sons, Lord Tyrell sent a letter to you, implicitly seeking permission to legitimize a bastard."

Rhaenyra's face grew stern. "Rhaegar, you must never agree to this. Your status cannot support such approval."

"Don't worry, I haven't written back," Rhaegar reassured her, taking a calm sip of his fruit wine.

In Westeros, where bloodlines were paramount, bastards were greatly disfavored. As the king's eldest son and heir to the kingdom, Rhaegar was among those least able to support the legitimacy of bastards. Supporting a bastard for the Highgarden succession could set a dangerous precedent, potentially undermining his own position and that of his family.

Relieved, Rhaenyra sighed. "The Tully and Tyrell families both face similar problems with their heirs."

Old Tully's eldest son had died in battle, leaving Riverrun without a clear heir. For the past three years, he had wavered between his two younger sons and his grandson. While the second son should theoretically be first in line, both were too weak and foolish. The grandson, though mediocre, was at least capable.

Old Tully wanted to make his grandson heir, but his two younger sons had banded together to cause trouble and disturb the peace of Riverrun. Rhaegar, unwilling to interfere, left the Tullys to resolve their problems independently.

Seeing Rhaenyra's frustration, Rhaegar smiled helplessly. "But these two families are among the most loyal to the Crown. We can't just ignore them."

"Let's not talk about them anymore. It's frustrating," Rhaenyra said in exasperation.

"It's late. Let's get some sleep," Rhaegar suggested.

"Very well. Serve your queen and take me to bed," Rhaenyra replied playfully, opening her arms.

Rhaegar laughed and rose to carry her.

...

The next morning, Harrenhal Castle buzzed with activity as craftsmen worked on repairing the walls. Most of these workers had come from King's Landing, deployed by Maester Maynard of the Dragonpit. The rest were slaves and natives of the Riverlands.

Rhaegar estimated that about 1,000 craftsmen and their families, a total of 4,000 to 5,000 people, now lived within the castle. Fortunately, the vast expanse of Harrenhal easily accommodated them all.

Suddenly, the air was filled with the thunderous roar of dragons, accompanied by fierce winds that swept over the castle walls. The craftsmen steadied themselves and looked up in awe.

In the clear sky, a massive black dragon, as dark as charcoal, led the way, its wings casting a wide shadow over the land. Dreamfire, slightly smaller, flew alongside, carrying Helaena, whose eyes sparkled with excitement as she soared through the clouds.

The smallest of the trio, Syrax, followed, three times smaller than Cannibal and not yet an adult.

The three dragons circled the vast expanse of God's Eye Lake before heading southeast in a less traveled direction. A few dozen miles from Harrenhal, they approached a large, unwallled village.

From the sky, the village was a sprawling beehive of human activity. The houses were strange, with round stone walls and conical roofs of wooden beams that resembled large mushrooms with brown caps and gray stalks. This was Mushroom Village, a bustling market community.

The village was a mix of free folk loyal to Rhaegar, slaves, and women and children taken in from Flea Bottom. It thrived on trading regional specialties, leather goods, and handicrafts. Rhaegar had even acquired several fruit groves, and the slaves produced a popular, refreshing sweet fruit wine that sold well at the market.

Mushroom Village had become a major trading hub, attracting merchants from the Riverlands, the Crownlands, and even as far as the Vale, the Reach, and the Stormlands. Each year, the wealth generated by the market grew exponentially.

As the dragons flew overhead, the Cannibal's eyes gleamed with superiority. With a powerful flap of its wings, it soared over the bustling village below, indifferent to the small gathering of people that seemed like mere bugs from its vantage point.

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The sun rose, casting its warm light over the land and melting away the winter chill. As a coastal city, King's Landing rarely saw snow, but the cold and damp climate was still harsh. Every winter, the alleys of Flea Bottom were littered with the bodies of those who had succumbed to the cold and hunger. This winter, however, had been different.

The king had heeded Prince Rhaegar's advice and given the homeless refugees land in the kingdom to farm. Prince Rhaegar himself had welcomed many women and children into the Riverlands, providing them with work and a means to survive. As a result, the people of King's Landing fared better than in previous winters.

As the morning wore on, the temperature slowly rose.

"Roar..."

A muffled dragon roar echoed through King's Landing. The black dragon, Cannibal, circled above, its mouth spewing a trail of green dragonfire. People emerged from their homes, leaning against the walls to bask in the sun. When they heard the dragon's roar, they looked up in awe.

"The black dragon belongs to Prince Rhaegar..."

"Prince Rhaegar has returned!"

The sight of Cannibal brought the image of the young prince to their minds and filled them with hope. In recent years, Prince Rhaegar and his dragon had rarely been seen in King's Landing, often staying in the Riverlands. Each appearance of the black dragon stirred the hearts of the people, who admired a prince who cared for the commoners.

"Roar..."

Cannibal completed two full circles over King's Landing, heralding the return of both dragon and rider. Following closely, Dreamfire and Syrax descended towards the Dragonpit.

At the gates of the Dragonpit, the wiry Maester Maynard awaited, his face lit with excitement. As Cannibal landed, Rhaegar dismounted and greeted him.

"Prince, it's been a long time," Maynard said, joyfully limping forward.

"Long time no see, Maynard," Rhaegar replied with a smile. "This time, I'll be staying in King's Landing for a while."

"Excellent," Maynard said, clapping his hands with glee.

"Roar..."

A sharp dragon roar emanated from within the Dragonpit. Rhaegar turned, peering into the dim interior where a scarlet hue flickered.

"Can it fly?" Rhaegar asked, frowning slightly.

Maynard shook his head regretfully. "It's quite a struggle. The improperly healed wounds keep tearing and reconnecting. It'll take at least a year and a half before it can return to the sky."

Rhaegar nodded, handing Cannibal over to the Dragonkeepers. Even in his absence, the Dragonpit remained under his control, ensuring the safety and care of his dragons.