

G.O Thrones 261

Chapter 261: The Sea Snake and Daemon's Collusion

Rhaegar's eyes sharpened as he grew wary of the dragon he had never seen before. Any dragon not under Targaryen control was a potential disaster.

The battle in the clouds intensified, dragon flames piercing the sky. A cold feeling crept into Rhaegar's heart as he tried to shift his gaze. He possessed the rare gift of Dreamscape, which allowed him to explore the secrets hidden within his dreams.

But his vision moved only slightly upward and then stopped beneath the clouds. It was as if some unseen force was preventing him from seeing the truth above.

"Roar!"

"Roar..."

Suddenly, several dragon roars rang out, converging from different directions. Rhaegar turned his head to see a group of unfamiliar dragons flying toward each other, spitting dragonfire in a fierce aerial battle.

These dragons of varying sizes clashed violently across the vast sea.

"Roar!"

A giant dragon suddenly swooped over Rhaegar's head, releasing a pillar of dragonfire. Rhaegar's heart raced and he instinctively raised his hand to block it.

Boom...

A thunderous roar echoed through the sky as the wind howled and the sky darkened.

When Rhaegar opened his eyes, the dragons were gone.

"Dragons..." Rhaegar muttered in confusion, scanning the sky for any sign of them.

A meteor streaked across the sky like a fiery ball, followed by a dense stream of falling stars.

Simultaneously, a snowflake landed on Rhaegar's eyelashes. In an instant, snow covered the sky, and the sea below froze into a solid expanse of ice.

The meteor shower continued, crashing into the frozen sea, sending up waves of ice and frigid water.

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Outside the Hot Spring

"Princess, the prince is bathing inside. You cannot enter."

A dissuasive voice tried to reason.

"Get out of the way. There is no place in Rhaegar's territory I cannot enter."

The protest fell on deaf ears as someone shoved the speaker aside. The white stone entrance was covered with a beaded curtain, obscuring the view.

A small hand lifted a corner of the curtain, which was decorated with fine drops of water. A long, white leg stepped over the threshold, droplets adorning the smooth, wet skin.

Rhaenyra stepped slowly into the tub, tilting her head and running her hands through her long, loose hair. She wore a light gauze robe that barely hid her form in the misty steam.

"Rhaegar~~," she called softly, her voice soft and melodic.

Inside the Hot Spring

Rhaegar was lost in a dream that was slowly turning into a nightmare. His pale face was flushed and he mumbled incoherently, "Great snow... flames..."

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and his body shook nervously. His movements disturbed the hot spring water, causing ripples to spread.

Sensing something was wrong, Rhaenyra stepped forward in her bare feet and said anxiously, "Rhaegar, wake up!"

Rhaegar had been plagued by nightmares for years, his nerves growing more tense each day. He had even taken up playing the harp to relieve his gloomy mood.

Hearing the familiar call, Rhaegar's eyes snapped open, and he let out a hoarse roar. He sat up abruptly, gasping for breath, and looked around alertly.

"Rhaegar, it's me," Rhaenyra said softly as she approached him, worry etched on her face.

Rhaegar's eyes were bloodshot, his chest heaving violently. He felt dizzy from the sudden movement and lack of oxygen. Holding his spinning head, he looked at Rhaenyra with a helpless expression. The blood in his eyes faded, replaced by a watery sheen.

"Sister," he murmured, his voice filled with vulnerability.

Rhaenyra was deeply moved by the sound of his voice. She quickly walked to the edge of the heated pool where Rhaegar was sitting. It had been a long time since he had called her with such vulnerability.

The last time had been when he was a boy, awakening from a nightmare and shivering in her arms.

"Don't be afraid. Another nightmare?" Rhaenyra's eyes were full of concern as she knelt beside the hot spring and pulled Rhaegar into her arms.

Rhaegar shifted his position, resting his head against her softness and wrapping his arms around her waist. His head throbbed, and his heart pounded frantically.

It was hard to breathe because of the oppressive feeling that lingered after waking from the nightmare. Rhaegar didn't know if it was the fear or the dizziness from the lack of blood supply.

"Rhaenyra, I had a dream, a very bad one," he whispered weakly, rubbing his cheeks vigorously, trying to gather warmth.

Rhaenyra stroked his spine gently and kissed his forehead, her lips soft but firm. "Don't worry, I'm always here for you."

She didn't know how to fully comfort him or share his fears, but she would always be his haven.

"Rhaenyra, I dreamt that a child and the dragon he was riding was attacked and fell into the sea." Rhaegar closed his eyes tightly, remembering a similar dream from three years ago, and spoke almost unconsciously.

Rhaenyra pressed her forehead to his and caressed his cheeks, her voice soothing and sympathetic. "Don't be afraid. It was just a dream. No one gets attacked by a dragon."

"No! You don't understand. I saw it all." Rhaegar's eyes opened, trembling with intensity. "That child looked exactly like me when I was young."

Rhaenyra was stunned and stared at him in horror.

"And the dream I just had," Rhaegar continued nervously, "it was also a child fighting a dragon, and then it snowed heavily."

He exhaled sharply as he spoke, his legs causing the water to ripple. Beneath him stretched a thick tree root, its skin dry.

At a loss for words, Rhaenyra asked cautiously, "What is the connection between these two dreams?"

"My dreams don't just come for no reason. They must be prophetic," Rhaegar said, a shiver running down his spine. "These two children, they are my children!"

"They're in danger... what will happen?" Rhaenyra listened intently, her mind racing.

Rhaegar turned to face her, staring directly into her purple eyes. A few meters away, a leafless weirwood tree, its branches like the claws and teeth of a monster, loomed ominously. On its trunk, a ghastly face with bleeding eyes seemed to gaze at the siblings clinging to each other.

Rhaegar, lost in thought, said, "It is likely... that they will lose their lives!"

He knew the terror of a dragon fight all too well. One wrong move and you could be consumed by Dragonfire. These two dreams, connected as they were, must be a warning from his prophetic gift.

Rhaenyra's face fell, her eyes flickering with confusion. She reached out to touch her flat belly, a new worry taking hold.

"Rhaegar's child... is it not...?" she whispered, trailing off as the weight of their shared fears settled heavily between them.

It took Rhaenyra half a second to shake off her unease. Her eyes flared with anger as she met Rhaegar's gaze, biting her lower lip. "Whose dragon was it in the dream? Aegon's or Daemon's?"

The only ones she could think of who could threaten Rhaegar were her half-brother and her evil uncle. Daemon in particular was highly suspicious.

Rhaegar and Daemon had long feuded. Lately, rumors had it that Daemon was stirring up trouble on the Stepstones Islands and seemed to be planning something big. Rhaenyra couldn't help but be cautious. Not only was it a nightmare, but it might affect her heir.

"I'm not sure, but I have a feeling it's not them," Rhaegar replied, doubt flashing in his eyes. The two dragons in the dream—one with green scales and the other with dark red—didn't resemble Sunfyre or Caraxes.

Unable to get a definitive answer, Rhaenyra gritted her teeth and pulled Rhaegar into her arms for comfort.

A gust of wind lifted the curtain and stirred the steamy mist that enveloped the grim-faced Weirwood tree nearby. Rhaegar leaned back and murmured, "Rhaenyra, I sense a curse surrounding the Targaryens. The end of one nightmare is the beginning of another."

The feeling had started when he couldn't heal his father's wounds, and now it was getting stronger.

Rhaenyra held Rhaegar like a child, her chin resting on his silver hair as she bit her lip. "Shh! No one can hurt us. Dragonfire will dispel any evil."

"You're right," Rhaegar said, his voice soothing as his mind began to settle. He had been startled by the snow and meteor shower in his nightmare and had shared everything that was on his mind.

Rhaenyra wasn't supposed to know about these prophetic dreams - it only added to the bad mood.

After a long time they separated. Rhaenyra sat at the edge of the hot spring and dipped her legs into the water. Rhaegar rested his head on her lap, telling her of his recent troubles.

After a moment, he rubbed his cheeks, pinched the corner of her dress, and muttered, "Rhaenyra, why are you wearing a dress? It's disrespectful to the hot springs."

"Go away, and think of something pleasant," Rhaenyra retorted, sending a blank stare his way. "You occupied the Isle of Faces, and that green man, who boasts of being the island's guardian, blocked me from coming in."

If it weren't for outsiders, she wouldn't have had to wear a dress. Under the dense fog, it quickly got wet and was not comfortable against her skin.

Rhaegar laughed. "Don't be angry. Gal is quite capable. He's a very skillful mage, maester, and gardener."

"Hmph!" Rhaenyra grunted softly, kicking the water hard.

"Oh, Rhaenyra, now you're even kicking me," Rhaegar said pitifully, holding her thigh tightly and not letting go.

Rhaenyra turned her head proudly, her cheeks flushed red.

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Driftmark.

The fire crackled softly, casting flickering light across the lavishly furnished room, perfumed with the sweet scent of burning incense wood.

A round table and two chairs adorned the space beside the fireplace.

Seated in one of the chairs, cloaked in a blanket, was the Sea Snake, his expression solemn, eyes cast downward, his long hair cascading over his shoulders.

Though the physical wounds from three years prior had long since healed, the pain in his heart remained unhealed.

"The Triarchy continues their movements, trading goods and slaves in abundance, steadily amassing their strength," a magnetic, low voice sounded from across the room.

The Sea Snake, without looking up, added another piece of firewood to the flames, watching them dance as he spoke in a deep tone, "The dragonfire of the last war ignited the seeds of discord, fostering deep resentment among the nine free-trading city-states towards the Targaryens and Velaryons."

Or rather, against the dragons themselves.

His companion chuckled playfully but remained silent.

As the Sea Snake extended his hand towards the warmth of the fire, he murmured, "More than a curse has been sown; an unprecedented opportunity presents itself."

"We must seize this moment, for it is an imminent transformation of the entire world, one that will shake it to its core."

With a cold, calculated gaze, the Sea Snake turned his head towards the figure seated on the opposite side of the table, beside a wine cabinet adorned with bottles.

There sat a man, legs crossed, a smirk gracing his lips.

Under the flickering firelight, Daemon's ruggedly handsome face was illuminated.

Arms folded, his eyes deep in contemplation, Daemon became lost in thought.

Chapter 262: Alicent's Rage

As evening fell, two dragons soared from the Isle of Faces toward the moonlit Harrenhal Castle. The gates of Harrenhal stood wide open, and a procession of wagons, loaded with goods and trunks entered the castle in an orderly line.

From above, Rhaegar watched the long line of loaded wagons being pulled into the courtyard. Cannibal landed gracefully, and Rhaegar dismounted to help an exhausted Rhaenyra down from her dragon.

As they walked back to the Kingspyre Tower, Rhaegar wondered aloud, "Did Old Tully really send so many gifts?"

He knew Old Tully's character well enough to find it surprising. The man was notoriously stingy and would not easily part with such a large sum.

"Hmph, of course not," Rhaenyra replied with a cold snort, her voice tinged with jealousy. "It's a gift from your Highgarden rose, a hundred wagonloads of it."

"Margaret?" Rhaegar frowned slightly, filtering out the bitterness in Rhaenyra's tone. "Why would she send so much for no good reason?"

He had no plans to visit Highgarden and no intention of getting involved romantically. Receiving such a generous gift felt awkward.

Rhaenyra leaned sullenly on Rhaegar's shoulder and murmured, "Why else? It's your irresistible charm."

For years, noblewomen had coveted Rhaegar's attention, and Rhaenyra had long since grown indifferent to it.

"Forget it," Rhaegar said, shaking his head. "Make sure you send a gift back so we don't seem ungrateful."

With that, he hoisted the weary Rhaenyra onto his back and left for the tower.

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Time flew by, and half a month had passed.

In King's Landing, within the vast halls of the Dragonpit, a young voice echoed persistently.

"Stormcloud, can I touch you?"

"Stormcloud, try this—it's better than lamb..."

The silver-haired, green-clad Aemond wore a hopeful smile, his eyes fixed nervously on the dragon just a few meters away.

"Roar..."

The young dragon, covered in bright silver scales, lay prostrate, its golden eyes staring indifferently at Aemond. The dragon's small claws gripped the stone floor as it listened to Aemond's attempts at communication.

After three years of growth, Stormcloud had reached the size of a horse. Despite being a young dragon, Stormcloud had been kept in the Dragonpit. Aemond, the only Targaryen without a dragon, frequently visited, hoping to bond with the creature.

"Stormcloud, I brought you a goat," Aemond said, his voice steady despite his growing frustration.

Ignoring Aemond's words, Stormcloud remained impassive. Determined, Aemond ordered the Dragonkeepers to bring in a goat.

"Baa..."

The goat, tied with a hemp rope, wiggled its fat body. Aemond took the twine and led the goat toward Stormcloud, speaking in High Valyrian, "Stormcloud, Dracarys!"

The dragon, however, continued to creep towards its crypt, showing no interest in Aemond or the goat.

People choose dragons, and dragons choose people. Clearly, Stormcloud did not recognize Aemond as its master.

"Stormcloud, Dracarys!" Aemond shouted again, his frustration growing. All his siblings—Aegon, Helaena, and Daeron—had their own dragons. Feeling increasingly overlooked, Aemond couldn't bear the disappointment in his parents' eyes.

Stormcloud remained indifferent, its tail lazily coiled under its long neck, eyes closed in a feigned sleep.

"Stormcloud, rise! Obey my commands!" Aemond yelled, shoving the goat closer to the dragon.

His yelling finally provoked the young dragon. With a mighty roar, Stormcloud opened its icy pupils, turned its body, and unleashed a fierce blast of silver-gray Dragonfire.

"No, no, no!" Aemond cried out, shocked. Instinctively, he turned and fell to the ground, narrowly avoiding the searing flames.

The goat, however, was quickly roasted and turned into a blackened charcoal. Aemond curled up on the ground, avoiding the direct impact of the Dragonfire, but his green cloak caught fire from the sparks.

"Ahh! It's so hot!" Aemond got up quickly as the flames died down, unbuttoning his cloak as he ran.

"Prince, I'll help you!" One of the Dragonkeepers rushed forward, almost stunned by the dragon's unexpected aggression.

Stormcloud's usually aloof and mild character didn't suggest he would breathe fire so readily.

After a moment of scrambling, Aemond managed to rip off his burning cloak and stomped on it in frustration.

"Take Stormcloud back to the dragon pit," said the older Dragonkeeper. "He's not fit to tame anymore."

Dragons are proud creatures. When they don't recognize someone, they never will. A dragon that breathes fire at a potential rider is nearly impossible to tame.

Aemond, still furious, stomped on the charred cloak, cursing, "Damn, damn..."

He just wanted to tame a dragon like his siblings, but it was proving to be so difficult.

"I'll get it!" Aemond muttered, gasping for breath, his eyes filled with frustration.

Suddenly, a muffled dragon's roar echoed through the kingdom, coming from the direction of the Dragonpit. The Dragonkeepers rushed to open the doors.

A huge black dragon, as dark as charcoal, descended from the sky, its sharp feet landing with a burst of hot sparks. Aemond turned, panic in his eyes, staring at the massive creature. The panic quickly turned to envy and jealousy.

"Roar..." The black dragon roared lowly, bent its lofty back, folded its wings, and crawled into the Dragonpit. Its fierce green eyes showed disdain for the confined space.

Aemond ran to the side, hiding beside the Dragonkeepers, watching the silver-haired figure on the dragon's back. His eyes lit up, and he shouted, "Brother!"

Rhaegar, standing on high ground, had already spotted the boy. As Cannibal crawled to the edge of the Dragonpit and settled, Rhaegar slid down and walked towards his foolish younger brother.

Aemond hurried to greet him with a bright smile. "Brother, why did you suddenly come back?"

"What, don't you welcome me?" Rhaegar teased, taking off his cloak and casually tossing it to Aemond.

Aemond caught the cloak obediently, hugging it as he followed Rhaegar. "No, I missed you."

“Oh, I think you miss the dragon,” Rhaegar said, noticing the burnt and crushed cloak, guessing that Aemond had failed in his attempt to tame Stormcloud.

“You see through everything,” Aemond said sheepishly, scratching his head. “Brother, Stormcloud doesn’t like me. Can you take me to Dragonstone Island?”

This was his plan. On Dragonstone, there were three unowned dragons, including the formidable bronze fury Vermithor. Aemond wanted a real dragon, not a baby Stormcloud.

Rhaegar glanced at him and said, “I can take you to Dragonstone Island, but there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to tame a dragon.”

Aemond had faced ridicule from Aegon and many disapproving stares. The three dragons on Dragonstone Island were adults, making the task even harder.

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t give up,” Aemond said excitedly. At ten years old, he could see things more clearly. Aegon, though his brother, was unreliable. If he wanted to succeed, he had to rely on Rhaegar.

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Red Keep, Banquet Hall

Viserys was arranging the wine for the dinner, a smile on his face as he directed the servants to set up the place.

The sound of high heels echoed menacingly.

Viserys's smile froze as Alicent, dressed in a green gown, descended the stairs. Her curly hair trembled with each step, and her grim expression betrayed her foul mood.

"Alicent, you should be with Aegon," Viserys began.

Alicent's eyes, filled with sadness and anger, flashed as she retorted, "You are the one who should be with Aegon; you are his father."

Viserys rubbed his forehead. "Aegon is a man, not as fragile as you think."

"What do you mean, not as fragile as you think?" Alicent exclaimed angrily, nearly dancing with agitation. "It's all because of your good brother! He attacked Rhaegar before, and now he's injured Aegon, and you're just going to let him do it?"

At that moment, Rhaegar and Rhaenyra entered the hall together, followed by a small entourage: Helaena, Aemond, and Daeron. Aegon wasn't there. Rumor had it he'd been beaten and was bedridden.

Viserys glanced at the arriving children and tried to soothe his wife. "Daemon has changed. He is the Lord of the Narrow Sea and is responsible for the Stepstones."

"His responsibility is to wound Aegon, his own brother's child?" Alicent would not relent, her voice rising.

A few days ago, Aegon had returned to King's Landing by ship, bruised and swollen. The guards revealed that Daemon had beaten him on Bloodstone Island. Daemon had mobilized the garrison to

attack the Triarchy's pirates, but Aegon had delayed the attack, allowing the pirates to escape. In a rage, Daemon had publicly beaten and humiliated Aegon.

Alicent's children were her bottom line, and Daemon's actions had frayed her fragile nerves. She couldn't stop thinking about Aegon's physical and mental humiliation and demanded Daemon be held accountable.

Viserys sighed helplessly, his head aching. Daemon had sent a letter explaining that Aegon's actions over the past year had undermined the defense of the Stepstones. Viserys had reconciled with his brother, believing Daemon was right to discipline Aegon.

Chapter 263: The Clever Daeron

"Viserys, I have reason to suspect that Daemon is up to no good and harbors covetous desires for the Stepstones' army."

Alicent's voice was serious, her eyes hard as she voiced her doubts about Daemon.

There were 3,000 troops stationed on the Stepstones, controlled by Aegon, Daemon, and Cole. Cole had stepped down as Commander of the Kingsguard and remained on the Stepstones to atone for his sins. All three were people Viserys trusted implicitly.

"Alicent, think about what you're saying... How could Daemon covet the army of the Stepstones?" Viserys was physically and mentally exhausted, confused by his wife's skepticism.

Daemon was his brother, the infamous Rogue Prince. His father-in-law was the head of House Velaryon, Corlys Velaryon, the wealthiest and most powerful lord in the Seven Kingdoms.

Both he and his wife were esteemed dragonriders, commanding Caraxes and the largest dragon, Vhagar. If Daemon needed an army, he could simply call for one, and many in the Seven Kingdoms would rally to his side. Why would he covet a garrison of 3,000 men on the Stepstones?

Alicent persisted. "Daemon has always been constrained by Aegon. If he didn't want to control the army, why did he send Aegon back to King's Landing injured?"

The conflict between Aegon and Daemon went back a long way. It was hard to believe that Daemon's sudden move was without ulterior motives.

"Alicent, enough!" Viserys's voice was low and frustrated. "Daemon is my brother. He has the right to discipline his nephew who doesn't follow the rules. Don't suspect our family without sufficient evidence!"

It was an irrefutable fact that Aegon had made a mistake. There was no need for conspiracy theories.

"You will regret this, Viserys!" Alicent flinched at the outburst, her eyes reddening as she cried out and turned away.

No one understood Daemon's nature better than she did. He was an unapologetic rogue, a wolf in sheep's clothing eager to take advantage of any weakness in the royal family.

Viserys watched his wife's retreating back helplessly, reaching out to stop her but then letting his hand fall.

"Forget it, let her calm down first," he muttered to himself. Aegon had been injured, and it was natural for Alicent, as his mother, to be angry. Viserys was trying to convince himself.

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Without Alicent, the hostess, and Aegon, who was bedridden recuperating from his injuries, the dinner party felt awkwardly cold.

After a quick meal, the children dispersed. Alone with his mulled wine, Viserys forced a smile and wished each of them "good night."

Late at night, Rhaegar lay on his couch, pondering his father's quarrel with Alicent. Since his release from prison, Daemon had kept a low profile in King's Landing. Besides the last family dinner, Rhaegar had seen little of him. Yet it was evident to everyone that Daemon was not a man of honor. After losing his bid for the Iron Throne, he was bound to set his sights on something else.

Knock, knock...

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," Rhaegar called out casually.

Creak—

The wooden door opened, and Rhaenyra, wearing a loose nightgown, quietly walked in. Rhaegar's lips curled up involuntarily as he stretched his neck to take a look. Rhaenyra had been unusually clingy lately.

"Rhaegar, I just went to see Alicent. She's in her room, in tears," Rhaenyra whispered as she walked over to the bed and sat down.

"You're concerned about her?" Rhaegar reached out, grasping her small, soft hand.

Rhaenyra folded her legs together, her long hair cascading over her pink neck. She whispered, "Alicent is actually pretty pitiable too. No one truly cares about her."

She had grown up with only three friends, with Alicent being the closest. Despite their estrangement, a bond remained. After all these years, it was time to let go of old grudges.

Rhaenyra was doing well, loved by others, and free from trivial worries. Alicent, on the other hand, bore a heavy burden and had never truly lived for herself. Rhaenyra felt a pang of sympathy.

"When you pity her, remember she's married to your father, and you have to call her stepmother," Rhaegar said flatly, dismissing the notion of sentimental ties. He wasn't like Rhaenyra, who had grown up surrounded by emotions and had developed a sentimental nature.

He had no mother, rarely saw his father, and nightmares were his constant companion. Rhaenyra's "love" was what had drawn them close. He cared for nothing else, and the concept of "friendship" seemed irrelevant. In the Seven Kingdoms, no one his age was worthy of being his friend.

"Rhaegar, you always manage to bring me back to reality," Rhaenyra said, rolling her eyes as she fell into his arms, bumping her head against his chest.

Talking to him like this didn't offer any emotional solace. Rhaegar cupped her troubled head, saying dejectedly, "Alicent is not as simple as you think."

A woman who had taken care of her great-grandfather Jaehaerys I in his old age, climbed into her father Viserys' bed, and bore four heirs—she was far from simple-minded.

Rhaenyra, frustrated, rolled over and pinned him beneath her, her hands supporting her on the soft goose-feather mattress as she looked down at him.

Rhaegar lay there, waiting for his punishment.

"Rhaegar, you're not listening," Rhaenyra said, pulling back her silver hair and running her small hand down the collar of his shirt.

Knock, knock...

A knock on the door abruptly interrupted the intimate atmosphere. Rhaenyra's face fell as she quickly moved away, retreating from the "battlefield."

"Who is it at this late hour?" Rhaegar called out in annoyance, his head hanging in frustration.

"Brother, it's me."

Helaena's delicate voice floated through the door.

Rhaenyra gave Rhaegar a playful kick, muttering, "You're right, Alicent is really annoying."

Especially her daughter, who had a knack for interrupting at the worst moments.

Sighing inwardly, Rhaegar got out of bed and opened the door.

Creak...

The door swung open, revealing Helaena in a light green robe, her face bright and expectant.

"Helaena," Rhaegar greeted, his gaze drifting to the small figure beside her.

"Brother," came the delicate voice of Daeron, who held Helaena's hand and flashed a smile.

Daeron was very handsome, no less than Rhaegar had been as a child. Dressed in a white shirt with a green coat, his short silver-blond hair and big purple eyes darted around.

Rhaegar nodded in response, blocking the doorway as he asked, "Why are you up so late?"

"We..."

Helaena hesitated, her response slow.

Daeron answered first, "Mother is angry and doesn't care about us, so we came to play with you and sister."

"Is that so?" Rhaegar questioned, scanning his siblings.

Helaena nodded vigorously, her face tight with worry.

Daeron nodded as well, producing a book from behind him.

Rhaegar rubbed Helaena's hair, asking, "Where's Aemond? Isn't he usually the clingiest to you?"

"He's gone to find Aegon and isn't with us," Helaena said crisply, half-squinting in comfort.

"Come in. Rhaenyra's here too," Rhaegar said, stepping aside to let the two youngsters enter.

Rhaenyra knelt on the couch, eyeing her younger siblings critically.

They didn't sleep in the middle of the night but came to Rhaegar's room; there was something odd about that!

Feeling their elder sister's scrutinizing gaze, Helaena and Daeron hurriedly saluted, looking like a pair of guilty children.

Rhaenyra waved her hand dismissively, slightly embarrassed by her intensity.

"As if I'm that scary," she murmured to herself.

Rhaegar sat on the bed and stared at Helaena and Daeron with a serious expression. "Alright, what's really going on at this late hour?"

Helaena and Daeron exchanged wide-eyed glances.

Helaena nudged Daeron. "You tell him."

Daeron hesitated.

Rhaegar noticed and focused his attention on Daeron, suspecting the younger sibling had instigated this visit.

"Ahem, I found a book on the occult," Daeron finally admitted, holding up the book in his hands.

"It talks about the connection between dragons and magic. I thought it was fascinating."

He handed the book over, his eyes full of anticipation.

Rhaegar shook his head with a chuckle, reaching out to take the book and flipping through it. He recognized it immediately—a collection of speculative tales about dragons and magic.

"According to the traditions of the Dothraki people of the Great Grass Sea of Essos, there were originally two moons in the sky, and one of them got too close to the sun and suffered a heat explosion, giving birth to countless dragons... Magic is like a tidal wave, sometimes surging, sometimes falling silent... Magic disappears from public view, but the Citadel and the Alchemy Guild have magical glass candles that allow them to observe the existence of magic..."

Rhaegar smiled nostalgically. He had read this same book when he was young and had been equally captivated by its imaginative tales.

"How is it? Isn't it wonderful?" Daeron stood on his tiptoes, pointing to a passage in the book.

"Glass candles, to observe real magic."

Daeron was fascinated by dragons and magic, especially given his own young cobalt blue dragon, Tessarion.

Rhaegar handed the book back and asked, "How do you think dragons came to be, and what is magic?"

"I don't know," Daeron admitted, shaking his head.

"Don't dwell on this book. It will pique your interest but won't provide real answers," Rhaegar advised, nodding at the book in Daeron's hands. He then reached into his space bracelet and produced two ancient books.

"Wow, this is magic!" Daeron's eyes widened in awe as he watched the silver-gray patterned space bracelet reveal the ancient tomes.

Rhaegar smiled and handed the books to Daeron. "These are ancient books from another powerful Dragonlord family. They're more suited for your studies."

These were books from the long-lost "Belaerys" family, which Rhaegar had found in his space bracelet when he was six. They chronicled a different history of dragonlords and were among his most treasured possessions.

Daeron held the books as if they were the most precious things in the world. "Brother, do you really know magic?"

"Not know it, but I can tap into it," Rhaegar corrected, speaking seriously. "Every Targaryen has magic in their blood. The difference is that I've figured out some of its mysteries."

Chapter 264: Teaching Runes

"Where's the magic?" Daeron frowned, extending his small hand in eager anticipation.

He didn't see any magic, nor did he feel any different from an ordinary person.

Rhaegar mirrored his gesture, holding out his own hand. "You are a Targaryen," he said seriously. "Remember, blood and fire come from the same source."

As he spoke, a wisp of flame flickered into existence on his palm.

"Fire!!!" Daeron exclaimed in shock, his eyes wide with amazement.

Rhaenyra and Helaena remained much calmer, watching patiently. They had witnessed Rhaegar's extraordinary powers before; flames were just one of his abilities.

Rhaegar gently shook his hand, making the flame dance. "Grow up quickly," he said. "When you can help share the burden, I'll consider passing this power on to the family."

Though his words were directed at Daeron, they seemed to echo his own thoughts. The family was strong, but fragmented, and none of them were reliable enough for him to share his secrets. Be it pyromancy, blood magic or runic knowledge.

If things continued this way, he might have to wait for his own heir to carry on the legacy.

Daeron stared at the flames, longing etched on his face. "Can I really learn this kind of fire magic?"

"It's hard to say, but there's always something you can learn," Rhaegar replied, extinguishing the flame.

Daeron, determined, clutched the ancient book tightly. "I can definitely do it," he declared. Remembering something, he turned to leave. "I'll go back to read the book and finish the ancient one you gave me first."

Rhaegar didn't stop him, watching Daeron's small figure exit the room. This youngest brother, apart from his talent for taming dragons, also showed a remarkable determination to learn. Compared to Aegon and Aemond, he had a greater will to improve himself.

As Daeron left, Helaena stood frozen, tilting her head in confusion. Was she just being left here?

Rhaegar turned to Rhaenyra and Helaena. "Do you want to learn magic?"

"Are you sure you want to pass on this power?" Rhaenyra asked, her tone serious.

"You must keep it a secret," Rhaegar cautioned.

He wanted to equip Rhaenyra and Helaena with some self-preservation skills, unlike his brothers. Rhaenyra considered this, then extended her hand. Helaena followed suit, holding out her chubby little hand.

"Ready?" Rhaegar asked, his eyes full of seriousness.

The sisters nodded solemnly.

"Very good," Rhaegar said, touching their hands briefly before shaking them off.

Under their puzzled gazes, he took out a sheet of paper and shrugged. "You don't have the talent of a Pyromancer, so you'll learn some runes."

He wasn't an inherited bloodmage who could discern talent with a handshake. Passing on knowledge through written instructions was more practical.

Rhaenyra sighed, feeling a bit embarrassed by her own curiosity.

On the page, the construction and inscription of the rune "Bronze" were clearly detailed. The preface described the mysteries of the runic system and the connection between magic power and bloodline.

Rhaenyra pulled the confused Helaena into her arms so they could view the contents together.

Rhaegar lay back and closed his eyes, letting them absorb the information at their own pace. Passing on knowledge required patience. If they could understand, they would learn. If not, even hands-on teaching wouldn't make a difference.

...

Meanwhile, in Aegon's room:

As Aemond approached, he heard their mother's voice from inside.

"Aegon, your father doesn't care about you. You need to learn to think for yourself."

Creak...

Before Aemond could eavesdrop further, the door opened, and Alicent emerged, her eyes red and swollen from crying. She wiped away her tears and forced a smile.

"Aegon is resting inside. Go see him," she said softly, knowing how close her two sons were.

"You should rest too, Mother," Aemond advised, gently pushing the door open and stepping inside.

Alicent nodded, smiling faintly, and hurried away.

Inside, Aegon lay shirtless on his couch, staring bored at the ceiling. A maid was tidying up, bending over to pick up the dishes. Aegon glanced at her rounded figure, licking his lips.

Just as he was about to reach out, Aemond's voice interrupted, "Aegon, are you all right?"

Startled, Aegon quickly withdrew his hand.

"Prince Aemond," the maid said, curtsying to the young prince.

Aemond gave Aegon a knowing look and waved the maid away. "You may leave. I need to speak with Aegon."

The maid nodded, gathered the tray, and left the room with a quick, formal step.

Now alone, Aegon's face twisted in annoyance. "I was just about to touch her, and you had to come in."

"Aegon, she is Mother's maid," Aemond said, his voice tinged with disapproval as he sat down on the bed.

"So what? You like voluptuous women too," Aegon retorted, sitting up and propping himself on his hands.

"Aegon!" Aemond's voice rose, scolding him.

Aegon smirked. "Fine, fine, I'll stop." He pulled the quilt over his lower body and asked reluctantly, "What do you want?"

This younger brother of his always tried to play the noble role, the perfect child their parents adored. But deep down, Aegon knew he was no different from him.

"I asked Rhaegar for permission to visit Dragonstone, and he agreed," Aemond said, excitement gleaming in his eyes. "I want you to come with me. Help me find a powerful dragon."

Aegon looked at him quietly, tilting his head.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then, Aegon burst into laughter. "Pfft... hahahaha... You can't even tame a young dragon, and you want to tame an adult one?"

If the dragons on Dragonstone were that easy to tame, they would have been secretly taken by the dragonseeds on the island long ago. What makes him think he has a chance?

Aemond's face flushed with anger. "Why can't I do it? If Rhaegar can tame the Cannibal, I can too!"

"Hahaha, stop it, you're killing me!" Aegon laughed loudly, wincing from the bruises and pain on his face. He covered his face, still laughing. "Rhaegar is a monster. He jumped on the Cannibal's back to tame it. You'd be too scared to move if you saw that black dragon."

"Aegon, I consider you my brother!" Aemond shouted, clenching his fists at the ridicule.

Aegon stifled his laughter and said, "It's all right if you don't have a dragon, Aemond. There was a dragonless Targaryen in our grandparents' generation too."

Vaegon Targaryen, the seventh child and fourth son of King Jaehaerys I, was known for being mean and emotionally indifferent. He disliked his sister, whom he was supposed to marry, and had no interest in dragons.

Later, he traveled to the Citadel and became a maester devoted to research. Shortly after Jaehaerys I's death, Vaegon also died, and thus the Targaryens of that generation were nearly wiped out.

Being taunted as dragonless made Aemond grimace. Rising to his feet, he shouted, "Aegon, I will prove myself!"

He was fed up with his brother, who only found validation in mocking him. Aemond walked quickly to the door of his room and left in a fury.

As he watched his brother leave, Aegon lay back down, smacking his lips. The movement caused his bruises to ache, and he grimaced, cursing, "Damn Daemon. How dare you hold a personal vendetta? You'll pay for this."

...

A few days later...

In the Council Hall, a Small Council meeting was in session.

The exhausted King Viserys sat at the head of the table, looking around at his royal advisers.

"Your Grace, Lord Boremund has passed away, and his son Borros has inherited Storm's End and is organizing a funeral," Otto Hightower reported, holding a letter with a solemn expression.

Viserys rubbed his brow and sighed, "Lord Boremund was an honorable lord. His death is a loss for the Seven Kingdoms."

Lord Beesbury spoke up, "Your Grace, Lord Boremund was highly esteemed by the people. The royal family should pay their respects."

Lyonel Strong nodded in agreement. "Indeed. It would also be a good opportunity to connect with the new Lord Borros and ensure his loyalty to the crown."

Borros had a formidable reputation—rude, martial, proud, and arrogant. It was crucial to confirm his loyalty now that he was the Lord of Storm's End.

"Borros is a cousin of Rhaenys. He will be a loyal Targaryen ally," Viserys said, trusting yet clearly reluctant to travel to Storm's End for the funeral. His health had been declining, and any journey, whether by Kingsroad or by sea, would be taxing.

Lyonel, detecting the king's reluctance, insisted, "Your Grace, Lord Boremund was once married to a Targaryen. It's fitting for the royal family to intervene."

"I agree," added Jasper Wylde, the Master of Laws. With the end of the War for the Stepstones, the kingdom's control over the Narrow Sea had strengthened, and relations with the Baratheon House had become more frequent. The Baratheons' attitude towards the royal family had shifted from respect to a more indifferent stance, which was concerning.

Several advisers supported the idea, but Viserys remained hesitant. After a moment of thought, he looked towards his eldest son.

Sensing his father's silent plea, Rhaegar spoke up, "Father, I will go to Storm's End on behalf of the royal family."

He had anticipated Lord Boremund's demise and was keen to gauge Borros' loyalty. As the heir, his presence would be significant.

Viserys' eyes brightened, pleased with his son's offer. At this moment, Otto Hightower knocked on the table, suggesting, "Why don't we have Prince Rhaegar lead several princes and princesses to Storm's End? It would show the royal family's respect for Lord Boremund."

"All of them?" Viserys hesitated.

Otto's eyes were calculating. "Storm's End is not far from Bloodstone Island. Prince Aegon needs to address his recent mistakes and should return to his fief to oversee it. Additionally, the other princes and princesses seldom venture outside the kingdom. It would be beneficial for them to show the royal family's prosperity and strength."

Viserys hesitated. Otto's suggestion had merit and aligned with his ideals of family unity and public display of the royal family's importance.

Chapter 265: The Strength of the Targaryen House

Viserys' desire to showcase the prosperity and power of House Targaryen began to take shape.

Gently turning the gemstone ring on his finger, he asked Rhaegar, "Storm's End is not far from King's Landing. Will you be able to manage your younger siblings on such a journey?"

Rhaegar, ever cautious, responded, "I will be riding my dragon. Are you certain about this?"

He advised his father to think carefully, considering the harsh weather conditions around Storm's End with its constant cloud cover and heavy rains. Alicent would not be pleased with sending several of her children away.

"That's not a problem. Aegon, Helaena, and Daeron all have dragons as well," Otto interjected confidently. His faith in his grandchildren was evident.

A Targaryen with a dragon was a formidable presence.

Rhaegar's eyes glinted as he looked at his father, who seemed torn yet determined. He did not rush to refuse. Borros Baratheon was known for his arrogance and conceit. A visit to Storm's End with his siblings would remind the nobles of the Stormlands of the Targaryens' might.

After a brief discussion, the advisors agreed to Otto's proposal. Viserys, filled with confidence, declared, "Let Rhaegar lead the expedition to Storm's End with his younger brothers. Let the people of the Seven Kingdoms see the strength of House Targaryen."

His old dragon had died, but his children were all dragonriders. It was time to show the world this heritage.

Rhaegar nodded in agreement, mentally planning the details of the journey.

...

Early the next morning, the usually cold and quiet Dragonpit was bustling with activity.

Several dragons emerged from their pits, guided by their keepers to find their respective riders.

Aegon reluctantly mounted the magnificent Sunfyre, his expression mirroring the dragon's unwillingness.

Aemond, without a dragon of his own, was assigned to ride with Aegon. He nervously climbed onto Sunfyre's back, fastening himself into the saddle.

"Roar..."

Sunfyre let out a low growl, his golden scales shimmering in the sunlight as he shifted restlessly.

Nearby, Syrax responded with a warning growl, flapping its wings in a display of dominance.

Sunfyre spread his wings in response, his pale pink membranes catching the light.

“Syrax, calm down,” Rhaenyra commanded, standing in front of her dragon in a black dragonrider's outfit, soothingly rubbing Syrax's jaw.

Not far away, Tessarion lay on the ground, wagging his tail and watching the commotion.

“Climb onto the dragon's back and fasten the chains; everything will be fine,” Rhaegar instructed, helping young Daeron onto Tessarion's back.

“Don't worry, brother,” Daeron said, climbing into the saddle with a mix of excitement and nervousness. It was his first time flying a dragon.

“Roar...” Tessarion growled softly, getting to his feet and looking back at his new rider.

Daeron took a deep breath. “Tessarion, carry me into the sky.”

With a powerful flap of his wings, Tessarion created a fierce wind, blowing dust in all directions. Rhaegar stepped back, signaling the Dragonkeepers to clear the area.

“Tessarion, fly!” Daeron shouted, gripping the saddle tightly.

Tessarion roared, stomping his feet before launching into the air, quickly exiting the Dragonpit and soaring into the sunlight.

“Not bad for a seven-year-old,” Rhaegar muttered, his blood boiling with excitement.

Climbing onto Cannibal's back, he looked around at his siblings and shouted, “Let's go, everyone!”

Cannibal roared and took off first, his massive wings propelling him into the sky.

Helaena's Dreamfyre followed, a light blue dragon matching the pace with a roar.

Sunfyre and Syrax spread their wings and joined the ascent, determined not to be left behind.

Five dragons carrying six Targaryens flew over King's Landing, heading towards Blackwater Bay, a magnificent display of Targaryen power and unity.

...

Afternoon

Several dragon shadows crossed the Narrow Sea, reaching the region of Storm's End.

Rhaegar led the way on Cannibal, plunging into the heavy clouds of gloom and mist, feeling the cool, moist air.

Aegon urged Sunfyre to speed up, ignoring Aemond's terrified screams as they disappeared into the clouds.

Syrax and Dreamfyre flew steadily, with the smaller Tessarion trailing far behind. It was Daeron's first time riding a dragon, and his sisters stayed close to watch over him.

...

At Storm's End Castle

Storm's End Castle, a legendary fortress built on the edge of the sea, had withstood thousands of years of wind and rain. Upon hearing of Lord Boremund's death, nobles from across the Stormlands had gathered to pay their respects.

A carriage crossed the narrow bridge of Storm's End Castle, entering amidst the wind and rain. The sky was cloudy and the air humid, adding to the somber atmosphere of the funeral.

Rumble

Rain poured down, accompanied by continuous lightning and thunder, drenching every guest who stepped out of their carriages.

"Roar!"

Suddenly, a dragon's roar, thunderous and echoing, filled the sky, sending gusts of wind toward Storm's End.

"Look, it's a dragon!"

"Several dragons!"

Cannibal, black as charcoal, broke through the rainy clouds, its green pupils flashing coldly. Rhaegar narrowed his eyes and opened his arms, letting the cold rain beat down on him.

Amidst the guests' panic, Cannibal circled Storm's End Castle twice before landing in an open space outside the city walls.

Boom

The ground compacted into a deep pit, splashing muddy water as Cannibal landed, roaring with its head held high. Under the gloomy rain, it looked like a terrifying god of destruction.

"Roar!"

Another roar, as loud as a flood bell, echoed with a menacing tone. Rhaegar and Cannibal turned to see a massive dragon with dark green scales on the other side of the city wall.

Vhagar, with its thick neck and spiny back towering over the wall, stared coldly at the younger Cannibal. The two true dragons locked eyes in a deadly stare, their murderous intent palpable.

Cannibal's green eyes flashed with cruelty, baring its dragon teeth. Despite growing larger, it refrained from attacking. Vhagar, though enormous and imposing, showed signs of age with cloudy pupils and a stiff, heavy body.

"Cannibal, it is not our enemy," Rhaegar said coldly, sensing the dragon's agitation and curbing its bloodlust. Cannibal had grown significantly, its spine towering over the 100-foot wall and wings covering a vast area, but Rhaegar knew Vhagar was not to be fought.

The old dragon had once belonged to his grandfather, Baelon. Laena was wise and intelligent, unlikely to ride Vhagar into battle. Letting the first-generation dragon live out its final days in peace was a more honorable choice.

Sunfyre broke through the rolling clouds, carrying Aegon and Aemond around Storm's End Castle. Its roar echoed arrogantly across the sky.

At a glance, Aemond spotted Vhagar confronting Cannibal and quickly looked away.

"It's Vhagar, the biggest dragon in the world!" Aemond nudged Aegon excitedly.

He had only seen Vhagar a handful of times, and this close encounter was awe-inspiring.

"Quiet, I'm landing," Aegon muttered impatiently, guiding Sunfyre to the courtyard of Storm's End Castle.

With Vhagar and Cannibal dominating one side of the wall, the other dragons kept their distance.

Storm's End had limited space, and the courtyard was the only area left to house the dragons.

Rhaegar dismounted, stepping on the wet black scales of Cannibal. He walked to the top of the dragon's head and soothed it gently, "Stay here, wait for me."

Cannibal let out a low growl, flicking its tail and planting its wings in the muddy ground. Dragons, being highly territorial, felt the urge to fight when facing an equal.

"Good, I'll be back soon," Rhaegar reassured, rubbing Cannibal's rough horns before sliding down its neck through the rain.

By the time he reached the courtyard, Dreamfyre and the other dragons had also landed with their riders.

"Prince, Princess..." The guards of Storm's End Castle hurried to greet them, holding up canopies.

The arrival of several dragons was a significant event, and they dared not show any disrespect.

Rhaegar's long hair was drenched, and water droplets covered his pale face, but he smiled nonetheless.

He walked up to the soaked Rhaenyra, gently twisting the wet hair on the side of her face, and teased, "The rain can't dull the beauty of a lady."

Rhaenyra wrung out her long hair, patted down the water on her dragon suit, and glared at him playfully.

Rhaegar accepted the glare with a grin, pulling out two cloaks and draping them over his sisters.

"Thank you, brother," Helaena said, clutching the cloak tightly. Her small face was pale from the cold, and she managed a faint smile.

"Prince, please come inside. The Lady has prepared a room for you," a modestly dressed butler urged as he opened the castle door.

Rhaegar looked at his younger siblings and led the way. "Let's go inside, no more wind and rain."

"Good," Daeron agreed, patting Tessarion and ordering the guards to hold a canopy over him.

Dragons hated water and were especially restless in the rain. Tessarion, still a young dragon, was more agitated than the others.

Rhaegar rubbed his youngest brother's head and asked, "How was your first time riding a dragon?"

"It was amazing!" Daeron replied, jumping up and down with joy.

Aemond watched the scene, clenching his fists. Just before entering the castle, he glanced back at the massive Vhagar, his eyes full of longing and expectation.

Chapter 266: Daemon's Unauthorized Actions

As they walked into the castle, the stone halls appeared empty, lit only by a few bonfires.

Stepping onto the soft carpet, Rhaegar noticed two women approaching with their servants.

"Cousin, come wipe off the rain before you catch a cold," Laena said, draped in a blanket. She handed out towels and shawls with the help of the servants.

Beside her stood a mature woman with black curly hair and a beautiful face. She spoke courteously, "It is an honor to welcome all the princes and princesses to Storm's End."

Rhaegar, who had never seen this lady before, looked at Rhaenyra inquiringly.

Tightening her cloak, Rhaenyra replied regretfully, "We are here to pay our respects to the late Lord Boremund, Lady Elenda."

Elenda responded mildly, "I have seen the sincerity of the Targaryens. Please, prepare to take a warm bath to avoid catching a cold."

"Thank you, my lady," Rhaenyra said, expressing her gratitude and quietly informing Rhaegar of Elenda's identity.

Elenda Caron, born into the House Caron of Nightsong, a region in the Dornish Marches, had married Borros Baratheon. She wasn't well known in her early years, but now she was the Lady of Storm's End.

Rhaegar brushed back his wet hair, exchanged polite pleasantries, and then asked bluntly, "Where is Lord Borros? Why haven't we seen him?"

"My husband is entertaining Lord Corlys and Princess Rhaenys, paying homage to his late father-in-law," Lady Elenda's voice was magnetic, and she responded calmly.

Although it was discourteous that Borros hadn't come out to greet them, her explanation was reasonable, assuaging any discontent among the princes and princesses.

Since they had come to pay their respects, Rhaegar chose not to be critical and allowed himself to be led up the stairs by his attendant. He was soaked to the skin and needed to change before seeing anyone.

As the group conversed, more guests were entertained and brought into the castle. Lady Elenda managed the arrivals with well-organized grace, thanking each one personally.

...

After washing up, Rhaegar left the bathroom to find his brothers and sisters. Laena had been waiting for a while, gathering her cousins to head upstairs to the Great Hall of Storm's End for the feast.

She rubbed her belly with one hand and explained, "There will be no outsiders at the feast. Lord Borros has arranged it especially for us and our family."

"Cousin, Daemon and Laenor didn't come?" Rhaegar asked, noting the absence of Seasmoke.

Laena hesitated for a moment, then grumbled, "Daemon arrived later, and Laenor went with him to the Stepstones for defense."

With Caraxes not fully healed, Daemon didn't have a dragon to lead him, so Laenor and Aegon took turns leading the patrols.

As they chatted, they soon arrived at the hall where the banquet was to be held. A bearded Borros sat at the head of the table, scolding his servants. Across from him, Corlys was calmly rubbing his chin, and Rhaenys, dressed in a corseted gown, stood by the wine cooler, eyeing Borros with displeasure.

If he weren't her cousin, she might have slapped him.

Rhaegar and Rhaenyra approached with smiles, greeting them, "Aunt Rhaenys, Lord Corlys."

Seeing her nephews and nieces, Rhaenys lifted her smile and held a bottle of fine wine as she stepped forward. "I didn't expect you all to be here. What a pleasant surprise!"

"Lord Boremund's contributions were so significant that Father emphasized our presence here," Rhaegar said warmly, offering a hug to his enthusiastic aunt.

Rhaenys hugged her nephews and nieces in turn, then took the hands of Rhaenyra and Helaena. "Borros can be rough around the edges. Don't be offended by any lack of hospitality. It's commendable that you braved the rain to come here."

Rhaegar and his brothers followed her, casting glances at the still-irate Borros. Realizing he was being watched, Borros patted his coat, stood up, and lifted his chin proudly. "The Baratheon House thanks you and your family for visiting, Prince."

He then gave a shallow bow, his bloated stomach making the gesture awkward.

"Huh," Aegon snorted, seating himself with a sigh.

Rhaegar glanced at Aegon but said nothing. He placed a hand on Borros' shoulder and said softly, "A moment of silence for your father."

With that, he ignored the lord and sat down next to Rhaenyra. Borros, visibly irritated, took his seat and yelled at the servants to bring the dishes, venting his frustration.

The grief of his father's death, combined with the excitement of newfound power, left him struggling to control his emotions.

The feast was about to begin when Lady Elenda arrived, apologizing, "I just greeted House Dondarrion of Blackhaven. I hope I'm not late."

"No, please sit down," Rhaenys replied, tasting the red wine and sharing it with her husband and two nieces.

The feast officially began. Rhaenyra enjoyed the carefully selected dishes, smiled at Corlys, and casually said, "Lord Corlys, I heard you recently made a significant deal with the Prince of Pentos?"

Corlys, his demeanor unchanged, forked a steak and replied indifferently, "The spices and wine from Pentos are quite good."

"I've been to Pentos. The local customs are fascinating," Rhaegar said, implying more but choosing to drop the topic.

The Sea Snake had been quiet for three years, but his increasing contacts with the free cities warranted attention.

Corlys didn't respond directly, instead chatting with Borros about some strange tales. The banquet felt a bit chilly, but Lady Elenda and Laena did their best to entertain the ladies.

Aegon ignored the conversations, gulping his wine and thinking to himself, "Daemon didn't show up. Otherwise, I'd have made him look bad."

Despite being bested by his uncle before, Aegon didn't believe he couldn't win. He felt that Daemon's initial attack had caught him off guard, preventing him from fighting back effectively.

...

Bloodstone Island.

The sky was dark, with clouds rolling in, heavy with moisture, foreshadowing an impending storm.

On the azure sea, a warship sailed toward the strait leading to the disputed lands. Several cargo ships flying the flag of the Triarchy moved steadily through the waterway.

A deep horn sounded from a remote island watchtower, its call spreading across the sea for miles.

"What's going on? Increase the alert!" The mercenaries on the cargo ships sprang into action, emerging from the cabins and taking up defensive positions.

"Roar..." A sharp dragon roar pierced the air as a light gray dragon swooped down, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire.

Boom...

The dragon's flames struck a cargo ship, snapping its mast and igniting a fierce blaze, sending mercenaries sprawling in chaos.

"It's a dragon, retreat!" the mercenary leader shouted, his face pale with shock. He had never imagined a dragon would attack them.

As the cargo ships attempted to turn and flee, a warship approached from the distant sea, its mast flying the three-headed red dragon banner.

Daemon, clad in black armor, his expression as cold as the stormy weather, eyed the cargo ships intently.

With a swift motion, he drew his longsword and ordered the archers to ready their bows. "Attack! Leave no one alive!"

Swish, swish, swish...

Arrows flew, their flaming tips raining down on the cargo ships like deadly fireflies. Screams filled the air as the ships erupted in flames, and the mercenaries fell into disarray.

"Roar..." Laenor rode back on his dragon, Seasmoke, shouting, "Dracarys!"

A fierce sea battle erupted. The warships closed in, their ramming horns smashing through the hulls of the cargo ships. Chains were thrown to hold the ships together.

Daemon, wearing a helmet adorned with dragon wings, leaped onto the cargo ship with the agility of a predator. He cut down mercenaries with ruthless efficiency, his eyes cold and unyielding.

The battle was long, but finally it ended. The soldiers cleared the battlefield and threw the bodies of the mercenaries into the sea to feed the fish.

"Please, my lord, I am only a merchant..." One of the merchants begged for mercy on his knees, but was quickly silenced with a slash to the neck, dying with a look of despair.

Daemon removed his helmet, leaned back against the railing, and received a letter from his adjutant. After reading it carefully, he grinned and stomped on the corpse beneath him with satisfaction.

The letter bore the Volantis crest in wax. Casually tearing the paper, Daemon strode to the cabin and kicked open the door.

"Ah!... Don't kill me..." Inside, besides crates of goods, there were ragged slaves huddled together.

Daemon scanned the room and then addressed his adjutant coldly, "Keep the female slaves, dispose of the rest."

"Yes, Prince." The adjutant, his face just as cold, drew his sword and entered the cabin. Soon, the air was filled with the sound of desperate, dying screams.

Daemon paid no attention to the carnage, ordering the soldiers to gather the goods and transport them to the warship.

Seasmoke flew overhead, its wings stirring the cold wind. Laenor, riding the dragon, looked torn and hesitant. "Is it really necessary to plunder the Triarchy's ships?"

The Triarchy was divided between the aggressive Hawk faction and the more moderate Dove faction. Though tensions remained, both sides had maintained a fragile peace.

Malicious plundering of the other side's cargo ships can easily be the cause of a violent backlash.

"Why not?" Daemon replied, his face expressionless. "If the Triarchy can plunder our ships, we can plunder theirs."

Laenor, uncomfortable with such ruthlessness, changed the subject. "Laena asked you to attend the funeral at Storm's End. Do you want a ride?"

"No need," Daemon said, wiping the blood from his longsword on a corpse's clothes. He smirked, "I can go where I want without a dragon. Besides, I've just acquired a shipment of treasure. I'll take a ship and bring gifts to the appointment."

...

Three days later, the funeral ceremony was held at Storm's End Castle.

The sky was overcast, casting a somber mood over the event. In the center of the vestibule, a one-person-high wooden platform held the body of Lord Boremund.

Rhaegar presented a bouquet of flowers and bowed his head in silence. Behind him, Borros and the other guests followed suit, laying down their bouquets and offering eulogies.

Borros, his eyes red and swollen, held the hands of his wife and daughters as he struggled to contain his grief while looking at his father's closed eyes.

Rhaenys gently urged, "Borros, let uncle rest in peace."

Borros nodded, releasing his wife's and daughters' hands. He walked solemnly to Rhaegar, who was dressed in black armor, and said, "I beg you, Prince."

"My condolences," Rhaegar replied, then turned his gaze to the Cannibal dragon near the city gates.

According to Lord Boremund's dying wish, he desired to be cremated like his wife. Rhaegar connected with Cannibal's mind and spoke in High Valyrian, "Cannibal, Dracarys!"

"Roar..." Cannibal's wings spread as he slowly approached the wooden platform. He raised his neck high and unleashed a precise stream of dark green Dragonfire.

The flames engulfed the remains rapidly, the dry wood fueling the intense blaze. The fire consumed the body, leaving only ashes behind.

"Roar!!"

"Roar..." Cannibal's roar was joined by those of other dragons, including Dreamfire and Syrax, their cries echoing throughout Storm's End Castle.

The guests lifted their heads and recited eulogies reverently. The vestibule was filled with the sight and sound of several massive dragons, each with different scales and colors, their roars resonating deeply with the mourners.

The ruling power of House Targaryen was felt by all in attendance.

Chapter 267: Head-on Confrontation

Halfway through the funeral, a guest arrived late. Daemon docked at Storm's End Castle on a three-masted sailing ship, bringing with him a considerable cargo of goods.

A grief-stricken Borros ignored the arrival and sent his wife, Lady Elenda, and their two daughters to greet Daemon.

As Daemon entered the castle's forecourt, the cremation pyre blazed brightly, casting an eerie glow against the gloomy sky.

At the sight of the visitor, Aegon, visibly irritated, wrinkled his face and shouted, "Daemon, how dare you appear before me!"

He lunged forward, fist raised to strike. His sudden action stunned everyone present.

"Aegon!" Aemond exclaimed, shocked by his brother's impulsiveness.

Aegon, however, saw only Daemon's hateful figure. Daemon, with a playful glint in his eyes, waited for his nephew to approach.

Aegon's punch missed, leaving him open.

"Fool!" Daemon sneered, yanking Aegon's arm and driving a knee into his chest.

Aegon's face turned pale as he staggered, feeling his heart momentarily stop. Daemon followed with a slap that sent Aegon sprawling onto the patio floor, silver hair disheveled.

"Daemon, stop it!" Laena cried out in shock, remembering the Queen's hatred from the last time Daemon had taught Aegon a lesson.

The crowd finally reacted. Rhaenyra watched in disbelief, her eyes wide with confusion.

Aegon... how dare you?

That's Daemon! If you want to challenge him, you need to weigh your own strength first.

Daemon heard Laena's cry and paused, mockingly kicking Aegon with the tip of his foot. "My dear nephew, do you think you're your brother, mimicking his disrespectful words to me?"

"Daemon, you bastard!" Aegon groaned in pain, curling up on the ground.

Daemon's face darkened. He crouched down, yanking Aegon's collar and gripping his jaw.

That bastard has been looking for trouble ever since he took office as Commander of the Narrow Sea. I've tolerated him long enough.

"Daemon, think about what you're doing and stop," Laena pleaded, rushing over with her belly in her hands. She pushed her angry husband away, fearing the consequences.

Daemon took two steps back, looked at Aegon with contempt, and sneered, "He started it. It is my duty to teach my disobedient nephew a lesson."

At this point, no one could remain passive. Borros stepped forward, his sadness replaced by anger. "Demon, this is my father's funeral. Show some respect."

Daemon ignored the wailing Aegon and walked towards the pyre with a straight face. Passing a servant, he took a bouquet of flowers and threw it into the flames, clasping his hands to recite the eulogy.

At least he had the decency to do so.

Borros glared angrily, turning his anger towards Rhaegar. "Prince, is this your Targaryen etiquette, disrupting the funeral of a loyal servant?" he demanded in a deep voice.

"Lord Borros, it was Aegon and Daemon who started the fight. It was never our intention to cause a disturbance," Rhaenyra interjected, trying to defuse the situation and prevent Rhaegar from taking the blame.

Rhaegar remained composed, his expression impassive as he glanced briefly at Rhaenyra. He knew he had to handle this himself. Borros did not deserve a calm explanation, nor did he merit the courtesy Rhaenyra had shown.

Predictably, Borros ignored her words, his anger directed solely at the Targaryens. "Daemon is the king's brother and Aegon is the king's second son, yet they show no respect for the Baratheon name!" he spat.

Rhaenyra's face darkened, ready to retort, but Rhaegar intervened. "Enough, Rhaenyra," he said firmly, gripping her waist and moving her behind him.

He knew arguing about right and wrong would only escalate the situation. He turned his cold gaze to Daemon. "Don't you have anything to say, uncle?"

Daemon finished placing the bouquet, his expression indifferent. "A disobedient nephew needs to be educated," he replied flatly.

"Aegon may be foolish, but he is not the only one who is disobedient," Rhaegar responded, his tone measured but wary. He suspected there was more behind Daemon's recent behavior.

"Prince, my father's body is still being cremated. You owe me an explanation!" Borros insisted, his face flushed with anger.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he looked at the Lord of Storm's End. "Lord Borros, what kind of explanation do you seek?" he asked, his voice cold and unyielding as he stepped closer, towering over the other man.

Borros hesitated, remembering the recent roar of the dragons, and his breath caught. Rhaegar's piercing purple eyes bore into him, and he could feel his resolve weakening.

"Lord Boremund was a tolerant man. I believe he would want you to exhibit the same heart," Rhaegar said, his voice calm but firm.

The tension was palpable as no one dared to interrupt. Everyone knew of the friction between Lord Borros and Prince Rhaegar, but they never expected it to escalate into a confrontation.

Daemon watched with interest, feeling no guilt, only contempt for Borros. He was a Targaryen, and he would not bow to anyone.

Rhaegar's way of handling the situation resonated with him deeply. It was a display of strength and authority, befitting their house.

"Roar..."

The thoughts of humans were complex and strange, but the thoughts of dragons were more pure. Sensing his master's displeasure, Cannibal let out a warning roar. His long, thick neck descended, and his dark head loomed over Rhaegar, casting a shadow over the prince.

A pair of eerie green eyes glared at Borros, the dragon ready to unleash destruction at its master's command.

Facing the fierce dragon, Borros swallowed hard, cold sweat running down his spine. At that moment, his thoughts raced, recalling his father's words: "The Targaryens never lacked an army because they rode the dragons."

His father had fought alongside King Jaehaerys I, defeating Dornish armies by the thousands. The world, having enjoyed peace for so long, had forgotten the wrath of dragons.

Borros resisted the urge to flee, trembling as he lowered his proud head. "Prince, this is merely a small incident. It will not affect the generations-long friendship between the Targaryens and the Baratheons," he said, his voice shaky.

He yielded. The status of a lord did not permit him to act recklessly and publicly challenge a Targaryen heir.

Rhaegar remained silent, hands folded in front of his belly, staring as if he hadn't heard Borros. The Cannibal grinned, revealing sharp teeth, its breathing synchronized with its master's.

Seeing the dragon's bared fangs, Borros's heart raced. He hastily added, "Prince, the funeral is over, and a sumptuous feast awaits in the castle!"

He was at a loss for words, unsure how to beg for mercy. Seeing his dilemma, Rhaenys broke away from her husband's grasp and interceded. "Rhaegar, Borros is as generous as his father. Don't misjudge him."

First, Aegon and Daemon fought; now Borros was being targeted by a dragon. The rapid turn of events left most people's heads spinning. The atmosphere had soured, and the air felt tense and cold.

Borros, hearing his cousin's voice, felt a glimmer of hope and moved towards it. But Rhaegar's voice stopped him in his tracks. "Lord Borros, where are you going?"

Borros froze, not daring to move. Rhaegar exhaled deeply, his voice softening. "I apologize to you and your late father for the ill-advised actions of my brother and uncle. I hope you won't be offended; they did not mean to disturb."

Rhaegar's sincere apology shifted the blame away from Aegon and Daemon. Borros, eager to end the confrontation, responded quickly, "No matter, the feast is about to begin. Let us move to the castle."

He had lost face in front of all his bannermen and wanted to leave the scene as soon as possible. "As you wish, my lord," Rhaegar replied, his demeanor returning to its usual gentle and elegant state.

The desired deterrent had been achieved. Borros forced a smile, unable to face his bannermen, and walked back to the castle under the watchful eyes of his guards.

"Gentlemen, let us go as well," Lady Elenda said, embarrassed, leading the way back to the castle with her two daughters, trying to maintain the guests' mood.

Her husband's character flaws and moodiness often led him into situations without an easy escape. Soon, the guests, having witnessed enough excitement, dispersed with their own thoughts.

The courtyard was left to the Targaryen members. Daemon took Laena's hand, gently stroking her slightly bulging belly, feeling the new life within.

Rhaegar glanced at him, not in the mood for conversation. Daemon's arrogance and unwillingness to heed advice was a constant source of tension.

Aemond and Daeron helped Aegon to his feet and stood beside Rhaegar. Unlike the strained relations with Aunt Rhaenys and Lord Corlys, or the animosity with Uncle Daemon, Rhaegar offered them a sense of security. The massive black dragon was a clear deterrent to anyone who dared to offend him.

"Daemon, don't think I don't know what you're up to. I won't let you get away with it," Aegon spat despite his battered appearance, glaring at Daemon with anger.

Chapter 268: The Free Cities Ambition

Humiliated by his opponent, Aegon's pride burned. If Rhaegar could defeat Daemon, then so could he.

"Aegon, you should shut up," Rhaegar said coldly. He despised stupidity, and his brother epitomized it.

"Daemon is the guilty one!" Aegon retorted defiantly.

Daemon raised an eyebrow, his gaze darkening, but someone else acted first.

With a sudden movement, Rhaegar grabbed Aegon by the neck and lifted him like a rag doll. "Aegon, if you want to throw tantrums, do it back at the Red Keep. Don't cause trouble here," he said icily. He turned his head towards Daemon, pointing sharply. "Uncle, that goes for you too. I'm done cleaning up after everyone."

This wasn't a place for reckless behavior. Their every action reflected on the Targaryen honor. Rhaegar would not tolerate his family tarnishing their legacy.

Daemon sensed the warning in his nephew's eyes. He glanced at Rhaegar, his expression unreadable, before leading his wife past him. As he departed, the tension eased.

Aegon, still held by the neck, struggled to breathe, his face turning red. His hands clawed at Rhaegar's grip in desperation. In that moment, the fear of the past overwhelmed him.

Seeing Aegon's distress, Rhaenyra rushed forward. "Rhaegar, let go of Aegon, he can't breathe," she pleaded, her voice laced with anxiety.

"I'm just trying to teach him a lesson," Rhaegar said, releasing his grip and feeling a surge of relief from his anger.

Aegon collapsed to the ground, clutching his throat and coughing violently, tears streaming from his eyes. Aemond, watching in fear, tugged at Aegon's coat, his body trembling.

"Let's go, the feast is starting," Rhaegar said indifferently.

Rhaenyra took his hand, squeezing his knuckles in a gesture of helpless support.

...

Late at night, Storm's End Castle was ablaze with light. The banquet, filled with merriment, was set to last until dawn.

Around the table, members of the Targaryen and Velaryon families Houses. Thanks to the efforts of a few of the women, the atmosphere was congenial, filled with laughter and toasts.

Rhaegar, deep in thought, suddenly asked, "Uncle, what are the recent movements of the Triarchy?"

At his question, the lively chatter at the table ceased.

Daemon, swirling his wine, responded frankly, "The Triarchy is as ambitious as ever, constantly plotting to regain their power."

He glossed over the recent plundering of cargo ships, focusing instead on the Triarchy's covetous designs on the Stepstones.

"The pirates of the Triarchy are like weeds—impossible to eradicate," Rhaegar agreed, before shifting the topic. "I've heard that the Tiger Party of Volantis has its eyes on the Triarchy?"

Rhaegar had his own sources, probing into the affairs of the Free Cities.

Volantis, the oldest of the Free Cities, held on to many Valyrian traditions. Its political system, a remnant of the Freehold era, saw three rulers elected annually from the native Tiger and Elephant parties. The Tigers, aristocrats and warriors, believed in conquest by force, while the Elephants, merchants and moneylenders, favored trade.

During Volantis's last invasion of the Triarchy, Aegon the Conqueror had intervened, defeating them with Balerion the Black Dread. Since then, the Tiger Party had waned, electing only one consul to the Elephants' two. However, with the Triarchy weakened from their loss in the Stepstones, Volantis now saw an opportunity.

Daemon took a sip of wine, impressed by his nephew's knowledge. "Volantis is stagnant. Without change, it's bound to decline."

"So the Tiger Party is actually considering war?" Rhaegar's eyes narrowed.

He had no love for the Triarchy and saw potential in the turmoil. The Free Cities fighting among themselves could be beneficial.

"I'm not sure," Daemon admitted. "Volantis has always spurned the Targaryens."

He grinned, "If you're really interested, you should see for yourself."

"Go to Volantis..." Rhaegar mused. He had rarely ventured into Essos, having only visited Braavos and Pentos. His brief foray into the Triarchy had been hasty, yielding little more than some money and slaves.

Now, however, he found himself intrigued.

Rhaenyra leaned forward and whispered, "Do you want to leave?"

Rhaegar blinked and made no immediate reply.

"Volantis is near Slaver's Bay and the ruins of Valyria - a free city full of slavery," Rhaenyra continued, her eyes bright with excitement. She had never been to Volantis and hoped to entice Rhaegar into the adventure.

Sensing her anticipation, Rhaegar squeezed her hand and considered his next move. After a moment, he turned to Daemon and said, "Uncle, the Dornishmen are active on the border. The kingdom cannot afford to fight across the sea."

He had considered provoking Volantis into conflict with the Triarchy, remembering Daemon's past ambitions in the Stepstones. A thought occurred to him: perhaps Daemon could use this situation to gain military power over the islands.

Daemon, though proud and self-satisfied, had always cared for his family. In his youth, he had coveted the Iron Throne. Now, in middle age, with a wife and children, his ambitions had shifted to territorial control.

Rhaegar understood Daemon's psychology but did not share his approach. Targaryen control of Westeros was not yet absolute. The North was largely autonomous, the West faced raids from the Iron Islands, and the Riverlands and the Reach had their own succession issues. In addition, Prince Qoren of Dorne was too ambitious.

Rhaegar believed it was premature to extend their reach across the Narrow Sea. Overreaching could destabilize the kingdom and erode public support.

Daemon's expression darkened as he realized that his nephew had partially revealed his intentions. Without giving him a chance to respond, Rhaegar stood and pushed back his chair. "I've eaten enough. I'm going to rest."

Rhaenyra, momentarily stunned, smiled apologetically at her hosts before rising to follow him. The atmosphere around the table cooled noticeably.

Aegon, gritting his teeth, angrily sliced the roasted meat on his plate, but no one paid him any attention.

Corlys, his face dark and pensive, exchanged a glance with Daemon. Daemon, unperturbed by the revelation of his plans, poured himself another glass of wine.

Laena lowered her head and rubbed her belly, her eyes filled with worry.

...

As the funeral ended, the guests began to disperse and return to their homes.

"Roar..."

Vhagar and Meleys soared into the sky, heading for Driftmark.

In the front yard of Storm's End, Cannibal and Syrax stood a short distance apart. Rhaegar and Rhaenyra faced each other in the empty space.

Rhaenyra's expression was cold and silent.

Rhaegar sighed, breaking the silence. "Rhaenyra, you should be overseeing Aegon and the others on their safe return to King's Landing. That's more important than following me."

"Aegon is old enough to look after his brothers and sisters," Rhaenyra retorted, her voice icy. She was furious that Rhaegar had refused her request to accompany him. She longed to explore the free cities with him, not be left behind.

Rhaegar tried to explain. "You know Alicent's temper. Besides, my plans go beyond just visiting Volantis, and there are dangers involved."

He had had a dream the night before - a vision of a smoky sea with an inaudible voice echoing through it. From the map, it resembled the Smoking Sea. He wanted to fly on Cannibal and see what had become of the Targaryen homeland.

"Rhaegar, do you think I'm a burden?" Rhaenyra's frustration was obvious.

"No! You know that's not what I mean," Rhaegar replied, smiling bitterly as he embraced her. He remembered how fierce she could be, even as a teenager.

"Just this once, Rhaegar," Rhaenyra pleaded, her serious demeanor betraying her desperation. She had been trying to convince him for days, feeling unappreciated by his constant refusals.

"I'll be back soon," Rhaegar assured her quietly.

Rhaenyra stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I'll be waiting for you on Dragonstone Island. Remember to miss me."

"Always," Rhaegar promised, tightening his embrace before turning to Aegon and Helaena with a few final words.

With Rhaenyra's reluctant gaze following him, Rhaegar mounted Cannibal and flew off into the distance.

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King's Landing

Viserys sat on the Iron Throne and listened to the northern envoy's report.

"Your Grace, I appreciate the invitation to the tournament, but I must inform you that Rickon Stark has passed away. Consequently, neither I nor any representative from the North can attend," said Roderick Dustin, Lord of Barrowton, a strong old man with a grim expression.

Viserys frowned, his face reflecting sorrow. "Lord Rickon's passing grieves me deeply, just as Lord Bormund's did. Losing two guardian lords in such a short time is a heavy blow."

After a moment of reflection, Viserys asked, "Who holds power at Winterfell now?"

Roderick answered directly, "Before his death, Lord Rickon passed the title to his only son, Cregan Stark. However, young Cregan is still a minor, so his uncle, Bennard Stark, is overseeing Winterfell and mentoring the new lord."

"A young heir," Viserys sighed. "I hope both Bennard and Cregan will be able to attend the tournament. I regret that I cannot travel to the North in person to offer my condolences."

Roderick nodded. "I will convey Your Grace's sentiments to Winterfell."

With the report concluded, Lord Dustin took his leave.

Viserys, weary and burdened by the Seven Kingdoms' troubles, lost focus for a moment. His left hand absentmindedly touched the Iron Throne's armrest.

He had forgotten the throne's treacherous design, with its sharp blades and lack of proper backrest or armrest.

A sudden pain jolted him back to reality as a deep cut appeared on his left hand, blood flowing freely.

"Ah! Damn it," he cursed, wincing. The sharp pain brought him fully awake. He quickly shook off his injured hand and stepped down from the Iron Throne, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Chapter 269: First Visit to Volantis

Leaving the throne room, the servants quickly summoned Grand Maester Mellos.

In the king's chambers, Maester Mellos arrived with a satchel and several young auxiliary maesters. Viserys leaned back on a bench, one hand covering his forehead, the other resting on the round table for the maester to examine.

"Your Grace, the wound is deep this time," Mellos said, his old face creased with concern as he carefully inspected the cut and prepared medicine to clean it.

Viserys endured the pain and sighed, "Thank you, Grand Maester."

Despite his words, he was troubled inside. Not having been cut by the Iron Throne for some time had made him complacent, and now this open wound was a stark reminder of his vulnerability. He feared it would be conspicuous to the courtiers, adding to his burdens.

With few words, Mellos dried the blood and applied crushed herbs to the wound.

"Grand Maester, the bandages you requested," an assistant said, handing him a roll of sterilized bandages.

Mellos glanced at the young man and silently began to bind the king's hand. The attendant, a dark-skinned young man with short stubble and a gray robe, watched intently.

As the bandage was being applied, the attendant couldn't help but suggest, "This herb may not be effective for His Grace. I have a new idea-

"Silence, Orwyle!" Mellos scolded, his eyes flashing a warning.

The young man, Orwyle, quickly bowed his head and fell silent.

"Your Grace, avoid getting the wound wet and abstain from greasy or spicy foods," Mellos advised, packing up his supplies and leading his assistants out of the room.

Viserys forced a smile, trying to hide his irritation as the door closed, leaving the room in silence.

Outside the chambers, Ser Erryk, clad in silver armor and white robes, stood guard. After Cole's departure, he had been appointed Commander of the Kingsguard, charged with the King's personal security.

Suddenly, a choking cough erupted from the chambers, the sound harsh and desperate.

Erryk's face darkened with worry. The king's health was failing, and he often found it difficult to sleep without the aid of wine.

The coughing subsided after a while. Viserys' irritated voice broke the silence, "Erryk, get me some wine. My chest is suffocating!"

"Yes, Your Grace!" Erryk replied, bowing before finding a servant to carry out the order.

...

The Summer Sea

The Summer Sea, a vast ocean south of Dorne, stretches eastward to the southern coast of Essos and the northern coast of Sothoryos. The Stepstones mark the boundary between the Narrow Sea and the Summer Sea.

On the undulating sea, beneath a clear sky, a warm breeze blew gently. High above the clouds, a colossal dragon as black as charcoal streaked by like a dark meteor. After a day's flight, the Cannibal crossed the scattered isles of the Stepstones and officially entered the Summer Sea.

"Cannibal, fly southeast," commanded a firm voice.

Rhaegar reclined on the broad spine of the Cannibal, clad in a black robe, his eyes half-closed as he basked in the sunlight. Compared to the still-chilly eastern part of Westeros, the tropical climate of the Summer Sea was a welcome change, warm and pleasant.

The sunlight bathed his bare skin, spreading warmth throughout his body. The air was warm and humid, but not oppressively so. This comfortable environment allowed Rhaegar, who hadn't relaxed in a long time, to shed his usual tension and stretch out contentedly.

"Roar..."

Sensing its rider's joy, the Cannibal let out a low growl and slowed its pace. Man and dragon soared through the sky, savoring the fresh breeze and the rare moment of leisure.

A smile played at the corners of Rhaegar's mouth as he reminisced about the freedom of dragon riding in his youth. It had been far too long since he had enjoyed such peace.

The Cannibal, with its dark wings and green eyes, surveyed the distant land of Essos, flying in the correct direction with ease. Having roamed several continents during its century-long life, the dragon knew these waters well.

Time passed quietly. As the sun rose to its zenith, the temperature of the Summer Sea increased, and the air became hot. The Cannibal crossed the sea and flew over a barren coast, entering the land of Essos.

"Quick, grab the cart! We need to get the goods to Volantis by nightfall..."

"The wheels are stuck! Push harder..."

From the sky, Rhaegar heard voices speaking in Valyrian. Stirring from his half-sleep, he opened his eyes and surveyed the scene below. A bustling town lay beneath him, with many carriages moving in and out through towering white walls.

The sounds he heard came from a small caravan of traders traveling south along the river. The men were dressed in a variety of garb, shielding themselves from the burning sun as they pushed a muddy cart.

"Push, you slaves!"

A fat merchant, decked out in gold and silver, cursed and waved his whip at the struggling crowd.

From the snippets of conversation, it was clear that the merchants were headed for Volantis. Rhaegar watched the city and the wide, swiftly moving river beside it, recognizing the place as Volon Therys, a city in the interior of Volantis. The river was the famed Rhoyme.

Following the Rhoyme south would lead to Volantis. Realizing this, Rhaegar understood that the Cannibal had brought him to Essos.

"Cannibal, fly south and find a place to land," he instructed, forming a plan.

He had two main goals for his visit to Volantis. First, to contact the Triarchs of the Tiger and Elephant Parties and understand their movements. Second, to negotiate a diplomatic agreement to ease tensions with the Free Cities.

Daemon had warned that the people of Volantis were likely to reject the Targaryens. Rhaegar planned to keep a low profile, avoiding undue attention with the Cannibal, and conceal his visit to Volantis to avoid provoking the Triarchy. These were standard diplomatic tactics, and he expected nothing less.

...

It was dusk. A caravan of merchants carrying food entered the western part of Volantis. At the head of the caravan walked a tall, silver-haired young man in black robes. This was Rhaegar, who had separated from the Cannibal and used the caravan as a guide to enter the city-state.

"So this is Volantis," Rhaegar muttered, disappointment evident in his voice. The crowded harbor assaulted his senses with the pungent stench of rotting fish, flowers, feces, and decay. It was no better than King's Landing before the street reform program.

He mingled with the crowd, listening to the vendors' shouts along the filthy streets, wandering aimlessly. Volantis, once an outpost of the Freehold, bore the marks of its Dragonlord heritage. The city, situated at the mouth of the Rhoyme River, was divided into two districts by the fast-flowing waters.

Rhaegar found himself in the western district, a place of squalor. Everywhere he looked, there were signs of poverty—feces, urine, garbage, beggars. The harbor was teeming with ships from across the world, and the clamor of sailors and porters filled the air.

He soon learned that the western side was home to mercenaries, foreigners, slaves, and commoners, and that law and order was abysmal. "Out of the way, out of the way, the Tiger Cloak Army is patrolling, everyone out of the way!" a loud voice suddenly shouted. The already chaotic street became frenzied as slaves and civilians scurried to the corners.

Rhaegar blended into the crowd, using his height to peer over their heads. A common city guard marched through the street, brandishing short clubs and boasting loudly. Each guard bore a tiger tattoo on his cheek, the likely origin of their name, the Tiger Army.

Volantis was a city rich in tattoo culture. High officials, merchants, commoners, and slaves all had tattoos on their faces and bodies. High-ranking individuals had tattoos that symbolized their accomplishments and strength, while slaves were marked to indicate their roles, branding them with a lifetime of shame.

Daemon had often spoken of the harsh life of slaves in Volantis. From what Rhaegar observed, slaves far outnumbered free citizens in the city.

"I need to find a place to stay before nightfall," Rhaegar thought, shaking off his thoughts. He made his way to the eastern district, guided by a passerby. The eastern district was home to old nobles, warriors, and wealthy merchants.

The walk felt too slow, and he feared he wouldn't make it in time. Just then, he saw something promising ahead.

Half an hour later, a carriage drawn by dwarf elephants made its way through the Western District and arrived at a long, wide bridge. The bridge spanned the fast-flowing River Rhoyme, supported by massive pillars, and stretched out as flat as a continent.

At the entrance was an arch of black boulders decorated with monstrous designs—dragons, lion- and scorpion-tailed beasts, sphinxes, and other fantastic creatures.

The dwarven elephant caravan paid the toll, and a slave with wheel tattoos on his head led the elephants onto the mighty bridge. Rhaegar poked his head out of the curtain, curiosity gleaming in his eyes.

The bridge, constructed by the Valyrian consuls centuries ago, connected the Old Town and the West Town. Seeing this impressive structure for the first time, Rhaegar was captivated by its scale. The bridge was wide enough for two carriages to pass each other comfortably.

"It's not as grand as Harrenhal, but it's one of the Nine Wonders of the World," Rhaegar mused, his tone serious. Comparing it to his own giant castle, he found himself pondering the significance of the long bridge.

Westeros boasted many legendary structures: House Arryn's Eyrie, House Baratheon's Storm's End, House Lannister's Casterly Rock, and the Great Wall that had stood for thousands of years, protecting the realm from the cold threats of the north.

Each of these wonders, Rhaegar thought, was more majestic than this long bridge.

Chapter 270: Descendants of Valyria

The sun was setting.

The caravan of dwarf elephants crossed the long bridge and arrived in the eastern part of the city, where the environment markedly improved.

The carriage slave bowed humbly, his voice rough, "My lord, there's a black wall ahead. I can't go any further."

"Understood," Rhaegar replied. He lifted the curtain and stepped down from the carriage, casually tossing two gold dragons to the slave.

"Thank you, my lord," the slave said, bowing even lower as he hastily accepted the coins.

Westeros and Volantis had different coinage systems. Westeros used gold dragons, silver stags, copper stars, and copper pennies, while Volantis minted gold coins with engraved images and accepted coins from various lands.

As Rhaegar walked forward, he saw by the moonlight that the area was dotted with flower gardens, statues, and fountains. Most of these fountains, however, were dry or filled with stagnant water, and the air still carried a nauseating odor.

It was getting late. Rhaegar decided not to rush to find the city Triarchs; securing a place to stay first was the best course of action.

Soon, he spotted a towering building surrounded by parked carriages. It was a four-story structure made of stone, a real monstrosity.

"The Merchant's House," Rhaegar read aloud, grinning. "Found a place to stay."

...

The next day, within the black walls of the east city district, the streets were neat and orderly. Wealthy residents reclined on sedan chairs carried by slaves, accompanied by dainty slave girls.

Everything exuded a sense of natural corruption.

At the entrance of the Tiger Party's Residence, a black-robed figure stood and knocked on the closed door. A slave hurriedly opened it and respectfully welcomed the visitor inside.

The mansion's interior boasted a three-story pavilion with carved beams and intricate paintings. Rhaegar sat on a velvet stool, indifferently observing female slaves playing in the courtyard fountain.

Before long, a tall, robust man entered the pavilion, flanked by two slave girls.

"Hahaha, welcome, Prince of House Targaryen! It is truly an honor to have you in my humble abode!" the man exclaimed, arms spread wide.

Rhaegar turned and replied politely, "Lord Malaquo, please forgive my unannounced visit."

Maintaining his noble demeanor, Rhaegar exuded elegance and grace.

Malaquo Maegyr, with his rough face and bushy beard, responded boldly, "I was a good friend of your uncle. You, of the great Dragonlord bloodline, are always welcome here."

As a member of Volantis's old nobility, Malaquo believed deeply in the importance of bloodlines. Most Volantenes prided themselves on their Valyrian descent. The Targaryens, as the last Dragonlord family, held an undisputed noble lineage.

After exchanging pleasantries, Rhaegar got to the point, inquiring about the Tiger Party's views on the Triarchy and their relationship with Daemon.

Malaquo did not mince words. He explained that the Triarchy was in a weakened state, and the long-suppressed old aristocracy of Volantis saw an opportunity to reassert themselves. However, the Tiger Party was not the sole ruling faction. The Elephant Party, consisting of merchants and moneylenders, showed no interest in war. The struggle for power between the two parties had already resulted in casualties.

Malaquo openly admitted his correspondence with Daemon. Daemon had established a friendship with Malaquo and the Tiger Party, promising to suppress the Triarchy's trade routes.

Even without explicit details, Rhaegar understood the implications. If the Tiger Party gained the upper hand, they would likely form a stronger alliance with Daemon.

After a lengthy discussion, Malaquo ordered a sumptuous meal. Rhaegar accepted the invitation, and the two dined together, solidifying their newfound friendship.

As the meal ended, Malaquo's eyes gleamed with purpose. "Prince, why not stay at my residence for a while? I will treat you with the utmost courtesy."

Rhaegar's reputation, known throughout the Nine Free Trade City-States, carried the title of the Maker of Ruins. Recognizing Rhaegar as a war-advocating Dragonlord like Daemon, Malaquo saw an opportunity to gain the upper hand against the Elephants with Targaryen support.

Seeing through Malaquo's intentions, Rhaegar politely declined. "No, I must visit the other two cities and experience more of Volantis."

"Prince, the members of the Elephant Party are stubborn and might offend you," Malaquo cautioned. "I have the most beautiful, voluptuous slave girls. Stay and enjoy their company."

"My journey is not yet over, and I must respectfully decline your offer," Rhaegar replied, rising to leave. He was uninterested in the slave girls, preferring to explore Volantis and absorb its unique customs.

...

After leaving the mansion, Rhaegar pulled up his hood and stepped into the bustling streets. In that moment, he understood Daemon's wanderlust. The feeling of being alone was invigorating.

He wandered the crowded streets, the passersby indifferent to his presence. Finding the residence of the ruler of the Elephant Party proved to be a challenge, as they were even more xenophobic than the hospitable Tiger Party.

Inspired by a beggar, Rhaegar thought of a place where information would be abundant—the Long Bridge. Lined with countless restaurants, brothels, and shops, it was the best place to gather news.

"I missed it last night, so I'll make up for it today," he murmured, hurrying towards the bridge.

The black wall that separated the rich and poor in the East City District loomed ahead. Rhaegar easily passed through the massive barrier, built from black dragonstone, and stepped onto the Long Bridge. The environment shifted dramatically—from the cold indifference of the affluent area to the vibrant hustle and bustle of the marketplace.

Without the elephant cart, Rhaegar moved between the stores on either side of the bridge, the air filled with noise. He noticed a latrine cleaner with a fly tattoo on his face, a blacksmith with a hammer tattoo. They were all slaves, closely monitored by their masters, laboring tirelessly.

"O Lord! Give us light!" a loud woman's voice suddenly rang out, reciting a prayer. More voices joined in, men and women repeating the chant.

"For the night is dark and full of terrors."

Intrigued, Rhaegar followed the sound to an open corner. A striking woman in red robes stood on a raised platform of hay bales, passionately preaching to a group of ragged, collared slaves. They listened intently, their eyes filled with hope.

Rhaegar watched the scene, drawn to the Red Woman's presence. He had encountered followers of the Lord of Light before, including two red-robed women he had killed. Though once blessed by the Lord of Light, those encounters had soured his perception of the deity, whom he now suspected to be an evil god with malevolent followers.

"The God of Light listens to your prayers, regardless of who you are..." the Red Woman continued, her voice stirring the slaves' spirits.

Bored, Rhaegar turned away. The faith of the Lord of Light was widespread in Essos, and Volantis housed the largest temple of R'hllor, beloved by the commoners and slaves. The rich and powerful, however, scorned and dismissed it.

As Rhaegar walked, the tiles of the brothel overhead blocked the sunlight, narrowing the path.

"Quickly! Grab that slave girl, don't let her get away!"

"Damn it, I'll sell her to the lowest brothel..."

Suddenly, a burst of yelling and cursing erupted nearby. Rhaegar pulled back his hood and lowered his eyes, watching the commotion.

On the crowded street, a passerby was knocked over in the chaos, and a woman with disheveled hair darted out. Her face was obscured, but her skin was strikingly white, almost translucent like pure milk pudding. The most eye-catching feature was her long, dirty hair—silver-gold, a color Rhaegar knew well.

"Valyrian descendant," he murmured, observing like a disinterested passerby.

He didn't intervene. Volantis, the first colony of the Freehold, had spread Valyrian blood for centuries. Just moments ago, he had seen a whore with silvery blonde curls among the slaves.

"Stop her, she's a runaway!" The pursuing slave trader yelled, closing in on the woman.

The white-skinned woman struggled to escape, darting past Rhaegar and carrying a faint, not unpleasant breeze. This breeze lifted Rhaegar's hood, revealing his own prominent silver-blond hair.

The fleeing woman glanced back and saw Rhaegar. She froze, tripping and falling heavily onto the muddy bridge.

The slave trader caught up, punching and kicking her, pulling her collar, and dragging her like a dead dog. Hearing her screams, Rhaegar was about to leave, uninterested in the spectacle.

"My lord, help me, please!" The woman's clear, miserable cry rang out.

Rhaegar ignored it, silently putting on his hood.

But the woman kept struggling. She bit the slave trader's hand and broke free, flinging herself at Rhaegar's feet in a panic. "My lord, please help me," she begged.

Surprised, Rhaegar looked down at her. "Why should I help you?"

His right hand, wearing a spatial bracelet, retracted into his black robes, though he felt inclined to assist.

The woman tugged at his trouser leg, panic-stricken. She pushed back her hair, revealing a beautiful face, and spoke quickly. "My name is Daella, and you are a Targaryen descendant. Please help me for the sake of the name."

"Daella?" Rhaegar's eyes widened slightly, his mind reeling. Daella was his grandmother's name—Daella Targaryen, the eighth child and fourth daughter of his great-grandfather, Jaehaerys the First.

"Get out of the way, boy!" Several slave traders surrounded them, grimacing.

One of them, a sharp-tongued man, pointed at Daella and said coldly, "She's a slave girl from the brothel, and she cost us a hundred gold coins."