

G.O Thrones 271

Chapter 271: A Fallen Targaryen

"Everyone, calm down," Rhaegar commanded, his voice steady and authoritative.

He removed his hood, revealing a handsome face and a composed demeanor. The slave traders, recognizing his Valyrian features and noble bearing, hesitated and did not dare approach.

"Stay quiet and let me handle this," Rhaegar continued, his tone brooking no argument.

The slaves exchanged glances, then stepped back, forming a circle around the two figures at the center. They assumed this man must be wealthy and might buy the slave girl.

Rhaegar took a moment to examine Daella, who was kneeling at his feet. Her slightly curly hair, bright white skin, and delicate figure evoked a protective instinct in him. She wore only two rags to cover herself, highlighting her vulnerability.

Her face, beautiful and reminiscent of Rhaenyra's, captivated him. The tear-shaped tattoos on her cheeks marked her as a prostitute, and Rhaegar frowned in displeasure.

"Who gave you that name, and how do you know who I am?" he demanded.

Daella's name was not common, especially among Valyrians. It was a variation of an ancient Targaryen name, indicating she knew more than a typical prostitute should.

"My lord, my name comes from my mother, and many of my kin have shared it," Daella replied, her eyes tearful. She knew the young man before her was her only hope.

She pointed to a button on Rhaegar's black robe, trembling as she spoke, "On your button, there's the symbol of the three-headed red dragon."

Rhaegar loosened his collar and looked down, seeing the Targaryen emblem. His distinctive clothing had given him away.

Realizing there was more to Daella than met the eye, Rhaegar crouched down, looked directly into her blue eyes, and repeated his question, "Why should I help you?"

Daella's white face was bruised, and her large eyes showed unease. She trembled as she answered, "I may share the same blood as you."

She retracted her neck, anticipating scolding or a beating. Her status was too low to claim kinship with any lord.

Rhaegar was taken aback, his eyes clouding over in thought. After a moment of silence, he stood up and pulled a bulging bag of money from his sleeve.

The slave traders caught it eagerly, their eyes widening at the sight of the gleaming gold coins inside.

"Take the money and leave!" Rhaegar ordered, his voice firm.

Whether Daella's claim was true or not, her origin couldn't be discussed in public. She had asked for his help, and he wouldn't let the slave traders take her.

One of the traders bit a gold coin to confirm its authenticity, then smiled obsequiously. "She's yours, my lord."

Securing the money bag, he scanned the area and quickly departed. In a free-trade city-state, money was paramount.

Rhaegar ignored him and took Daella's hand from her with a quick stride. "Come with me!" he ordered coldly.

"Yes, my lord," Daella replied overjoyed. She straightened the rags that covered her and followed him closely.

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Rhaegar found a tavern with decent surroundings and chose a secluded corner by the window. Draping a cloak over Daella, he asked plainly, "Whose bastard daughter are you?"

Daella, who appeared to be around his age, pulled the cloak tightly around her small frame. She lowered her head and replied timidly, "I am no one's bastard daughter. My mother was a whore and didn't know who my father was."

"Your blood comes from your mother?" Rhaegar inquired, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

Daella nodded, her voice barely audible. "Yes, my blood comes from my mother, and her blood came from my grandmother."

"Your grandmother?" Rhaegar echoed, intrigued and a bit incredulous. It was rare for Targaryen traits to persist so strongly through the generations, especially in someone of Daella's background.

Daella seemed to shrink further into herself, trembling as she continued. "You might have heard of my grandmother. Her name was Saera..." She hesitated before whispering the rest of the name, "Saera Targaryen."

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That night, Rhaegar crossed the Long Bridge and found himself amidst the bustling brothels of the east side, stopping in front of a large establishment with a constant flow of customers.

"Is this the place?" Rhaegar asked, pointing at the brothel.

Daella, clad in black robes with her long silver-blond hair hidden under a hood, nodded with certainty. "This is it. I grew up here. I wouldn't mistake it."

"Lead the way," Rhaegar instructed, his eyes reflecting a mix of emotions as he followed her into the brothel.

The brothel was a sprawling, three-story building adorned with seductive oil paintings and carvings. The pungent smell of perfume hit Rhaegar as soon as they entered, mingling with the sight of prostitutes and their eager clients. Lustful noises echoed from the surrounding rooms.

Daella led the way, and though the prostitutes glanced at her in surprise, they didn't approach her. Rhaegar followed her to the third floor, where the sounds of lust gave way to the sounds of music.

As they moved down the corridor, a door opened, and a middle-aged man with silver-blond hair stepped out. Daella froze at the sight of him, halting in her tracks.

The man approached them, scrutinizing Daella before speaking in a mocking tone. "I heard someone report you were back. Quite surprising."

His gaze shifted to Rhaegar. "Kid, you bought Daella?"

Rhaegar lifted his head, removing his hood to reveal his face. "I'm looking for a woman named Saera. I heard she was here."

"Of course she's here. She's my mother and the madam of this brothel," the middle-aged man replied, noticing Rhaegar's long silver-gold hair and purple eyes.

"Take me to her," Rhaegar's voice turned cold, his patience waning.

"She hasn't taken clients in a long time, even if you are young and handsome," the man refused, his tone firm.

"Uncle, my lord is from Westeros," Daella interjected, her voice trembling.

The man's face changed slightly, the mention of Westeros stirring memories of his travels across the ocean. He took a serious look at Rhaegar, quickly piecing things together.

Pure Valyrian descent, from Westeros... he must be a member of that family.

Flustered, the man hurriedly said, "Please, come with me. Mother is resting in her room."

He turned and walked briskly down the corridor. Rhaegar, deepening his breath, followed closely behind.

Entering the room, Rhaegar noticed the white walls adorned with various ornaments. A velvet bed, surrounded by a circle of light gauze, was placed by the window. On either side of the bed knelt two young male slaves, naked and toned.

"Geddel, who is it?" a lazy woman's voice called out from behind the veil, revealing a figure lying on the bed.

"Mother, a man with dragon blood is here," the middle-aged man, Geddel, announced hesitantly from the doorway.

"Dragon blood? Targaryen!" the woman's voice rose abruptly as she sat up from her bed, pulling back the curtains from the inside to reveal her face.

Rhaegar remained silent, his gaze fixed on her.

Half-sitting on the bed was a woman in her forties or fifties, with long silver-gold hair and purple eyes. Her skin was very white, and she had taken good care of herself, still showing traces of the beauty she once possessed.

The woman's expression was a mix of disgust, nostalgia, and indifference as she noticed the young man in the room.

After a moment of silence, she pulled a thin quilt over her bare thighs and asked flatly, "Whose child are you?"

"If I remember correctly, there were only two male heirs left in Targaryen, Viserys and Daemon. The boy in front of me must be the heir of one of them," she mused.

"My father was Viserys, King on the Iron Throne," Rhaegar responded, his heart twisting. "My name is Rhaegar, Aunt Saera."

Yes, the brothel madam before him was none other than his great-aunt, Saera. A pure-blooded Targaryen. Saera, the ninth child and fifth daughter of his great-grandfather, Jaehaerys the First.

Rhaegar knew well the history of his great-grandfather's twelve children, and Saera was the one who had angered and broken his heart the most.

Saera had been a stubborn and rebellious child, often playing pranks on her siblings and courtiers. She was ostracized by her sisters, including Rhaegar's grandmother, Alyssa, and his great-aunt, Daella.

As an adult, Saera surrounded herself with multiple female and male companions, engaging in scandalous relationships. She even lost her virginity to one of her three male companions and had relationships with all three.

When the truth was revealed, Jaehaerys imprisoned her companions and even sentenced one to death in a trial by combat. In his anger, Jaehaerys banished Saera to Oldtown, placing her under the care of her sister, Septa Maegelle.

After enduring a series of strict punishments, Saera could no longer stand the nuns' beatings and ran away. She found a ship in Oldtown and sailed to Lys, where she worked in a brothel, posing as a young girl new to the trade for the pleasure of clients.

It took half a year for the news to reach King's Landing. Jaehaerys was furious and no longer recognized her as his daughter, leading to a severe quarrel with Queen Alysanne.

From that point on, Saera became a true whore. A few years before 99 AC, she left Lys and came to Volantis, where she opened her own brothel.

During the Great Council of 101 AC, Jaehaerys, who had lost his heirs, sent for his remaining daughter to be brought back to King's Landing. Saera refused, stating that she had her own kingdom in Volantis and did not need the Iron Throne.

She had three bastards from different fathers, all of whom she sent to Westeros to participate in the Great Council. Naturally, none of them were chosen; no one would fancy a bastard born of a whore.

Saera straightened her silver hair, looking a little frazzled, and asked irritably, "Why did you come to see me?"

It had been many years since she had contacted any of her relatives. Seeing Rhaegar brought back memories of the past.

Chapter 272: Unknown Curse

Facing Saera's cold attitude, Rhaegar smiled noncommittally, his hesitation vanishing. Her curt words confirmed the rumors from Westeros: his aunt indeed harbored little affection for her family.

Without feeling awkward, Rhaegar said calmly, "As the only surviving heir of our great-grandfather, it's my duty to visit you."

Regardless of her demeanor, Saera was still his aunt. Knowing she was in Volantis, he felt compelled to meet her.

"What do I have worth seeing? A disgrace that brings shame to the family," Saera retorted, her face alternating between green and white as she suddenly coughed heavily.

One of the male slaves kneeling beside her bed quickly stood up, fetched a bottle of wine from the bedside table, and poured it, presenting it respectfully.

"Get out."

Saera took the wine, downed a mouthful, and waved the slaves away in disgust. Rhaegar watched impassively, stepping aside to clear the doorway.

Geddel, Saera's son, whispered, "Mother is getting old; her health isn't what it used to be."

Rhaegar remained indifferent. At 54, Saera was indeed aging.

With a sigh, Rhaegar stepped forward, pulled a chair, and sat down. He voiced the question in his mind, "Aunt, why didn't you return to Westeros?"

Saera had many chances to go back, but she chose not to.

"I've made a life here in Volantis," Saera said, forcing herself to stop coughing. "King's Landing is a cesspool of rats; the thought of returning there gives me nightmares."

Rhaegar frowned, sensing an underlying bitterness. Deliberately, he added, "Great-grandfather cursed you, but he always longed for you."

"My stepmother, Alicent Hightower, tended to him in his final days," Rhaegar continued. "He chose her because he often mistook her for you."

He watched as Saera's expression shifted. "When he was dying, he held Alicent's hand, calling out your name, believing you had returned to see him one last time."

Rhaegar wasn't lying; it was documented in the family history. Alicent had shared these stories during his childhood. He spoke with such sincerity that even a hardened heart might be moved.

As expected, Saera's face softened, and her breathing grew labored.

Rhaegar pressed on, "You are the oldest surviving Targaryen. Don't you want to return to the family?"

"Don't talk nonsense. If I wanted to go back, I would have done so long ago," Saera replied, her voice low, eyes wrinkling deeper with nostalgia. "Out of all my siblings, only the most insufferable two outlived Father."

"Great-grandfather was known as a wise and benevolent king, ruling during a time of peace," Rhaegar said, spreading his hands in a gesture of openness.

When considering the continents of Westeros and Essos, it's evident that life expectancy wasn't particularly high. His great-grandfather's 69-year life span had spanned two generations.

Saera glanced at Rhaegar and murmured, "Kid, don't you think it's strange?"

Rhaegar's curiosity was piqued, and his eyes showed a hint of intrigue. It was clear that Saera's earlier words concealed a hidden truth.

Saera looked despondent, her voice distant. "Targaryens originate from flames, and Westeros is too cold."

"Auntie, can you be more specific?" Rhaegar asked, trying to piece together her cryptic statement.

"Stupid!" Saera snapped, her frustration evident. "The land of Westeros does not welcome Targaryens. It's full of lurking predators."

Rhaegar was taken aback by her bluntness, his eyes widening. "Do you mean to say someone murdered great-grandfather's children?"

His great-grandfather had thirteen children. Most of them died prematurely or under mysterious circumstances, leaving room for speculation.

Saera shook her head, her voice dry. "I don't know for sure. There's no solid proof, just suspicion."

"Then why did you..." Rhaegar trailed off, thinking of her years of indulgence in Lys and Volantis.

"I simply didn't want to be under my father's control. He was too overbearing, never valuing me as a daughter," Saera admitted, her resentment clear. "King's Landing is a nest of rats, unfit for a true dragon."

Rhaegar remained silent, absorbing her words.

With her defenses lowered, Saera continued, her voice laced with bitterness. "My sisters died in childbirth, fell from horses, drowned themselves..."

She listed off their fates, each one a grim tale. "And then there were Aemon and Baelon, father's favored heirs, both great dragon riders."

"And what happened to them? They all died, none of them ever sitting on the Iron Throne."

Rhaegar listened intently, his mind racing. Saera's words revealed that, despite her distance, she had kept close tabs on the family.

Rhaegar's grandmother, Alyssa, died in childbirth, and his great-aunt Daella succumbed to puerperal fever. His other great-aunt Maegelle contracted greyscale while caring for infected children.

Another great-aunt, Viserra, died after trying to seduce their grandfather Baelon to become queen, but Baelon sent the drunk girl away when he arrived, not long after the incident with Baelon, as arrangements were being made for Viserra's departure to White Harbor, Viserra traded clothes with one of her maids and escaped her guards.

She slipped from the Red Keep for "one last night of laughter" with her companions, at the foot of Aegon's High Hill, Viserra's palfrey collided with the mare of one of her companions. Viserra was thrown from her saddle into a wall, and she died of a broken neck at the age of fifteen.

There's also the youngest, Princess Gael Targaryen was the thirteenth and last child of King Jaehaerys I Targaryen and Queen Alysanne Targaryen, Gael had been seduced and impregnated by a traveling singer, right after that, Gael had given birth to a stillborn son, and overwhelmed by her grief, she had walked into Blackwater Bay and drowned.

Saera's recounting left Rhaegar with a chilling realization. His great-grandfather's children had met untimely ends: Aemon assassinated, Baelon suspected of being poisoned, and three more dying in infancy. Only Saera and Vaegon, "the Dragonless," survived.

Rhaegar shuddered, understanding the weight of Saera's words: "the most repulsive" had outlived their great-grandfather. If there was indeed a conspiracy, Saera had been safer far from Westeros.

Vaegon, a renowned maester who distanced himself from the family, died of natural causes a year after their great-grandfather. Saera continued to mutter, "My brother, a cold-hearted man who disliked his sister and dragons, had to become a maester."

Rhaegar sat in silence, his mind racing with the implications of Saera's revelations.

Vaegon Targaryen, the only surviving male heir of his great-grandfather.

He had refused to marry his sister Daella, who was intended for him, and disliked Saera, who was closer in age, ultimately leaving for the Citadel.

"He died about a decade ago, I think. I haven't kept up with Westeros for a while," Saera muttered, scratching her silver hair irritably. She started coughing again but continued, "We exchanged letters after the 101st Assembly. He was bedridden at the time, his health was poor."

"Don't waste time on me. Go to the Citadel and check out Vaegon's research," she added, her voice strained.

Rhaegar blinked, doubt creeping into his mind. "Go to the Citadel..."

Vaegon, known as the Dragonless, had earned bachelor's chains of various materials during his lifetime and was indeed very knowledgeable.

Saera coughed violently, struggling for breath. "Vaegon said the Citadel's maesters are a bunch of self-important fools. He didn't fit in," she gasped.

Rhaegar twiddled his fingers under his gray robes and said seriously, "I will go to the Citadel."

Saera wouldn't have mentioned Vaegon without reason. There had to be something significant that even she didn't fully understand.

Thinking about Saera's earlier comment about Targaryens not being suited for Westeros, Rhaegar decided to visit the Citadel after returning.

"Cough, cough, cough..."

Saera's coughing grew worse, and even after taking two gulps of wine, she lay on the bed, pounding her chest, her face flushed with discomfort.

Seeing this, Rhaegar felt a pang of worry for his aunt's health.

Geddel, Saera's son, said softly, "Mother's old illness is acting up. Let me arrange a room for you to rest."

Rhaegar shook his head. "No, you take care of aunt."

With that, he planned to leave. He had met his grandmother's blood relative and uncovered some little-known secrets. It wasn't a wasted trip.

As Rhaegar walked out of the room, Geddel and Daella followed him.

"It's late outside. I'll find you some pretty girls to spend the night comfortably," Geddel offered curtly.

Rhaegar's face turned cold, and he glanced at Daella without speaking. The thought of her being reduced to prostitution infuriated him, even though she was a bastard.

Geddel quickly explained, "Daella's mother was a whore, and after her death, she was kept in a brothel. But only two days ago, she was purchased at a high price by a Lysene merchant."

Rhaegar looked at Daella inquiringly.

Daella bowed her head and nodded. "I didn't want to be a whore, but that Lysene merchant gave my grandmother a lot of gold."

She was making it clear that she had been forced into prostitution.

Rhaegar, still displeased, said coldly, "She was sold like cattle, attribute it to your greed."

Geddel was speechless, unable to defend himself. The price the Lysene merchant had paid was indeed too high.

Ignoring him, Rhaegar headed for the door.

Daella took two quick steps, tugged at his black robe, and whispered, "I have a sister. Can you take her with you?"

Rhaegar stopped and looked back at Geddel.

Geddel, panicked, quickly explained, "Layla is still young and just works in the kitchen of the brothel."

Rhaegar took out a bag of gold coins and tossed it to Daella. "Go and take your sister away, and any other Targaryen bastards too."

There were plenty of bastards on Dragonstone. It would be easy to resettle them there.

"No, mother only has two bastards. The other is married," Geddel interjected, fearful of further misunderstanding.

Daella nodded and hurried off to find her sister.

Once she was gone, the corridor was left with only the sounds of the rooms on either side.

After a moment of silence, Rhaegar asked, "You have two more bastard brothers?"

Geddel, surprised by Rhaegar's question, replied, "Yes, the eldest brother is a merchant, and the youngest has a Triarch father. Both left the brothel."

Rhaegar's eyes flashed, thinking of the two consuls of the Elephant Party.

Chapter 273: The Temple of the Lord of Light

Within moments, Daella returned in a hurry, accompanied by a girl of about twelve or thirteen dressed in rough clothing.

The girl possessed distinct Valyrian features: silver-blond curls, light purple eyes, and delicate, porcelain-like skin.

Rhaegar examined her. She was a pleasant-looking girl with a cute, round face, holding Daella's hand timidly.

Daella led her forward and said gratefully, "Layla, this is the lord who saved me. Thank you, my lord."

Layla, an earnest child, dropped to her knees and said softly, "Thank you, Your Grace."

"Stand up," Rhaegar said, his voice softening as he looked at the little girl, who was about the same age as Helaena. He had always been objective in his views on bastards and held no particular bias against them.

"Let's go."

Ignoring the embarrassed Geddel, Rhaegar put on his hood and led the two girls out of the brothel.

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The following day.

A black-robed figure emerged from the Black Wall and entered an unassuming inn. Ascending to the second floor, he pushed open a door, and a young girl's surprised voice immediately came from inside: "My lord, you're back."

Daella's face lit up with joy as she held a rag for wiping the table in her hand. She hurriedly brought a cleaned stool and said, "My lord, please rest. I'll go order food."

"No need, I brought it back," Rhaegar replied, removing the hood that hid his face and setting down the purchased food on the table.

Daella and Layla didn't dare to take it and looked timidly at Rhaegar.

"I've already eaten," Rhaegar said, waving his hand. "You two eat."

The two girls, having grown up in fear and deprivation, respected and feared him. Daella murmured her thanks and took the food, sharing it with her sister.

As she chewed the bread, Daella whispered, "My lord, did you not see the Triarch?"

She knew Rhaegar's purpose for the morning journey but it seemed to have yielded little success.

Rhaegar nodded. "Neither of the two leaders of the Elephant Party were at their residence."

Last night, he had learned from Geddel about the residence of the two Elephant Party leaders, but it was unfortunate that he was in a hurry and missed them.

"The Triarchs are abominable," Layla muttered softly, nibbling on a piece of ham and bowing her head timidly.

"Because they encourage the slave trade?" Rhaegar asked.

Layla nodded vigorously, her thin body leaning against her sister. Her heart ached for Daella, who had been trafficked.

"Eat up, I have to go out later," Rhaegar said, rubbing Layla's head, seeing a resemblance to Helaena in her.

"Can we follow you out?" Layla tilted her little face up and asked miserably, "My sister and I have been working in the brothel. We haven't seen what it's like outside."

"Layla, stop it!" Daella was startled and scolded her bold sister.

Rhaegar laughed, "It's alright. Let's go out for a while. It's no big deal."

Saying that, he took out a black robe for Layla. Without seeing the Elephant Party's consul, he didn't intend to waste time waiting.

"After taking in the sights of Volantis and buying some local specialties as gifts, it will be time to return," he thought.

The two sisters, excited to hear they could go out, quickly gulped down their food.

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At noon, the sun was shining brightly.

Three black-robed figures walked through the streets of the eastern district, drawing curious glances from passersby.

As they strolled, the voice of a woman preaching the faith of the Lord of Light reached their ears, her fervent words echoing through the crowd.

Rhaegar pulled down his hood to see the same red-robed woman from the Long Bridge the day before, passionately preaching to a group of commoners and slaves.

"Let's go around," he said, repulsed by the sight of the red-robed woman, and led his companions into a nearby alley.

Emerging from the narrow passageway, they found themselves in front of a tall building that resembled a temple. Its white walls were decorated with small pieces of red cloth painted with flames, and two stone torches flanked the entrance, their flames flickering brightly.

Rhaegar glanced around and noticed a group of warriors in red robes, armed with short sticks and spears, standing guard near the temple.

"My lord, this is the temple of R'hllor. These are the guards of the Lord of Light," Daella explained quietly.

"I can't believe we've ended up at the doorstep of the Lord of Light," Rhaegar muttered, shaking his head and turning to leave.

"Wait, esteemed guest!" a woman's magnetic voice suddenly called out.

Rhaegar stopped and looked around cautiously. There were few pedestrians near the temple entrance, so it was clear that the voice was directed at him.

A red-robed sorceress with a slender figure and a dignified presence approached him from the temple. She had a striking appearance and moved with grace, her red lips parting as she spoke, "Honored guest, the High Priestess invites you to the temple."

"Invites me?" Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he asked cautiously, "Who is your High Priestess and how does she know who I am?"

The followers of the Lord of Light always seemed a bit mystical, and he was reluctant to get involved.

The red-robed sorceress smiled softly. "The High Priest foresaw the visit of an honored guest, and was guided by the Lord of Light to recognize you."

"Speak plainly," Rhaegar replied, unimpressed by the talk of oracles.

The sorceress's smile faltered slightly. "I saw your image in the flames. It must be you."

Rhaegar frowned, recalling how a red-robed woman at Stone Hedge had used flame illusions to deceive House Bracken three years ago. He had learned of the deception from the soldiers afterward.

Suddenly, he felt a gaze upon him. Looking up, he saw an old man in a red robe standing at the temple entrance, watching him calmly.

The sorceress followed his gaze and said respectfully, "Esteemed guest, that is High Priest, the one who wishes to see you."

"I see," Rhaegar responded indifferently, striding toward the temple.

The high priest had revealed herself, so he had nothing to fear. Worst case, he could call upon Cannibal, and there was little a dragon's fire couldn't resolve.

Shortly after, Rhaegar entered the temple.

The interior was stark, with walls adorned with flame patterns and a stone sculpture of a burning red heart. Fire pots scattered around the space cast a flickering glow, illuminating the dark hall.

The red-robed old man had returned to his place, kneeling by a central bonfire, his hands extended toward the flames. Rhaegar approached, examining the intricate carvings on the walls.

"Great Dragonlord, I have seen you in the flames," the old man intoned, opening his cloudy eyes.

Rhaegar's face remained impassive. "What message has the Lord of Light given you, and how does it concern me?"

The old man, with a kind face and a white beard, shook his head. "The Lord of Light did not send an oracle. It was I who saw you in the flames."

Rhaegar sat down by the fire, listening intently.

"The tides of magic are surging," the old man said slowly. "In recent years, these waves have brought me confusion."

"Tides of magic?" Rhaegar's interest piqued. He had heard this term before, from the head of the Shadowbinder.

"Yes, magic exists in the world, as unstable as the tides," the old man explained. "The flames foretell that the tides of magic will be imprinted on your family."

"The Targaryens do not have a legacy of sorcery from the time of the Freehold," Rhaegar murmured, thinking of the Forty Dragonlords Houses, known for their pyromancy and blood sorcery. The Targaryens, being lesser lords, had not inherited such knowledge.

"Dragons are the strongest magical creatures; they carry part of the magic," the old man said calmly.

Rhaegar fell into thought. It was true that dragons were inherently magical, which explained their immense power.

"Is the number of dragons related to the magic tides?" he mused aloud.

The Targaryens currently had fourteen dragons, both adults and juveniles.

"I don't know. I have never encountered a dragon before," the old man admitted hesitantly. "Since the Fall of Valyria, the magic tides have been in decline. In recent years, they have begun to rise again."

"So, it's not the dragons that influence the magic tides, but the magic tides that influence the dragons?" Rhaegar guessed.

When the Targaryens first migrated to Dragonstone, they brought six dragons with them. Five of these dragons died under mysterious circumstances, leaving only a young Balerion, the Black Dread. Over the next decade, Meraxes and Vhagar hatched. It took several more decades before the fourth dragon, Silverwing, hatched.

The hatching and survival rates of dragons were incredibly low. Starting from the reign of his great-grandfather Jaehaerys, the number of dragons began to increase slowly.

Dragons such as Cannibal and Dreamfyre hatched on Dragonstone, while Vermithor and Silverwing emerged from eggs in the cradle. Twenty years later, Sheepstealer, Meleys, and Caraxes were hatched. In recent years, Syrax, Sunfyre, Seasmoke, and Grey Ghost joined the ranks.

It took over a hundred years from the time of Aegon the Conqueror for the Targaryens to breed fourteen dragons. It was believed that the surging magic tides increased the dragons' hatching rate.

The red-robed old man sighed and said, "The magic tides are extremely unstable. The current high tide may soon give way to an even greater low tide."

In his perception, the magic tide was already weak. If it continued to drop, magic might dry up completely. This would prevent the oracles of the Lord of Light from descending, a terrible tragedy for his followers.

Rhaegar understood the gravity of the situation. The Targaryen dragons depended on magic for their existence. The receding tide of magic would hit them hard.

"Is there any way to stop the receding of the magic tide?" Rhaegar asked.

The red-robed old man shook his head, smiling bitterly. "The magic tide is a natural phenomenon that cannot be reversed by human power. Even the gods' will is beyond our comprehension."

"I suppose we can only hope and see what happens," Rhaegar said, feeling helpless.

The old man's expression grew serious. He reached into his robes and said, "I saw a disaster in the flames. Perhaps this is a test brought by the magic tide."

"You seem to see many things in the flames," Rhaegar said, half-skeptical.

The old man had spoken of seeing Rhaegar and now of a looming disaster. Rhaegar was dubious about the truth of his visions.

The red-robed old man remained silent as he pulled out a glass candle from his pocket.

Chapter 274: The Dragon Arrives in Volantis

The glass candle was a foot long, as thick as a baby's arm, and composed of transparent, glazed crystal.

The red-robed old man hesitated before explaining, "The Dragonlords of Valyria could use glass candles to tap into magic and see scenes thousands of miles away."

He handed the glass candle to Rhaegar, adding softly, "This candle was recovered from the ruins of Valyria. It cannot be replicated in the present world. I am giving it to you."

In his mind, the vision in the flames alone might not convince the Targaryen Dragonlord. Offering the glass candle could create the value it deserved and potentially solve many problems.

Rhaegar examined the glass candle curiously. "How do I use this thing?"

He had heard of glass candles before. The Citadel in Oldtown had such alchemical artifacts. According to a de-named Maester, he earned his Valyrian Steel link, symbolizing expertise in the occult, when he accidentally lit a glass candle in an empty room.

The red-robed old man's eyes grew distant as he recalled, "The glass candle may require magic. You will need to figure out the rest on your own."

"I'll try," Rhaegar said.

He closed his eyes and focused on the glass candle in his hand. After talking with the old priest, he was certain the man harbored no ill intent—just a genuine concern.

Rhaegar flattened the glass candle in his hand and silently summoned the magic within his blood. As a pyromancer, he could channel magic.

Suddenly, the familiar beep of the Explorer System rang in his ears.

"Quest initiated: Target—Bloodmage's Secret Candle."

Rhaegar opened his eyes in surprise.

The glass candle flickered, its glazed wick igniting. Rhaegar felt the magic in his blood being drawn into the candle at a slow but steady rate.

"Does it really need magic to activate?" he murmured to himself, ignoring the old man's suspicious gaze as he checked the Exploration System.

[Bloodmage's Secret Candle]

Exploration Progress: 0.3%

Note: This relic is a product of alchemy. Please maintain magic infusion.

Rhaegar realized he had instinctively cut off the magic flow.

[Blood Witch's Secret Candle]

Exploration Progress: 0.3% (paused)

"Magic is the source..." Rhaegar speculated, his eyes brightening. "Secret Candle? Could it be hiding a bloodmage's legacy?"

The thought of sorcery inheritance excited him.

"Guest, it seems you truly are the owner of this glass candle," the red-robed old man marveled, watching the candle dim and flicker in Rhaegar's hands.

This glass candle had remained inert in his possession for decades. Occasionally, during sacrifices to the Lord of Light, it would ignite, a miracle that boosted the faith and offerings of his followers.

The old man sighed and rose to leave the temple. He had ceded the hall to the Targaryen Dragonlord, hoping that Rhaegar might indeed uncover something within the glass candle.

The magic tidal wave of disaster had been foretold.

...

Hours passed.

Rhaegar sat before the dying bonfire, feeling drowsy. The glass candle rested between his legs, its wick burning with a small, wavering orange flame.

"Fiery Hands! Protect the temple!"

"The Tiger Cloaks have gone mad, hide in the temple!"

A terrified woman's scream suddenly pierced the calm, echoing from outside the R'hllor Temple.

Rhaegar snapped awake, confused. Everything had been quiet—why the sudden chaos?

As he lifted his head, a dozen red-robed priests and women rushed into the temple. The priests, of various ages, all had shaved heads. The women were young, dressed in revealing clothes, with tattoos of tears or flames on their cheeks.

Rhaegar knew the temple of Rahlo included slaves. The red-robed guards, called the Fiery Hands, were slave soldiers trained from a young age. Additionally, young girls were purchased to serve as lifelong slave girls, with the most devout becoming Red Priestesses who spread the faith of the Lord of Light.

"Honorable guest, please come with me! There's a rebellion within the Black Wall—the rebels have invaded the entire east city district."

The Red Priestess who had invited Rhaegar earlier now ran towards him, panic evident in her voice.

"Rebellion? What's going on?" Rhaegar frowned, his eyes scanning the Fiery Hands gathering rapidly outside the temple.

Hundreds of them surrounded the temple entrance, their spears pointed at the chaotic streets.

The priestess's voice trembled with fear, but she spoke quickly, "The two Triarchs of the Elephant Party assassinated the Tiger Party's Triarch. The commander of the Tiger Army has led a riot."

As she spoke, she ran ahead of Rhaegar, her loose sash flying open, revealing bouncing snow-white curves. She seemed oblivious to it.

Rhaegar averted his eyes, dismayed. "Volantis is in chaos?"

No wonder he hadn't found the two Elephant Party Triarchs earlier—they'd been plotting an assassination.

The priestess, still in a hurry, continued, "The streets are filled with Tiger Cloaks burning and looting. Many slaves have joined in. You and I must hide in the temple cellar."

Rhaegar hesitated, glancing at the glass candle. Should he follow her or deal with the chaos outside?

Rhaegar checked the status of the glass candle.

[Bloodmage's Secret Candle]

Exploration Progress: 56%

Note: This relic is a product of alchemy. Please maintain magic infusion.

The glass candle was halfway through its exploration and needed more time to complete. Rhaegar rubbed the candle, deep in thought. He wasn't afraid of the chaos outside, but he had come to Volantis with specific goals: to understand Volantis's stance towards the Triarchy and to establish initial diplomacy with the three Triarchs.

The assassination of the Tiger Party's Triarch complicated matters. The Tiger Triarch, a hardliner, had shared common ground with the Targaryens. With the Tiger Party's leader gone, their initial efforts seemed wasted. The two Triarchs of the Elephant Party, clearly opposed to the Tiger Party's policies, were likely responsible for the upheaval.

Rhaegar had to decide his next move. Ignoring the red priestess's urging, he noticed the glass candle had extinguished.

The Triarchy was always an enemy of the Targaryens. Volantis, under the Tiger Party, also despised the Triarchy, aligning with Targaryen interests. But now, the Tiger Party was in disarray.

Rhaegar muttered to himself, uncertain of his next step. Suddenly, a thunderous explosion erupted at the temple entrance, followed by screams.

A burning stake hit a large torch in front of the temple, igniting a raging fire. The Fiery Hands guarding the entrance were caught in the flames, their screams piercing the chaos.

Rhaegar's gaze turned cold as he asked, "Where are the two girls who came with me and the high priest of the temple?"

Only the red-robed priests and women had entered the temple. Daella, her sister and the High Priest were missing.

The red priestess replied quietly, "The high priest led the believers to preach, and the two girls followed."

Rhaegar cursed under his breath, "What terrible timing."

"I'll go find them. You all stay hidden."

Ignoring the fierce flames at the temple entrance, Rhaegar tucked the glass candle into his sleeve and walked out without looking back. He intended to understand the situation outside and find the Daella and Layla along the way.

The red priestess, wanting to stop him, heard the screams of the Fiery Hands and instead knelt before the bonfire to pray to the Lord of Light.

...

The East Side of Volantis was in chaos.

The Tiger Cloaks, identifiable by their tiger tattoos, had revolted and were robbing civilians. Among their ranks were stone-throwing vehicles aimed at wealthy merchants' residences. Their focus was clear: target the rich, without concern for collateral damage.

"Run!"

"Hide, hide in the cellar!"

Rhaegar, dressed in black robes, moved against the flow of fleeing civilians. After a short distance, he encountered a group of well-equipped mercenaries. Their mismatched armor indicated they were hastily assembled.

As soon as they appeared, they clashed with the Tiger Cloak army. Rhaegar took cover behind a stone pillar, listening to the curses from both sides.

"Damn Elephants! Assassinating our Triarch, you betrayed Volantis!"

"The Tiger Party tried to start a war and deserved it..."

"Our consul is dead. Kill the Elephant Party Triarch too. We'll take control!"

The conflict was irreconcilable.

"Volantis is going to be in complete chaos," Rhaegar thought, summoning the Cannibal dragon in his mind.

Avoiding the fighting, Rhaegar headed towards the Long Bridge. The High Priestesses were spreading their faith in this area, rallying the slaves.

Boom!

A flaming stake flew in, destroying a distant house. The heat wave knocked Rhaegar off his feet, sending him flying backwards.

"Ahem... Damn Tiger Cloaks."

Struggling to his feet, Rhaegar coughed, his arm sore from the impact.

"Run!"

Around the corner, a group of fleeing slaves appeared, pursued by Tiger Cloak soldiers wielding scimitars. One soldier spotted Rhaegar and sneered, "A Valyrian-blooded boy with no tattoos. He must be rich!"

Rhaegar's hood had slipped, revealing his long silver-gold hair.

"Grab him! It's not every day we get rich!"

The Tiger Cloak soldiers, eyes filled with greed, surrounded him. One rushed forward, machete in hand.

Clang!

Rhaegar dodged and drew his Dragon Claw sword, slicing through the approaching machete.

"You've got guts!"

With cold eyes, Rhaegar swung his sword horizontally.

Swoosh.

The sharp blade of the Dragon Claw cut through the Tiger Cloak soldier, bisecting him before he could react.

"It's a Valyrian steel sword! Let's take him down together!"

Recognizing the material of Rhaegar's sword, the soldiers' greed intensified.

"Oh, I really don't have any luck with the Free Cities."

Facing ten times his number, Rhaegar showed no fear, a sneer playing on his lips as he twirled his sword.

Believing he was scared, the soldiers charged even more fervently.

Suddenly, a shadow darkened the sky, enveloping the broken city.

"Roar!"

Chapter 275: A Deathbed Prophecy

The dragon's roar echoed through the chaotic city, and a torrent of green Dragonfire descended from the sky.

In an instant, it engulfed the alleyway where Rhaegar stood.

Under the intense heat of the Dragonfire, the rebels couldn't even scream. Their flesh and bones incinerated instantly, leaving behind only ashes.

Above, the Cannibal dragon circled, its enormous, charcoal-black body looming like a mountain in the sky. The green Dragonfire slowly lost its intensity and extinguished.

"Cough, the storm is getting worse," Rhaegar muttered, covering his mouth and nose. He walked out of the ash-covered alley, his black robe peppered with burn holes.

All around him, the eastern district of the city was ablaze. The air was filled with the sound of screams and wails.

Rhaegar shook his robe to extinguish the remaining sparks and muttered, "Volantis is in complete chaos."

Chaos was good. He would add more fuel to the fire.

"Roar..."

High above, the Cannibal roared, its green eyes surveying the turmoil below. The dragon had been roaming the wastelands outside Volantis for days and was finally releasing its pent-up energy.

After a couple of circles, Cannibal found a clearing and landed with a thunderous boom. The impact shattered the ground and sent sparks flying.

"Cannibal, let's go!" Rhaegar called out, his black robe billowing in the wind. He hurried forward and climbed up the dragon's back using a ladder.

Reunited with his dragon, Rhaegar felt his heart pounding with exhilaration.

"Roar!" Cannibal roared, stamping the ground with its claws before launching into the sky.

Half-crouched on the dragon's neck, Rhaegar's long hair flew wildly in the wind. Looking down, he spotted stone throwers scattered around the Black Wall. "Cannibal, destroy those stone throwers," he commanded.

Cannibal, highly intelligent, understood. Its green eyes flashed with a ferocious light as Dragonfire erupted from its mouth.

The chaotic army below heard the dragon's roar and saw the Dragonfire descending upon them.

"Fire! Dragonfire!"

"It's the dragon that burned the Triarchy!"

As the stone throwers were engulfed in flames, the surrounding Tiger Cloak soldiers were caught in the inferno, their screams lost in the sea of fire.

Volantis, with its Valyrian traditions and culture, was no stranger to dragons. The moment the massive Cannibal appeared, everyone trembled in fear, their cries filling the air.

Rhaegar, atop his dragon, heard the distant screams and smiled coldly. He would have preferred to keep a low profile, but circumstances didn't allow it.

Cannibal, sensing his thoughts, roared as they flew toward the Long Bridge over the Rhoyme. Rhaegar remembered his mission.

First, he needed to find his lost companions.

...

Meanwhile, the bridge was in chaos.

Brothels and stores on both sides of the bridge slammed their doors shut, sending slaves to barricade them.

Hearing the news of the Triarchy's assassination, the Tiger Cloak Army from the West Side rushed onto the bridge, heading toward the East Side, the epicenter of the chaos.

As they charged forward, stalls were overturned, and barriers were violently broken down.

Some slaves, still tied to stakes, couldn't be led away in time. They fell to their knees in fear, holding their heads and trembling.

A stall was knocked over, and coins from its drawer spilled onto the noisy bridge, their clanking echoing through the chaos.

In an instant, the coins caught the attention of the Tiger soldiers.

The air seemed to freeze.

Moments later, an agitated shout rang out: "Gold!"

The leaderless Tiger Cloak army descended into chaos, scrambling for the fallen coins.

The few coins weren't enough to satisfy them, so their eyes turned to the stores lining the bridge.

With the chaos in the eastern city center spreading like wildfire, the situation grew worse.

Volantis, with its stark divide between rich and poor, was ripe for pandemonium.

"Loot!"

The Long Bridge erupted in violence as stores were broken into, smashed, and robbed.

A while later, a thunderous roar filled the air.

Cannibal, a majestic dragon, swooped down toward the flaming Long Bridge like a dark cloud blocking the sun.

Seeing the chaos below, Rhaegar's heart pounded. His voice turned icy. "Cannibal, Dracarys!"

To find his companions, he couldn't afford to waste time with the chaotic soldiers.

With a rumble, Cannibal flung its thick neck, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire that swept from the east side of the bridge to the west.

The powerful flames lifted debris and sent blazing heat in their wake.

In mere moments, the Long Bridge was engulfed in green fire, the flames sweeping across like a wave.

None of the Tiger Cloak soldiers caught in the Dragonfire survived; they were reduced to ashes.

Those who hid in the stores were too terrified to come out.

"My lord! Lord Rhaegar!"

As Cannibal circled over the Long Bridge, a small girl with silver-blond, slightly curly hair emerged from a hidden stable.

Rhaegar looked down at the sound of his name and saw Layla, wrapped in black robes.

Relief washed over him; at least she was safe.

As Layla appeared, many half-dressed slaves ran out from stables, warehouses, and corners, falling to their knees and kowtowing on the boiling hot bridge.

"Lord Dragonlord..."

Cannibal ignored the small group of people below, its pitch-black wings casting a vast shadow over the long bridge.

Kneeling and looking up at the dark dragon, both civilians and slaves, their faces flushed with a mix of fear and reverence, cried out, "Dragonlord!"

"Cannibal, land," Rhaegar commanded, moved by the sight below.

Obedying his voice, Cannibal descended, its claws crushing buildings on either side of the long bridge, and its body landed with a resounding crash.

The long bridge, wide enough for two wagons to pass side by side, seemed narrow under Cannibal's massive claws.

Rhaegar slid down the dragon's neck and headed straight for Layla. "Where is your sister and the High Priest?"

Layla, anxious, pointed towards the stables behind her. "My sister is in the stables. The old priest... he's hurt."

"I'll go and see," Rhaegar said, his eyes darkening with concern.

Pushing open the barred door of the stables, he saw horses paralyzed with fear, shitting and pissing themselves.

In the corner, Daella sat on her knees, holding a bloodied old man.

Rhaegar stepped forward to examine the wound. There was a sword cut through his abdomen, and his intestines were exposed.

"He can't be saved," Rhaegar sighed. The damage was too severe for any healing magic to work.

Daella, teary-eyed, explained, "The Tiger Cloak army is looting everywhere..."

Rhaegar didn't need further details. The old priest and his followers had been caught in the violence.

"Cough..." The red-robed old man stirred, coughing up blood. Seeing Rhaegar, he strained to speak.

Rhaegar crouched closer, hearing the old man repeat, "The flame foretells disaster... The flame is accompanied by winter..."

"Song of Ice and Fire?" Rhaegar asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Flames... the long dark night..." the old man gasped out his final words, then slumped, dead.

"The long night... it really is ice and fire," Rhaegar murmured, feeling a chill. The old man's prophecy matched what Aegon the Conqueror had foreseen.

"My lord, the city-states are at war. What should we do?" Daella, her hands covered in blood, trembled.

"Don't be afraid. It's just a delay in our departure," Rhaegar reassured her, though his mind was racing. He called for the slaves to remove the old man's body.

Mounting Cannibal once more, Rhaegar addressed the civilians and slaves below, who looked at him with fear, reverence, and hope.

Drawing his sword, Rhaegar stood tall on Cannibal's back and shouted, "Those who want to live, go to the Temple of R'hllor. The dragon will quell the war!"

Cannibal roared, flapping its wings and ascending from the long bridge, heading back towards the eastern city district.

Seeing this, the civilians and slaves were awestruck, hesitating only a moment before one of them shouted, "Follow Lord Dragonlord!"

With renewed hope, the group moved as one, following the dragon's silhouette.

...

As Cannibal flew back towards the eastern city district, the chaotic scene below began to shift. The hired mercenaries retreated to the Black Wall, closing the city gates behind them. Meanwhile, the Tiger Cloak army, seeking vengeance for the Triarch's death, assembled outside the Black Wall with siege wagons, ready to breach the gates.

The sudden appearance of the dragon halted the chaos momentarily. The Commander of the Tiger Cloak army blew his horn, rallying his troops for the impending assault on the city.

On the battlements of the Black Wall, two middle-aged men, both dressed in elaborate, richly adorned clothing, paced nervously. They were the Triarchs of the Elephant Party. One had short silver-gold hair and blue eyes, clearly of Valyrian descent, while the other, with black hair and dark brown skin, was a prominent moneylender.

"Lord Triarch, the Tiger Mantle army is gathering in greater numbers," a breathless mercenary reported.

The Triarch, both chubby and pale-faced, exchanged worried glances.

"Forget the Tiger Cloak Army for a moment. Where did that dragon go?" one of the Triarchs demanded, his face contorted with fear. The dragon was a real threat, capable of destroying a city-state.

The mercenary, looking distressed, could only shake his head, unable to provide an answer.

Suddenly, a familiar, thunderous roar echoed above the Black Wall, carrying for miles. Both Triarchs looked up in horror, their eyes widening as they saw the black dragon soaring overhead.

From the dragon's back, Rhaegar gazed down with a cold, expressionless face, easily spotting the two richly dressed consuls amidst the crowd.

"Cannibal, give them a warning," Rhaegar commanded.

Chapter 276: The One-Day Emperor of Volantis

Boom...

Ghostly green dragonfire erupted from Cannibal's maw, sweeping over the defending troops on Blackwall. In an instant, the impregnable fortress was engulfed in flames, and wails of agony filled the air.

One breath of dragonfire was not enough. Cannibal unleashed successive torrents, burning both sides of the wall from top to bottom.

"Run for your lives! It's a real dragon..."

"The dragon's flames will consume Volantis..."

Under the relentless dragonfire, the troops inside and outside Blackwall were terrified, their will to resist completely shattered.

"Cannibal, that's enough," Rhaegar commanded.

After the onslaught, Rhaegar surveyed the chaos below, where soldiers flailed in the sea of fire. He clenched his fist, satisfied with the result.

Connected by their bond, Cannibal circled Blackwall twice before landing on the solid gatehouse.

Before them, the two Triarch of the Elephant Party, flanked by hired mercenaries, panicked and tried to flee.

Rhaegar's gaze hardened. He patted Cannibal's back.

Without a word, Cannibal lowered its massive head, blocking the Triarchs' escape. The dragon bared its fangs, roaring menacingly.

Thud!

One of the Triarchs fell to his knees in terror, his face ashen. The bystanders followed suit, their fear palpable.

"Lord Dragonlord, Volantis has always been peaceful. We never intended to provoke your dragon!" the Triarch pleaded, his voice shaking. He felt a warm wetness spread in his trousers.

"Cannibal," Rhaegar shouted, signaling the dragon to draw back the flames that were building in its throat. He dismounted and walked toward the Triarchs, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Standing between Cannibal's curved gray horns, Rhaegar looked down at the crowd. "Malaquo was my friend, and you killed him for no reason!"

His voice was cold and unyielding. The presence of the dragon demanded attention.

The Triarchs were taken aback by the mention of Malaquo. They had heard whispers of Malaquo's correspondence with a Targaryen, but dismissed them as rumors.

The silver-haired Triarch spoke tremblingly, "Lord Dragonlord, we were unaware of your friendship with Malaquo. Please don't be angry. Give us a chance to make amends."

As he spoke, his eyes darted nervously to the dragon.

Cannibal sensed his fear and snorted in displeasure, sending waves of hot, sulfurous air over the Triarchs, nearly knocking them down.

"Lord Dragonlord, I have connections with the Targaryens. Please, spare me," the dark-skinned Triarch pleaded, his voice desperate.

Rhaegar's face darkened. He remembered Geddel's complaints in the brothel about this Triarch who had taken Saera as his mistress.

"Oh, you dare mention that," Rhaegar said icily. He slapped Cannibal's rough horn and commanded, "Cannibal!"

In a flash, Cannibal's vertical pupils gleamed with malice. The dragon lunged, its fangs piercing the Triarch's body. With a swift motion, it flung the Triarch into the air, tearing him apart.

"No! Have mercy!" the Triarch wailed, but his pleas were cut short as Cannibal devoured him piece by piece.

Rhaegar watched coldly, a hint of satisfaction playing at the corners of his mouth. Finding a Targaryen princess as a mistress and then mentioning it in front of him—such insolence deserved a brutal end.

"Spare me, Dragonlord! Spare my life..." The remaining Triarch collapsed, his mental defenses shattered. He cried out, begging for mercy.

He was a moneylender, not a warrior. He had bought his way into power, and he knew better than to challenge a dragon.

The hired mercenaries, equally terrified, dropped their weapons and fell to their knees.

Rhaegar ignored them. He turned Cannibal's attention to the Tiger Cloak army below.

Cannibal's maw opened slightly, and green dragonfire began to gather.

...

The next day, just at dawn, the sun rose in the east, casting its light on the rapids of the Rhoyme River and illuminating Volantis after the tumultuous night.

Beneath the Black Wall, a black dragon lay prostrate, its thick, long tail coiled under its head, wings spread out like a vast curtain. Seated cross-legged atop the dragon's head, a young man in black robes leaned against the dragon's slender, pillar-like horns.

In front of the dragon and its rider, a diverse crowd had gathered. The Black Wall was surrounded by layer upon layer of people, extending as far as the eye could see. Gorgeously dressed merchants, armor-clad warriors, wealthy commoners, and tattooed slaves—all stared in awe at the formidable dragon and the young Dragonlord.

"My lord, the prisoners have all been escorted here!" announced a red priestess, leading a group of prisoners bound in chains through the crowd. The masses parted, creating an open space in front of the dragon.

Anyone observing closely would notice that the prisoners were prominent figures of Volantis—moneylenders, merchants, slave-owners, and even a Triarch. Among them was a military officer with a tiger tattooed on his face.

As the Dragonlord remained silent, the red priestess stepped forward into the clearing and addressed the assembly.

"People of Volantis..." she began, using the persuasive rhetoric she had honed in spreading her faith. Her impassioned speech outlined the crimes of the Elephant Party Triarch, who had secretly incited war and assassinated the Tiger Party Triarch. She identified the prisoners as the culprits involved.

The Dragonlord of Targaryen, she explained, was a close friend of the slain Tiger Triarch and had come to Volantis to seek peace. Upon encountering the chaos, he had used his dragon to quell the unrest and save the people from their suffering. Now, under the guidance of the Lord of Light, he was ready to judge the sinners.

She spoke of the friendship between the Targaryens and Volantis, the king's mercy, and his accomplishments, embellishing her narrative with mythological hues. The commoners and slaves, who had endured plundering and fear the previous day, were won over by her words.

"Long live the Dragonlord... Long live the Dragon..." The cries of the crowd grew louder, reaching a fervent pitch under the Black Wall.

In front of the masses, some of Volantis' old nobility and warrior class exchanged glances and joined the chanting. Soon, even the moneylenders, merchants, and slave-owners of the Elephant Party, seeing the tide turning, began to chant as well.

The previous night, the Dragonlord had summoned all prominent figures of Volantis into the Black Wall for a grand council under the dragon's watchful eye. Those who supported him were now among the crowd. Those who opposed him were bound in chains.

As the chanting peaked, the red priestess smiled and waved her hand. The Fiery Hands brought forth a large pile of firewood, stacking it and igniting a massive flame. The sorceress, holding a torch, waved it before the crowd.

"People of Volantis," she proclaimed, "the Dragonlord will judge Volantis for its hidden sins. We must grant him the most noble rights!"

The crowd erupted in cheers, their voices rising to a crescendo.

Whispers about electing the Dragonlord as Triarch filled the air. These murmurs, however, came primarily from the commoners and slaves.

Representatives from both the Tiger and Elephant parties silently stepped into the clearing. From the Tiger Party, an elderly nobleman in fine attire and a fierce young man with a tiger-tattooed face presented themselves. The old nobleman trembled as he knelt before the dragon, fumbling in his pocket before producing a golden crown. This crown, adorned with a ruby the size of a pigeon's egg, featured intricately carved dragons along its edge, each one spewing fire.

Raising the crown with both hands, the old nobleman declared, "Honorable Dragonlord, this coronation crown from the days of the Freehold is dedicated to you, noble of blood."

The Elephant Party's representative knelt as well, adding, "We ask you to serve as the supreme Triarch of Volantis and restore the glory of the Freehold."

At these words, the black-robed figure atop the dragon stirred. Rhaegar awoke from his feigned slumber, his gaze fixed on the ancient crown. Despite its age and slightly blurred carvings, the crown radiated the weight of centuries.

Stretching from his cross-legged position, Rhaegar straightened his back and spoke calmly, "This is the crown of an empire and can only be worn by an emperor."

Historically, Valyria was known as the Valyrian Freehold. It had no emperor or king, instead electing a supreme Triarch from among the forty Dragonlord families. Rhaegar's statement, however, was deliberately ambiguous.

The old nobleman, clutching the crown, shouted with fervor, "You are the Emperor of Volantis!"

Rhaegar surveyed the crowd, remaining silent and not rushing his response. Observing this, the red priestess knelt and implored, "Your Grace, the Dragonlord, please be crowned under the watchful eye of the Lord of Light!"

Her action prompted the commoners and slaves to follow suit, kneeling and voicing their agreement. Members of both the Tiger and Elephant parties hesitated before also kneeling.

Rhaegar noted their reactions and laughed inwardly. This had all been prearranged. He had acted as the supreme Triarch of Volantis for a day, judging the remnants of the power structure. Under the dragon's threat, the Tiger and Elephant parties had no choice but to cooperate. In return, Rhaegar would step down after a day, selecting three new Triarchs.

This exchange of benefits allowed Rhaegar to gain fame, fortune, and recognition. It also positioned him to support at least one Triarch, enabling him to influence Volantis' political landscape.

Surveying the crowd's pleas for his coronation, Rhaegar felt a surge of emotion. "Malaquo, thank you for your death," he thought. Without the assassination of this Tiger Party Triarch, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to dominate Volantis.

Rising and patting his torn black robe, Rhaegar drew the Dragon Claw from his waist. The Valyrian steel sword, gleaming with cold light, was raised high, reflecting the morning sun's rays and exuding an aura of fearlessness.

The crowd fell silent, tens of thousands of eyes fixed on the silver-haired youth atop the dragon.

"Gentlemen, thank you for your trust," Rhaegar began, his violet eyes sweeping over the assembly. "But I am from Westeros, and there is a real kingdom waiting for me to rule. I cannot fully protect Volantis."

A murmur of disappointment rippled through the crowd. Who wouldn't want to live under the rule of a powerful, benevolent Dragonlord?

"But!" Rhaegar's voice, filled with precise emotion, regained their attention. Pointing forward with the dragon's claws, he struck his chest with one hand and proclaimed, "In this moment, I will become your emperor to rid you of evil!"

Chapter 277: Precious Magic Spells

After Rhaegar's declaration, tens of thousands of people erupted in applause, their cheers echoing across half of the East Side.

To the commoners and slaves, even a single day of the Dragonlord's rule as Emperor was a monumental event. In this city-state, where Triarchs were elected annually, such an occurrence was unprecedented.

"Before the sun sets today, I will judge all the affairs of Volantis," Rhaegar announced, seizing the moment. "No matter one's status or origin, I will ensure a fair investigation."

The commoners and slaves were ecstatic. In a city-state that prided itself on equality, they often found themselves overlooked and mistreated. The Emperor's promise of impartiality filled them with hope.

Under the gaze of tens of thousands of eager eyes, Rhaegar took a deep breath and pointed his sword at the chained prisoners in the open space.

The red priestess, her eyes glowing with fervor, urged, "Your Grace, these are the culprits who disrupted the peace of Volantis. Please deliver the highest judgment!"

On the open ground, the Elephant Party's Triarch and the officers of the Tiger Cloak Army shook their heads and shouted in fear. Their mouths, stuffed with rags, could only produce muffled whimpers.

Rhaegar surveyed the crowd, his Valyrian steel sword gleaming in the morning light, his voice chilling as he declared, "I sentence you to be consumed by Dragonfire!"

Sensing his master's intent, Cannibal's eyes glowed fiercely. A low growl rumbled from his throat as he shifted his massive body, supported by his wings.

Rhaegar, standing between the dragon's curved horns, his silver hair blowing in the breeze, commanded proudly, "Dracarys!"

The word, spoken in pure High Valyrian, reverberated in the ears of every Valantian present.

Cannibal's nostrils flared, and he bared his teeth, roaring, "Roar!"

The dragon's roar blew the prisoners off their feet, sending them rolling on the ground. Before their screams could be heard, a wave of green Dragonfire engulfed them.

Zira...

The stench of burning flesh and smoke filled the air as the Dragonfire scorched the earth, leaving behind a charred pit with only a few remnants of bone.

...

The trial ended and an unprecedented parade began.

Crowned Emperor, Rhaegar wore his black robes, now adorned with a golden crown, and paraded through the eastern and western districts of Volantis, greeted by an adoring crowd.

Refusing to be carried by slaves, he chose instead to be carried by a large white elephant with magnificent tusks, found for him by the citizens.

Seated on the elephant's broad, red-carpeted back, Rhaegar was flanked by a hundred members of the Fiery Hands.

Above him, Cannibal, the black dragon, soared through the sky, occasionally roaring and releasing bursts of dark green dragonfire that sliced through the sky.

As the white elephant advanced, it frequently stopped to allow many civilians and slaves, including merchants, to approach and air their grievances.

An elderly fisherman spoke of thugs who had stolen his boat, a prostitute spoke of being beaten by her clients, and a merchant complained of a lack of dock space despite paying taxes.

True to his word, Rhaegar addressed each injustice, regardless of the status of the complainant, be it slave or prostitute.

He also received many suggestions, with concerns about safety and sanitation on the West Side being the most common.

Rhaegar had noticed the poor conditions of the West Side on his first day in Volantis.

After much deliberation, he assured the people, "I will formulate a plan to improve the West City District. Even if I step down tomorrow, the new Triarch will ensure its implementation."

"Thank you, Emperor," the citizens replied, kneeling in gratitude.

Who wouldn't want to live in a cleaner, safer environment?

Rhaegar's willingness to accept suggestions and guarantee their implementation showed his wisdom as Emperor of Volantis.

...

Time, always precious, passed quickly.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, its red glow painted the sky. The patrol left the West Side and returned to the mouth of the Rhoyme River near the Long Bridge.

Rhaegar rode the majestic, tusked white elephant, cutting a regal figure against the setting sun. His violet eyes were calm, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

After serving as Emperor for one day, he had cemented his reputation as a wise and brave leader in Volantis, a reputation that would surely reverberate throughout the nine free trade city-states.

Following the white elephant was the red priestess on a white horse. Three others, surrounded by the crowd, accompanied her: the old nobleman who had offered the crown, the fierce young man with the tiger tattoo, and a handsome middle-aged man with Valyrian features.

These three were the triarchs Rhaegar had carefully chosen for Volantis.

The old nobleman represented the noble power and had been instrumental in securing the agreement with Rhaegar. The fierce young man, Tesrio, was a rising star in the Tiger Cloak army, renowned for his exceptional martial prowess. Upon being chosen as a Triarch, he immediately pledged his loyalty to Rhaegar.

The last man, Varos, had a unique background. He was the third illegitimate son of Saera, and his father had been the executed Triarch of the Elephant Party. As a bastard, Varos had received little attention from his father, leading to a strained relationship.

Rhaegar's decision to kill the Elephant Party Triarch and appoint Varos as the new Triarch won the immediate loyalty of the Elephant Party faction, which was eager to stabilize under new leadership.

As the sun set, the three new Triarchs of Volantis officially took office. The old nobleman and Tesrio were from the Tiger Party, while Varos represented the weakened Elephant Party.

This strategy was a calculated move on Rhaegar's part. The Tiger Party, allied with the Targaryens, could generate more value and maintain stronger ties. Once Varos stabilized the remnants of the Elephant Party, the old nobleman and Tesrio could effectively control the situation in Volantis.

In this intricate power play, Rhaegar ensured that he would reap the benefits.

...

The procession moved slowly as the white elephant carried Rhaegar through the bustling port. Suddenly, a loud commotion erupted nearby.

Rhaegar turned to see a group of launchers in disarray on a ship moored in the harbor.

"Capture him quickly, he's infected with greyscale! We can't let him go ashore!" someone shouted.

"Throw him overboard, but be careful not to let him touch anyone!" another voice added.

At the mention of greyscale, Rhaegar's expression hardened. "Let's go see what's happening," he ordered.

"Yes, Your Grace," replied one of the Fiery Hands, leading a group toward the ship.

The red priestess, now presiding over the Temple of R'hllor, saw this as an opportunity to spread the faith of the Lord of Light and supported Rhaegar's actions.

Not long after, the Fiery Hand returned with the ship's captain, a sailor, and a broken black tablet.

The Fiery Hand explained the situation: the ship was a smuggler's vessel that had encountered a storm and drifted into the Smoky Sea near the ruins of Valyria.

There, they discovered a subterranean cave along the coast and retrieved an ancient relic—a broken stone tablet with carved inscriptions. During their exploration, they were attacked by stone men, monstrous figures infected with greyscale. Several sailors were scratched and contracted the disease.

When the ship docked, the infected sailors were prevented from disembarking.

The red priestess approached Rhaegar on her white horse, her voice filled with concern. "Your Grace, greyscale is extremely dangerous. They must be banished immediately."

Rhaegar nodded thoughtfully. Both Westeros and Essos typically dealt with greyscale by exiling the infected to the harsh environment of the Smoky Sea.

"First, imprison them under strict guard," Rhaegar commanded. He then instructed the Fiery Hands to bring the broken stone tablet closer.

The tablet, made of black dragonstone, was heavily damaged, with a rectangular shape that was split in the middle and crushed around the edges. Valyrian script was faintly visible on its surface.

Rhaegar examined it closely, silently reading the fragmented inscription: "Belaerys... high tower... nest..."

Despite the erosion of time, he managed to recognize a few words. His eyes widened in surprise. "Belaerys family!" he exclaimed.

The Belaerys House was one of the forty Dragonlord families that had once lived on the Fourteen Flames. They were renowned for their immense power, far surpassing House Targaryen, which ranked lower among the Dragonlords.

Realizing the gravity of this discovery, Rhaegar decided to keep it discreet. "Carry the stone tablet away. I will deal with this privately," he ordered, aware of the potential complications involving a prominent Dragonlord family.

As the sun set, the crowd looked up at the sky, their faces reflecting a mix of emotions—loss, regret, and joy.

Rhaegar felt a deep sense of satisfaction. He had already achieved much in his brief tenure as Emperor of Volantis. Holding onto the title any longer would only invite unnecessary trouble.

...

Night descended upon the city.

Within the black walls, in what used to be the residence of the Tiger Party, now repurposed by the Dragonlord, a quiet mist filled the air. Steam billowed from a cracked window in a courtyard bathroom, accompanied by the gentle sound of flowing water.

A tattered black robe hung over the door, signifying the identity of the occupant.

Inside, the bath was elegantly designed, with cobblestones lining the floor, flowers adorning the corners, and hot water cascading from a bamboo tube into the bath.

Rhaegar was completely submerged in the warm water, his body relaxed and his mind at ease. At the edge of the bath, the ancient stone tablets lay flat, their surfaces meticulously cleaned.

Resting his head on the edge of the tub, Rhaegar's face reflected serene exhaustion. The relentless events of the day had taken their toll, and now was his moment of rest. He drifted off into a deep, unguarded sleep, his long hair fanning in the water, the soothing sound of the flowing water in his ears.

In his hand, close to his chest, was a glass candle. Even in his sleep, Rhaegar's dedication to uncovering the secrets of the relics remained.

As night fell, a faint beep sounded.

"Exploration complete, please retrieve the lost treasure."

Rhaegar, still deep in slumber, stirred slightly but did not awaken.

The system automatically resumed its task.

[Bloodmage's Secret Candle]

Exploration Progress: 100%

A small purple orb appeared above the water and gently descended. As it made contact with Rhaegar's arm, it burst into a soft glow, infusing him with its light.

"Relic picked up successfully, detecting..."

"Detection successful, recognized as an Epic Relic, Bloodmage's Treasure."

The messages continued, but Rhaegar remained undisturbed, his fatigue too deep to be shaken.

With the glass candle near his ear, another beep sounded.

"Congratulations, Bloodmage's Treasure has been activated, you have obtained..."

[Enchantment Spell

Grade: Excellent (Blue)

Effects: When used with a glass candle, it enhances the potency of the bloodline and strengthens magical abilities.

Rating: "A rare spell co-developed by a Pyromancer and a Bloodmage."]

Chapter 278: Dream of the Smoking Sea

The exploration mission concluded, and the knowledge of the [Enchantment Magic Spell] quietly seeped into Rhaegar's mind.

"Haha~~"

Each infusion of knowledge sent shivers down his spine, eliciting a moan of pleasure. His hands fell naturally by his sides as he drifted deeper into sleep.

Gradually, Rhaegar entered a peculiar dream.

The dreamscape was shrouded in mist, with fine dust floating in the air, making visibility extremely poor. In this misty environment, a lone boat floated on a calm sea.

Rhaegar found himself on a narrow wooden boat, his hands gripping the oars as he drifted slowly down a winding tributary. Lush bushes lined the shore on either side, adding a splash of color to the dull surroundings.

"Where is this?" Rhaegar wondered aloud, paddling in a daze. He was unaware that he was dreaming, his consciousness confused.

Suddenly, a massive, partially collapsed stone bridge loomed before him. Rhaegar was startled, but remained calm. The bridge, once arched, now stood as a mere frame on either side, its center reduced to ancient ruins.

As the wooden boat slid beneath the remains of the arched bridge, Rhaegar looked around in wonder.

Crack...

A bolt of lightning pierced the dark sky, illuminating the scene for a fleeting moment.

Rain...

Almost immediately, a downpour began, drenching Rhaegar within moments.

He sighed helplessly, paddling on as the rain soaked him through.

Then the scene changed dramatically.

The air grew thick with smoke, rolling like a torrent. Rhaegar wiped the rainwater from his face, only to find himself sweating profusely. The oppressive heat made it hard to breathe.

Looking back, he saw volcanoes lining the shore, spewing rivers of reddish magma.

"No wonder it's so hot," he thought in amazement.

But the chaos didn't stop there.

The heavy rain, smoke, and volcanic eruptions were followed by another change. The sky, swirling with smoke, revealed a strange red light that pierced the haze and cast an eerie glow.

Rhaegar lifted his head and muttered, "What is that?"

Boom...

A red meteorite pierced the haze, slicing through the dark sky before crashing into the sea.

Rhaegar's eyes widened in horror as he watched the densely packed points of red light resembling a chaotic display of fireworks.

Within moments, one meteorite after another began to fall, transforming into balls of fire as they plummeted toward the sea.

Realizing that he felt no pain when he pinched his face, Rhaegar understood that he was in a dream world. This realization caused the dream space to waver and crack slightly.

He reached out his hand reluctantly and muttered, "I still don't understand what this dream means!"

As the meteorites continued to fall, the sea rippled violently and the wooden boat rocked violently. The dream began to fade.

Rhaegar closed his eyes, quietly awaiting the moment he would wake.

"Roar!"

At the last second before the dream shattered completely, a loud and rough dragon's roar echoed through the sky, filled with a sense of ominous danger.

"A dragon?" Rhaegar's heart tightened. He tried to open his eyes to see.

Suddenly, a massive wave surged, instantly sinking the wooden boat.

Rhaegar woke abruptly, water splashing as his long hair slapped against his face.

"Hooooo~~" he exhaled heavily, heart pounding. "There's a dragon..." he murmured in a trance.

The dragon's roar from his dream lingered in his mind. "This isn't normal," he muttered, rubbing his face.

As he calmed down, his gaze fell on the broken stone tablet, an artifact from the Smoking Sea ruins, potentially linked to the Belaerys family. "Daydreaming and nightdreaming," he shook his head, still puzzled.

Rhaegar had interrogated the smugglers. They had found the relic in the fog-shrouded Smoking Sea, likely part of the ancient Lands of the Long Summer. Navigation was treacherous there, but the old sailor managed with ancient charts.

The real danger was the stone men—irrational, cruel, and bloodthirsty beings who knew the terrain intimately, hunting any who strayed into their domain. Their attack had decimated the smuggling crew.

"The site of the Belaerys family is too tempting," Rhaegar mused. The Dragonlord families were powerful, especially one like the Belaerys. The ancient knowledge he had from other sources was invaluable, but finding dragon-taming lore could significantly strengthen House Targaryen.

"I have to plan well," he thought. "Valyrian ruins are dangerous, and the Smoking Sea even more so."

He recalled the tragic tale of Aerea Targaryen, niece of his great-grandfather Jaehaerys. Aerea, daughter of Rhaena Targaryen, was the third rider of Balerion, the Black Dread. After mounting Balerion, she disappeared for a year. When Balerion returned to King's Landing, Aerea was barely alive, her body ravaged.

Balerion bore terrible wounds, and Aerea was even worse off, with her bones visible and skin red and bloody. She died that night, her body burned from within by a creature known as the Firewyrms.

It was theorized that Aerea, unable to control Balerion, was taken to Valyria, the dragon's homeland, and fell victim to its cursed creatures.

The ruins of Valyria.

There, a man and a dragon faced peril—one was killed, the other severely injured.

As a result, King's Landing forbade any ship that had ventured near the Valyrian ruins from docking for a long time.

Rhaegar was silent, weighing the benefits against the risks.

The legends of Aerea and Balerion were horrific. But according to Rhaegar's speculation, they must have ventured deeper into danger, leading to the tragedy.

The empire of the Freehold is in ruins, and the land of the Long Summer has become the Smoking Sea. But that doesn't mean no one lives there.

At least a few fringe city-states still exist on Valyrian soil. There are also many fishermen around the Smoking Sea, and occasional expeditions.

The ruins of the Belaerys family were located in the Smoking Sea—not an inaccessible place.

As he pondered, Rhaegar ruffled the water, revealing a glass candle.

He recalled the disturbances he had experienced in his sleep.

With a thought, he called up his personal status.

Rhaegar Targaryen

Talents: Dreamer (Gold), Pyromancer (Purple), Longevity (Green)

Bloodline: Ancient Valyrian Dragonlord (47%)

Rune: Serpent (Blue), Bronze (Green)

Blood Sorcery: Enchantment Spell (Blue), Dragonstone (Blue)

Relics: Blood and Fire, True Dragon's Blood, Dreamscape

Evaluation: "Ancient bloodline at the threshold, perhaps more fire and magic can enhance it."

Rhaegar checked his status and whispered, "One more enchantment spell."

He scanned the trigger conditions for [Bloodmage's Treasure]. It only required the ability to light a glass candle.

This had triggered the Explorer System in his sleep, granting him the Blood Sorcery: Enchantment Spell.

"A rather useful sorcery," Rhaegar's eyes lit up as he held the glass candle and secretly activated his Pyromancer talent.

Boom...

The glass candle in Rhaegar's left hand glowed softly, while flames erupted from his right hand, growing more intense.

"Let's try this."

As the flame crackled, Rhaegar aimed at the broken stone tablet and flung the fire. The flames shot smoothly from his hand, hitting the tablet with a muffled thud and leaving a charred patch on its surface.

Rhaegar clicked his tongue, pondering, "The flames are indeed stronger, but it's just a rudimentary fireball."

Throwing fireballs was the stuff of legends, something he'd only dreamed of.

Previously, he possessed the talent of a Pyromancer but lacked the means to fully utilize it.

Examining the marks on the stone tablet, Rhaegar felt a twinge of dissatisfaction. "Impressive, but the power is lacking."

One fireball drained a tenth of his magic power, enough to potentially kill an ordinary person. Yet, he assessed it wasn't as effective as drawing a sword and striking directly.

Turning the glass candle in his hand, Rhaegar's curiosity got the better of him. He decided to try a few more "fireball spells."

Aiming at the broken stone tablet, he launched a series of fireballs with loud thuds. Before long, his head pounded, and dizziness set in. His legs weakened, and he sank into the pool.

He had experienced this before. Enduring the dizziness, he muttered, "Insufficient mental power."

Casting magic required not only magical power but also strong mental strength. Excessive use of enhanced fire spells had depleted his mental energy.

Crunch-

The bathroom door creaked open, and Daella hurried in, looking around nervously. "My lord, I heard strange noises. Is everything alright?"

The loud fireballs had startled the girls downstairs.

Embarrassed by the sudden intrusion, Rhaegar turned his back, saying, "It's nothing, you can leave now."

He shook his head, the dizziness intensifying.

"My lord, you seem to be in pain," Daella said worriedly, moving closer. She closed the bathroom door behind her.

Rhaegar covered his forehead, vigorously rubbing his temples.

"Let me help you," Daella offered.

Rhaegar's headache was severe, his agitation growing. The faint scent of green flowers filled the room as Daella approached.

The fragrance soothed him, his brow relaxing as he inhaled deeply. The headache seemed to ease.

Realizing the floral scent might be aiding his recovery, he wanted to ask her about it. Just then, a pair of cool hands touched his head, gently massaging his temples.

Chapter 279: Daemon Sudden Appearance

"My lord, let me help you relax," Daella said earnestly, kneeling at the edge of the bath as she began to massage his temples.

Rhaegar hesitated for a moment, then accepted her offer and asked bluntly, "What is that scent you're wearing?"

The fragrance seemed to alleviate his headache, likely replenishing his mental energy.

"Scent?" Daella blinked her sparkling eyes and replied honestly, "It's a homemade scent powder, made from a beautiful orchid."

Curious, Rhaegar immediately inquired, "What kind of orchid, and where can I find it?"

"I believe it's called the Soul Restoring Orchid. The name sounds a bit ominous," Daella explained. She lowered her head, continuing in a whisper, "A whoremonger gave the orchid to my mother as a gift. She didn't want it, so she gave it to me."

She blushed with a mix of shame and frustration. Deep down, she resented her grandmother and mother. Even as an bastard, she wished she hadn't been born in a brothel, surrounded by chaos.

"The orchid is a rare flower with a Valyrian name. It grows in the Smoking Sea and is occasionally brought back by expeditions as a souvenir," Daella added. She had come by the orchid a few years ago by chance. She crushed it into powder and stored it in a discarded powder box, using it sparingly because of its rarity.

Rhaegar listened quietly, feeling the headache ease under Daella's massage and the soothing effects of the flower. "Later, bring me the pollen, and I'll give you a bag of gold coins," he said. The Soul Restoring Orchid was rare but incredibly useful. It was worth spending money to obtain more.

Daella shook her head, refusing the offer. "My lord, you saved me. I can't accept your money."

Rhaegar didn't insist. "As you wish."

Daella smiled and increased the pressure of her massage. After a while, Rhaegar felt drowsy, his eyes growing heavy.

As he drifted towards sleep, he heard a rustling sound behind him. Then, a soft touch on his back made him open his eyes in confusion. The touch became a gentle, fluffy rub.

Rhaegar froze, quickly realizing what was happening. He tried to move away, but Daella's hands slid down to encircle his waist, preventing him from escaping.

"My lord, let me serve you in your rest," Daella whispered shyly, her face flushed.

Rhaegar's eye twitched, and he said breathlessly, "Let go, I'm not sleepy yet." He was acutely aware of the fierce female dragon waiting for him back in King's Landing. He couldn't afford to be unfaithful.

Daella tightened her grip, her voice trembling, "My lord, you are a noble dragon lord. Please don't disdain me for my lowly origins."

In her heart, she felt honored to serve a true dragonlord. The scent of the orchid filled the air, and Rhaegar leaned back with mixed feelings.

The water in the pool began to ripple gently.

...

Three days later, at the harbor of the Rhoyme River, a beautifully shaped three-masted sailing ship was docked, proudly flying the flag of the three red dragons. Sailors bustled about, loading goods onto the ship, while a team of 100 well-equipped mercenaries maintained order.

Rhaegar, dressed in black, stood on the shore, gazing out over the blue sea.

"Prince, we will strictly handle the affairs you left behind," one of the three new Triarchs assured him.

"The Smoking Sea is dangerous. Be careful, Prince," another Triarch added.

The three Triarchs stood respectfully behind Rhaegar. The old nobleman wore a solemn expression, his eyes shrewdly observing the sailboat. Tesrio remained expressionless, like a stern wooden figure. Varos, with a flattering demeanor, showered Rhaegar with pleasantries, expressing his reluctance to see him leave.

After days of contemplation, Rhaegar had decided to explore the Smoking Sea ruins. To prevent worry in King's Landing, he had sent a raven explaining his plans. He promised to return within a month, confident in his preparations and strategy.

Rhaegar had hired the best helmsmen and sailors in Volantis, along with a team of elite mercenaries to ensure his safety. Half of these men had previously ventured into the Smoking Sea and returned safely, significantly reducing the trip's danger.

Once the goods were loaded and preparations complete, Daella approached timidly, bowing her head in farewell. "My lord, you must return safely. I will be waiting for you."

Layla stood beside her, eyes slightly red and swollen. The sisters, deeply grateful for Rhaegar's favor, were reluctant to see him go.

Rhaegar smiled softly. "Take care of yourselves. The voyage won't be long." He then bid farewell to the three Triarchs, entrusting the governance of Volantis entirely to them.

Boarding the ship, Rhaegar ordered the mercenaries to escort sailors infected with greyscale disease into the bilge. These patients could not remain in the castle and were to be deported to the Smoking Sea along the way.

"Roar..." A black dragon's shadow flashed overhead, its presence stirring a gale that billowed the ship's sails and soared towards the high clouds. From the deck, Rhaegar watched the mighty figure of Cannibal, feeling a surge of energy and confidence.

The Smoking Sea was perilous, and Rhaegar wasn't going alone. He would sail using the traditional routes taken by fishermen and explorers, while Cannibal would provide aerial escort and support, ready to intervene at any sign of danger. This strategy minimized the risks, allowing one man and one dragon to navigate the treacherous journey safely.

...

The sailboat set off, disappearing over the horizon.

That night, under the cover of darkness, a massive fire broke out in Volantis. The flames originated from a prestigious brothel, quickly engulfing the entire establishment. None of the prostitutes or patrons managed to escape. The fire spread rapidly, prompting the Tiger Army to intervene.

A mile away, in an inconspicuous attic, a black-robed figure stood by a window, watching the inferno. The sounds of panicked shouts reached his ears, and he chuckled, "Good job. It burned very cleanly."

It was evident that he had orchestrated the blaze, and he was quite pleased with the outcome.

"My lord, Varos was also in the brothel. He may be discovered by morning," another voice spoke from the shadows.

The black-robed figure turned to face a fierce young man with a tiger-like visage—it was the new Tiger Party Triarch, Tesrio.

He stared at Tesrio for a moment before speaking in a bored tone, "Go down. The commander of the guards should be present at the fire scene."

Tesrio hesitated briefly, then replied, "Yes, my lord." He quickly exited the attic, his eyes flickering with a touch of malice.

The black-robed figure watched him leave, then removed his hood, revealing Daemon's handsome face in the firelight.

"A poorly trained dog can still be useful," Daemon muttered coldly, assessing Tesrio. He had a history with Malaquo and had long been in secret contact with his men. With Malaquo dead and Tesrio in power, Daemon found it easy to manipulate him, knowing his vices well.

Rhaegar's hurried selection of the Triarchs had left little time for thorough vetting. Daemon, however, did not aim to control Volantis completely—he only sought to exploit it for his benefit.

Daemon tapped his fingers on the window frame, sneering, "A temporary emperor, playing a child's game."

In a trading city-state like Volantis, where power and money ruled, trust was a rare commodity. The presence of a dragon could enforce order for a day, but it would eventually leave. Daemon intended to extract as much value as possible, taking advantage of the chaos.

"Put out the fire... put out the fire..." Heart-wrenching cries echoed from the streets, but the attic remained calm.

Daemon's gaze returned to the burning brothel, his eyes filled with contempt. "A Bitch who tarnish the honor of the Targaryens..." he spat, his disdain palpable.

...

Time flew by, and ten days passed in the blink of an eye.

On a vast sea, a thick haze shrouded the sky, blocking out the scorching sun. A three-masted sailing ship drifted alone.

Rhaegar stood on deck, gazing at the foggy sky with a slight frown. There seemed to be small ashes floating in the air, making it somewhat uncomfortable to breathe.

"My lord, we've entered the Smoking Sea," a middle-aged sailor with one blind eye and a short, sturdy build reported as he approached.

Rhaegar nodded lightly, then said cautiously, "Robert, lower a boat and send a few mercenaries ahead to scout the area."

"No problem, my lord," Robert replied, thumping his chest in assurance before issuing the order in a loud voice. He was one of the best sailors in Volantis, having survived numerous sea storms. His commanding skills and passion had earned Rhaegar's trust.

With a splash, a small wooden boat was lowered into the sea, and several mercenaries jumped in, holding torches and rowing forward.

Rhaegar watched silently. It was a simple but effective strategy. The Smoking Sea was perpetually shrouded in smoke, reducing visibility to almost nothing. Sending scouts ahead was safer than venturing into the depths blindly.

Seeing Rhaegar's concern, Robert grinned broadly, "My lord, I've navigated the Smoking Sea before. As long as we find the right direction, there won't be any accidents."

"I hope you're right," Rhaegar responded, his tone reserved.

He then took out a rough chart and searched for a red cross marked on it. That was the location identified by a smuggling ship. First, they would encounter the ruins of a long stone arch bridge. After sailing along the ruins for a certain distance, they would reach a remote rocky beach. The site they sought was in a cave on that beach.

Two hours later, a cluster of torchlight emerged from the haze as the scouting boat slowly returned.

Robert leaned over the railing eagerly, "Anything ahead?"

"All is clear, just thick smoke," the lead mercenary shouted back, waving his torch.

Robert beamed, turning to Rhaegar, "My lord, shall we set out?"

Satisfied with the report, Rhaegar mused, "Sail for an hour first. Let's find the bearing on the chart before proceeding further."

The Smoking Sea did not cover a large area; the real danger lay in the old Valyrian ruins along the northern and southern shores. Their destination was marked near the northern shore, likely a fragmented piece of land rather than the mainland itself.

Chapter 280: Ghost Ship Incident

Time passed quickly.

On the vast sea, the three-masted sailing ship drifted slowly, like a fallen leaf caught in a river's current.

Gulp, gulp, gulp...

About two hours into the voyage, the gray seawater began to bubble strangely, resembling boiling water. Scorching steam, thick with the smell of sulfur, surged upward, and scalding splashes erupted sporadically.

Unable to withstand the heat, the mercenaries in the canoe clambered back onto the sailboat in a panic, seeking refuge.

Rhaegar leaned against the rail and watched the turbulent sea.

"My lord, the Smoking Sea comes from the region of the Fourteen Flames, so there are numerous volcanoes and magma lurking beneath the water," Robert explained, sweating as he removed his jacket.

The climate of the Smoking Sea is unpredictable, unlike any other ocean in the world. Active volcanoes intermittently erupt below the surface, causing constant crustal movement. This constant activity explains the ever-present haze and boiling appearance of some areas.

Rhaegar had familiarized himself with these facts before embarking on this journey, so he wasn't too surprised. He silently lamented the loss of the Fourteen Flames, once a natural dragon's nest. Had it not fallen, the Freehold of Valyria might never have fallen, and both Westeros and Essos might still be under dragon rule.

"Roar..."

A loud roar echoed from afar as a black dragon shadow pierced the haze and glided over the sailboat.

Rhaegar, snapped out of his thoughts by the dragon's roar, tensed, "Look out, there's movement!"

Swish...

The hired mercenaries quickly gathered at the bow, torches in hand, staring intently into the misty waters.

Robert, startled and nervous, asked, "My lord, why is the dragon roaring? What has happened?"

The pitch-black Cannibal hovering above the ship had roared for the first time, signaling something unusual.

"Not sure, anything can happen on the Smoking Sea," Rhaegar replied with a slight frown.

Cannibal was responsible for surveying from a medium to long distance to prevent the ship from encountering unavoidable dangers. Rhaegar sensed a warning in its roar—something nearby had caught its attention.

Rumble...

A thunderous explosion echoed from afar. Rhaegar looked up in surprise, seeing a column of fire piercing the sky and splattering like fireworks through the indistinct haze.

Though the haze obscured the view, it was evident that a volcano had erupted.

"My lord, it's an active volcano! There's a volcano erupting in the distance!" Robert trembled, his one remaining eye wide open.

Rhaegar hastily consulted the map, comparing landmarks to determine their position. Moments later, he sighed in relief and said, "This active volcano is not on our route. It's a random eruption."

From a distance, the eruption site was several dozen miles away. The eruption was so powerful that the magma broke through the surface and could be seen from afar.

"Roar..."

A gust of wind rocked the ship as Cannibal swooped overhead, roaring sharply. Rhaegar grabbed the railing to brace himself against the wind.

Cannibal's roar echoed in his ears, and he snapped to attention, yelling, "Alert, enemy!"

Cannibal's roar was usually thick and heavy, but this one was different. It signaled the approach of an unknown enemy.

...

Volantis.

The free people of the city-state gathered beneath the black walls of the east side.

Ten nights ago, Varos, the new leader of the Elephant Party, was killed in a fire.

Under the leadership of the two Tiger Party Triarchs, the city held its annual election.

It lasted for ten days, with the city's freeholders casting their votes.

Finally, on the tenth day, the Elephant Party elected a rotund, middle-aged man with a beaming smile.

His name was Dofas Bartholomew.

Originally a member of the Elephant Party, he quickly gained the favor of many freedmen who revered the "Emperor for a Day" and was elected as the new Triarch.

When the election concluded, Dofas stood on a temporary platform, raising his arms and shouting, "My fellow citizens, I will honor His Majesty the Emperor's will and improve the order and construction of the Western District!"

"Good..."

The free people cheered, admiring the Triarch who pledged to follow the Emperor's will and improve the lives of the commoners.

After the proclamation, slaves brought buckets of wine, fruits, and meat for all to enjoy.

This was a custom in Volantis: ten days of voting followed by ten days of revelry.

Dofas joined the crowd, celebrating with them.

On the platform, only the old nobleman and Tesrio, the Tiger Party Triarch, remained.

The old nobleman leaned back in his chair and whispered, "Is the mastermind behind the fire gone?"

"Yes," Tesrio replied, enjoying a massage from a female slave, his eyes half-closed. "He heard where the Emperor went and took a boat to chase after him."

"Sigh, being targeted by the Dragonlord family means Volantis will never know peace," the old nobleman sighed, full of worry.

He was an old man, only wanting to secure the right to make money without risking his life.

Tesrio opened his eyes, disdain evident. "Volantis was lost because of people like you. Now, with the support of the two Dragonlords, what is there to fear?"

His thoughts were simple.

Volantis had the potential to conquer other free trade city-states, but it lacked an opportunity and a strong ally.

Now, both the opportunity and the allies had come.

...

The Smoking Sea.

The three-masted schooner drifted aimlessly, its deck crowded with battle-hardened mercenaries.

Rhaegar stood at the center, his hand absently rubbing the hilt of his Dragon Claw sword.

A deep, mournful horn sounded across the chaotic sea, its eerie, orderly tone lending a sense of solemnity to the moment.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed, locking onto the direction of the horn's source—somewhere behind the sailboat.

Through the haze, a massive shape emerged, cutting through the boiling water and drawing closer.

"It's a ship! A warship!" cried a sharp-eyed sailor in panic.

Ignoring the rising clamor, Rhaegar focused on the approaching vessel, barely discernible in the dim, smoky environment.

"An exploration team?" he speculated, noting the warship's approach from the Smoking Sea's entrance.

After a moment's consideration, he ordered, "Raise the flag and sound the horn!"

"Yes, my lord."

Several mercenaries sprang into action, hoisting the three-headed red dragon flag of House Targaryen and blowing a warning horn.

In the perilous Smoking Sea, encounters often ended in violence, but Rhaegar hoped to avoid conflict.

However, the warship continued its relentless approach, seemingly oblivious to their signals.

Rhaegar noted the warship lowering its own horn, adopting an unmistakably aggressive stance.

"Fools," he muttered, "they have no idea what they're dealing with."

He mentally communicated with Cannibal, preparing to unleash dragonfire upon the intruding vessel.

The warship loomed closer, its sailors' frantic horn blasts now audible.

Cannibal hovered above, ready to unleash destruction.

As the ship broke through the haze, its full form came into view, and Rhaegar's eyes widened in shock.

The warship was a wreck, its hull tattered and torn, marked by knife and axe scratches. Its filthy canvas flapped in the wind, riddled with holes.

The decaying deck was swarming with eerie figures—men with scarlet eyes fixed on the sailboat.

These creatures, covered in cracked, gray dead skin, moved with stiff, twisted limbs and lifeless faces.

Rhaegar recognized them instantly: Stone Folk.

"Get away from the sailboat immediately!" he shouted, his voice sharp with urgency.

The schooner already carried a few Gray Scale patients awaiting banishment. If these Stone men boarded, none of the crew would survive.

"Roar..."

Cannibal roared, swooping down with a burst of green dragonfire.

Boom...

The warship was engulfed in flames, the sticky dragonfire quickly spreading over its hull.

The boat of Stone men was consumed by dragonfire, their roars turning into mournful wails as they struggled in the green flames. These irrational creatures, now reduced to primal fear, thrashed wildly.

"Release the arrows! Release the arrows!" Robert shouted, his voice filled with urgency as he urged the mercenaries to draw their bows.

Arrows flew as the tattered warship, teeming with Stone men, began to burn. Those not immediately consumed by the fire leapt into the boiling sea, driven by a desperate instinct to survive.

The sea bubbled and roiled as Stone men fell into the water, floundering and roaring in panic. Mercenaries drew their bows, firing arrows into the writhing mass.

Cannibal circled above, unleashing dragonfire on the broken warship, determined to reduce it to ashes.

"Save your arrows, evacuate the ship!" Rhaegar commanded, sensing the need for a swift retreat. The sudden appearance of a warship laden with Stone men was too unsettling.

At Rhaegar's command, the schooner quickly turned and set a new course. Stone men survivors swam after the sailboat, some managing to cling to the hull, their hideous forms clawing and roaring as they tried to climb aboard.

Mercenaries lined the sides, dispatching the creatures with point-blank shots. Slowly, the schooner sailed away, leaving the boiling waters behind.

The immediate danger passed, and the tension aboard the ship eased. Rhaegar looked up, surprised to see the sky clearing, the sun breaking through.

Turning back, he saw the haze of the Smoking Sea still hanging in the distance.

Robert approached with a chart, excitement in his voice. "My lord, we've entered a safe zone. The Smoking Sea abnormal distribution is scattered here."

The Smoking Sea, once part of a continental collapse, had areas of relative calm where the volcanic activity was less intense. In these zones, the haze would lift, and the sea would be more serene.

Rhaegar sighed in relief, a smile tugging at his lips. Encountering the Stone men had shaken him a little, but now they were in safer waters.

As they sailed further, the outline of land appeared on the horizon. Beaches, hillsides, and patches of greenery came into view, signaling their approach to their destination.