

G.O Thrones 281

Chapter 281: Strange Ruins Everywhere

The Smoking Sea

The three-masted schooner rocked violently as the Cannibal swooped overhead, its wings creating a gale that rattled the sails. Rhaegar stumbled, barely maintaining his balance.

"What's wrong, Cannibal?" Rhaegar muttered, watching the dragon's agitated circling. Cannibal had been unusually tense since they entered the Smoking Sea, and its behavior grew more erratic after the stone mans attack.

The dragon roared again, its wings flapping angrily as it vented its frustration. Rhaegar's face grew grim. "Dock the ship!" he ordered, eyeing the distant shore. The Smoking Sea was a place of constant danger, and the chance for rest was welcome.

"Yes, my lord," came the weary response from the sailors and mercenaries. The volcanic eruption and stone men assault had left them physically and mentally exhausted.

Rhaegar studied the map Robert handed him. They had deviated slightly from their course during the escape, but the markings showed that they were closer to their destination.

After half a day of sailing, they finally reached land. The sailor anchored the ship near a reef, and several canoes were lowered into the sea.

Cannibal snorted, its breath hot and fishy. Rhaegar approached with open arms, soothing the dragon with a gentle touch. "It's okay, partner," he murmured, rubbing Cannibal's scales.

The dragon slowly calmed down, his body relaxing in the warm sunlight. "The Smoking Sea bothers you, doesn't it?" Rhaegar asked quietly.

Cannibal growled lowly, its eyes flashing with disgust. "I understand. Just hold on for two more days," Rhaegar said, recalling similar behavior when he had first tamed the dragon near the toxic swamp.

Satisfied that Cannibal was settling down, Rhaegar turned his attention to the beach. Mercenaries were pushing back a group of sailors infected with greyscale. Recognizing them as patients from the smuggling ship, Rhaegar ordered, "Drive them away. This land is already a gift to them."

The mercenaries complied, herding the greyscale patients to a hillside behind the beach. Rhaegar instructed, "Rest here for the night. We depart tomorrow."

"Yes, my lord," the men replied, grateful for the rest.

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At noon the next day, the sun shone brightly in a clear azure sky.

A pitch-black dragon soared above the sea, its hind legs clutching a large fish, which it tossed into its mouth with a snap of its jaws. Behind the dragon, a three-masted sailing ship slowly entered a narrow tributary.

On deck, Rhaegar gripped the boom and closed his eyes, letting the sea breeze wash over him.

After a while, Robert's excited voice broke the silence. "My lord, the ruins of the Stone Bridge are in sight!"

Rhaegar opened his eyes and looked ahead. The tributary narrowed, green ridges lining the north and south banks. In the distance, a mass of boulder-strewn ruins came into view.

The ruins were vast, stretching across the sea for more than ten miles. Occasionally, remnants of piers jutted out of the water, though the bridge itself had long since collapsed. The decaying structures on both sides of the river hinted at a once-great past.

Seeing the iconic ruins, Rhaegar's spirits lifted. "Increase our speed. We're almost there."

Robert, equally excited, shouted orders to the helmsman and crew. The ship picked up speed, gliding along the coast of the stone bridge ruins.

As they sailed, a mist began to cover the sea, obscuring their view. Despite the clear sky, Rhaegar sniffed the air and frowned. The mist carried a strong sulfuric odor, mingled with a faint stench. Reflected in the firelight, fine particles could be seen swirling in the mist.

"Toxic minerals left over from the volcanic eruption," Rhaegar muttered, taking a deep breath. His lungs felt heavy and tight.

He sensed that the mist might be a reason for the dragon's restlessness. The miasma of the Smoking Sea contained substances that disturbed the dragon.

"Prince, we are approaching an unusual jumble of rocks. It may be our destination," Robert said, pulling out a map and swallowing his excitement.

Reaching their destination meant they were close to returning to the ship. Robert could almost taste the large sum of gold that awaited him, enough to ensure a life of comfort and leisure.

"Dock the ship and leave some men to guard it," Rhaegar ordered, his eyes fixed on the distant pile of rocks that could only be described as "magnificent."

The chaotic pile resembled a mountain of stones, with dark roots of walls peeking out from the rubble and rotting wood.

The ship docked along the shore, and Rhaegar led fifty mercenaries ashore to make their way toward the pile of rocks.

They soon found the entrance to the ruins, marked by earlier smugglers. It was a dark cave hidden in the center of the ruins, with only one corner visible. The ground around the mouth of the cave was covered with dirty footprints.

Rhaegar frowned slightly and selected a few of his best mercenaries. "You men, go down and scout the area."

"Yes, my lord," the mercenaries replied without hesitation, lighting torches and descending into the cave.

These were experienced men who valued gold more than their lives, and with Rhaegar and his dragon watching from the outside, they dared not refuse.

"Roar..."

Cannibal landed on the ground, its massive feet crushing the pile of rocks beneath him as it sniffed the air cautiously.

Rhaegar swept the cave entrance with his boots, scanning for any signs of recent activity. Moments later, a few torchlights flickered at the cave mouth, and a mercenary emerged, his forehead glistening with sweat. "My lord, there's a deep passage in the cave, and some strange things inside."

Rhaegar's mind raced. "Leave a group to guard the entrance. The rest follow me."

The mercenaries who had scouted the cave had reported oddities, but nothing overtly dangerous. It suggested something unusual, but not immediately life-threatening.

With a firm leap, Rhaegar entered the dark cavern, the mercenaries leading the way. As they ventured deeper, the tunnel gradually widened, and unlike typical underground caves, it was dry, not cold or damp.

Half an hour later, they encountered the first signs of strangeness.

Crack—

A mercenary stepped on a bone, looking down to find a human skeleton clad in ancient armor. There were many such skeletons, scattered across the floor.

"My lord," a mercenary said, handing Rhaegar a piece of breastplate he had retrieved.

Rhaegar held up a torch, illuminating the breastplate. Carved on the left chest was the insignia of a roaring lion.

"Lannister?" Rhaegar murmured, recognizing the emblem instantly. Checking the other skeletons confirmed it: they all bore the Lannister crest.

Robert examined one bone and remarked, "My Lord, these bones crumble at the slightest touch. They must be very old."

Rhaegar's mind drifted to some ancient Lannister legend, but he shook it off. "Let's move on."

"Look, My Lord, it's that thing!" The mercenary scout pointed to a corner of the tunnel, his voice urgent.

Rhaegar turned to see several different remains, covered in the telltale wounds of grayscale. Their joints were twisted, and foul blood had seeped into the ground.

"The bodies of Stone Men, and they're fresh!" Rhaegar's interest was piqued as he hurried forward to investigate.

Each of the stone men was skeletal and emaciated, their eyes wide open in death. Dirty blood spurted from their mouths, and their bodies bore fatal wounds to the chest, neck, and skull - clean, round holes that seemed too precise for a spear.

"This is not spear work," Rhaegar remarked, his eyes narrowing.

As a skilled spearman, he knew what spear wounds looked like. These wounds were different - smooth, large, as if pierced by something unnatural. He'd seen similar wounds before, inflicted by the shadow creatures of the Shadowbinders, who attacked with tentacle-like appendages that pierced their victims.

Alarmed, Rhaegar ordered, "Keep all the torches burning and light the tunnel as much as possible! The bodies of the stone men were fresh, their blood barely dry. The tunnel might harbor unknown creatures, perhaps shadow creatures. Fire would be their best defense against whatever lay ahead.

Chapter 282: Digging Up Dragon Eggs

King's Landing

Red Keep, King's Bedchamber

"Cough, cough, cough..."

Viserys lay on his bed, his face gaunt and pale, each cough wracking his frail body.

Grand Maester Mellos stood nearby, speaking in a measured tone. "Your Grace, you have contracted a cold. Rest is imperative."

"I can't afford to rest; there's too much to be done." Viserys struggled to suppress another coughing fit, his breath coming in labored gasps. "How are the preparations for the tournament? The nobles in the North must be notified. I want an event that will be remembered throughout the seven kingdoms!"

The tournament was approaching quickly, and Viserys was determined to make it an unprecedented spectacle for his eldest son's rite of passage.

"With all due respect, Your Grace, you should leave these matters to the Queen and the Princess," Mellos suggested gently.

"No! They are women; they cannot grasp the significance of a tournament," Viserys retorted, dismissing the idea without hesitation.

Mellos sighed and shook his head. "Even so, Your Grace, you must take care of your health. I doubt the prince would want you burdened by mundane concerns."

Viserys forced a smile through his discomfort, his thoughts drifting. "Rhaenyra and the girls are back. But Rhaegar... he went to Volantis. What is taking him so long?"

Rhaenyra had mentioned that Rhaegar's trip to Volantis was for diplomatic purposes. It had been over two weeks with no word from him, and Viserys couldn't help but worry.

"The people of Volantis are known for their hospitality," Mellos said, his tone noncommittal. "The prince is likely being treated with great warmth."

Viserys chuckled weakly. "With the Cannibal at his command, no one would dare treat him otherwise."

He had heard the tales of his eldest son's exploits in the Riverlands and wanted to discuss more, but another bout of coughing seized him, leaving him breathless and red-faced.

"Ahem, I'll take the medicine later. You may leave now," Viserys managed, waving a hand to dismiss the Grand Maester.

Satisfied that the king's condition was stable, Mellos gathered his belongings and quietly left the chambers.

The door closed with a thud, and the sound of coughing echoed from within the chambers. Mellos didn't return to his attic for rest. Instead, he walked to the open-air promenade of the Red Keep.

Rhaenyra, dressed in a red gown, sat on a bench, gazing into the distance. At the sound of footsteps, she returned to her senses, clutching a piece of letter paper in her hand.

"Princess," Mellos greeted with a respectful bow.

"Thank you, Grand Maester," Rhaenyra responded with a smile.

"The king's health is stable, but he mustn't overexert himself. You need to advise him and share his burdens appropriately," Mellos urged.

"I will," Rhaenyra promised, then hesitated. "Regarding Rhaegar's news, do not inform my father yet."

Rhaegar's personal letter had arrived from Volantis the previous day. With Viserys preoccupied with tournament preparations, Mellos had delivered it to Rhaenyra instead. The letter had left her both anxious and annoyed; the Smoking Sea was no place for a Targaryen to venture. Given her father's fragile health, she wanted to keep this matter secret to avoid additional stress.

Mellos understood her concern and didn't object outright. "The prince wrote that he would return within a month, but the situation is unpredictable," he murmured.

As a Grand Maester, he knew well the perils of the Smoking Sea. History recorded that even a powerful Dragonlord of the Freehold, with a vast army and a giant dragon, had vanished without a trace after entering those cursed waters. Rhaegar's journey carried immense risks.

Rhaenyra's eyes dropped as she said solemnly, "Rhaegar is not impulsive. He mentioned in his letter that he has maps and the location of the ruins. He will return in time."

"I hope so. Legendary people often have legendary experiences," Mellos remarked, his expression stoic.

Since the Conquest, few had achieved true legendary status. Rhaegar's exploits - taming the King of the Wild Dragons, burning the Three Daughters, reigning briefly as Emperor - were already the stuff of legend for one so young.

Rhaenyra sighed, rubbing her forehead, and signaled for Mellos to leave. "I'll keep it a secret," he promised and departed quietly.

"Rhaegar, you must return soon," Rhaenyra murmured, feeling a deep sense of foreboding. King's Landing was rife with intrigue, and secrets couldn't be kept for long. After her recent trip to Storm's End, she sensed a brewing storm in the court. She needed Rhaegar to quell it.

Meanwhile, Mellos reached the door of the queen's chambers. He knocked softly.

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Smoking Sea, Underground Ruins

Rhaegar and his party advanced through the dark tunnels, their path lit by dozens of torches. Soon the sound of rushing water reached their ears.

"Is there a water source?" Rhaegar cocked his head, listening intently.

Robert whispered, "My lord, there are green plants on the bank. There may be an underground stream."

"Makes sense. Let's investigate."

Leading the way, Rhaegar led the group through the dimly lit tunnel. Eventually, a winding, dark river appeared before them.

Rhaegar's gaze bypassed the slightly turbulent river, focusing instead on the jagged black rocks along its banks. He knelt and touched one of the rocks, feeling its brittle texture. Crushing some of the fragments between his fingers, he sniffed them and detected a sulfurous odor.

Looking around, Rhaegar noticed that the area around the dark river, including the nearby cave walls, was covered with similar rocks. "This is gray rock from dried magma. There must have been underground lava flows here once."

"What about the dark river?" Robert asked, perplexed.

Rhaegar stood and dusted his hands. "The Doom probably altered the crust, creating this dark river. The cataclysm probably changed the flow of water underground."

Otherwise, there wouldn't be tuff in the crypts and the tunnels wouldn't be so dry.

With renewed purpose, the group continued downstream along the dark river. According to the information from the smuggler's ship, the broken monolith was at the end of the tunnel. The smugglers had been attacked by the stone men and had fled, leaving the relics unexplored.

As they walked, the crypt gradually widened. The dark stream widened, flowing through channels littered with gray rock. The space opened up, a stark contrast to the claustrophobic tunnels of the past.

Rhaegar observed his surroundings closely, feeling a sense of familiarity. The crypt reminded him of the Dragonmont on Dragonstone and the underground beneath the Dragonpit.

Suddenly, a massive claw mark appeared on the cave wall. Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he compared it to the Cannibal's claw marks in his memory.

"That's a dragon's claw mark."

Silently contemplating, Rhaegar suspected the relic might have originally been a dragon cave of the Belaerys family. The claw marks on the cave wall were unmistakably made by a dragon, though they were not as large as the Cannibal's. They seemed to be from an adult dragon of a size similar to the Red Queen Meleys.

Caraxes, known for its unique breed with small hind feet and membranous wings, couldn't have left such deep marks.

Moments later, the group rounded a corner, moving cautiously and quietly. The sound of clattering stones reached their ears, lifting Rhaegar's spirits. He signaled the mercenaries with a subtle nod.

Understanding his intent, the mercenaries slowed their movements and quietly dispersed to either side of the corner, cutlasses at the ready.

Rhaegar crept closer to the corner, hiding his torch behind him, and peered inside. His heightened senses allowed him to see in the dim light, a result of his extensive training and powerful mental energy.

Beyond the corner was an empty crypt. The chert was gone, replaced by piles of dark, lumpy matter. Rhaegar recognized it immediately as dried dragon droppings. His experience repairing Harrenhal and handling dragon waste from Dragonstone and King's Landing made him certain of its nature. Clearly, the dung here was very old.

His attention was drawn to a corner where the tapping was coming from. A flicker of firelight illuminated a dim area, revealing several slender figures clad in black robes with shaved heads. They wore masks with indecipherable designs.

One of the black-robed figures raised an arm and muttered incantations. A long, writhing shadow serpent was wrapped around the arm, its grotesque head repeatedly striking the aged dragon dung, tearing it apart as if searching for something.

"My lord, they seem to be Shadowbinders from Asshai, using sorcery to manipulate shadows," Robert whispered, his voice trembling.

"Quiet, I recognize them," Rhaegar replied, his face set in a steely expression. He motioned to the mercenaries on either side.

The Shadowbinders, though formidable, were not invincible. Rhaegar had faced them before, most notably during the bloody clashes on the Crab Claw Peninsula.

The mercenaries drew their bows and aimed at the flickering firelight.

"Release!" Rhaegar commanded.

Arrows flew through the air, eliciting a few muffled screams from within the crypt. Rhaegar paid no heed to the cries and continued, "Release again!"

Human or not, anyone caught in the hail of arrows would find no mercy. The arrows rained down until the mercenaries' quivers were empty. The torches within the crypt had been extinguished in the assault, plunging the area into darkness.

"Follow me!"

At Rhaegar's command, he drew his Dragon Claw, flames instantly spreading across the blade and illuminating the cavern. As a Pyromancer, he had a natural advantage over the Shadowbinders.

The mercenaries surged forward, torches held high. Several of the black-robed figures lay motionless, their bodies riddled with arrows, their limbs twitching involuntarily.

Rhaegar approached the fallen, noting the painted masks each wore. They were indeed Shadowbinders.

One of the fallen Shadowbinders, still alive, gasped and glared at Rhaegar with burning eyes.

"I... curse..."

Before he could finish, Rhaegar's sword descended and severed his head. The severed head rolled to the ground and Rhaegar, not satisfied, stabbed both the head and the body repeatedly, reducing them to ashes with his flaming sword.

"Curse me? You think you're the God of Death?" Rhaegar sneered, his Dragon Claw blazing and lighting up half the cave.

"My lord, it appears to be a dragon egg," Robert exclaimed, his eyes wide with excitement. He crouched in the pile of dragon droppings disturbed by the shadow serpent and held up a grayish dragon egg.

Rhaegar turned his attention to the egg, his interest piqued.

Suddenly, a wounded Shadowbinder, pierced by several arrows, lunged at Rhaegar with a low roar. He brandished a conical dagger in his hand, aiming for Rhaegar's back.

Rhaegar's eyes stayed cold and focused. Without turning, he drew his sword and thrust it backward, the blade finding its mark with a sickening squeal.

The Shadowbinder's advance halted abruptly as the Dragon Claw pierced his heart. Disbelief filled his eyes as he crumpled to the ground, collapsing into the dragon dung.

Chapter 283: Ancient Dragon Remains

"Sift through the bodies carefully and burn them evenly with fire," Rhaegar ordered, his expression neutral as he flicked the blood from his sword.

The mercenaries moved quickly, stripping the Shadowbinders of their masks and black robes with practiced efficiency.

"My lord, there are so many dragon eggs here!" Robert exclaimed, excitedly sifting through the pile of dragon droppings.

Rhaegar picked up a grayish dragon egg and examined it, sighing, "These are dead eggs, petrified."

He tapped the egg, noting the dull, muffled sound instead of the crisp ring of a viable dragon egg. Robert's enthusiasm waned as he continued to unearth five fossilized dragon eggs, each one lifeless.

Rhaegar compared them to the dragon eggs on Dragonstone Island, confirming that this relic was indeed one of the Belaerys' dragon lairs. As he pondered its significance, Robert suddenly shouted, "My Lord, there's a vacancy here! A dragon egg is missing from the dragon droppings!"

Rhaegar's heart tightened. "What's going on?"

Robert examined the aged dragon droppings and counted six craters where eggs should have been. "One, two... There's one missing," he said.

Rhaegar's mind raced. "The Shadowbinders must have accomplices."

"My lord, we found a flower!" a mercenary reported hesitantly.

"Search more carefully for lurking dragon eggs," Rhaegar ordered, storing the five petrified dragon eggs in his space bracelet before turning to the mercenaries.

Dragons were the cornerstone of House Targaryen's power, and even petrified dragon eggs were too valuable to leave behind.

As he approached the pile of Shadowbinder corpses, the mercenaries formed a circle and began burning the bodies with their torches. One squad leader held up a strange blue, wilted flower.

The flower had seven petals, purple stamens, and a soft stem wrapped in dark leaves. "Orchid?" Rhaegar mused, recognizing the plant.

The squad leader hesitated. "If I'm not mistaken, it should be the Soul Restoring Orchid, which can fetch a high price in Volantis."

Rhaegar's eyes brightened slightly at the news. Carefully taking the Soul Restoring Orchid, he smiled. "Well done. This many flowers will bring you wealth."

He lowered his head and sniffed the nearly withered orchid. Its light, refreshing scent was invigorating, reminiscent of the scented powder of Daella.

Hearing the mention of money, the junior captain eagerly pulled a piece of parchment from the Shadowbinders' black robes and said excitedly, "My Lord, would you look at this and see if it is useful?"

"You are resourceful," Rhaegar praised, taking the yellowed parchment and examining it for a few moments.

"My Lord, what do you think?" the junior captain asked expectantly.

Rhaegar read the small, intricate characters on the parchment twice and frowned. "It's neither Common Tongue nor Valyrian. I can't make it out."

He was familiar with several widespread scripts, but the complex symbols on the parchment were unfamiliar.

Robert stepped forward, scratching his head. "My lord, this looks like the ancient language of Yi Ti."

"You recognize it?" Rhaegar asked, surprised at the old sailor's knowledge.

"No, no, I don't even recognize native Valyrian," Robert admitted sheepishly. "But one of my former captains was from Yi Ti, and I saw similar symbols on his ship."

"Never mind. We'll find someone to translate it when we get out," Rhaegar decided, putting the Soul Restoring Orchid and the parchment away.

The Soul Restoring Orchid was a precious treasure that could nourish depleted spiritual energy, making it valuable to him and his family.

After personally burning the bodies of the Shadowbinders, Rhaegar ordered his men to search the cave again. Finding nothing more, they prepared to leave.

As they walked along the dimly lit, dark river, Robert asked, "Sir, where shall we go next?"

Having dealt with the immediate threat of the Shadowbinders and found the dragon eggs, Robert was still reeling from the experience.

. Rhaegar listened to the rushing water and thought rationally. "The caves at the end of the lower river have already been explored. Let's follow the dark river upstream."

He suspected that there were other accomplices in the ruins besides the dead Shadowbinders. Besides, he was here to uncover the lost legacies of the Belaerys family, and a few fossilized dragon eggs weren't worth the risks they'd taken.

As they made their way upstream, they passed by the tunnels that led in and out of the ruins, continuing to explore the dimly lit underground. The elevation increased, making the current more turbulent. After about an hour, the gray rock beneath their feet disappeared, replaced by broken stone slabs.

The firelight illuminated a crushed and deformed open space with cracked slabs on all four walls. The sudden change caught everyone's attention and alarmed them.

Rhaegar's mind raced as he surveyed the area. "Downstream is the pit of the Dragon Nest. Upstream should be the main body of it."

Considering the structure of the Dragonpit and the Dragon's Nest, he hypothesized that this Dragonpit was similar before it was destroyed. From the pile of rocks outside, he estimated it was about the same size as the Dragonpit in King's Landing.

"This Dragonpit likely belonged to the Belaerys family," Rhaegar thought, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the area. "It's unlikely that something important would be hidden in an unimportant part of the Dragonpit."

He knew that if there were significant treasures or legacies of the Belaerys family, they would be found in the heart of the Dragonpit.

Plop-

The sound of splashing water broke the silence, stirring the dark current.

Rhaegar's eyes darted to the source and he whispered urgently, "Stay alert!"

A mad roar echoed through the cave as a figure leapt from the dark river and splashed toward the shore.

"It's the Stone man! Prepare to attack!" Rhaegar shouted as he recognized the hideous silhouette.

Splash, splash, splash...

More sounds of falling water followed, indicating the presence of numerous Stone men emerging from unknown underwater caverns and swarming over the ruins.

These creatures, with no apparent weaknesses, crawled beast-like on hands and knees, their fierce eyes fixed on the living as they pounced with teeth and claws.

"Squad one, move up to block! Rotate back!" the squad leader ordered, trying to keep order as the mercenaries formed up.

Ten men formed a line along the riverbank, their curved swords slashing fiercely to keep the Stone men from coming ashore and to ensure that the main group could retreat.

"Grab what you can and go! Don't get bogged down!" Rhaegar urged, leading the mercenaries upstream.

No one wanted a protracted battle with the unintelligent, contagious stone men.

The stone-paved tunnel narrowed, evidence of the room's tragic collapse under pressure.

Moments later, two dark holes appeared ahead.

"My Lord, which way?" the commander asked, panic in his voice.

Rhaegar's eyes widened and his breath quickened as he stared at the two cave entrances.

Behind them, dozens of Stone men pursued relentlessly, roaring and clawing at the mercenaries holding the line, tearing senselessly.

"Which entrance?" Rhaegar muttered, knowing he had to decide quickly.

Based on the layout of dragon caves, the two paths likely led to different parts of the upper cave, perhaps to the chaotic pile of rocks outside the ruins. Each path could represent a different area of the Dragonpit—maybe a dragon's lair or a long-buried exit.

His eyes settled on the right entrance near the dark river, noting a large, gaping hole that appeared to have been smashed open. The edges of the gap were scorched black, as if by fire.

"This way!" Rhaegar decided.

Rhaegar pointed to the hole on the right and charged forward, torch in hand. He had a theory about the scorched blackness around the edges of the rift.

It wasn't caused by dragon flames or molten lava, but by the friction of dragon scales scraping the rock as they fled. The scales of adult dragons were as hard as iron, capable of generating high temperatures under violent impact.

Rhaegar had seen the claw marks of an adult dragon before, and he believed that this gaping hole was its work as well.

During the Doom, the dragon, trapped in the Dragonpit, fought to escape, driven by sheer survival instinct. The route it took likely led to the usual exit used for flight.

Whether the exit still existed or not didn't matter to Rhaegar. He wanted to follow the dragon's path, hoping it would lead to an opportunity.

"Quickly! Block the entrance!" he ordered.

The group hurried through the hole on the right and the commander ordered the remaining mercenaries to block the entrance with rubble, ignoring the screams and growls from outside.

"Let us in!" "Roar!"

As the rubble piled up, muffling the sounds of battle, Rhaegar glanced back, but did not stop. The mercenaries blocking the stone men were already infected with grayscale. It was better they died quickly now than slowly from the disease.

"Keep moving! The cave isn't that deep!" Rhaegar urged, touching the damp stone slabs.

Soon the narrow passage opened into a massive cave filled with debris.

Water trickled from cracks in the rocks above, flowing into a deep spring that joined the dark river. Ignoring the strange landscape, Rhaegar's eyes were drawn to a chaotic pile of rocks that formed a small mountain.

Beneath the rubble and dirt lay the bleached bones of a massive creature - curved dragon horns, sharp claws, broken wings.

Rhaegar gasped, lost in thought. "The dragon of House Belaerys!"

Chapter 284: Binding Spell

Staring blankly at the remains of the dragon, Rhaegar felt a wave of disappointment wash over him. "It didn't escape; it died," he murmured. The loss weighed heavily on him, as he cherished the life of every dragon. This one hadn't perished in glorious battle or peacefully at the end of its life, but had instead been trapped and crushed in the collapse of the Dragonpit. Such an ignoble end felt unworthy of any adult dragon in Rhaegar's eyes.

"My lord, there's another passage in the corner of the cave," an alert mercenary reported.

Rhaegar descended from the giant dragon's remains, his expression flat. "Got it. Scout it out and report back."

The dragon's remains lay near a deep pool, its pitch-black tail bones trailing into the water. Rhaegar nimbly climbed up the rubble, coming face to face with the dragon's skull, its fangs interlocked in a final grimace. This dragon, in life, might have resembled Vermithor or Meleys, with a crown of dense horns and bone spurs protruding from its cervical vertebrae.

Rhaegar reached out and touched the hideous skull, hoping to trigger some sort of explorer's quest. He waited, but no familiar beep sounded in his ears. Disappointed, he withdrew his hand. A dragon's remains without reputation seemed insufficient to unlock relic exploration.

"Pity," Rhaegar muttered, comparing the size of the dragon's head with his hands. If circumstances allowed, he would have liked to cut off the cervical vertebrae and bring the dragon's head back to King's Landing for his collection. The skull was enormous, as large as a small bedroom, and would require seven or eight people to encircle it fully.

Moments later, the mercenary who had scouted ahead returned in haste. "My lord, I found a black-robed man!" he exclaimed eagerly.

Rhaegar abandoned his thoughts of taking the dragon's head and asked urgently, "Are you sure it's a Shadowbinder?"

"Seems so. Cloaked in black robes and wearing a lacquered red mask," the mercenary replied, gulping nervously.

"Lead the way. No Shadowbinders can be spared," Rhaegar ordered, drawing the Dragon Claw sword at his waist. Shadowbinders of Asshai, always traveled with mysterious purpose.

Their presence in these ruins was no coincidence—it involved the Dragonlord's legacy, and outsiders could not be allowed to uncover its secrets.

Rhaegar led the way, over thirty mercenaries following close behind with torches. They had already lost a dozen men to a round of attacks by the Stone men. As they entered the passageway within the stone wall, the cave fell into another deathly silence.

Suddenly, the deep pool rippled, creating a series of waves that cast a shadow over the entire pool, adding another layer of ominous tension to the scene.

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On the other side, Rhaegar advanced through the passageway, the faint sound of rushing water echoing in his ears. "There's a dark river at the end," he thought silently.

After a few more steps, a dim light appeared ahead. He signaled the mercenaries to slow down, their footsteps quieting. As they reached the edge of the passageway, a burst of unintelligible, almost demonic whispers filled the air.

Outside the passage lay a stone palace reminiscent of the Dragonpit hall. The palace walls had been crushed and deformed by external forces, with intricate patterns barely visible beneath the dust. Several stone pillars supported the structure, though half were broken, and the collapsed roof revealed patches of soil.

The floor was cracked down the center, forming a deep chasm leading to the shattered wall's rear, where the sound of flowing water came from a tributary of the dark river.

A slim figure in black robes and a red-painted mask stood with his back to the passageway, facing an intact stone wall. He muttered odd incantations under his breath.

Rhaegar ignored the strange sounds, focusing instead on the Shadowbinder's withered hands raised above his head. In one hand, he held a green dragon egg, smeared with dragon dung; in the other, a yellowed parchment book lay open.

As the Shadowbinder chanted, the parchment stirred as if blown by an unseen wind, and a wisp of black smoke emerged, enveloping the stone wall. "There's definitely something here," Rhaegar thought, his eyes flicking between the dragon egg and the wall.

From his distance, he couldn't discern many details about the dragon egg, which looked much like the fossilized eggs he had excavated earlier. The carvings on the stone wall, however, shocked him deeply. The pattern began with fourteen flames, followed by a group of shepherds and a dragon.

The carvings, divided into sections by cuts in the stone, depicted history in a blend of images and High Valyrian text.

Rhaegar could clearly read the top few words: "Belaerys... Dragon Taming... Binding Spell..."

Thoughts raced through Rhaegar's mind as a glint of realization flashed in his eyes. During his youth, educated by the maesters of the Citadel, he had encountered many speculations about ancient Valyria, particularly the Dragonlords' methods for taming dragons.

The maesters deduced from sparse ancient texts that the Dragonlords possessed some form of magic, referred to in the texts as the "binding spell," which compelled dragons to obey their commands.

Rhaegar had delved into the knowledge from the "Belaerys" family's ancient books, which hinted at the existence of a "dragon's horn" and vaguely referenced the "binding spell."

The Belaerys family was a prominent Dragonlord house, known for their mastery of powerful magical spells and artifacts. The Targaryens, however, had never reached such heights of power.

Taking a deep breath, Rhaegar suppressed his excitement and resolved, "Whether true or not, I must obtain the binding spell." The Targaryen dragons were not yet numerous or powerful enough to subdue Westeros and Essos. With the binding spell, the Targaryens could potentially revive the glory of a top Dragonlord family.

"Do we have any arrows left?" Rhaegar whispered.

The commander behind him hastily handed over two arrows, saying, "My lord, we've used most of our arrows. These are the only ones left."

Rhaegar accepted them, confident. "It's enough," he said. Proficient in swordsmanship, spearmanship, and archery, Rhaegar knew he could make the shots count.

Moving stealthily, he nocked an arrow and drew his longbow, aiming at the defenseless Shadowbinder. A direct confrontation was unwise; striking from behind was the best strategy.

Crunch...

The drawing of the bow made a strange sound, causing the Shadowbinder to turn violently. Behind his red-painted mask, he shouted, "Who's there?"

Whoosh-

The bowstring released and the iron-tipped arrow shot out with deadly speed. The Shadowbinder couldn't react in time and took the arrow right in the chest, the force throwing him against the stone wall.

"Kill him!" Rhaegar ordered, his voice cold. He drew his remaining arrow and fired.

The mercenaries rushed forward, swords drawn, toward the Shadowbinder pinned against the wall.

Ahem...

The Shadowbinder slumped to the ground, blood seeping from beneath his mask, his eyes filled with resentment. "The Lord of Light will not forgive you. You all deserve to die," he spat, smearing the blood on his mask.

A second arrow flew toward the Shadowbinder's head. But just as it was about to strike, the rope holding the mask snapped. Shadows rose from the ground, wrapped around the mask, and lifted it into the air.

The next moment, the shadow transformed into a humanoid figure, complete with a red mask.

Clang-

The Shadow drew a heavy greatsword from the Shadowbinder's grasp and sliced through the arrow.

"An abomination!"

"Beware, it's Shadow Sorcery!"

The mercenaries stopped, fear gripping them. Magic had been a rarity since the Doom, and this sudden appearance of evil sorcery stunned them.

"Don't run!" Rhaegar shouted, dropping his longbow and stepping forward. He ignited his sword by rubbing it against a torch, flames enveloping the blade. "Kill the Shadowbinder!"

Inspired by their leader's bravery, the mercenaries rallied, brandishing their swords and surrounding the shadow and its master. The Shadowbinder, weakened by summoning the shadow, cowered under his robes.

"Kill him!" roared the commander, charging.

Suddenly, the shadow moved with uncanny speed, slicing through the commander's neck. Blood sprayed as his head fell.

The shadow continued its deadly dance, cutting down mercenaries who dared approach.

"Use your torches! The shadow fears fire!" Rhaegar shouted.

The mercenaries gathered, waving their torches. The shadow recoiled, shielding its mask with its greatsword.

"Where do you think you're going?" Rhaegar bellowed, rushing in with his flaming sword. He slashed at the shadow, and it stiffened under the firelight.

Pff—

Rhaegar's blade sliced through the shadow's waist, splitting it in two.

"Die!" he cried, stabbing the lacquered red mask. Flames erupted, consuming the mask and the shadow.

Sizzle...

The lacquered red mask burned to ashes, and the shadow melted into a puddle before evaporating.

Rhaegar sheathed his sword, his eyes cold. "Arrest the Shadowbinder. I will interrogate him personally."

"Yes, my lord," the mercenaries responded, dragging the Shadowbinder away.

The mercenaries hurried to capture the Shadowbinder, who had lost the ability to resist. Rhaegar's eyes fell on the heavy greatsword. Its blade was cold, adorned with water-like patterns, and the hilt, cast in gold, ended in a lion's head.

Chapter 285: Valyrian Steel Sword – Brightroar

"Valyrian steel?" Rhaegar muttered, planting Dragon Claw on the ground as he bent down to pick up the heavy sword.

The water ripple pattern on the blade was unmistakable—a hallmark of Valyrian steel. This sword's ability to slice through iron with ease meant he had stumbled upon a valuable treasure.

"The quest mission is activated. The target is the Valyrian Steel Sword - Brightroar," a system beep announced in his ears as soon as he touched the hilt.

Rhaegar's eyes widened in astonishment. "Brightroar?"

He had heard tales of Brightroar's legendary past. This Valyrian steel greatsword had once been the ancestral weapon of House Lannister.

Before Aegon's Conquest, Westeros was divided among seven warring kingdoms. A century before the Doom of Valyria, House Lannister purchased Brightroar at an immense cost. It was said the gold spent on the sword could have raised an army.

King Tommen II later led a fleet of golden ships on an expedition to the ruined Valyria, taking with him the famed Brightroar. The fleet vanished after resupplying at Volantis, never to be seen again. Despite numerous attempts to locate them, neither Tommen II nor Brightroar was ever found.

"Tsk, a long-lost Valyrian steel greatsword, now mine," Rhaegar mused, a smile curling his lips as he admired the sword.

He activated the system panel.

[Brightroar]

Exploration Progress: 0.3%

Sheathing the heavy sword, Rhaegar secured it with a rope and slung it over his back, ensuring that nothing would interrupt his exploration.

Thump...

He patted the sword, unable to suppress his grin. The Lannisters had long sought to reclaim Brightroar, hoping it would restore their family's former glory. But now, the sword belonged to him.

Rhaegar glanced at the lion's head carved into the hilt and mused, "I'll have the blacksmiths of Qohor reforge it."

Though Brightroar had once belonged to the Lannisters, it was now his.

And now, it bore the name Targaryen.

"My lord, there's something wrong with the Shadowbinder."

Two mercenaries approached, dragging the limp body of the Shadowbinder, their faces etched with fear.

Rhaegar's smile faded. "Let me see."

The Shadowbinder had taken an arrow to the chest, and his black robe was soaked with blood, which dripped steadily onto the floor. A mercenary, suppressing his revulsion, pulled back the hood, revealing the man's face.

Rhaegar recoiled slightly. The Shadowbinder's face was stripped of skin, exposing raw, bloody tissue beneath. His eye sockets held tethered, blood-covered eyeballs, which twitched grotesquely. Despite his horrific condition, the Shadowbinder was still alive, his throat emitting a ghastly, rasping sound as he drooled.

"My lord, he seems to have gone mad," the mercenary said hesitantly.

Rhaegar looked away after a moment, then ordered, "Give me the dragon egg and the parchment book."

The Shadowbinder was no longer of any use for interrogation. This grotesque state was likely the price of summoning the shadow. Such dark sorcery would undoubtedly come with a terrible curse.

The mercenaries dragged the incapacitated Shadowbinder away and handed over the green dragon egg and the parchment book.

Rhaegar's eyes gleamed as he held the dragon egg. He examined it closely, his mind racing.

"It's alive!" he thought, his heart pounding. "This dragon egg is still viable."

The egg was green, covered in scale patterns, and stained with dragon dung. Outwardly, it seemed no different from the fossilized eggs he had found earlier. But Rhaegar had touched many dragon eggs, and with his Pyromancer talent, he could sense its potential for hatching.

Blowing off the dragon dung, Rhaegar felt a surge of excitement. The Targaryens had plenty of dragon eggs, many unhatched and hidden on Dragonstone Island. However, this green egg from the Belaerys family, retrieved from the Smoking Sea, was special.

"Maybe it can hatch," he thought, determined to incubate it at high temperature back at the dragon's nest.

He carefully tore a piece of fabric from his coat, wrapped the egg, and tied it to his belt. An active dragon egg couldn't be stored in his space bracelet; he had to keep it with him.

Suppressing his excitement, Rhaegar turned his attention to the stone wall while leafing through the parchment book.

The walls were adorned with various patterns and inscriptions in High Valyrian. Rhaegar studied the designs, which depicted the rise of Valyria and the history of the Belaerys family. But the most valuable part was the text on the front stone wall.

"The Dragonpit ... The Art of Taming Dragons ... Flying ..."

Rhaegar translated the inscriptions on the stone wall with great care. He was certain now—this relic was indeed a Dragonpit of the Belaerys family.

According to the text, this Dragonpit was a private property of the Belaerys family in the Land of the Long Summer, used to temporarily house dragons. There were two significant magical elements associated with the Dragonpit.

The first was the broken stone tablet at the entrance of the ruins. This tablet was a magical monolith, inscribed with a spell to pacify the dragons and prevent agitation. The second was the stone wall before him, which did not possess inherent magic but recorded a "binding spell" specialized in taming dragons—or rather, a part of it.

This binding spell originated with the first families of dragonlords. The sages had used the Valyrian language and blood sorcery to create a spell that would better control dragons. The stone wall documented three crucial keywords of the binding spell, paired with various techniques for mastering dragons.

"Forbidden Magic Spell..." Rhaegar murmured, eyes gleaming with desire as he swept the dust from the stone wall. The three keywords were "flying," "dragon flame," and "forbidden," symbolizing the taming, commanding, and pacifying of dragons, respectively.

The Fly spell helped the tamer reach and tame the dragon. The Dragon Flame spell contained offensive techniques used in war and dragon combat. The Forbidding spell, which could also be translated as "Landing," "Silence," or "Submission," had the effect of calming the dragon, ensuring obedience, and fostering a bond.

The stone wall featured keywords for the "Forbidding" spell, essential for every Belaerys family member to skillfully use to guard their dragons. This was why the forbidden spell was engraved on the stone wall of the Dragonpit.

"Now it's mine," Rhaegar thought joyfully, committing the spell to memory.

He had risked exploring the Smoking Sea precisely for this inherited knowledge. With the forbidden magic spell, the Targaryens would better manage their dragons, avoiding the dangers of losing control.

After memorizing the spell, Rhaegar turned his attention to the parchment book. It was filled with a dense script and strange scribbles. On the last page, he found text in High Valyrian.

Recognizing it as a replication of the forbidden magic spells from the stone wall, he tore the page out and burned it to ashes with a torch. He then stowed the parchment book in his space bracelet, suspecting it contained other valuable knowledge.

"Too bad there wasn't time to figure out how the Shadowbinders found the ruins," Rhaegar thought, his eyes flashing with resolve. He instructed the mercenaries, "Kill the Shadowbinders and burn the bodies."

It didn't matter if he couldn't discover their methods; he needed to eliminate the threat completely. The Shadowbinder's magic was too dangerous to leave any traces.

"Yes, my lord," the mercenaries responded, swiftly slitting the Shadowbinder's throat and igniting the bodies with torches and kerosene.

Without a backward glance, Rhaegar drew the Valyrian steel sword Brightroar from his back, twirling it skillfully.

Dangkang--

The heavy sword struck the stone wall, scattering small pieces of carvings. Rhaegar's eyes were sharp and focused as he swung the sword tirelessly, erasing the parts of the text that described the binding spell. This dragon-taming magic was a secret the Targaryens alone should possess. There was no need to leave any trace for others to discover.

After several powerful swings, Rhaegar stopped. The Shadowbinder's body had burned to a crisp.

"Let us move. We have a hard fight ahead of us!"

Rhaegar secured Brightroar and left the great hall, carrying his torch and Dragon Claw. He hadn't forgotten the Stone men waiting outside.

...

The group exited the great hall, traversed the underground cavern, and re-entered the cave they had come from. No one noticed the thick, smoke-like substance seeping from the charred corpse of the Shadowbinder. It burrowed into the floor, moving like an inconspicuous mouse, and eventually dived into the pool of water in the underground cave.

Clatter...

The pool of water trembled violently, splashing in all directions like boiling water before calming down.

...

At the same time, Rhaegar's shout echoed through the ruins, "Charge, don't get stuck in the fight!"

His Dragon Claw wrapped in flames, Rhaegar led the charge. The stone men were quickly dispersed, roaring as they chased the mercenaries. A ray of light shone ahead—the exit was close.

Rhaegar licked his dry lips and shouted, "The exit is just around the corner!"

He stomped on the cave wall under the exit and, with a powerful leap, emerged from the ruins. The dimness vanished, replaced by the foggy sky.

Rhaegar looked up, gasping slightly. Soon, mercenaries followed, emerging from the cave as stone men roared and tugged below. After about a dozen mercenaries had escaped, the stone men blocked the hole, pouncing on the remaining laggards.

"Roar..."

A pitch-black dragon hovered in midair, landing slowly. It spewed ghostly green dragon flame into the cave entrance, where screams echoed.

"Ah..."

The dragon flame spread rapidly, enveloping the ruins in a ghostly green hue. Screams and hisses filled the air. The surrounding rocks melted into magma, sealing the cave entrance completely.

"Well done, Cannibal," Rhaegar said, sitting down heavily and letting out a long breath.

Chapter 286: Sea Monster Attack

"Roar..."

With the danger resolved, Cannibal raised its head proudly, wisps of dragon flame escaping its maw. Seeing this, Rhaegar chuckled, "Well done, partner."

As Rhaegar and his dragon shared a moment, the mercenaries who had narrowly escaped lay sprawled on the rocky ground, paralyzed with exhaustion.

"My lord, we should get moving."

Several mercenaries, vigilant and back-to-back, kept an eye on the entrance to the ruins while glancing at their weary comrades.

"Agreed." Rhaegar understood the urgency in their tone. He forced his tired body to move, distancing himself from the ruins.

Mercenaries had their own harsh rules of survival, and he didn't need to interfere. For a while, mournful wails echoed from the direction they had come.

When they regrouped on the shore, only seven or eight mercenaries remained, besides the few who had been keeping watch. One had an arm severed, another had lost his left calf. The rest were mostly unharmed, aside from their tattered leather armor.

Rhaegar remained silent as they paddled their canoes back to the sailboats waiting at sea. He knew that the mercenaries left behind were likely infected with greyscale. Those who had amputated limbs were only buying time, hoping the disease wouldn't spread further.

...

As the night wore on, the sea's winds and waves grew fiercer, the gusts carrying a mournful cry like that of a lost woman. The sailboat rocked back and forth, the deck torches flickering in the dim light.

In the captain's cabin, Rhaegar lay in a false sleep, his body gently rocking with the ship. He cradled a green dragon egg in his left arm and held the heavy Brightroar sword in his right.

"Roar..." Cannibal's roar echoed as the sailboat sailed away from the ruins. At dawn, sunlight pierced through thin clouds and fog, bringing a hint of warmth. After a tumultuous night, the sailboat emerged from the smoky sea into a clearer sky.

"My lord, the ruins of the stone bridge are ahead. We should be out of the Smoking Sea in two days," Robert said excitedly, clutching the charts.

Protected by the mercenaries, Robert had emerged unscathed from the previous day's ordeal and was eager to continue his duties.

"Got it," Rhaegar replied, rubbing his forehead wearily. "Inform everyone that their pay will be increased by thirty percent when we return to Volantis."

The fierce winds and waves of the night had exhausted him.

"Understood," Robert grinned, his single eye gleaming as he set to work.

Soon the ship was filled with the joyous chatter of the mercenaries. The promise of a greater reward lifted their spirits and dispelled the fears of the previous night.

With dark circles under his eyes, Rhaegar leaned against the railing, enjoying the early morning sun. The successful exploration of the ruins had made him feel generous to his hired men.

Time passed slowly as the sailboat drifted toward the ruins of the stone bridge. Rhaegar remained still, savoring an orange and remarking, "I feel much better after a short rest."

Under the clear sky, he glanced occasionally at the approaching ruins and felt a growing sense of calm.

"Roar!"

Cannibal's sudden roar broke the tranquility. Its dark wings beat furiously as it hovered in the air.

Rhaegar's eyes widened at the warning. He stood up, scanning the horizon. His expression shifted as he saw what lay ahead.

As the sailboat neared the stone bridge ruins, a horde of terrifying stone men emerged from the north and south sides, their bodies covered in gray scales. Most were bare-chested, their eyes wild with hunger, yelling as they crowded along the shore.

Just as the sailboat approached, they prepared to swarm.

"My lord, what should we do?" the squad leader asked, his face pale and slick with sweat.

The mercenaries' leader had died the previous day at the hands of the Shadowbinders, leaving the deputy leader in charge.

"Hold your ground. It's just a bunch of Stone men," Rhaegar replied, trying to mask his own unease at the sight of so many of them.

Rhaegar surveyed the north and south coasts, estimating there were at least three hundred Stone men gathered in groups. He sighed inwardly; this was an unexpected obstacle.

"My lord, the sailboat will soon arrive at the Stone Bridge Ruins," the deputy leader said, his voice taut with anxiety as the eerie roars of the Stone men filled the air.

The sixty battle-hardened mercenaries on board could handle a fight against a few hundred men, but these weren't ordinary men. The Stone men, once human, were now monstrous carriers of gray scale disease, and even a scratch from them could be fatal.

Rhaegar understood their fear. "Maintain formation and use arrows to keep the Stone men from boarding. We have a dragon."

"Roar..." Cannibal sensed its rider's resolve, its green eyes gleaming as it hovered above the ship.

"Dracarys!" Rhaegar commanded.

As the sailboat neared the ruins, Cannibal swooped low and unleashed ghostly green dragonfire. The fire engulfed the southern bank of the stone bridge, reducing hundreds of Stone men to ash.

"Prepare to draw your bows!" shouted the squad leader, strengthened by the dragon's power.

The surviving Stone men, now frenzied, leapt into the sea and swam towards the sailboat. Rhaegar remained composed. "Dracarys!" he ordered again.

Cannibal pivoted and directed its flames at the north shore, incinerating Stone men both on land and in the water. Despite the dragon's efforts, a few Stone men managed to cling to the hull of the ship, using their sharp nails to climb.

The mercenaries fired arrows at the climbers, managing to keep most of them at bay. The situation seemed under control until a sudden burst of firelight appeared on the hazy sea more than ten miles away.

Rumble-

The ground shook violently, sending ripples through the seawater and causing the sailboat to rock uncontrollably.

"Everyone, prepare yourselves!" Rhaegar shouted, struggling to keep his balance. He barely managed to stay upright as several mercenaries were thrown from the deck by the sudden tremor.

The stone men in the sea seized the opportunity and pounced on the fallen mercenaries with ferocious intensity.

Rhaegar clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. "Damn it!"

He looked up to see a bright red flame shoot into the sky in the distance, exploding like fireworks. "A volcanic eruption," he muttered, watching the magma pour into the sea, sending up plumes of smoke.

The undersea volcano was dangerously close to the ruins of the stone bridge, and the situation was rapidly deteriorating.

"Helmsman, turn the helm! We have to get out of here, now!" Rhaegar ordered.

The volcanic danger spread quickly. The air grew thick with acrid smoke, and the temperature of the seawater rose, making it difficult to breathe.

Despite the imminent danger, the Stone Men continued their assault, climbing onto the sailboat. The mercenaries, struggling to keep their footing, found it increasingly difficult to fend them off with their arrows.

"Roar!" Cannibal, sensing the chaos, flapped his wings furiously, sending gusts of wind and indiscriminate bursts of dragon flame at the Stone Men in the sea.

Some of the Stone Men managed to climb onto the deck and launched frenzied attacks on the mercenaries.

"Do not panic! Follow me and fight off the Stone Men!" Rhaegar shouted, drawing Dragon Claw from his waist and decapitating a Stone Man with one swift blow.

The seawater began to boil, bubbling with hot water and steam. Suddenly, a shadow emerged from the raging sea and moved quickly toward the slowly moving sailboat. Vaguely, several soft, vine-like limbs could be seen twisting and reaching out.

On the deck, Rhaegar raised his sword and sliced a Stone Man through the chest, sending him crashing back into the sea. Just as he was about to face another, a cold shiver ran down his spine and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"Something's wrong!" Rhaegar's heart skipped a beat as he instinctively searched for the source of the danger. The Smoking Sea was notorious for harboring all manner of demons and devils, so he knew he had to be extra vigilant.

With a sudden crack, a crimson limb shot out of the sea, lashing out like a whip.

"Roar!" Cannibal roared furiously, spewing a stream of dragonfire.

Man and dragon were in perfect sync. Reading Cannibal's intent instantly, Rhaegar stepped back, twisting to protect himself with the Dragon Claws. A thick, soft limb came down and tried to crush him.

Bang! The impact was tremendous. Rhaegar raised his sword to block the blow, but he was thrown backward, slamming into the solid wooden hatch of the cabin.

In the next moment, Cannibal swooped down and unleashed a torrent of dragonfire that scorched the surface of the sea. The water boiled and churned under the eerie green fire, revealing a massive shadow.

"Sea monster! A legendary Kraken!" Robert, cowering in a corner, shouted in horror, staring at the colossal creature with limbs tens of meters long. This was no ordinary monster but a giant squid, a true terror of the deep sea.

House Greyjoy of the Iron Islands had a golden kraken as their emblem, a nod to this very creature.

Rhaegar coughed violently, his body heaving. He lay amidst the rubble of the shattered hatch, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. His skin was covered in a layer of green scales, as if he were possessed by a dragon.

"It hurts!" Rhaegar groaned, struggling to get up as his body spasmed uncontrollably. He managed to roll over and looked down, his eyes widening in fear.

From his neck down to his collarbone, left chest, and side waist, the bronze scales manifested by ancient runes were shattered in large areas. The overall glow was dim, indicating the severity of the blow he had taken.

Chapter 287: Flaming Red Heart

"That was close."

Rhaegar gasped in pain, his body aching as he surveyed the sorry state of his bronze runes. The massive, whip-like limbs had struck with such force that only the protection of his Dragon Claw sword and bronze runes had kept him from being pulverized.

Shaking, Rhaegar slowly rose to his feet, his hand instinctively reaching for his waist. "Where is the Dragon Claw?" he muttered, looking around. All he saw were splinters of wood.

"Damn, it must have been knocked away," he realized. Just before the tentacle struck, he had used Dragon Claw to shield himself, but the impact had knocked it out of his grasp.

Coughing up blood, Rhaegar gritted his teeth and pulled his heavy sword, Brightroar, from his back. He had dropped the sword in his dazed sleep the night before, but fortunately it was still strapped to his back.

"Roar..." Cannibal roared continuously, its pitch-black wings spanning like a dark canopy. It unleashed torrents of ghostly green dragonfire.

The sea monster clung to the sailboat, its crimson skin impervious to the dragonfire. The flames only blackened its flesh and gave off a pungent, burnt smell.

"Heh, smells like dinner," Rhaegar muttered bitterly, staggering into a corner to take cover. His right hand glowed darkly, wisps of black smoke coalescing into a small, eyeless black serpent. It curled around his neck, sucking in the smoke.

Rhaegar's breathing was labored and his body throbbed with pain. The green scales had shielded him from critical damage, but the shock and impact had still damaged his bones and organs.

"Come on, little one," he urged the serpent, coughing and clutching his side. The serpent rune he had mastered could heal most injuries, given time.

Meanwhile, the sea monster, overwhelmed by the dragonfire, began to retreat. Its tentacles flailed wildly, whipping the deck and causing chaos. Stone men and mercenaries were caught in the onslaught, their bodies reduced to pulp, blood spurting everywhere, feeding the creature's rage.

After several agonizing minutes, Rhaegar's strength began to return. His face was still pale, but he was no longer coughing and his movements were more fluid.

"Cannibal, pull it out of the sea!" he ordered, running out of his corner. His eyes were fixed on the boiling sea, his determination unwavering despite the lingering pain.

Cannibal responded immediately, diving and grasping the creature with its claws. The struggle was fierce, but the dragon's power began to pull the monstrous squid from the depths.

Rhaegar's breath was steady now, and he gripped Brightroar tightly. The serpent rune had done its job, restoring enough of his strength to fight. He couldn't help but marvel at the power of the advanced runes, knowing that their full potential had yet to be realized.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal, initially consumed by rage, gradually regained its senses and heeded its rider's commands. Its massive form descended, casting a shadow over the nearby sea and plunging the surroundings into an instant darkness.

As it glided, its claws dipped into the seawater, seizing the crimson sea monster lurking beneath. The sea monster, terrified, wrapped its soft limbs around the dragon's black claws and silently roared with its gaping, fang-filled maw.

Rumble--

At that moment, a distant underwater volcano erupted once more, sending flames skyward. The Cannibal's green vertical pupils gleamed with cruelty as it lifted the sea monster from the water, flapping its wings.

The sea monster's torso, nearly as large as the dragon's head, was encircled by its thick, intimidating limbs. With a fierce grip, the Cannibal hoisted the creature like a rag doll and began tearing it apart mid-air with its claws.

Rip!

The sound of flesh and bone tearing filled the air as the sea monster was torn in half. Its limbs, strained to their limits, snapped under the dragon's immense strength.

"Roar!"

The Cannibal's fury found release as it roared into the sky, spewing Dragonfire onto its claws. The flames consumed the still-writhing sea monster, its body shrieking as it burned.

Driven mad by pain, the sea monster's crimson skin glowed darkly as it bit down on one of the dragon's claws. The Cannibal shook it off, climbed higher, and incinerated the creature with another blast of Dragonfire.

Rhaegar stood on the deck, watching the erupting volcano and feeling the temperature rise. He swung his sword, cutting down a Stone man that had rushed at him, and moved towards the deck's edge. The sea churned like boiling water.

"We need to leave now," Rhaegar muttered urgently. "That underwater volcano is too close. If we stay, we're in serious trouble."

Volcanic eruptions were no joke, and the ash could spread for hundreds of miles. The sailboat was only a dozen miles away. One bad move, and the lava could hit them directly.

Splash!

The sea monster's remains fell from the sky, crashing into the sea and raising enormous waves. Rhaegar's eyes widened as he quickly got down.

The waves slammed against the sailboat, sweeping Stone men and mercenaries into the sea. The force knocked them unconscious, and the boiling water ensured a swift end.

Rhaegar held onto the railing, drenched but unharmed. The bronze runes on his back protected him from the impact.

Splat!

As he stood up, a soft crimson limb emerged from the sea and latched onto the sailboat. Rhaegar looked up to see the sea monster's remaining half clinging to the deck, its limb writhing.

"Damnation!"

Rhaegar's face hardened. He gripped Brightroar and stepped forward quickly. The sea monster, clinging to the sailboat, couldn't be attacked with Dragonfire, but his sword would suffice.

His Pyromancer talent surged, flames enveloping his body, and Brightroar seemed to roar with the fury of a lion. With a cold smile, Rhaegar rushed to the sea monster's writhing limb and swung his sword violently.

Plop!

Rhaegar's sword fell, severing the sea monster's thick, soft limbs. Blue, fishy blood splattered everywhere.

Rhaegar stepped back quickly, watching the severed limb writhe as the rest of the sea monster's body lay limp on the deck.

"A sea monster is no match for a dragon!" he roared, raising his sword high and driving the point down swiftly.

Another jet of foul-smelling blood erupted as the sword pierced the sea monster's mouth, churning the soft flesh inside.

As Rhaegar tried to pull the sword free, the sea monster's fangs clamped down and held it in place.

Without hesitation, Rhaegar summoned a ten-foot spear into his right hand. The spearhead, a foot-long blade forged from Valyrian steel, glowed with a cold light.

"Sneaking up on me, are you? Go to hell!" he growled, ignoring the writhing mass beneath him. He gripped the shaft of the spear with both hands and thrust it forcefully into the sea monster's mouth.

Rhaegar remembered tales from the Iron Islands that said a sea monster's weakness lay in its mouth, connected to its respiratory and nervous systems. A strike there could cause instant collapse.

The sea monster struggled desperately under the attack, black water bubbling from its crimson skin. But its struggles soon faded.

The broken limbs fell limp, twitching weakly. Its torso deflated, and azure blood gushed from its mouth.

"Haha! I finally got it," Rhaegar grinned, his chest heaving. He retrieved his sword and spear, then sat down on the slippery corpse.

"The quest mission is open—the target is the cursed sea monster," the Explorar System announced as he touched the sea monster's skin, triggering a system beep in his ears.

Rhaegar froze, then called up the system panel.

[Cursed Sea Monster

Exploration Progress: 0.5%]

Stunned, he ran his hand over the sea monster's slimy surface. "It was a magical creature?" he mused. But something didn't seem right.

The quest emphasized "cursed."

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he noticed black slime oozing from the sea monster's body. He stood and poked at the slime with his lance. A familiar image came to mind, surprising him. "The Shadowbinder's Curse?"

He ignited the lance and set the black slime on fire. It burned with a crackling sound, incinerating the slime and even drying the sea monster's blood.

"It's really tough to deal with," Rhaegar sighed, satisfied. "But it should be fine now."

With the sea monster dead and the black slime burned away, even the most potent curse had lost its host.

"Push them all down!"

"Kill them..."

Having slain the sea monster with his own hands, Rhaegar returned to his senses, the chaotic sounds of battle filling his ears.

On the deck, the remaining mercenaries worked together to push the few remaining stone men into the sea. The blows from the sea monster's soft limbs had left only a handful of mercenaries and stone men standing. Fortunately, the stone men in the water were unable to climb onto the violently rocking sailboat, allowing the mercenaries to gain the upper hand.

Rhaegar watched the scene from his perch on the sea monster's corpse, temporarily removed from the chaos.

"Move, don't let the stone men in the sea climb up!" the squad leader shouted, his helmet askew.

The sailboat had been inching forward, slowed by the earlier turmoil. Now, unhindered by the stone men and the sea monster, it began to make its way past the ruins of the stone bridge and away from the dangerous area.

"Roar..." Cannibal hovered above, unleashing Dragonfire upon the stone men still attempting to pursue them through the water.

Rumble-

The underwater volcano continued its eruption, spewing magma and filling the sky with volcanic ash. Crimson lava splashed high into the air, some of it landing near the southern shore of the ruins of the Stone Bridge.

Rhaegar's face tightened in concern. He called to Cannibal, ready to mount and flee at a moment's notice. The Smoking Sea's reputation for danger was well deserved; the underwater volcano alone posed a significant threat.

Fortunately, only a small amount of lava reached their vicinity, reducing the immediate danger of being drenched in molten rock. However, the black volcanic ash had spread rapidly and caught up with the sailboat.

The ash, carrying high temperatures and mixed with loose minerals, resembled thick black smoke. Cannibal, flying through the air, was the first to encounter the ash, choking and unable to see properly, emitting a low, gurgling roar.

"Cough, cough, cough..." Rhaegar choked and coughed, the ash choking him as he covered his mouth and nose. The heat was unbearable, and the volcanic ash felt like furnace soot, making it impossible to breathe.

The mercenaries fared even worse, already exhausted from the battle. They panted heavily, choking and whimpering in agony.

"Dangerous," Rhaegar muttered, his face covered in ash, his eyes red with irritation.

Buzz...

In the moment of crisis, his space bracelet trembled slightly, emitting a faint red glow. Rhaegar's mind raced, remembering a snowy treasure he had acquired.

He touched the bracelet, and a slender silver necklace appeared in his hand. The necklace itself was unremarkable, but the pendant - an octagonal crimson ruby the size of a baby's fist - was extraordinary.

"Flaming Red Heart!" Rhaegar exclaimed, astonished.

When the Mountain Clans were burned, the red priestess who carried the Flaming Red Heart had shown no fear of Dragonfire. As an inherited treasure of the R'hllor Temple, it must possess extraordinary properties.

Chapter 288: Wild Dragon in the Mist

Buzz--

As if sensing his thoughts, the Flaming Red Heart emitted a reddish halo that enveloped Rhaegar. Before he could react, the halo expanded, enveloping the entire ship in a protective sphere of red light.

"Roar..."

Cannibal roared in puzzlement as it emerged from the volcanic ash, its green pupils faintly glowing with the same red halo.

Protected by the red light, the volcanic ash was kept at bay, and the oppressive heat dissipated.

"The Lord of Light has manifested! Let's go!" Rhaegar shouted, urging the mercenaries to row with all their might.

They had to hurry; maintaining the halo drained Rhaegar's magic, and he was already borrowing magical energy from Cannibal.

"Roar..."

Cannibal swooped lower, its wings creating gale-force winds that propelled the sails forward.

The sky and sea were shrouded in volcanic ash, a chaotic darkness.

"Cannibal, guide the course ahead," Rhaegar called out.

Cannibal, a wild dragon with intelligence surpassing that of a normal human, heeded Rhaegar's command. Using its sharp senses, it led the sailboat through the treacherous sea.

With the powerful winds at their back, the sailboat sped along.

Within half an hour, they had traveled a hundred miles, far enough to escape the worst of the volcanic ash.

Wave~

Free from the scorching ash, the red halo around the sailboat dissipated like a bursting bubble.

Rhaegar, pale and exhausted, lay on the sea monster's corpse, clutching the now-glowing Flaming Red Heart.

After infusing it with their combined magic, the heart had been activated, no longer dull but vibrant and eye-catching.

Rhaegar gazed up at the sky, the unique hazy weather of the Smoking Sea dim yet serene.

"Good stuff, worthy of being the Lord of Light Temple's inheritance item," he sighed, relieved.

"Roar..."

A deep dragon roar echoed from afar, stretching out for a long time.

Rhaegar sprang up, ignoring his aching muscles, and looked towards the sound.

He knew Cannibal's roar well, deep and resonant like a bell. This roar, though loud, lacked its rough and domineering quality.

"There are still dragons in the Smoking Sea!"

Rhaegar's expression grew solemn as he stared at the thick haze behind the sailboat.

With Cannibal leading the way, this dragon roar had to belong to another dragon.

He stared intently, but the haze revealed nothing.

"Why isn't it there?" Rhaegar muttered, disappointed but unwilling to give up.

He was determined to confirm if there truly was another dragon in the Smoking Sea.

"Roar..."

A dragon's roar echoed, but it wasn't from the dragon in the mist. Cannibal, sensing the presence of another dragon, had turned, flapping its massive wings and hovering above the sailboat, its green vertical pupils focused on a distant point.

Just as Rhaegar was about to give up hope, the haze in the sky shifted and rippled. A grayish figure appeared briefly, darting into the dense mist before vanishing.

"There really is a dragon!" Rhaegar exclaimed, his face hardening with determination.

In that fleeting moment, he had seen the shadow of a dragon. It seemed larger than Syrax but smaller than Caraxes, with unusually smooth scales that appeared silvery black and blended seamlessly with the mist. Its body was well proportioned, reminiscent of Dreamfyre and Grey Ghost.

Rhaegar's mind raced with wonder. "The Smoking Sea does indeed harbor dragons, and they appear young from their size."

Given the dangerous nature of the Smoking Sea, it was unlikely that this dragon had been tamed. It had to be a wild dragon that had hatched on its own.

His thoughts drifted back to the green dragon egg stored in the captain's quarters. "The wild dragon in the haze must have hatched from an egg left behind by the Dragonlord family," he mused.

"A wild dragon..." Rhaegar murmured, feeling a mixture of relief and excitement.

A wild dragon was manageable, far less threatening than a tamed one. The origins of Cannibal were also shrouded in mystery. Some believed it was hatched on Dragonstone Island, while others speculated that it was an exotic, pure wild dragon. Either way, the details were unimportant now.

Rhaegar's gaze remained fixed on the layers of mist as his thoughts drifted off into the distance, pondering the implications of this new discovery.

...

Time flew, and ten days later...

In the bustling harbor of Volantis, a three-masted sailing ship with a strong smell of the sea docked.

"Roar..."

A loud and clear dragon roar echoed through the harbor. Sailors and slaves alike raised their heads to see a huge pitch-black dragon soaring above them. The dragon circled the sky above the city-state twice, roaring as if to announce its presence, before slowly descending near the Black Wall.

Everyone recognized it as the dragon of the Targaryen Dragonlord.

Soon after, the black dragon took to the air again, flapping its massive wings as it headed toward the Narrow Sea.

No one knew what happened during the dragon's brief landing. No one dared to ask.

One thing was clear: R'hllor's faith was growing stronger by the day.

...

Above the Narrow Sea, the sky was a clear blue with white clouds drifting lazily. The salty sea breeze carried a refreshing coolness.

A conversation was taking place on the deck of a large cargo ship.

"Uncle, I didn't expect you to be waiting for me here," Rhaegar remarked, his tone calm as he looked at the familiar figure before him.

Daemon, holding a half-finished glass of red wine, stared out at the pale sea. "I didn't expect you to actually dare to explore the Smoking Sea," he said blandly. He glanced at the rounded bundle at his nephew's waist and noted its presence without comment. "Looks like you made quite a haul."

Upon hearing of Rhaegar's venture into the Smoking Sea, Daemon had set out to intercept him. Not for personal gain, but for the sake of his family and his brother and niece.

Rhaegar patted his satchel and said without hesitation, "I didn't go for nothing."

"To be honest, you're too reckless," Daemon replied, taking a sip of his drink. "I once tried to explore the Smoking Sea with Caraxes, but the dragon got restless when we reached the area, so I had to turn back."

The Smoking Sea was rumored to hold Valyria's lost treasures, but luck favored few.

Rhaegar fell silent, acknowledging the truth in Daemon's words. The Smoking Sea was treacherous indeed. It was a place to avoid unless absolutely necessary.

Changing the subject, Daemon glanced at the two girls standing in the corner of the deck, a playful expression in his eyes. "Are you sure you want to return to King's Landing with those two bastards ladies?"

"It's not me who's bringing them, it's you," Rhaegar replied with a helpless shrug. "I'm flying back to King's Landing on the dragon. They're your responsibility."

Daemon scoffed, "I thought you had more guts."

"No way," Rhaegar shook his head, then his tone grew serious. "I've heard about the brothel incident."

His words were pointed, his gaze intense. He wasn't particularly upset about Varos's death—a puppet like that was expendable—but the circumstances were troubling.

Daemon's eyes flashed with a dangerous glint as he sneered, "A mere bitch."

"She was a Targaryen," Rhaegar retorted, his brow furrowing. He didn't mince words. Saera's death by fire was essentially Kinslaying.

Daemon's expression hardened. "My grandfather always said she wasn't a true Targaryen, just a bitch."

He had long known about her existence but hadn't paid her much mind until recently. When Varos made his move, Daemon had seen an opportunity to erase a stain.

"Perhaps you're right," Rhaegar conceded, shaking his head.

Their conversation fell into silence. Rhaegar didn't press Daemon about Varos's demise. He hadn't intended for Varos to wield real power—he was meant to be a mere figurehead.

Similarly, Daemon's involvement with the old noble and Tesrio had made it clear that the powerful nobles of the free trade city-states were not to be trusted. Overseas power was ultimately detached from the king's authority. It was fine to show saintliness in public, but exercising unchecked power was dangerous.

Rhaegar's focus needed to remain on Westeros.

Daemon found a wooden crate and sat down, sipping his wine and gazing at the sky. The brief period of tranquility was something he was reluctant to break.

...

King's Landing, Red Keep.

The Council Hall was filled with the members of the Small Council. Viserys sat at the head of the table, cradling a wine cup in his hand. Compared to more than half a month ago, his health had improved significantly, and the usual smile had returned to the corners of his mouth.

The table was surrounded by a group of royal advisers: Hand of the King Lyonel, Master of Civil Affairs Otto, Grand Maester Mellos, Master of Coin Lyman, and Master of Laws Jasper. The seat for the Master of Ships remained vacant, the position still unfilled.

"Gentlemen, we all know the situation in the Stormlands. What are your views?" Viserys asked, raising an eyebrow as he addressed the advisers.

The advisers exchanged glances, their eyes frequently darting toward the king's side.

Viserys noticed this but forced himself to ignore it, maintaining his smile. To his right, Alicent sat demurely in a long green dress, silently pouring wine for him. On his left, Rhaenyra, in a strapless black dress, toyed with a stone ball adorned with black and green dragon patterns—her brother's stone ball.

The room fell silent, the advisers hesitant to speak.

Viserys glanced around the table, contemplating whether to dismiss his wife and daughter. Earlier, when he had been weak, Alicent had attended the council on his behalf, serving with dedication. Rhaenyra, as the Princess of Dragonstone, also had a rightful place at the table in Rhaegar's absence. Despite his misgivings, Viserys decided to allow them to stay.

Seeing this, the advisers, though helpless, accepted the situation. There was no conflict between the Queen and the Princess, so their presence would not disrupt the meeting.

Lyonel stood up to break the silence, clearing his throat. "Your Grace, the construction of the Prince's Palace required significant resources, most of which were provided by the Riverlands and the Stormlands."

"Recently, the Stormlands were struck by a storm, and several noble houses that supplied wood and stone suffered losses. They are now seeking an advance on their compensation from the treasury."

Viserys took a sip of wine and replied with a touch of sarcasm, "But weren't the houses that provided the materials located inland?"

When the kingdom undertook major projects, local nobles were temporarily conscripted and later reimbursed from the treasury. These particular noble houses, who had barely contributed, now sought premature rewards from the treasury. It was an audacious request.

Lyonel hesitated, unsure how to respond. He too recognized the underlying issue but was reluctant to voice it openly.

Chapter 289: Conflict Between Hightower's Father and Daughter

"Your Grace, I do not approve of this matter."

While Lyonel hesitated, Lyman Beesbury raised his hand to express his position. The old man from Honeyholt frowned as he spoke slowly, "In the early days of the kingdom, there was no precedent for advance payments from the treasury. It does not align with our established rules."

Though over fifty years old and gradually slowing in thought, his political acumen remained sharp. He prioritized maintaining the court's dignity above all else.

Viserys, pleased to hear a suggestion that resonated with him, smiled warmly. "Lord Lyman makes a valid point."

Lyonel, after a brief hesitation, responded, "However, without an advance from the treasury, the construction of the Prince's Palace will be delayed."

He pulled a letter from his chest and placed it on the conference table. The letter clearly stated that several nobles had suffered losses, making it difficult to provide building materials. It was filled with excuses and requests.

Viserys frowned. "Can't we rotate the responsibility to other noble houses first?"

Lyonel found himself at a loss for words.

Otto, breaking his silence, subtly reminded, "Your Grace, the noble houses who provided the materials are still dealing with the aftermath of the disaster inland. The coastal houses may also be struggling..."

His meaning was clear: this situation was more than just bad luck; it was likely someone was intentionally causing trouble. Rotating a few noble houses wouldn't resolve the issue.

Viserys, not a fool, sensed the undercurrent of discontent among the Stormlands bannermen. In his mind, he labeled it "malicious provocation."

Without rushing to take a position, he scanned the advisers and asked, "Given your insights, how should the court respond?"

Though his instincts told him one thing, he wanted to hear the small council's opinions.

"Your Grace, the Stormlands did suffer a natural disaster recently. Perhaps a careful and thorough investigation is warranted," suggested Jasper, the Master of Laws, before Lyonel or Otto could propose anything.

Jasper had black curly hair, a shapely beard, and a serious square face.

Lyonel disagreed. "A thorough investigation is time-consuming and labor-intensive. The court should directly assert its authority."

"It's about the court's reputation, and there may be no clear leads for an investigation," Lyonel continued.

Jasper, crossing his arms, smiled lightly. "The nobles of the Stormlands have always been loyal. We could ask Lord Borros to look into this matter."

"Lord Borros has just assumed his position. He might not have the experience to manage such a complex issue," Lyonel retorted, his tone resistant.

The Baratheon family oversaw the Stormlands, making Borros investigating akin to a thief investigating their own crime.

Jasper, hiding his insecurity, replied, "Lord Lyonel, every region has its own challenges. Being forceful won't win favor."

Lyonel's face darkened, a fire kindling in his heart. "Lord Jasper, I have reason to suspect you harbor selfish motives to protect your own fiefdom."

A tense silence fell over the council hall.

Mellos and Lyman raised their heads, surprised at Lyonel's rigid and resolute stance.

Otto remained calm and habitually silent.

Bang—

Jasper slammed his hands on the table, his face red with indignation. "Lord Lyonel, I hold the same rank as you. Your insults demean both of us."

Lyonel remained stern and unmoved, about to retort when someone else interrupted.

Thud—

A stone ball dropped into its slot, the sound drawing everyone's attention.

Rhaenyra, who had remained silent, rose gracefully, smoothing her skirts. Her bright eyes were icy as she spoke. "Lord Jasper, the blatant defiance of the Stormlands nobles is evident. Is an investigation really necessary?"

Jasper, though intimidated by the imposing princess, continued to argue. "Perhaps there are hidden factors at play."

He had received a letter from Lord Borros, who admitted to struggling with his unruly bannermen and had asked for support in court. In exchange, Borros promised a marriage alliance, offering his daughter to Jasper's son.

"Lord Jasper, your reasoning is insufficient," Rhaenyra said, her voice edged with anger. "This is a test of the local nobles' loyalty to the crown. They must be firmly reprimanded."

The interference with the Prince's Palace construction was a direct affront to the royal family. With Rhaegar absent from King's Landing, Rhaenyra felt compelled to assert her stance.

Jasper hesitated, then weakly defended, "Even so, this is not directly tied to Lord Borros."

"Hmph, you're mistaken," Rhaenyra retorted sharply. "At Lord Boremund's funeral, Aegon and Daemon disrupted the proceedings, angering Lord Borros. This incident is well-known across the Seven Kingdoms."

Her blunt statement cut through the formalities, exposing the true issue. Jasper, speechless, sat down in frustration.

Lyonel seized the moment, speaking in a grave tone. "The root of the problem lies with Lord Borros and his dissatisfaction with the royal family."

This was what he had been waiting to say.

Lyman then suggested, "Why not summon Borros to King's Landing so His Grace can address the issue personally?"

Viserys, reluctant to cause offense, looked to his indignant daughter for reassurance. "Rhaenyra, sit down and listen to the advisers' counsel."

Rhaenyra pursed her lips, then complied, resting her hands on her back. She couldn't fully take Rhaegar's place, but opening the discussion was a significant step.

Sensing the king's hesitation, the advisers avoided direct confrontation. After a brief murmur of conversation, Otto Hightower rapped the table and spoke firmly. "Your Grace, the tension between the Targaryen and Baratheon Houses is the issue. A marriage alliance could resolve it."

Viserys looked intrigued. "What do you propose?"

Otto, glancing at Alicent, smiled. "Prince Aegon is not yet betrothed, and Lord Borros has four daughters. A marriage could foster harmony between our houses."

It was a conventional but effective solution.

Viserys' eyes brightened as he considered the benefits of uniting the families through marriage, which was preferable to conflict.

The advisers mulled over Otto's suggestion, each with their own thoughts.

Lyonel, a staunch supporter of the heir, felt uneasy. He feared that a marriage to the Baratheons, who had their own ambitions, could lead to complications. Yet, he chose not to voice his concerns. The royal family's marital decisions were not for court advisers to meddle in.

Just as the advisors thought the king would agree to the proposal, an unexpected voice rose in opposition.

Alicent frowned in displeasure and looked at her father, Otto. She took a deep breath. "I have discussed with His Grace that Aegon should be united with Helaena and not marry an outsider."

"The Small Council is not aware of this," Otto replied coolly. "Besides, there is nothing wrong with Prince Aegon marrying the daughter of House Baratheon. It will help unite the Stormlands."

"I am the mother of the child, and I disagree," Alicent countered, turning to her husband with a plea in her eyes. "Viserys, you know Helaena's situation. She is not fit to marry outside the family."

Her maternal instincts made her fiercely protective. She didn't want either of her children to be used as political pawns, especially Helaena, whose unique beauty and gentle nature made Alicent wish to keep her close.

Viserys, feeling the weight of the moment, said softly, "Alicent, there's nothing wrong with Helaena. We are discussing Aegon's marriage."

Privately, they had indeed discussed the children's marriages. With Rhaegar and Rhaenyra's unions already settled, Alicent focused on Aegon and Helaena, favoring intrafamily marriages to keep the bloodline pure and strong.

Alicent, frustrated by her husband's evasiveness, snapped. "In short, I do not agree. My children's marriages should be decided by me."

She shot a warning glance at her father, Otto, across the table. Though she was defiant, she still feared opposing him openly. Seeking an excuse, she added, "Aegon and Daemon disrupted the funeral, and Rhaegar was also present. We should wait for Rhaegar to return and discuss it together."

She believed Rhaegar would oppose Aegon's marriage to a Baratheon, allowing her to keep her children close.

Viserys, momentarily distracted by thoughts of Rhaegar, asked, "Rhaegar has been away for a long time. Has there been any word on when he will return?"

"He's been gone nearly a month. I think it will be soon," Rhaenyra replied quickly.

Viserys looked around, his gaze lingering on Alicent and Otto. He murmured, "In that case, let's wait for Rhaegar to come back and discuss it together."

The meeting had reached an impasse over the marriage issue. Waiting for Rhaegar's return seemed a sensible solution.

"I'll go find the children, so I'll leave you now," Alicent said, her voice tinged with relief as she hurried away.

Rhaenyra picked up the stone ball, her expression serious. "Lord Borros does not honor the royal family. Let's wait for Rhaegar to come back to negotiate a solution."

She was indifferent to the politics of the marriage, but determined to point out the disloyalty of the Baratheon House.

The royal meeting concluded. The advisers stood and bowed before leaving.

Rhaenyra accompanied her father as he walked back to his chambers. Just as they were about to part ways, a muffled voice called out.

"Princess," Grand Maester Mellos said from behind.

Rhaenyra's heart skipped a beat as she turned. "Is there news from Rhaegar?"

"A letter from Volantis, sealed with the three-headed red dragon," Mellos said, producing an envelope from his pocket. His bald head gleamed slightly as he bowed.

Chapter 290: Alicent Trains Her Son

In the blink of an eye, three days passed.

King's Landing

The early spring snow had melted, and the streets were abuzz with activity. Septage workers, driving worn-out horses and hauling carts, diligently cleaned the public toilets in every nook and cranny. Even the notoriously filthy flea dens had lost much of their stench. Crowds thronged Silk Street, where money flowed freely, and revelry was in full swing.

Suddenly, a deep dragon roar echoed through the city. A shadow as dark as night rose from Blackwater Bay, soaring above King's Landing. The dragon's scales were as black as charcoal, with piercing green eyes and wings that blotted out the sun. Its presence was as menacing as a dark god's.

After a slow, deliberate circle over the city, the dragon descended over Rhaenys's Hill and landed in the Dragonpit.

Inside the Dragonpit, Cannibal lowered its massive spine, folded its wings, and lay down, feigning sleep.

"Good, rest well," Rhaegar said, standing before the formidable dragon's head, his hands gently stroking the black scales.

"Prince, you have finally returned," greeted Maester Maynard, his eyes brimming with joy. He was thin and pale but wore a smile. Beside him stood Syrio, his fluffy curls bobbing as he walked.

Rhaegar smiled at Maynard. "Thank you for your hard work," he said, his gaze shifting to Syrio.

The water dancer from Braavos wore a loose black robe, his thin sword at his side. "Ready?" Rhaegar asked.

Before returning to King's Landing, Rhaegar had sent two letters ahead, detailing several instructions.

Syrio raised his hand in greeting and smiled confidently. "The ship is at the docks, ready to sail."

"Excellent," Rhaegar nodded. "Stop at the Temple of R'hllor and gather as much information as you can."

"As you wish," Syrio said, pulling on his hood and disappearing into the shadows of the Dragonpit.

Rhaegar shook his head with a smile, exchanged a few words with Maynard, and rode back to the Red Keep. Syrio was to be his shadow in Volantis, tasked with gathering intelligence and preparing for future endeavors. Even if they couldn't control the city-state, they aimed to be well-informed and ready.

...

The Gates of the Red Keep

"Welcome, Rhaegar of House Targaryen, Heir to the Iron Throne!" The booming proclamation of the Kingsguard echoed through the courtyard as the carriage slowly entered the forecourt of the Red Keep.

Lifting the carriage curtain, Rhaegar stepped out just as a familiar, thoughtful voice rang out.

"Rhaegar!"

Rhaenyra, who had been waiting at the doorway, ran towards him, her excitement palpable. Rhaegar turned at the sound of her voice, his eyes lighting up. Rhaenyra looked radiant, her long silver hair braided and coiled behind her head. Her gentle demeanor, bright purple eyes, and the smile on her white face made her look more beautiful than ever. Her purple gown swayed as she moved, and her black stockings peeked out from under her deerskin boots, covering her slender calves.

The moment Rhaegar stepped out, Rhaenyra leaped into his arms, her eyes scanning him worriedly. "You're finally back! Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Rhaegar replied, smiling. "But I missed you."

Rhaegar's words brought a smile to Rhaenyra's face. He wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in her neck. They had both missed each other deeply.

Rhaenyra, pretending to be aggrieved, tilted her head and gently bumped his. "No wonder you didn't take me to Volantis. You even ventured to the Smoking Sea alone."

She lifted his chin and studied his face closely. In the nearly month-long absence, Rhaegar had grown. His once youthful face had gained a touch of strength, and his silver-gold hair framed purple eyes that held a hint of unresolved melancholy. An eternal smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Rhaegar said, his voice sincere. "Next time I'll take you with me wherever I go."

"Not a chance," Rhaenyra laughed, pinching his cheeks. "I wouldn't dare go to the Smoking Sea."

She stood on her tiptoes to compare their heights. Though she was taller than most women at 162 centimeters, Rhaegar towered over her at over 180 centimeters. His frame, broad-shouldered and slender-waisted, was a testament to the strength of the Targaryen bloodline.

Rhaegar shook his head, breaking away from her playful hands. "I'll teach you a lesson later," he teased, resting his chin on her shoulder.

Rhaenyra grunted in mock annoyance and began to check Rhaegar for injuries. Her hands roamed over his body, and when she touched his right waist, she noticed something amiss.

"Rhaegar, where is your sword?" she asked, her eyes serious. She pushed him away slightly, searching his face for an answer.

Rhaegar hesitated before admitting, "I left it in the Smoking Sea."

"You really took on danger, didn't you? You even lost your sword!" Rhaenyra's eyes widened with worry, her voice tinged with anger. She knew that Rhaegar's trip to the Smoking Sea had been far from safe.

Fury and concern mixed in her heart. Rhaenyra gritted her teeth and slapped Rhaegar's chest a few times, her frustration evident.

"Wait, I didn't lose it. Listen to me first," Rhaegar said, capturing Rhaenyra's hand as she tried to express her frustration.

Rhaegar took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. "Dragon claw is temporarily out of my hands. It's in the possession of a... new friend."

"A new friend? Where did you find a new friend?" Rhaenyra's eyes widened with disbelief.

Rhaegar hesitated for a moment before affirming, "A wild dragon."

Rhaenyra's expression shifted from skepticism to one of bewildered curiosity, prompting Rhaegar to offer a detailed explanation.

The dragon claw was lost during THE battle with the sea monster. He thought it had fallen near the ruins of the stone bridge and planned to salvage it later.

But then, the mysterious scroll in his bracelet started glowing, pinpointing the exact location of Dragon Claw. It was moving rapidly within a dozen miles of the sailboat.

The visibility was terrible, but he realized that a wild dragon from the Smoking Sea had picked up Dragon Claw and was following the sailboat. This continued until he left the Smoking Sea. It seems the wild dragon there have never ventured far from his territory.

Rhaegar finished with a helpless smile, "The dragon probably took a liking to Dragon Claw because it was shiny, treating it as a collectible."

Rhaenyra listened intently, her mouth slightly agape. "There are wild dragons in the Smoking Sea?"

"Yes," Rhaegar confirmed with a nod, then added with a laugh, "But don't worry, I managed to find a substitute. The trip wasn't a complete loss."

Rhaenyra rolled her eyes, a hint of amusement in her exasperation. "Let's get back to the castle so you can rest. And you might want to clean up—you're starting to smell, and your hair is a mess."

Rhaegar chuckled, grateful for Rhaenyra's concern. Together, they made their way back to the Red Keep.

...

The Queen's Bedchamber

Alicent paced back and forth, her face twisted with anger. Aegon sat on a round stool by the table, his head hung low. His silver hair was disheveled, and he was shirtless, wearing only white pajama pants.

Not far away, Aemond stood watching, his expression helpless.

Helaena knelt on the floor, her light purple eyes unfocused as she muttered to herself, "Green spools, black spools..." She fiddled with two balls of thread, the only sound in the room besides Aegon's irritated head-scratching.

Alicent spun around, pointing an accusing finger at Aegon. "She is my personal maid, and you dare molest her?"

"I didn't! I was just teasing her," Aegon retorted, bristling.

Splat!

Alicent slapped him, her voice filled with fury. "The evidence is there, and you're still making excuses."

Aegon clutched his face in annoyance. "She was the one who bent over in front of me, and I just slapped her!"

Slap!

Alicent slapped him again. "Will you grow up? All you do is drink and waste your time with prostitutes. What else are you good for?"

"What future do you expect for me?" Aegon shouted back. "The heir is Rhaegar. What's wrong with me being a hedonistic prince?"

Alicent's chest heaved with frustration. "Even if you don't want the throne, you should still protect your family."

Aegon grimaced and pointed at Helaena. "Your idea of protection is marrying me to her, right?"

After the Small's Council meeting, his parents had approached him separately. Viserys asked if he was interested in marrying into the Baratheon House. Alicent wanted him to marry Helaena and strengthen the Hightower House's influence. But no one asked what he wanted.

Seeing Aegon's disdain for Helaena, Alicent felt a wave of disappointment. "You should protect her, just like Rhaenyra protects Rhaegar."

"She's just a silly girl," Aegon muttered dismissively.

"So, you'd rather marry Lord Borros' daughter?" Alicent's eyes reddened as she sat on a stool, holding her forehead.

Aegon felt a pang of guilt at his mother's sadness but responded with even more annoyance. "Who said I wanted to marry those ugly bastards?"

Lord Borros had a rugged face, and his daughters had inherited his looks. Even Aegon, with his lax standards, found them unappealing.

Alicent sighed deeply, fatigue washing over her. She glanced at Helaena and held back her words. The thought of marrying off her children depressed her.

Aegon had never liked Helaena. Growing up, they bickered constantly. Helaena, absorbed in her spools of thread, was no different.

"Never mind, all of you, get out," Alicent waved them away, distracted.

The solution for the Small Council's opposition to the Baratheon House had yet to be found. She needed to join forces with Rhaegar to block the marriage. Eventually, Aegon would have to unite with Helaena.

"Oh, you rest," Aegon muttered, leaving without a backward glance.

"Sister, let's go," Aemond said, taking the spool from Helaena and leading her by the hand.

As they passed the table, Alicent took Helaena's small hand. Ignoring Aemond's envious look, she cupped Helaena's cheek and kissed it. "Don't be afraid, Mother will not blame you."

Helaena's eyes lowered, her small hands fidgeting in front of her.