

G.O Thrones 41

Chapter 41: Sneaking Away for a Trip

As she left Rhaegar's room, her already heavy mood seemed to worsen.

All she longed for was to return to her chamber, immerse herself in a steaming bath, and curl up under the comforting warmth of her covers for a restful night's sleep.

The day had proven to be too much for her.

As the morning dawned, a new day unfolded.

Greeting Cole, who stood guard outside her door, Rhaenyra entered her room with a weariness that weighed heavily upon her.

Absentmindedly removing her jewelry, she instinctively poured herself a cup of wine from the nearby table.

In the midst of her actions, her attention was suddenly drawn to a package lying conspicuously on the table.

The sudden appearance of the package piqued Rhaenyra's curiosity, and she took a cautious look around the room.

Satisfied that she was alone, she carefully pinched a corner of the package, causing its contents to spill out onto the table.

Among the items were a set of simple hemp garments and a piece of parchment with a rudimentary map on it.

Examining the map closely, Rhaenyra was astonished to find that it detailed the layout of the secret passageways within the Red Keep, including her very own room.

Following the map's instructions, she located a wall adorned with a carved mural that, when pressed, revealed a concealed doorway leading to the night-shrouded exterior of the fortress.

Beyond the door was a staircase whose descent was shrouded in mystery.

A mischievous smile graced Rhaenyra's lips as she contemplated the adventure that lay ahead.

An avid explorer by nature, she relished the thrill of discovery - a sensation akin to flying astride a dragon.

Determined to indulge her curiosity, Rhaenyra shed her elaborate gown in favor of the humble hemp garment.

Satisfied that there was no discernible odor emanating from the garment, she ventured out and slipped into the hidden passageway that awaited beyond her room.

Navigating the shadowy tunnels, she passed the chamber where Balerion's colossal skull rested, and finally reached a secluded corner of the Red Keep.

There she encountered a figure cloaked in black, patiently awaiting her arrival.

At the sight of the familiar face, Rhaenyra gasped in astonishment.

"Daemon?"

Her uncle's presence took her by surprise.

With a mischievous grin, Daemon extended an invitation. "Would you care to venture out and explore unseen sights?"

Though hesitant at first, Rhaenyra was swayed by the prospect of adventure.

Daemon's teasing only fueled her resolve.

"I'm not afraid," she replied defiantly. "Lead the way."

With a nod, Daemon pulled on his hood and motioned for her to follow.

Excitement mingled with apprehension as Rhaenyra trailed behind, eager to join their clandestine escapade.

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Daemon led the way through the bustling Silk Street, the heart of the city's nighttime activity.

Compared to its daytime counterpart, the street was alive with a cacophony of sounds and a riot of color. People bustled about, merchants hawked their wares, and the air was thick with the scent of spices and exotic goods.

Despite her royal upbringing and training in etiquette, Rhaenyra was taken aback by the scene before her.

The crowded alleys teemed with a variety of characters, from merchants haggling over prices to street performers entertaining the masses. Men and women revelled in the festivities, heedless of the judgment of onlookers, their extravagant antics drawing curious glances.

Shielding her face from the occasional waft of filth, Rhaenyra could not help but marvel at the vibrant chaos surrounding her.

Peering through the gaps between her fingers, she soaked up the sights and sounds of the bustling Silk Street, realizing that she had never experienced anything like it before.

As they explored further, they came upon a bustling circus where a crowd had gathered to watch a theatrical performance centered on the Targaryen royal family.

The stage was alive with activity as actors brought the Targaryen saga to life. Amidst the colorful spectacle, two men took on the roles of children, while a clown in a white dress portrayed a whimsical princess.

With exaggerated gestures and playful banter, the lead actor told the story in a comical tone.

"Now, let us delve into the saga of the mighty Iron Throne and consider who shall claim its seat," he announced theatrically.

"As our benevolent king names his own daughter as heir, the former queen, burdened with a lethargic son, fades into obscurity."

"But lo and behold, a new queen appears, bearing a healthy son of her own! So the question arises: Who will inherit the throne?"

"Will it be the king's sibling, his daughter, or perhaps his sons from different wombs?"

In the midst of the play's climax, the two actors portraying the children engaged in a lively scuffle, each proclaiming his identity with gusto.

"I am Aegon, bearing the name of the conqueror, embodying majesty and power!" one shouted.

"And I am the slumbering dragon, scion of the king, ready to unleash my wrath upon you!" declared the other.

The audience erupted in cheers and applause, swept away by the theatrical fervor.

However, Rhaenyra was unable to share in the excitement, her smile fading as she watched the spectacle unfold before her, her understanding of the performance eluding her.

As the actor portraying Rhaegar pinned his opponent to the ground, he delivered his lines with dramatic flair.

"I am the king's eldest son, unmatched in skill and power!" he proclaimed, his words echoing across the stage.

Below him, the actor playing the opponent writhed and begged for mercy, adding to the intensity of the scene.

The audience, caught up in the drama, grew increasingly animated, their cheers echoing through the air.

Rhaenyra couldn't help laughing, her dissatisfaction evident as she glared at Daemon. "A lame joke, and you brought me to see it?"

Daemon replied nonchalantly, "Indeed, it's just a joke. But many commoners believe that male heirs like Rhaegar and Aegon should inherit."

"It matters little what they believe," Rhaenyra retorted, eager to move on from the uninspiring spectacle.

As they continued on their way, Daemon's voice drifted back to her. "If you aspire to rule someday, their beliefs have meaning."

"Psh, sometimes I wish I could shed the weight of being the heir," Rhaenyra remarked, her tone tinged with self-deprecation.

"Hehe, relinquishing that position would only elevate others," Daemon remarked pointedly.

Rhaenyra shot him an unhappy look. "And that includes you!"

Daemon merely grinned, his expression unchanged.

Fed up, Rhaenyra grabbed a jar of preserves from a nearby vendor and hurled it at him before turning and scurrying away amid the din of the bustling street.

Despite the commotion, her cathartic outburst was met with cheers that echoed her sentiments.

Daemon's face remained impassive as he deftly dodged the vendor and took up the chase, his steps quickening to match hers.

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As the night grew late, Helaena, tired from playing, had retired to her bed, and Rhaegar, left alone, turned out the light and settled down to rest.

As he drifted off to sleep, Rhaegar found himself once again in the grip of a dream.

In this dream, he wore a white robe and held a sword tightly in his hand. His surroundings were littered with broken weapons and lifeless bodies, a scene of carnage and chaos.

Bewildered and disoriented, Rhaegar was overcome by a sickening wave of blood and death, the stench assaulting his senses.

Bowing his head in disgust, he noticed a faint speck of blood creeping across the pristine white fabric of his robe, seemingly materializing out of thin air.

Before he could investigate further, the stains began to spread rapidly, multiplying in number until they consumed half of the once pristine robe, ominously dripping crimson droplets.

A chilling gust of wind swept through the Dream Realm, causing the stained robe to billow and flap, shrouding Rhaegar's head in an eerie veil.

As Rhaegar witnessed this eerie spectacle, he was struck with an inexplicable terror, his heart pounding in his chest as fear gripped him.

As the cold wind swirled around him, Rhaegar's mind raced with panicked thoughts.

"If I don't move, the blood will stain me," he realized as a wave of fear coursed through him.

Desperately, he tried to dodge the impending fall of the tainted robe, scrambling away in a desperate attempt to escape its grasp.

But no matter how fast he moved or how far he ran, the robe loomed ominously over him, its half-white, half-red form trailing closely behind him like a sinister shadow.

With each step, Rhaegar's heart pounded louder in his chest, his breaths coming in short, ragged gasps as he fought against the relentless pursuit of the bloodstained robe.

But try as he might, he could not outrun its relentless advance, his efforts proving futile against the unseen forces at play.

A profound sense of helplessness washed over him, rendering him immobile as the blood-soaked robe hovered ominously above him, ready to descend upon him at any moment.

"No!" he cried in terror, his voice echoing through the room as he jerked awake from the nightmarish vision, his body drenched in cold sweat.

Rhaegar winced as he tried to sit up, his fingers accidentally brushing the tender scab on his back, causing a sharp hiss of pain that brought him back to reality.

"Another nightmare..." he muttered through clenched teeth, tears welling up in the corners of his eyes as he clenched his fists against the agony coursing through him.

With a frustrated sigh, he buried his face in the pillow, his heart heavy with the weight of his torment.

But just as he began to drift back into the restless embrace of sleep, a strange sound caught his attention - the melodious call of a cuckoo drifting in through the open window.

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Cuckoos?" he wondered aloud, his senses sharpening as he strained to discern the source of the unfamiliar sound.

But the rhythmic melody persisted, its cadence disturbingly consistent and out of place amid the usual cacophony of cicadas that filled the Red Keep.

A feeling of uneasiness settled over him, the dissonance of the birdsong setting his nerves on edge.

"There shouldn't be cuckoos in the Red Keep..." he murmured, a flicker of concern creeping into his voice as he considered the anomaly.

Something wasn't right.

Chapter 42: The Mysterious Visitor

Intrigued, Rhaegar gingerly propped himself up, careful not to aggravate his wounds, and slowly made his way to the window.

Looking down, he discovered that the source of the strange birdsong was not a cuckoo at all, but rather a small swordsman with curly brown locks.

Syrio stood in the garden below, cupping his hands over his mouth as he continued to mimic the cuckoo's call.

Furrowing his brow, Rhaegar leaned out the window and called down, "What's all the racket at this hour?"

As soon as Syrio spotted Rhaegar, he bowed respectfully and quickly left the room, offering no explanation.

"Strange..." Rhaegar muttered, shaking his head in confusion as he closed the window.

His mind raced with questions. Was his nightmare a vision? And if so, what did it foretell?

But another thought soon interrupted his thoughts. "Why is Syrio here in the Red Keep?"

A sudden realization dawned on Rhaegar, and he called to his squire, Erryk, who was standing just outside the door.

"Erryk, I need to talk to you."

The door creaked open as Erryk stepped inside, his expression alert. "What is it, My Lord?"

Rhaegar wasted no time in recounting his encounter with Syrio.

Erryk nodded in understanding. "Syrio won the duel at the tournament and requested an audience with the king. He pledged his service to you."

"To me?" Rhaegar echoed, surprised at the revelation.

Erryk elaborated, explaining that Syrio had sought to become Rhaegar's sword-master and had remained in the Red Keep to do so.

The pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place, but Rhaegar couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that lingered in the back of his mind.

Rhaegar pondered the reason for Syrio's late night visit. "If he got what he wanted, why did he disturb me in the middle of the night? Could he have something pressing to discuss?"

"It is possible, Your Grace," Erryk replied cautiously. "But given the lateness of the hour, it may not be safe to meet him alone."

Erryk's words echoed the caution in Rhaegar's mind. The king had ordered that he not be left alone with Syrio, and for good reason.

Still, an unsettling feeling gnawed at Rhaegar's heart. His nightmares had made him feel strangely connected to Syrio, and he couldn't shake the urge to meet him.

After a moment's hesitation, Rhaegar made up his mind. "Ser Erryk, accompany me to the garden. I need to know what Syrio wants."

Erryk nodded solemnly, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Of course, Your Grace. Allow me to assist you."

With Erryk's help, Rhaegar made his way down to the garden, his injuries slowing his pace but not dampening his determination.

Under the dim light of the moon, they found Syrio waiting patiently beneath the Fishbeam Tree.

Upon meeting him, Rhaegar's curiosity grew. "Syrio, what brings you here at this late hour?"

Syrio offered a warm smile. "I apologize for the unexpected visit, but something caught my attention and I felt compelled to share it with you."

Intrigued, Rhaegar leaned forward. "Please, tell me what you have observed."

With a thoughtful expression, Syrio recounted, "After the banquet ended, I was strolling through the garden when I noticed two figures slipping away discreetly."

"Who were they? Did you recognize them?" Rhaegar's interest was piqued.

"One was dressed in humble garb, wearing a worn hat. But it was unmistakably your sister, Princess Rhaenyra," Syrio explained, his tone tinged with certainty.

As Syrio described the encounter, Rhaegar's skepticism grew. "And the other figure?"

Syrio hesitated for a moment before answering, "The second figure had a distinct presence, though its identity eluded me. However, if I remember correctly, it resembled Prince Daemon, who left the banquet early."

Though Syrio's words were cryptic, the implication was clear.

Rhaenyra and Daemon had left the Red Keep in secret.

Rhaegar's brow furrowed deeper as he absorbed Syrio's revelation.

Indeed, Rhaenyra and Daemon shared a close bond that was well known throughout the Red Keep.

Since their youth, Rhaenyra had looked up to her uncle with reverence, and Daemon, in turn, had showered her with affection and gifts during their interactions.

Given their relationship, sneaking out together might not have seemed out of character.

However, Syrio's behavior suggested something more troubling.

With a heavy heart, Rhaegar asked, "Is there more to this?"

Syrio's hesitation confirmed Rhaegar's suspicions.

Summoning his resolve, Rhaegar pressed for clarity. "Speak plainly, what else have you learned?"

Syrio confessed, his voice tinged with discomfort, "I overheard Prince Daemon's servant booking a suite at a brothel on Silk Street for tonight."

The revelation hit Rhaegar like a thunderbolt, freezing him in place as he processed the implications.

"Brothel... suite... Demon... and Rhaenyra?"

The possibility, scandalous even for the Targaryens, began to materialize in Rhaegar's mind.

Yet the idea of Daemon's involvement in such matters did not seem inconceivable.

Daemon, known for his cunning and ambition, was not one to adhere to conventional morality.

Erryk interjected, breaking the weighty silence, "Your Highness, this matter demands immediate attention. I suggest we inform His Majesty immediately."

The gravity of the situation dawned on Rhaegar as he realized the potential implications of Daemon's actions.

If he had indeed lured Princess Rhaenyra to a brothel, it would be a serious offense, tantamount to treason against the crown.

"Wait, let's not alert my father just yet," Rhaegar interjected quickly, his tone urgent.

He knew all too well the consequences of his father's rage—a storm that could wreak havoc on their family's stability and reputation.

With a heavy heart, he acknowledged the potential ramifications of this revelation: Rhaenyra's honor could be irreparably tarnished, casting a shadow over her entire line.

His mind raced as he turned to Syrio, seeking clarity. "How long have they been gone?"

Syrio's answer was measured, tinged with contemplation. "About half an hour."

Rhaegar studied him intently, a hint of doubt lingering. "Are you absolutely sure it was my sister? A misidentification could be disastrous."

Syrio's oath was solemn, his conviction unshakeable. "I swear by the old and new gods that my eyes do not deceive me."

Satisfied but wary, Rhaegar gave a firm order. "Let us keep this matter under wraps for now, understood?"

His tone carried a veiled warning, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Syrio nodded respectfully before leaving, his mission accomplished.

Alone in the garden, Rhaegar's thoughts raced with apprehension and uncertainty.

Syrio's sudden appearance had stirred a whirlwind of suspicion, but there was no time to dwell on it.

With a sense of urgency, Rhaegar set out to find Rhaenyra.

"Ser, let's leave at once and find my sister," Rhaegar urged, his concern for Rhaenyra palpable.

The urgency of the situation forced him to act quickly, lest harm come to his beloved sister.

But Erryk hesitated, his brow furrowed in apprehension. "It is a daunting task, searching for her alone might prove futile."

But Rhaegar was determined, his resolve unyielding. "It doesn't matter. Daemon undoubtedly frequents the largest brothel on Silk Street - that is where we must go."

With steely determination, he declared, "Daemon's intentions toward my sister are clear. We must intervene before she is harmed."

Erryk nodded in agreement, recognizing the gravity of the situation. "Yes, Prince. It seems we must solve this mystery before it spirals out of control."

As they prepared to leave, Rhaegar's mind raced with suspicion.

Syrio's sudden revelation raised doubts - were his intentions truly benevolent, or did he harbor ulterior motives?

Pausing midstride, Rhaegar halted their progress. "Wait, Ser!"

He needed time to dissect the tangled web of deceit that surrounded them.

The pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place as Rhaegar considered the implications.

Daemon's lust for power was no secret, and seducing Rhaenyra might be a means to an end.

But Syrio's involvement raised questions--was he truly an ally, or a pawn in a larger game?

In the midst of this intrigue, Rhaegar considered his role.

Should he play the naive child, reporting to his father and risking the king's wrath, leading to Daemon's arrest? Or should he take matters into his own hands and venture beyond the Red Keep to uncover the truth for his sister's sake?

Or could he feign ignorance and allow events to unfold and escalate unchecked?

As Rhaegar pondered, a grim realization dawned on him: regardless of his actions, if even a single soul caught wind of the scandal, it would inevitably spiral out of control and tarnish Rhaenyra's reputation beyond repair.

"Make it known to all! Someone is trying to exploit this situation for their own gain," he declared with newfound clarity.

In that moment, Rhaegar saw through the facade and recognized the machinations at play.

Finding Rhaenyra was imperative, but discretion was key.

They would tread carefully, lest they fall victim to the schemes unfolding around them.

"There must be a way to divert everyone's attention!"

Chapter 43: The Wind Rises in King's Landing

"Ser, do you have any trusted helpers?" Rhaegar asked, his mind racing with the idea of enlisting help.

Erryk nodded, "My brother, Arryk. We share an unbreakable bond of trust."

"Summon him. We need his help."

"Your Grace, he currently serves as Prince Aegon's guardian. If the queen were to discover..." Erryk trailed off, concern in his voice.

"Then we must proceed carefully to avoid detection."

With the urgency pressing upon him, Rhaegar had no time for delay.

"Ser, accompany me to Rhaenyra's chambers and then seek out Erryk."

"As you command, Prince."

Though unsure of Rhaegar's intentions, Erryk chose to stand by him, lending his support without hesitation.

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Outside Rhaenyra's quarters, Cole stood guard on night duty.

When he saw Erryk approaching with Rhaegar in tow, Cole's brow furrowed in confusion. "Your Grace, why are you here at this late hour?"

"I had a nightmare and wanted to speak to my sister," Rhaegar feigned distress.

Cole hesitated for a moment. "The princess has just retired, I fear..."

"Ser Cole, Rhaenyra is my sister. She will want to see me," Rhaegar interjected firmly, catching Cole off guard.

"Open the door and allow me to enter," his tone was now commanding, directed not at Cole but at Erryk beneath him.

Erryk moved to comply, prompting Cole's feeble attempt to intervene, only to be brushed aside.

Rhaegar's reputation hung in the balance; insistent on seeing Rhaenyra, Cole could not stop him.

With a swift entrance, the door closed behind them before Cole could examine further.

Erryk gently laid Rhaegar on the empty soft bed while he took an empty package and a piece of parchment with a drawn map from the nearby table.

Examining it closely, Rhaegar surveyed the scattered robes on the floor, confirming Rhaenyra's covert departure.

Passing the parchment to Erryk, Rhaegar instructed, "Execute the plan as I have outlined it. When you find Rhaenyra, retreat through the secret passage indicated here."

"Will there be significant consequences to following this plan?" Erryk voiced his reservations after hearing Rhaegar's strategy on the way.

"Ser, my sister is heir to the Iron Throne. For her honor, small sacrifices need not be considered," Rhaegar asserted, his hand clasped tightly over his heart. "Whatever the consequences, I alone will bear them."

Erryk's resolve hardened as he remembered past encounters with the White Hart. "I vow to ensure the princess's safe return!"

Under Rhaegar's unwavering gaze, Erryk turned and left the room.

Before closing the door, Erryk positioned himself to block Cole's view and gave a pointed order, "Ensure that the prince's nocturnal conversation with the princess remains undisturbed. Do your duty."

As a newly appointed member of the Kingsguard, Cole held Erryk in high regard and nodded in recognition.

With purposeful strides, Erryk left.

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Silk Street.

Rhaenyra darted through the bustling crowd, relishing the rare moment of solitude amidst the hustle and bustle.

Occasionally, she would accidentally knock over the wares of hapless vendors, her laughter ringing out as if in play.

Daemon kept a close watch, effortlessly thwarting any pursuers in her wake.

Thump.

Rhaenyra collided with a figure clad in gold robes as she dashed into a dimly lit alley, paying little heed to her surroundings.

The gold-robed man grabbed her small arm, his voice deep with accusation. "What mischief drove you to flee in such haste?"

Recognizing the man beneath the helm, Rhaenyra called out his name. "Ser Harwin!"

"Princess?"

Stunned by the sudden encounter, Harwin hesitantly glanced toward the entrance to the alley.

There, Daemon, having caught up with him, approached leisurely.

Seeing her uncle, Rhaenyra pleaded with Harwin, "Please don't."

After a moment's thought, Harwin surmised that it was the uncle and nephew who had embarked on a clandestine adventure.

Releasing his grip on Rhaenyra's hand, he feigned ignorance. "Take care, young one. You may not always be so lucky."

With that, he resumed his patrol as if nothing had happened, brushing past Daemon as he went.

Daemon merely smiled, indifferent to the minor inconvenience.

Before his dismissal as commander of the City Watch, every man in the golden robes had been under his command, loyal to a fault.

"Now that your reckless escapade is over, do you find it pleasant?" Daemon fell in step beside Rhaenyra.

"Who knows when I'll have another taste of freedom," Rhaenyra sighed softly, the intoxication obviously having eased her tension.

Uncle and niece talked as they walked.

As they walked, Rhaenyra's senses tingled with unease.

The lively merchants and jugglers began to fade, replaced by the unmistakable sounds of debauchery.

Daemon led her to an unfamiliar stone building, the cacophony emanating from within growing louder.

Crossing the threshold, the overwhelming scent of drunken revelry and disorder assaulted her nostrils.

Inside, men were carousing, their laughter coarse and lewd, fueled by drink and merriment.

Unclothed women moved about without inhibition, inviting touches and casting sultry glances, their laughter tinged with seduction.

Stunned, Rhaenyra stood frozen, allowing Daemon to lead her further into the debauched atmosphere, her eyes darting around the salacious scene in disbelief.

Rhaenyra found herself in an unfamiliar and unsettling environment, surrounded by sights and sounds that clashed with her upbringing and values.

"What is this place?" she asked, her voice tinged with caution as she surveyed her surroundings.

Daemon's answer was indifferent. "A place where people come to get their needs met."

Rhaenyra's shock quickly turned to indignation. "Are you mad, how dare you bring me here?" she snapped.

Rhaenyra's face stiffened, her features betraying her discomfort as she watched the provocative scene unfold before her.

She glanced nervously at her uncle, unable to ignore the lustful gleam in his eyes that sent a shiver down her spine.

A sense of foreboding washed over Rhaenyra, causing her to subtly assess her surroundings and consider her options. With a quick glance towards the door, she entertained the idea of escaping, realizing that she still had a chance to escape the uncomfortable situation.

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Meanwhile, in a secluded corner of the brothel, two figures dressed in black watched as Daemon led Rhaenyra inside.

"Go ahead, I'll handle things here," one of the black cloaked figures said solemnly, his expression stern under his hood.

"Remember, the bigger the commotion, the better. We must protect the princess's reputation with the utmost precision," the other figure, identical in appearance, asserted. It was none other than Erryk, who had quickly sprung into action.

Erryk moved with agility, quickly scaling the walls of the brothel and igniting flames as he made his way through the kitchen, the horse corridor, and beyond. The brothers' synchronization was flawless, each performing his task with precision.

Entering the brothel's main hall, Erryk navigated silently, deftly avoiding the provocative advances of the girls lining the perimeter as he made his way to the darkened alcove within.

Parting the gauzy curtains, Erryk caught sight of his target for the night.

At that moment, Daemon cornered Rhaenyra, his posture menacing as he approached her.

Rhaenyra pressed against him, terror etched into her face.

Just in the nick of time, Erryk sprang into action, quickly intervening by grabbing Daemon's shoulder and delivering a powerful left hook to his face.

Daemon staggered, unable to retaliate, and collapsed to the ground, dazed.

The sudden turn of events jolted Rhaenyra into action, and she broke free of Daemon's grasp.

"Princess, come with me at once," Erryk urged, tossing Rhaenyra the discarded black robe and leading her away without a word.

As they fled, Erryk cast a disdainful glance at Daemon before delivering a final, contemptuous kick between his legs.

With a resounding thud, Daemon let out a scream of pain and doubled over in agony.

Chapter 44: The Spreading Fire

"Who are you?" Rhaenyra cried in shock, trying to pull away.

Erryk grabbed her hand, quickly wrapped her in a black cloak, and with a strong tug, led her through the back door.

"Who do you think you are, and where are you taking me?" Rhaenyra struggled vehemently, shooting an angry glare at Erryk even though she could not see his face.

Unable to hide his identity any longer, Erryk revealed his face and explained, "You were seen leaving the Red Keep with Prince Daemon, and Prince Rhaegar sent me to bring you back."

"Rhaegar sent you?" Rhaenyra sniffed, her demeanor softening slightly.

"The situation is urgent and it is imperative that your identity remain unknown," Erryk warned, urging her to keep quiet.

Rhaenyra nodded in agreement and complied, matching Erryk's brisk pace.

As they emerged from the back door, they encountered a beggar boy slumped against the wall, seemingly helpless.

Erryk quickly intervened, grabbing the boy by the hair and slamming him against the wall, knocking him unconscious.

Blood splattered as the boy crumpled to the ground.

"He's just a little beggar boy?" Rhaenyra remarked flatly.

"It is common knowledge that most beggars near brothels and casinos are merely bait," Erryk explained, turning back to Rhaenyra. "He's not dead, just unconscious."

Rhaenyra breathed a sigh of relief, her concern for the beggar boy dissipating.

"There's a fire! Put out the fire!"

"Fire in the backyard! Someone come!"

The distant cries echoed, barely audible, as Erryk and Rhaenyra hurried away from the commotion, seeking refuge in a narrow alley.

Meanwhile, Erryk threw a torch through a second-story window of the brothel, his actions shrouded in the darkness of night.

Arson was his secret mission, though it conflicted with the honor expected of a knight. Yet he obeyed his brother's command without hesitation and helped to bring Prince Rhaegar to safety.

For him, serving the young king's eldest son was a matter of duty and respect that far outweighed any loyalty to Prince Aegon, a mere pawn in the king's political schemes.

The winds of change were upon them...

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Erryk quickly led Rhaenyra away from the scene, dodging a group of gold-cloaked men who rushed to put out the fire.

"Stay away from them," Erryk warned in a hushed tone, turning into another narrow alley.

Looking up, he spotted a lone figure in golden robes approaching.

"Who goes there, skulking about with ill intent?" a familiar voice challenged, causing Rhaenyra to strain her eyes to make out the speaker.

Instinctively, Erryk held Rhaenyra back, warning sternly, "Step aside, this is none of your concern.

Drawing his longsword, the brave knight Harwin sneered, "Quite the bold words, defying the authority of the City Watch."

Erryk, recognizing Harwin, hesitated. Though familiar, revealing his identity would jeopardize the secrecy of the mission, forcing him to maintain his disguise.

One hand hovering over his concealed sword, Erryk prepared for a possible confrontation.

"Stop this, we are comrades!" Despite Erryk's efforts to block her, Rhaenyra stepped between the two men.

As she spoke, Harwin's aggression faltered, his suspicion evident. "Princess, what brings you here again?" he inquired cautiously.

Removing her hood, Rhaenyra improvised, "There is no time to explain. I became separated from Daemon, but fortunately the royal guards accompanying me were able to locate me."

She strategically obfuscated the truth to avoid unnecessary complications.

Harwin watched Erryk closely and gave Rhaenyra a polite smile. "In that case, Your Highness should proceed. I must attend to the fire."

"Thank you, Ser Harwin," Rhaenyra expressed her gratitude, gently urging the agitated Erryk to leave.

As they walked away, Harwin watched them intently, his brow furrowed in suspicion as he pondered the situation and the distant fire.

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The fire on Silk Street spread quickly, prompting a swift response from the City Watch. Gold-robed officers from across the city rushed to the scene and joined forces to fight the flames.

Through tireless efforts that lasted until midnight, the raging fire was finally brought under control. However, the brothel at the epicenter of the blaze lay in ruins, reduced to charred rubble along with a dozen neighboring residences.

Though densely populated, the area was evacuated in time to avoid casualties from the inferno.

Meanwhile, Erryk had met up with his brother at the Red Fort. With a shared glance and knowing smile, their mission was accomplished.

Parting ways, the Erryk led Rhaenyra through the secret passage to her room, ensuring her safe return.

Watching the fire from the floor-to-ceiling window of his chamber, Rhaegar recognized it as the work of the Erryk brothers, orchestrated at his behest.

Rhaenyra had fallen into Daemon's trap, and spies lurked in the shadows. Tracking her movements was futile, for wherever Rhaenyra went, she was watched, especially in the brothel.

To erase any trace of Rhaenyra's involvement, the all-consuming fire was used to obliterate any evidence. Even if her presence at the brothel were proven, it would be undetectable amid the rubble.

Rhaegar had preemptively established an alibi for Rhaenyra, ensuring her innocence in the eyes of her father, Viserys, who would quickly silence any accusers without concrete evidence.

Crunch!

The entrance to the secret passage rotated, drawing Rhaegar's attention.

Erryk and Rhaenyra finally appeared before him.

"Rhaenyra, you're back," Rhaegar greeted with a relieved smile, a weight lifted from his chest.

He had feared that Rhaenyra would succumb to the demon's influence and decide not to return with Erryk.

But it seemed she had not disappointed him.

"Rhaegar, how did you know I was sneaking out?" Rhaenyra asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice as she shed her black robes.

Rhaegar glanced at Erryk who had closed the secret passage.

"There was no time to explain," Erryk muttered.

Rhaegar nodded and turned to Erryk. "Did the plan go well, Ser?"

"It went fairly well, but we ran into Harwin Strong on patrol and the princess's identity was revealed," Erryk confessed, a hint of regret in his tone.

Rhaegar frowned, wondering if Harwin would reveal their secret and if he needed to take precautions. As the eldest son of the Hand of the King Lyonel and heir to Harrenhal, Harwin's words could carry weight.

But given Lyonel's reputation and Harwin's own status, Rhaegar doubted the need to silence him.

Watching the cryptic exchange between the men, Rhaenyra interjected quietly, "Harwin is Lyonel's son and respects me, so he shouldn't betray our trust."

"That would be ideal," Rhaegar agreed, acknowledging Lyonel's reliability and assuming his son possessed similar qualities.

Approaching Rhaegar, Rhaenyra's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Who told you? Was it you who set the fire?"

Rhaenyra had pondered these questions during her return.

Erryk's timely arrival and the subsequent fire seemed too convenient to be mere coincidence.

Now, facing Rhaenyra in her chamber, Rhaegar understood her suspicions.

"I have plans for the informant, but I cannot reveal them yet," Rhaegar admitted, concealing Syrio's true identity. It was unwise to alarm him prematurely.

Then, with a serious expression, he continued, "As for the fire, that was my doing. I did it to protect you."

Chapter 45: Sibling Love

His words carried a subtle note of pride, echoing softly in the air.

"Rhaegar, did you help conceal my movements during the fire?"

Rhaenyra's gaze dropped, a sheepish confession dawning as she realized the gravity of the situation.

"Who else but I, your kinswoman, would bear the burden of your nightly troubles?" Rhaegar's face grew stern, his voice demanding attention.

"Silence now, who dared to betray my whereabouts?" Rhaenyra interjected, her hand muffling her brother's voice as she sought out the informer.

Rhaegar dodged her touch with a shake of his head, his gaze piercing. "No fortress is impregnable, sister. Have you acted foolishly only to cower at the prospect of discovery?"

"I never anticipated this, I merely sought respite," she murmured, her words tinged with regret.

The question stirred Rhaenyra's tender emotions, leaving her lost in thought, her words barely audible.

"Was Daemon... unkind to you?" Rhaegar asked, his concern evident.

"He didn't succeed. Ser Erryk intervened just in time," she replied, her hand soothing Rhaegar's hair as she forced a smile.

The evening's events unfolded unexpectedly.

Once she had admired and trusted Daemon.

But learning the truth behind the matter left her with a lingering sense of unease and reflection.

Rhaegar's anger at Rhaenyra's reckless plunge into another's plan simmered as he spoke with an air of indifference.

"Without timely intervention, do you think the tale of you and Daemon patronizing a brothel would have spread far and wide by morning?"

"I slipped away through a hidden passageway, unnoticed..." Rhaenyra's fingers fidgeted, tension knotting her muscles.

Rhaegar's tone remained blunt. "If no one knew, then who informed me?"

"Daemon, the secret watchers, those who tipped me off..." Rhaegar trailed off.

"While you ponder, consider the three factions that are watching you tonight. There are no secrets in this matter," Rhaegar said plainly, prompting her to remain silent.

She wasn't naive; she had simply put too much trust in Daemon.

The sudden revelation of her uncle's hidden agenda took her by surprise.

Had Rhaegar not secretly intervened tonight, she shuddered to imagine the consequences. What twisted version of the rumor would be circulating by dawn?

"I apologize; I was under stress and sought solace in a walk," she confessed, her realization swift but heavy.

"It better be. Daemon has long coveted the throne, and you've been served up like a plump morsel," Rhaegar retorted, his despondent gaze fixed on his sister.

At the sight of her being manipulated like a puppet, Rhaegar's once proud demeanor crumbled, replaced by a deep sense of humiliation.

"What kind of look is that? I am still your sister," Rhaenyra retorted, her voice tinged with wounded pride.

Bristling at the contempt reflected in her brother's eyes, Rhaenyra felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Rhaegar watched her inner turmoil in silence, his head shaking in quiet resignation.

A sneer slipped past his lips, reigniting Rhaenyra's anger, her laughter now laced with frustration.

Rhaegar met her gaze with a sideways glance, a flicker of understanding passing between them.

For an instant, memories of their past, of caring for each other, flooded their minds, tugged at their hearts.

But the moment quickly shifted.

Rhaenyra's eyes welled with tears as she sank to the ground, wrapping Rhaegar in a gentle embrace, her voice thick with self-reproach. "I am deeply sorry for my foolishness. I need your guidance to deal with the aftermath."

"Your value is paramount. You must learn to value yourself," Rhaegar sighed, his words heavy with concern.

"I'm sorry... truly sorry," Rhaenyra sobbed softly.

"I cannot always come to your aid in time," Rhaegar lamented.

Pressing her tear-stained cheek against the softness of her brother's hair, Rhaenyra whispered hoarsely, "Sister, do not fail father again.

Rhaegar choked back his emotions, his arms wrapped around his sister's trembling form, a vow slipping from his lips. "I will stand by you to the end."

As Rhaegar's gentle touch caressed her back, his words pierced her heart.

Reflecting on the night's indulgence, Uncle Daemon's deception, and now the comfort of her brother's embrace, Rhaenyra's emotions churned and tears flowed.

Burying her face in the curve of Rhaegar's shoulder, she wept softly, her grief soaking his collar.

With a helpless smile, Rhaegar glanced at Erryk, who bowed silently and withdrew, discreetly closing the entrance to the secret passageway behind him.

To stay any longer would be rude.

Leaving through the main door was risky with Cole still on guard.

The secret passageway offered a cautious escape.

The tears continued to flow until Rhaenyra's sobs subsided, leaving her drained of strength and Rhaegar's collar wet with her grief.

Rhaenyra rubbed her nose against her brother's collar, her red and swollen eyes showing the effects of her tears.

Rhaegar's expression was one of desperation. "I think it would be wise for both of us to change into clean clothes."

"Huh?" Rhaenyra's confusion was evident as she glanced at Rhaegar's blouse, stained with tears and snot.

Looking at her own rough, patched linen dress, she realized her state of disarray.

"Turn around while I change," she instructed, quickly maneuvering Rhaegar onto his back.

Moving to his blind spot, she shed her linen dress, exchanging it for a nightgown she had retrieved from the closet.

After tossing another nightgown to Rhaegar, she urged, "Wear this for now, as I don't have any pajamas for you."

Pulling off the pink nightgown that covered his head, Rhaegar's expression darkened and he rejected the offer outright. "With my back injury, I prefer to sleep without clothes."

"No, you're staying with me tonight and you're wearing clothes," Rhaenyra insisted, reaching out to begin the exchange.

Rhaegar resisted vehemently. "No, I'd rather sleep alone without them."

The banter continued until the candles flickered out, plunging the room into darkness.

Rhaenyra wrapped Rhaegar, who wore nothing but tiny pants, in her arms and closed her eyes with measured breaths.

Rhaegar, forced into the role of a reluctant embrace, shifted and squirmed until he found a comfortable position to rest his face against.

In the silence of the room, neither sibling spoke, awaiting the embrace of sleep.

...

The next day dawned.

In the early hours, a scout rushed into the Red Keep to deliver a message to the Hand of the King.

Lyonel's expression turned grim as he quickly sought out Viserys, who was in the midst of breakfast.

With a heavy face, Lyonel relayed the news from the night before.

"A scout reported that Princess Rhaenyra and Prince Daemon were seen wandering Silk Street last night, eventually visiting a brothel."

"Curiously, the same brothel later went up in flames, and while Daemon managed to escape, the princess was nowhere to be found."

Viserys' features hardened, his emotions unfathomable.

He was well aware of his brother's nature - ruthless, capable of anything.

He shook his head, forcing a strained smile. "This is a lie; we are being deceived."

"I fervently hope so, Your Grace," Lyonel replied, the gravity of the situation weighing on his demeanor.

Viserys sensed the gravity of the matter at once.

Unlike Otto Hightower, Lyonel would not implicate Rhaenyra, the Heir Apparent, for the sake of his own grandson. His every action was marked by impartiality and integrity.

"Demon! A ravenous wolf!" Viserys slammed his fist down on the table, a wave of rage coursing through him.

The mere thought of Daemon's involvement with his daughter ignited a primal rage within him, urging him to seek immediate retribution.

Still, a semblance of rationality prevailed, and he spoke skeptically, "It cannot be true. Rhaenyra probably slipped away while Daemon was busy in the brothel."

He refused to entertain the idea that his daughter would engage in such debauchery, let alone with Daemon.

"That's what worries me. The circumstances surrounding the fire are suspicious, with rumors suggesting it was intentionally set," Lyonel remarked thoughtfully.

"Daemon's departure from the brothel coinciding with the start of the fire, coupled with reports of his apparent injuries, raises further questions," he continued, his tone grave.

"In contrast, the princess's disappearance without a trace leaves us with no evidence of her presence at the brothel," Lyonel concluded.

Viserys seized on that glimmer of hope, his smile masking a simmering anger. "Since no one can attest to Rhaenyra's presence, we have no proof of her involvement. It seems we have cause for relief."

Beneath his facade of composure, a deep-seated rage simmered.

"Summon Rhaenyra; tell her her father invites her to breakfast," Viserys ordered the servant at the door, his intent clear - to gauge his daughter's reaction.

At this point, regardless of the truth, Rhaenyra's innocence remained paramount. As a father, he had to affirm that unequivocally.

With that established, he would determine the course of action in this delicate matter.

"No need, that's exactly what I want," a voice said from the doorway, and Rhaenyra entered gracefully, her demeanor unflappable, her smile as bright as a blossoming flower.

Viserys was taken aback. "Rhaenyra, what brings you here?"

"Did you not invite me to breakfast, Father? Strange question indeed," Rhaenyra replied, gracefully taking a seat on a round stool, betraying no hint of vulnerability despite her recent actions.

Viserys and Lyonel exchanged glances, both sensing an undercurrent of unease in the air.

Chapter 46: Ultimatum

"Rhaenyra, it has been alleged that you snuck out of the Red Keep with your Uncle Daemon last night and visited an inappropriate establishment. Do you have any explanation for that?" Viserys inquired cautiously, a sense of unease gnawing at him.

Rhaenyra tapped her chin thoughtfully and offered a contrite apology. "I did leave the Red Keep with Daemon last night, but we only ventured to Silk Street to see a play."

"Is that all?" Viserys pressed, looking for any hint of deception.

"Absolutely," Rhaenyra assured him confidently.

Satisfied with her answer, Viserys' mood lifted and he turned the conversation to Lyonel, the Hand of the King.

Rhaenyra glanced sideways at Lyonel, awaiting his question. "What is it, my lord?"

With measured words, Lyonel broached the delicate subject. "Princess, there have been reports of you and Prince Daemon entering a brothel last night..."

"However, in the absence of hard evidence, I would like to hear your account," he added, his tone neutral.

Rhaenyra's denial was quick and firm. "Since there is no evidence, it is undoubtedly false. Someone is attempting to besmirch my reputation, an act tantamount to treason."

Acknowledging her position, Lyonel nodded solemnly. "I will investigate the source of these rumors and see that justice is done for the princess."

At this point, the truth mattered little. Even if there was evidence that Rhaenyra and Daemon had left the Red Keep, all other accusations had been consumed by the fire.

As long as Rhaenyra maintained her innocence regarding the brothel visit, her virtue remained unassailable.

With a final nod to Viserys, Lyonel left, determined to put the unfounded rumors to rest.

The father-daughter duo exchanged incredulous glances and Viserys, unable to contain his excitement, spoke first.

"Rhaenyra, were you aware of the massive fire that engulfed Silk Street last night?" he asked, his tone laced with urgency.

"Thanks to the fire, I was able to avoid the lurking shadows," Rhaenyra replied calmly.

"You knew?" Viserys' astonishment was palpable.

"Rhaegar informed me. He received a tip-off and orchestrated the fire to get me to safety," Rhaenyra confessed truthfully.

Viserys was stunned by his son's cunning, his disbelief giving way to pride. After a moment, he smiled proudly. "Rhaegar is indeed a remarkable young man and a loyal brother."

"No doubt," Rhaenyra agreed, her smile reflecting her father's relief.

She had arrived early in the morning to accept Rhaegar's offer, knowing that the best defense against conspiracy was preemption. Confident in her innocence, she knew that no one could tarnish her reputation by standing firm.

Observing his daughter's delighted expression, Viserys shifted the conversation. "What do you think about it?"

"About what?" Rhaenyra asked, caught off guard for a moment.

"On considering Rhaegar's help in the future, as he did last night," Viserys clarified.

"Rhaegar is still quite young," Rhaenyra hesitated, unsure how to respond.

"That is of no consequence. He'll grow into a fine young man in time," Viserys insisted.

"But I only see him as... I haven't considered..." Rhaenyra trailed off, her mind still reeling from last night's events.

Viserys frowned, his tone grave. "Then who do you have in mind? Surely not some shameless scoundrel?"

"No, of course not," Rhaenyra denied hastily. "I confess that I once harbored a fleeting infatuation with Daemon because of his bold demeanor, but last night's revelation exposed his true nature."

"You have rejected all the suitors I have proposed, and now you reject Rhaegar. What do you expect your father to do about your marriage?" Viserys' disappointment was palpable.

The memory of Daemon's nefarious intentions almost succeeding sent a shiver down his spine and filled him with a sense of urgency.

With a heavy heart, Viserys issued an ultimatum:

"Lyonel has suggested Ser Laenor, son of the sea serpent Corlys, as a possible match for you, and I agree that he would be a suitable candidate."

"Marriage to him would heal the rift between House Targaryen and House Velaryon and solidify your power in the future," Viserys explained, his voice carrying the weight of authority.

After a pause, Viserys fixed his daughter with a commanding gaze, his demeanor regal. "Rhaegar? Laenor? You must choose between them!"

"Can I have some time to think?" Rhaenyra pleaded, her voice trembling slightly in the face of her father's determination.

When Viserys was determined, there was little room for negotiation. But his love and guilt for his daughter softened his resolve and he agreed to give her some time.

But he stressed the urgency of the situation. "The rumors will not disappear overnight. In the meantime, I will move our family temporarily to Dragonstone Island."

"On Dragonstone there are young dragons ready for taming, and both Rhaegar and Aegon have one each," Viserys continued, outlining his plan.

"After they have tamed their dragons, I will travel to the Driftmark. It may be to propose to Laenor on your behalf, or to extend an invitation to the Sea Serpent for your betrothal to Rhaegar."

"Regardless, you must give me an explanation!" Viserys concluded, his words leaving no room for argument as he gestured for Rhaenyra to leave.

Feeling suffocated by the weight of her father's expectations, Rhaenyra bit her lip tightly and hurried to leave the oppressive confines of the room.

Her mind raced as she searched for an escape, desperate to find solace outside the suffocating walls.

After Rhaenyra left, a slender figure emerged from the shadows of the room and wrapped her arms around Viserys from behind.

"You heard everything?" Viserys asked, sensing her presence.

"I had nowhere else to go," Alicent replied quietly.

"Rhaenyra's union with Rhaegar is long overdue. Their marriage would strengthen the stability of the throne," Viserys remarked, his tone tinged with resignation.

"But Rhaenyra still clings to her romantic notions," Alicent observed.

"The heir to the Iron Throne cannot afford to be a naive maiden," Viserys acknowledged, stopping Alicent's attempt at further persuasion and instead kissing her cheek gently.

Dressed under Alicent's watchful eye, Viserys gripped the hilt of the Blackfyre Sword with determination.

"Well, I must tend to my dear brother," Viserys declared before leaving.

At the end of the day, Alicent, dressed in a light gauze dress, remained alone in the room.

She took small, incoherent bites of the bread left on the table and gazed out the window with a distant expression in her eyes.

...

As the morning light filtered through the cloth curtain, it cast delicate shadows on Daemon's face, disturbed by a lingering hangover from the night before. He groaned at his thirst and felt the room spin.

A vision in white, Mysaria entered and pulled back the light-blocking curtains, flooding the room with blinding sunlight and jolting Daemon awake. Cursing under his breath, he shielded his eyes from the glare.

Crouching beside him, Mysaria offered a bowl of water, which Daemon gulped down greedily as if it were a life-saving elixir. His voice gravelly, he asked, "Any news?"

"Unfortunately, my informant was seriously injured, and it appears that last night's fire was a deliberate act," Mysaria replied in her rough, exotic accent, her expression tinged with grief for her informant.

Daemon rubbed his face wearily, a hint of anger in his tone. "It seems my brother never trusted me enough to neglect watching my every move."

"Would you dare seduce your own niece without someone intervening?" Mysaria's voice remained flat, devoid of emotion.

"I cannot say for certain. Power has always been a seductive poison," Daemon admitted, stretching his limbs before pulling Mysaria close, his affectionate gesture contrasting with the seriousness of the situation.

"At a time like this, you're still in the mood?" Mysaria asked, her tone neutral.

"Not particularly. I got a good thrashing last night. Let's see if it still works," Daemon replied, his confidence unshakable as he released Mysaria and began to dress.

Expressionless, Mysaria reminded him, "Don't forget to settle the bill before you leave."

Chapter 47: Alicent's Coaxing

Frustrated after being cornered by her father, Rhaenyra returned to her room to find it empty without Rhaegar's presence. The loneliness of the room only deepened the pain in her heart.

She thought about her father's incessant pressure to marry. Did he think she could not inherit the Iron Throne without a husband? Would the world turn against her if she remained unmarried?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Rhaenyra turned to see Cole, dressed in silver armor and white robes, entering the room.

"Cole, is everything all right?" Rhaenyra asked, hastily wiping away any traces of tears and feigning nonchalance.

With concern etched into his face, Cole replied quietly, "Princess, the queen wishes to speak with you in the back garden."

"Alicent?" Rhaenyra's skepticism remained, finding the timing too coincidental.

Straightening her clothes, Rhaenyra nodded. "Understood, I will leave immediately."

...

In the secluded back garden, Rhaenyra arrived alone and found Alicent already waiting under the canopy of fishwood.

When they met, Alicent's face was etched with concern. "What happened last night?"

Rhaenyra's brow furrowed in suspicion. "What do you mean?"

Alicent continued, her concern palpable. "Disturbing rumors have been circulating about you. Have you been with your uncle?"

Rhaenyra's senses sharpened at the mention of her uncle, and she was instantly on guard.

With a gentle smile, Rhaenyra replied, "Daemon and I haven't crossed paths in years. He simply accompanied me to the city."

"I am your sister. You must confide in me so that I can help you, Rhaenyra," Alicent urged, her tone pleading as she reached out to take Rhaenyra's hand.

"What exactly am I accused of?" Rhaenyra countered rhetorically. "Drinking wine? Sneaking out of the castle in the middle of the night?"

"According to the allegations, you were seen in a brothel with Daemon," Alicent continued, her expression feigning concern and embarrassment as she spoke.

"That is an outrageous accusation!" How could Rhaenyra admit it, she replied verbally.

Alicent, however, did not believe it, "Is that so? You Targaryens have strange customs."

"Daemon obviously doesn't know any better; he's a conniving man with ambitions that know no bounds."

"Shut up, Alicent!" The words came out, and Rhaenyra sternly stopped her from continuing. If she had actually done something wrong, she would not have dared to scold her so loudly. But she was too innocent to let Alicent take her word for it.

Shaking off Alicent's hand, Rhaenyra said, "Questioning my innocence is a treasonous offense, who told you that?"

Alicent was taken aback by her sudden outburst, his eyes darting, "I..... was in your father's bedroom this morning."

"Very well, you come to question me about something that both my father and the Hand of the King have already jumped to conclusions about!"

Rhaenyra's voice was clear and cold as she caught her words, her gaze piercing. "Alicent, Your Majesty the Queen. We used to be sisters, sharing everything, but you've changed so much, I hardly recognize you anymore."

Alicent seemed flustered and tried to backtrack, "It's not what you think. I overheard it and I was worried about you..."

"So you're accusing me and tarnishing my reputation with unfounded accusations?" Rhaenyra's tone became more heated, her frustration obvious.

At a loss for words, Alicent tried to defend herself, "I was only trying to help you, Rhaenyra."

Rhaenyra's smile was tinged with sarcasm, "We went to the tavern for a drink, and when it got late, I wanted to go home. But Daemon wasn't finished and insisted on visiting a brothel."

"We parted on the street and went in different directions."

"I returned to the Red Keep just as a fire broke out in the city, unaware of Daemon's whereabouts."

"I spent the night tending to Rhaegar."

Rhaenyra had meticulously prepared these statements to deflect Alicent's probing questions with unwavering certainty.

Without giving Alicent a chance to respond, she walked away alone, her expression cold.

She saw through Alicent's intentions, realizing that she was trying to discredit her by implying a connection to Daemon.

But Alicent had miscalculated.

...

The disheveled Daemon staggered back to the Red Keep, his steps unsteady, indicating that he hadn't yet sobered up.

As he made his way, Harrold, the captain of the Kingsguard, and two of his men rushed to intercept him.

Without a word, the two guards flanking Daemon grabbed his arms and promptly arrested him.

Harrold regarded Daemon with indifference, his voice devoid of emotion as he spoke, "The King wishes to speak with you, Prince."

Ignoring Daemon's protests, the guards lifted him up and began to escort him to the Hall of the Iron Throne.

"Release me, you filthy mongrels!" Daemon struggled against his bonds, his discomfort evident as he writhed and spat.

But his pleas fell on deaf ears as he was swiftly transported to the Hall, where he was unceremoniously thrown to the cold, black stone floor.

Daemon showed no sign of concern, simply lying face down, the smell of alcohol clinging to him.

Harrold motioned for two guards to stand guard at the door before a stern Viserys emerged from the shadows.

The king, struggling to contain his anger, approached Daemon in a cold voice and demanded, "What have you done with my daughter?"

Despite his belief in Rhaenyra's words, Viserys couldn't resist the urge to seek confirmation once more.

Daemon, in a confused state, let out a hiccup and remained silent.

Viserys' expression changed slightly as he pressed, "Have you nothing to say in your defense?"

"I cannot defend myself if I do not know the charges against me," Daemon replied, showing signs of sobriety.

Viserys, overcome with rage, delivered a powerful kick to Daemon's stomach.

His voice dripping with rage, he charged, "You kidnapped her from the safety of our home to defile her!"

Daemon recoiled from the blow, but remained defiant. "What does it matter? We roamed the brothels of Silk Street when we were Rhaenyra's age."

Viserys, his anger undiminished, retorted, "We were young men then. She was a child, your own niece!"

"Rhaenyra is a grown woman now, the first to ever show me any kindness," Daemon continued callously.

Enraged beyond measure, Viserys lunged at Daemon, grabbing his collar and delivering two powerful blows to his face.

Blood spurted from Daemon's mouth, a tooth knocked loose by the impact.

Viserys, still gripping his collar, seethed, "You will ruin her. After what you've done, what lord will want to marry her?"

"Who cares about these useless lords? You're the king, your word is law," Daemon shot back, the pain stirring a glimmer of sincerity in his words.

Viserys was taken aback. "I have defended you all my life, but your heart is darker than I ever imagined."

With contempt evident in his expression, Daemon sneered in response.

The two brothers locked eyes in the silent hall.

Suddenly, Viserys burst into laughter and taunted, "You didn't get it, did you? My son has foiled your plans."

"What?"

Daemon's confusion was palpable.

Viserys loosened his grip on Daemon's collar and stood tall as he continued, "Rhaegar, my eldest, he outshines you in every way."

"Not only did he see through your cunning schemes, but he values family and loyalty more than you ever could."

Daemon paled, his expression wavering. "Rhaegar sent the mysterious figure last night and he started the fire?"

"Indeed. Quite the clever boy, isn't he?"

Viserys' smugness was evident as he mocked his brother.

Daemon shook his head, his smile fading. "For a boy his age to be so astute, perhaps it's time to reconsider Rhaenyra's inheritance and name your eldest son as the rightful heir."

Chapter 48: Banishing Daemon

"There is no need to interfere with my children. I have plans for them," Viserys warned, pointing a finger at Daemon.

Daemon took a deep breath. "Marry Rhaenyra to me. I'll claim her when she takes the crown, no matter what others say!"

"I will cherish her as if my life depended on it and marry her according to the traditions of our family."

Viserys laughed bitterly. "You already have a wife."

"Yet Aegon the Conqueror had several wives," Daemon argued.

With a quick movement, Viserys drew his dragon's horn dagger and pressed it against Daemon's throat. "You are no conqueror. You're a curse sent to torment me."

Unfazed, Daemon met his gaze. "Marry Rhaenyra to me and we'll restore the dragons to their former glory."

"But you don't want my daughter, do you?" Viserys accused.

"It's my throne!"

Viserys, disgusted by his brother's ambition, replied, "I would rather betroth Rhaenyra to Rhaegar, or even both my daughters to him, than allow you to defile them in your quest for power."

Taking up his dagger, Viserys sighed. "Return to the Vale, Daemon. Reconcile with your rightful wife and salvage what honor remains."

"Or abandon tradition altogether. I don't care."

"Just never show your face to me again."

With that, Viserys wiped his dagger clean and walked away, leaving Daemon alone with his shattered ambitions, staring blankly at the ceiling as he muttered, "Not yet, brother. Not yet."

...

Dusk settled outside as Viserys stood alone at his bedroom window, his gaze fixed on the distant coastline.

Like many of his bloodline, Viserys had a fondness for heights, often finding solace in the elevated vantage points from which he could survey his realm.

Alicent approached him with gentle steps and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Daemon is no longer here," she murmured.

"Good riddance. I have no desire to see him again," Viserys replied, his tone tinged with bitterness at the mention of his brother.

"I spoke to Rhaenyra, and she denies any involvement with Daemon," Alicent informed him.

"Of course. Rhaenyra has her brother to protect her from Daemon's nefarious intentions," Viserys noted with a hint of relief.

"Yes, I only wish my children had such a bond," Alicent confessed, her gaze drifting as she unconsciously fidgeted with her fingernails.

Viserys, oblivious to her distraction, continued, "The blood of the Targaryens runs deep, filled with turmoil and unpredictability. Only those wise enough can navigate its complexities."

"Our children must be wise and united," Alicent agreed with a faint smile.

"I am considering betrothing Rhaenyra to Rhaegar," Viserys suddenly declared, turning the conversation to a more pressing matter.

Alicent's eyes flickered as she drew the curtains. "A wise decision. Rhaenyra is outspoken by nature and Rhaegar will surely grow into a man she admires."

"Do you think Rhaenyra doesn't already like Rhaegar?" Viserys probed, his keen intuition sensing Alicent's underlying thoughts.

Alicent hesitated for a moment before answering, "I know Rhaenyra well enough to discern her preferences in men."

"Yes, you do know her. She has always had a penchant for defying her father, unyielding in her convictions," Viserys mused, a hint of bitterness in his smile.

"We must try to communicate with her. After all, whoever Rhaenyra chooses will be a suitable match," Alicent replied, her voice tinged with hope.

"I pray she remembers the weight of her responsibility," Viserys murmured, leading his wife to the table where he poured them both glasses of wine.

As they shared a drink in the dying light of the evening, Alicent lay on her bed, her expression unreadable, pondering the implications of her conversation with Rhaenyra.

...

Half a month later, at the Lion's Gate, shipping officials shouted orders, directing sailors to load crates onto the waiting galleon.

Viserys stood nearby, arms crossed, his gaze fixed on the ship flying the three-headed red dragon flag on a black background, anchored in the sea.

"Your Grace, the supplies are ready for departure," Lyonel approached, carrying a final list.

"Understood," Viserys replied with a nod.

Behind him, Alicent led Aegon and Helena, each holding a small baby.

Meanwhile, Rhaenyra and Rhaegar lingered at a nearby fruit stand, selecting fresh produce with smiles on their faces.

Nearly twenty days had passed since Rhaegar's burns had healed, a miraculous recovery that Viserys attributed to the blessings of the Seven Gods.

"Come over here! Our journey is about to begin!" Viserys called, and Rhaegar was the first to eagerly respond.

Their destination: Dragonstone Island, where two young dragons awaited their presence.

The anticipation of having dragons of his own consumed Rhaegar's thoughts day and night, fueling his excitement.

Viserys lovingly ruffled his son's hair and remarked with a smile, "The ship is full of fruit, much finer than what the roadside vendors sell.

"I'm curious to see how the fruits aboard compare to those in the Red Keep."

Rhaegar hesitated, then replied, "I have noticed that the fruits within the Red Keep are more expensive. It seems the roadside fruits are of comparable quality but sold at a lower price."

Viserys' smile faltered momentarily, taken aback by his son's astute observation.

Lyonel cut in smoothly, "The fruits within the Red Keep come from different regions, offering a variety not found in the local fruits."

"Though the tastes may be similar, the difference in price reflects the different clientele they cater to."

Rhaegar murmured quietly, his insight surprising Lyonel.

The prince was indeed exceptionally perceptive, perhaps too much so at times.

In the midst of the conversation, Alicent and Rhaenyra arrived hand in hand, their previous coldness thawing with each step.

Their relationship had been strained since their argument, but Alicent's invitation to a tea party had begun to mend the rift between them.

Any further standoff would have displeased Viserys, the patriarch of the family, so they both took a step forward, easing the tension.

...

Into the night.

Sailboats adorned with intricate dragon carvings glided through the waters of Blackwater Bay on the gentle sea breeze.

Inside the lavishly decorated cabin, Viserys appeared pale and struggled to keep his composure as he clung to a barrel, overcome by seasickness.

Alicent and Rhaegar stood by his side, their expressions filled with concern.

It was ironic that Viserys, who had once tamed the largest and most fearsome dragon in Westeros, Balerion the Black Dread, should now succumb to seasickness.

But despite his discomfort, Viserys was determined to witness his son's attempt to tame a dragon and mend relations with the Velaryon family.

Under other circumstances, he would have chosen the excitement of Imperial hunts and jousting tournaments over the rocking of the waves.

"Father, the Grand Maester sent a special medicine before he left. It may help ease your discomfort," Rhaegar said, holding out a glass vial with concern in his voice.

Viserys examined the vial, then nodded, unscrewed the cap and carefully took the pill. He swallowed it with a sip of water, hoping for relief.

"I've been taking a lot of pills lately. Let's hope this one does the trick," Viserys remarked, his tone tinged with fatigue.

Rhaegar offered another vial from his pocket and suggested, "I also have pills to help you sleep. Would you like to try them?"

Having been bedridden for some time, Rhaegar had been in regular contact with Grand Maester Mellos. Upon learning of Rhaegar's frequent nightmares, the Maester had concocted a sedative. After confirming its safety, Rhaegar had brought it with him.

Chapter 49: Green Eyes

Viserys reluctantly swallowed his sleeping pills at his family's insistent urging, then settled into bed to endure the discomfort.

As his breathing gradually calmed, Alicent gave the siblings a warm smile.

In a hushed tone, she advised, "It is getting late, my dears. You should both retire to your chambers and rest."

"Thank you, Her Majesty the Queen," Rhaenyra replied with a smile before she and Rhaegar left the cabin.

Walking down the corridor, the siblings engaged in casual conversation for a few minutes before parting ways and returning to their respective cabins.

...

In the soft glow of the candlelight, Rhaegar stripped and gazed at his reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror.

The remnants of old skin had faded, leaving a delicate white surface where his burns once marred his skin, faintly revealing the extent of the pre-burn area.

"The recovery is remarkable, worthy of blood and fire," Rhaegar muttered to himself as he accessed the system panel.

[Rhaegar Targaryen]

Talent: Dreamer (Gold), Longevity (Green)

Bloodline: Old Valyrian Dragonlord (14%)

Skills: Proficiency in the Old Valyrian language

Relic: Blood and Fire (Fire Resistance +50%)

Evaluation: "The bloodline has undergone further purification, suggesting the discovery of an extraordinary secret."

Rhaegar's gaze lingered on the Bloodline bar, noticing an increase from the original 12% purity to 14%. This was the change his wound had observed since he had shed his skin.

The two point increase in Bloodline purity could only be attributed to exposure to Dragon Flame.

Before Dreamfyre's attack, Rhaegar had encountered only a handful of dragons.

In reviewing the ancient tomes of House Belaerys, he found little mention of humans forming bonds with dragons.

"A dragon is not to be considered a mere tool, but a partner to its rider," the texts said. "The deeper the bond, the greater the power that can be unleashed."

Though mere conjecture from ages past, Rhaegar was swayed by these theories.

He reasoned that increased interaction with dragons could only bring positive results.

"With the sailing ship due at Dragonstone Island tomorrow, I will soon have the opportunity to claim a dragon as my own," he mused.

As fatigue set in, Rhaegar undressed and collapsed onto his bed, pulling the covers over him in preparation for the dragon-taming expedition ahead.

Soon sleep enveloped him, taking him to the realm of dreams.

The scene unfolded once more: the dusky sky, the tumultuous waves, the crackling thunderstorm.

This time Rhaegar stayed awake.

The icy rainwater lapped at his skin, each drop cascading down his body.

Above him, dark clouds swirled menacingly and the wind howled with fury.

"Roar!"

The angry roar of a distant dragon pierced the storm, accompanied by thunder that echoed through the sky and earth.

Rhaegar raised his head, ignoring the rain that pelted his face, and fixed his gaze on the turbulent sky above.

As thunder rumbled overhead, a colossal figure emerged from the dark clouds, silhouetted against the flickering lightning.

Having endured two harrowing nightmares, Rhaegar clenched his fists and fixed his gaze fiercely on the approaching shadow.

His resolute determination seemed to draw the shadow closer, its trajectory shifting to head straight for him.

Rhaegar raised his head defiantly, meeting the shadow's advance with unwavering resolve.

Swift as an arrow, the shadow came closer, until...

"Roar!"

With a resounding roar, the shadow lunged at him, revealing razor-sharp claws that gleamed like polished obsidian.

Deafened by the force of the impact, Rhaegar felt his consciousness slip from the dream realm.

In those fleeting moments, he saw a sight forever etched in his memory.

A pair of eyes.

Dark green, brimming with malice, cunning, and pride.

Deep as the abyss, those eyes locked on Rhaegar with a chilling intensity.

"Ahh!!!"

Startled awake, Rhaegar found himself muttering breathlessly, "Eyes... green eyes..."

The image of that shadow lingered in his mind - a colossal dragon.

Pitch black, with emerald green eyes!

A shiver ran down Rhaegar's spine as he relived the scene from his dream.

Was it fear, or perhaps something else that coursed through him?

His chest heaved, he gasped for air, a bead of sweat coating his brow.

It took several moments for him to regain his composure, the tremors slowly subsiding.

"Hand it over!"

"Now, quickly!"

Lost in thought, Rhaegar leaned back against the bed, his mind clouded by the distant sounds coming from the hallway outside his cabin.

"Who's there?"

With a furrowed brow, Rhaegar rose from the bed and began to dress, his curiosity piqued by the commotion outside.

Pushing open the hatch, he found the corridor deserted.

"Idiot, can't you understand a simple command..."

The familiar voice echoed once more, sparking Rhaegar's intrigue as it stirred a memory deep within him.

"To the left, in the corner."

Rhaegar followed the direction, his steps measured and deliberate.

When he reached the corner, he discovered the source of the disturbance - a pair of young children.

The older child, a robust boy about Rhaegar's age, stood beside his younger sister, who huddled in the corner with her hands clasped over her head.

They were Aegon and Helaena, his half-siblings, engaged in a sibling quarrel.

Aegon's scolding grew louder as he tugged at Helaena's silver curls, a classic display of an older sibling bullying his sister.

Rhaegar considered intervening, but hesitated, realizing that this was a family matter between Aegon and Helaena.

Though not his blood kin, their bond as siblings was undeniable, and it was not his place to interfere with their dynamic.

With a silent step back, Rhaegar chose to observe from a distance, respecting the boundaries of their sibling relationship.

As Rhaegar turned to leave, his intention to discuss Aegon's upbringing with Alicent faltered when he heard Aegon's threatening tone.

"Remove it or I'll snap your fingers."

Rhaegar's steps paused, torn between intervening and letting Alicent handle the situation.

Then Helaena's screams pierced the air, drawing Rhaegar's attention back.

Glancing back, he saw Aegon straddling Helaena, grabbing her arm and tormenting her by squeezing her fingers.

"If you refuse, I'll make you regret it every night."

Helaena shook her head defiantly, tears glistening in her eyes.

Rhaegar noticed that Helaena was wearing the bracelet he had given her.

With a subtle shift in his gaze, Rhaegar's expression darkened as he approached the scene.

Without a word, he silently stepped forward, causing Aegon to release his grip on Helaena's fingers, tugging at her bracelet instead.

"Do you want it?"

Rhaegar's voice echoed from behind him, startling Aegon as he turned to find Rhaegar standing ominously nearby.

Though unnerved by his sickly brother's presence, Aegon tried to maintain a facade of bravado.

"It's none of your business!" he retorted indignantly, though his bravado wavered under Rhaegar's unflinching gaze.

Watching Aegon's growing agitation, Rhaegar remained calm, his eyes betraying no emotion.

As Aegon's eyes darted between Rhaegar's bracelet and Helaena's, a realization dawned on him.

Frustrated, he exclaimed, "How come you two have matching bracelets and I'm left with nothing!"

At the sound of his outburst, Helaena lifted her tear-streaked face, noticing Rhaegar's presence for the first time.

Chapter 50: Aegon's Wailing

"Brother..."

Helaena's face lit up when she saw Rhaegar, her voice tinged with misery as she called out.

Rhaegar glanced at her, his tone neither happy nor angry as he asked, "Being bullied again?"

"Aegon wants my bracelet..."

Tears streamed down Helaena's cheeks as she recounted her ordeal, her young voice trembling with anguish.

"I see."

Rhaegar nodded, rolling up his sleeve to reveal his own bracelet.

Undeterred, Aegon slapped Helaena on the head and admonished, "I'm your brother, not him. Stop calling him brother."

Helaena flinched at the blow, but her gaze remained defiant as she bit her lip, refusing to cower before Aegon.

Undeterred, Aegon continued, "Stop staring at me. I'll teach you a lesson later."

Turning to Rhaegar, he reached for his bracelet and suggested, "Give me your bracelet. Then Helaena and I can each have one, and I won't take hers anymore."

Watching Aegon's chubby hand reach out, Rhaegar smiled knowingly.

But before Aegon's fingers could touch the bracelet, another hand intercepted his.

"What are you doing?"

Aegon's expression changed, his voice tinged with embarrassment as he questioned the sudden interruption.

With a gentle smile, Rhaegar replied, "Since you like bracelets so much, I'll give you one."

With a swift motion, Rhaegar pulled his arm back, causing Aegon to lose his balance and stumble away from Helaena.

As Aegon fell to the ground with a soft scream, he tried to regain his footing, but his efforts were in vain.

Thud

Aegon's back was crushed under the weight of a foot, causing him to scream in pain.

"Ah! What are you doing? Let me go or I'll call mother..."

Desperately trying to wriggle free, Aegon tried to move, but his efforts were met with fierce resistance.

Rhaegar quickly rolled over and straddled him, forcefully restraining his arm and delivering a stern ultimatum: "You broke your own sister's fingers. I'm going to break my own brother's arm. Fair enough?"

"No, please, I was wrong! Let me go!"

Aegon's screams echoed down the hall as Rhaegar continued to apply pressure.

Unable to tolerate Aegon's incessant wailing, Rhaegar removed his buckskin shoes, pulled out two yellowed socks, and shoved them into Aegon's mouth.

"Your own socks, never mind!"

Rhaegar chuckled softly before grabbing Aegon by the hair and dragging him outside.

Having already given Helaena a replacement bracelet, Rhaegar had another one prepared in his cabin, especially for Aegon.

As Helaena watched Rhaegar drag Aegon away like a sack of potatoes, she stood frozen in place, torn between wanting to follow them and being haunted by fragmented memories of a terrible incident.

"Fire... Watch out for the flames..."

Overwhelmed with fear, Helaena screamed in distress, her anguished cries echoing down the corridor and catching the attention of a passing maid.

...

Rhaegar dragged Aegon all the way to his cabin, his grip tightening with each step.

As Aegon's terrified eyes begged for mercy, Rhaegar threw him inside and slammed the hatch shut.

With a scornful sneer, Rhaegar declared, "The bracelet was a gift from me to Helaena. By taking it from her, you disrespect me!"

"Now it's time for you to learn the consequences of disrespecting me."

Feigning a search under the bed, Rhaegar retrieved a replacement fake bracelet from his space bracelet.

Holding the fake up to Aegon's trembling form, he taunted, "Like it? It'll be yours in a moment."

The ship sailed through the cold, damp sea air, but each cabin was equipped with a heater for warmth.

Rhaegar opened the heater and removed the iron sheet covering the coals.

The fiery coals glowed red as he dropped the false bracelet into them.

The steel bracelet quickly absorbed the heat, turning red with intensity.

Rhaegar used a rag to retrieve the scorching bracelet and approached Aegon with an evil smile, beckoning him forward, "Come, dear brother."

"No! You can't do this to me! Father wouldn't allow it!"

Aegon's screams filled the cabin as he desperately tried to back away, his mouth free of the sock.

Ignoring his protests, Rhaegar kicked him in the chest, forcing him to the ground.

With a predatory stance, Rhaegar held the scalding steel bracelet close to Aegon's face.

"Don't you like it? If I promised it to you, it's yours."

Dodging Aegon's feeble attempts to push him away, Rhaegar leaned forward and held the blistering steel bracelet against Aegon's skin with unrelenting force.

...

The handmaiden carried Helaena, who had passed out from crying, and hurried to Alicent's cabin.

Ignoring Harrold's inquiries, she banged hard on the hatch door, her urgency palpable.

When he noticed the unconscious little princess, Harrold's face drained of color. "What happened here?" he demanded.

The maid, too frantic to speak, continued to pound on the door.

Crunch-

Beneath the relentless pounding, the hatch swung open quickly from the inside.

Alicent, clad in a nightgown, emerged, her expression filled with concern as she saw Helaena's limp form.

Fear gnawed at Alicent as she took her daughter into her arms. "What happened? How did Helaena faint?" she asked worriedly.

"The princess collapsed in tears and kept mumbling the names of Princes Aegon and Rhaegar before she lost consciousness," the handmaiden replied, her voice shaking.

"Aegon! What has happened to Aegon and how is Rhaegar involved?" Alicent's distress deepened as she learned of her son's involvement, her gaze piercing the maid's.

The handmaiden recoiled slightly in fear and whispered, "The princess mentioned something about being careful with fire, but I couldn't make sense of it.

Alarmed at her daughter's condition, Alicent's eyes widened, her unease reaching a fever pitch.

"Watch over Helaena," she told the maid firmly, then turned to Harrold. "Ser, something must have happened to Aegon and Rhaegar. I'll look for Aegon; you go to Rhaegar's quarters."

With that, she dashed off, her footsteps echoing in her frantic rush.

Only two steps into her dash, Alicent stopped abruptly in her tracks.

Remembering the mishap at Rhaegar's last birthday party, when Aegon had been shoved into the cake, Alicent's eyes widened with concern.

"I'll go to Rhaegar's quarters; you look for Aegon," she ordered firmly, her voice tinged with urgency.

Sensing an imminent threat to her son, Alicent hurried to where she suspected Rhaegar might be.

Navigating through the ship's vast hold, Alicent traversed deep corridors until she reached a cluster of royal cabins set close together.

As she approached another corridor, she was suddenly assaulted by Aegon's agonized cries echoing through the passageway.

"By the Sevens," Alicent murmured fervently, invoking a prayer for her child's safety as she quickened her pace toward Rhaegar's cabin.

Arriving at the hatch, Alicent kicked it open with fierce determination, ignoring the pain shooting through her feet.

Inside, she was met with a harrowing sight: Aegon, cornered and begging for mercy, while Rhaegar stood over him, brandishing a scorching steel bracelet.

Fury coursed through Alicent's veins as she bellowed, "Stop! Release him now!"

Turning to face Alicent's wrathful advance, Rhaegar's demeanor changed and she forcibly pushed past him, allowing Alicent to cradle the sobbing Aegon in her arms.

With a clatter, the steel bracelet fell to the floor, leaving scorched marks on the wooden surface.

Alicent's shock and indignation surged at the sight before her.

Confronting Rhaegar with fury, she lashed out, "You madman! Aegon is your brother, yet you would subject him to torture with a burning bracelet!"

Rising to his feet, Rhaegar brushed off his wounded pride and retorted icily, "I am not Aegon. He may torment his sister, but I refuse to persecute my own brother that way."

He pulled the steel bracelet from the ground, seemingly unaffected by the searing heat, and cast a scornful look at the stunned Aegon.

"Only a coward would prey on defenseless girls while lacking the courage to face a true challenge," he taunted, his voice dripping with contempt.