

## G.O Thrones 421

### Chapter 421: Encountering Sea Smoke

The environment of the Dornish Desert, where oases are scarce, makes it difficult for civilians to survive, causing them to flock to the Vulture Mountains. This issue, reported earlier this year, has now escalated into a significant problem.

Viserys frowned, confused. "It's just a group of disorderly people. Even if there are tens of thousands, the two passes should be able to handle it."

The Boneway was treacherous, with Blackhaven strategically positioned halfway through. The exit of the Prince's Pass was at Nightsong in the Dornish Borderlands, the territory of Lord Royce Caron, House Caron.

This territory was supported by House Tully to the west and led to Highgarden to the north. Whenever there was a rebellion in Dorne, large numbers of garrison troops were sent to defend The Reach.

Tormund sighed softly and explained, "Lady Jeyne of Eyrie City sent a message that the Sealord of Braavos recruited tens of thousands of mercenaries and transported them to Dorne for support."

Tens of thousands of people sounded like a lot, but in fact, only a dozen or so ships were needed, and they could be smuggled in batches with several round trips. Dorne was allied with the Triarchy and had always been adept at using mercenaries for their charges.

Viserys was stunned, aware of the danger. He stood and looked at the map, pointing out, "The Dornish sent their main force into the Stormlands, and the mercenaries and stragglers poured into the Vulture Mountains. Is this an attempt to fight on two fronts?"

As he said this, his finger pointed at the Disputed Lands and the Iron Islands, his face hardening. "With the Triarchy holding our main forces in check, and the Iron Islands taking the opportunity to invade the Westerlands and the Reach, we'll be stretched thin."

The weaker a person's mind was, the easier it was to see something in the worst possible light. Ironically, sometimes that kind of thinking was very close to the truth.

Lyonel and Otto stood up almost simultaneously and looked around at the map. Corlys' face fell, and the large hand holding the tablecloth clenched with tension.

Hearing the king's speculations, the possibilities seemed great indeed. Otto looked at Corlys and said flatly, "According to the current situation, Dorne has significant intentions of invading the realm, and the Vulture Mountains will be a trouble."

Another layer of meaning was implied. With Dorne paying such a high price, the sneaking up on Sunspear scenario would be difficult to pull off. After all, Qoren was no fool who only cared about his head and not his tail.

Corlys' face darkened even more, and not bothering to argue, he suggested, "There's no problem with sending troops from the Stepstones Islands. Sneaking an attack on Sunspear is more practical than sending reinforcements from the sea to aid the Stormlands."

Since there was a change in the Vulture Mountains, the sooner the war in the Stormlands was pacified, the better. Sunfyre plus two thousand naval forces would be more useful than the five thousand army that the King's Landing had temporarily conscripted.

"What about the Vulture Mountains?" Viserys asked bluntly, his eyes filled with inexplicable meaning.

"We can send word to Highgarden and Blackhaven to fortify the pass," Tormund replied.

"Tens of thousands of mercenaries, tens of thousands of refugees, plus the siege equipment secretly provided by Braavos..." Viserys raised his head, reciting Dorn's home base word for word. "With such thorough preparations, Blackhaven and Nightsong may not be able to hold them."

"Your Grace?" Tormund was confused for a moment, unsure of what the king meant. Otto and the others also looked puzzled, staring at the king in surprise.

It wasn't that fortresses hadn't been lost in history, but it seemed as if the king was almost expecting it.

Viserys felt uncomfortable under the scrutinizing gazes, lightly coughing twice to cover up his discomfort. His expression immediately turned serious. "The Vulture Mountains have treacherous terrain. Hidden threats are difficult to locate; a dragon with the defending army is necessary."

Otto's eyes flickered as he countered, "While it's true that many savages hide in the mountains to avoid detection, the people aiming to attack the fortress will have to reveal themselves."

He casually pointed the holes in the king's argument.

Lyonel nodded, adding, "We don't have any more dragons available. We may have to wait for Prince Rhaegar to return to the mainland."

Laenor's fate is uncertain, and they can't ask Laena, who just lost her son, to fight.

With Rhaenys and Daemon guarding the three city-states, the only dragon riders they can mobilize are Prince Rhaegar and Aegon.

Seeing the objections of his advisors, Viserys straightened his back and declared with determination, "My lords, don't forget that your king is also a dragon rider!"

As he spoke, he wiped the weariness from his face, revealing a few shades of firmness.

Otto said, "Your Grace, Prince Aegon's betrothal feast to Lady Selene has yet to be held. Perhaps you should focus on that matter instead."

"Don't mention these pesky matters to me now," Viserys snapped, his face darkening with disgust. He was disgusted by House Hightower's attempts to profit through his son. Alicent had also been pressuring him to recall Aegon, making a lot of noise.

Lyonel added, "Dorne and the Iron Throne have a long history of enmity. We lost a queen and dragon in the War of Dorne more than a hundred years ago, and now we've lost a Velaryon dragon rider. With all due respect, the kingdom cannot afford to lose the king, even if the likelihood is low."

"Lyonel..." Viserys began, his anger rising, ready to argue.

The old and calm Lyman interrupted quietly, "Your Grace, the defense of the Reach is not as fragile as you think."

Viserys could barely contain his frustration. "I am a dragon rider. My mount is Vermithor, and I've even ridden Balerion. Do you think I'm a braggart or a coward?"

He just wanted to go to war for once. Why did it always seem like he was bound to have an accident? If his sons could participate in the war, why couldn't he, as their father, take action?

The advisors were silent, not daring to challenge the king's harsh words. A king could be a fool or morally corrupt, but no one could call him a coward.

After a moment of silence, Corlys looked around and let out a loud laugh. "See, Our Grace is so competent and doesn't lack the vigor to bloodily wash away the offenders."

He was truly impressed. He had thought that his cousin-in-law and king was still a coward with a weak character. Now it seemed very different.

Viserys, with a solemn face, said, "I'll ride Vermithor south down the Boneway, while Lord Corlys can sneak into Sunspear by boat."

Defense and offense simultaneously.

Corlys stopped laughing, looked around, and said in a deep voice, "Vermithor is an adult dragon second only to Vhagar. I support Your Grace's decision."

The Bronze Fury's name had spread across the continent for decades and had long been deeply rooted in people's minds. At least in Westeros, the Bronze Fury's prestige was greater than Deathwing.

With supporters, Viserys was full of energy and said, "I'm going on a royal expedition, just like a conqueror."

The advisors were silent, quietly looking at each other, unable to find a reason to oppose. It was a good thing that the king dared to go into battle and take on the responsibility of guarding the entire realm.

In Westeros, brave lords were more worthy of following. The brave Heir Prince was the best example. Every lord loved him and was willing to follow him into battle.

The council hall remained silent for half a tea's time, and still no one objected.

In the end, the king's proposal passed.

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Outside the closed door of the meeting hall, two Kingsguards stood tall, guarding the entrance. Alicent, dressed in a green gown, stood nearby, picking her nails anxiously. Her daughter, Helaena, was half crouched with her freckled face pressed against the door, trying to listen to the discussions inside.

Helaena had returned to King's Landing from Harrenhal the night before. That morning she had heard of Laenor's accident and Aemond's disobedience, prompting her to eavesdrop on the meeting.

When the meeting ended, Helaena sat up, her expression blank. Alicent noticed her daughter's faint dark circles and approached her with concern. "Did you not sleep well?" she asked, her voice filled with motherly concern. In the vastness of the Red Keep, caring for her children was Alicent's way of finding a sense of presence.

Helaena shook her head. Alicent reached out and gently stroked her daughter's soft, bouncing cheek. "Don't be afraid. Aemond is well, and Ser Laenor will be blessed by the Seven Gods."

"I'm not worried about Aemond. He has his own fate," Helaena replied, her voice calm and measured.

Her thin eyebrows furrowed as she added cryptically, "I saw a fishmonger, working on a blue island."

Alicent looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Helaena quickly responded, stepping away and heading towards the door. As she walked, she muttered under her breath, "I need to check it out and caution Aemond on the way."

...

Day by day, time flew by.

Stormlands, East Coast.

"Roar-"

As soon as the white clouds parted, the black dragon soared into the air, its vast wings casting a large shadow below.

"Faster!"

On the dragon's back, Rhaegar's silver hair flew wildly, his black robe billowing in the wind.

Cannibal's vertical pupils were cold and indifferent as it lifted its wings across the lush Rainwood, startling countless birds into flight.

One man and one dragon moved with extreme speed, rushing towards Crow's Nest.

Halfway there.

"Roar..."

A sharp roar echoed, and orange and yellow Dragonfire laced with light silver shot into the sky.

The Cannibal's vertical pupils flashed with a cold light, and its flying speed slowed.

Rhaegar's heart filled with fear as he gazed into the distance.

In the southern part of the Rainwood, a greenish-gray castle stood majestically.

At that moment, a light silver dragon hovered in the air, recklessly spitting dragonfire and relentlessly bombarding the castle.

Rumble-

The castle towers were scorched black, the glazed windows shattered, and rolling black smoke rose into the air.

On the tall walls, there wasn't a single guarding soldier, and even the flags were carefully retracted.

A large portion of the defensive walls had collapsed, revealing the castle's dilapidation.

"Sea Smoke!?"

Rhaegar blurted out.

From a long distance away, he recognized both the castle and the dragon.

It was the Mistwood Castle of House Mertyns, and the dragon was Sea Smoke, now riderless.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke's nose sniffed lightly, seemingly sensing danger, and stared at the black dragon approaching from the distance.

Its vertical pupils flashed with a touch of tyranny, and it growled as if in defiance.

Immediately afterward, it spat out another mouthful of Dragonfire at Mistwood below and then twisted its head to soar in the opposite direction.

As he watched Sea Smoke fly away, Rhaegar's mind raced, and he quickly called out, "Cannibal, go after it."

"Roar--"

Cannibal's green vertical pupils appeared gloomy, its wide black wings flapped, and it quickly stormed after Sea Smoke.

A young dragon, less than a third of its size, dared to challenge it. It didn't know what was good for it!

The two dragons chased and fled, flying over the territory of Mistwood.

Sea Smoke flew very fast and was in a strange state.

Whenever it passed a village, even if it was unremarkable, it would lower its stature for a dive.

"Roar..."

Sharp and violent cries echoed as Dragonfire plowed through the villages without mercy.

Chapter 422: Dragon Taming Whip's Ability

"Roar--"

Cannibal roared arrogantly, its body resembling a black meteor as it rushed toward the top of Sea Smoke's head.

Sea Smoke looked up sharply, feeling an overwhelming sense of oppression.

"Cannibal, catch it!" Rhaegar commanded against the gusty wind.

With its rider gone, Sea Smoke had been retaliating with indiscriminate attacks. It was only right to stop it and force it into submission.

Boom--

Cannibal's body dived, and its dragon maw spewed Dragonfire. Ghostly green flames like smoke and mist enveloped the light silver dragon.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke cried out in fear and flapped its wings to flee. But Cannibal was faster, moving like a dark cloud and clearing obstacles with its eerie green Dragonfire.

As Sea Smoke flew some distance away, the adhesive flames clung to it. The light silver scales ignited with green fire, making its spine look like it was covered in green hair.

As a young dragon, Sea Smoke's scales lacked the thickness and resistance to withstand such an assault. It screamed miserably, closed one pair of vertical pupils, and quickly rushed out of the Dragonfire's scope.

Poof---

Sea Smoke's head burst through the terrifying Dragonfire, tilting as it spat out a large mouthful of its own flames. The Dragonfire formed a fiery curtain, through which Sea Smoke plunged, trailing wisps of black smoke.

Rhaegar watched the scene with surprise, letting out a surprised "Huh."

Sea Smoke had broken through the Dragonfire, and the green flames covering its body weakened visibly. It cleverly used its own fire to contain the spread of the enemy's flames and mitigate the pain.

"What a smart dragon," Rhaegar's eyes lit up. He bowed forward and called out, "Cannibal, Dracarys!"

Among the new generation of dragons, Sea Smoke had the most combat experience. It had seen battle and fought other dragons. Its decisive response to Cannibal's Dragonfire surpassed Syrax and Sunfyre.

"Roar!!!"

Cannibals bared its teeth, the dragon's head rising high as its swooping stance turned into a glide. It opened its abyssal mouth, spraying Dragonfire.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke let out a mournful cry as it was struck again. The light silver scales on its body burned to a crisp, fluttering to extinguish the attached Dragonfire. But the second wave of green flames from Cannibal descended with overwhelming force, leaving Sea Smoke with no power to fight back.

At that same moment, the black dragon swooped down, its massive body eclipsing the light, and extended its sharp claws.

Slash!

One claw gripped Sea Smoke's neck while the other embedded itself in the scales along its spine.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke thrashed wildly, struggling to free itself.

Boom--

The two dragons wrestled in the air, entangled, and crashed to the ground.

Sea Smoke landed heavily, dragon blood spurting from its mouth, its body writhing and twisting like a silver snake. Its wings spread wide, creating a tragic and striking image.

"Roar!"

Cannibal roared triumphantly, its claws pressing down on Sea Smoke's neck, its green eyes filled with arrogance and disdain.

Sea Smoke trembled all over, its chest and abdomen scales shattered and bleeding. Facing Cannibal, it couldn't muster a fraction of its strength. The fate of Morghul flashed in its mind, and Sea Smoke wailed.

Cannibal was unmoved, standing over the young dragon with a menacing presence.

"Cannibal, that's enough," Rhaegar called out, smiling helplessly from the sidelines.

Cannibal, however, didn't seem to heed him. Its green eyes glowed ominously, and its dragon maw nearly drooled with anticipation.

Looking around, there are only two dragons and visible smoke on the horizon. The villagers nearby were certainly unlucky.

Rhaegar sighed and jumped off Cannibal's back.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke lowered its head and squealed sorrowfully, its wings and tail flailing, stirring up dust.

Cannibal pressed harder with its claws, nearly crushing Sea Smoke's neck.

Sea Smoke let out a shrill scream, its body stiffening momentarily, its tail pointing skyward.

"Alright, you're all old comrades. Be gentle," Rhaegar spread his hands, trying to calm Cannibal.

Cannibal's green eyes glared with disdain, snorting heavily. The sulfurous heat nearly blew Rhaegar off his feet.

Rhaegar laughed and pointed, the man influenced the dragon and vice versa. Since he became a dragonborn, this big brute has become more rebellious.

Ignoring Cannibal, Rhaegar walked toward Sea Smoke and spoke in the dragon taming spell language, "Suppress Anger."

His voice was magnetic and gentle, with a slightly fluctuating tone.

"?"

Sea Smoke's vertical pupils widened, and it stopped its frantic thrashing. It seemed to understand.

Rhaegar faced the dragon's head and slowly approached. "Suppress your anger and return to Dragonstone Island."

This was his true purpose. With Laenor gone, Sea Smoke shouldn't remain in the wild; Dragonstone Island was its rightful place. The appearance and death of Morghul had already stirred too many dark thoughts and covetous eyes across Westeros and Essos.

Rhaegar regretted Laenor's murder deeply; the two had shared a close camaraderie since childhood. But the dragon belonged to the Targaryens.

"Roar..."

At the mention of his rider's name, Sea Smoke recalled the pain and thrashed uncontrollably. Its mournful roar echoed loudly.

Rhaegar covered his ears, his inhuman frame unable to withstand the dragon's scream. His eyebrows furrowed as he sensed something was wrong. The roar carried notes of disappointment and sorrow.

Rhaegar murmured softly, "This dragon is still looking for its rider."

Sea Smoke wasn't merely venting its anger but searching desperately. Every failed attempt resulted in an attack.

Rhaegar's brows gradually relaxed, and his mood grew complex. Ancient texts from various Dragonlord families and the Targaryen Brief History all emphasized that dragons possessed intelligence comparable to humans. With intelligence came emotions.

Sea Smoke was hatched on Dragonstone Island and had been with Laenor for over twenty years. Their bond was deep. The emotions of a dragon were strong and pure.

Rhaegar's eyes softened as he tried to soothe the beast. "Quiet!"

Just as Balerion's end, Vhagar's wail, and Vermithor's remembrance of his old master, Sea Smoke needed to be comforted.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke ignored him, its wings and hind legs straining to break free from the Cannibal's grip.

"Roar!"

Cannibal's eyes remained indifferent. Its claws tightened, easily suppressing the struggling dragon. In Cannibal's view, a dragon caught in its grip had no chance of escape.

Wild dragons survived through strength, endurance, and speed. Cannibal, especially in terms of speed, was unmatched. Against it, even the oldest and strongest dragons couldn't keep up.

"Roar..."

The brief moment of freedom vanished as Cannibal pressed down harder. Sea Smoke hissed in agony, its neck nearly embedded in the earth.

Dragons were inherently restless, each with a fierce personality. Facing constant calamities, Sea Smoke's desperation grew, and it rebelled without care.

It opened its maw and turned to attack the black dragon. Cannibal's claws tightened, extinguishing Sea Smoke's Dragonfire.

Sea Smoke's roar was cut off, its body twisting unnaturally under the pressure. Cracks appeared in its flesh as its spine strained against the force.

"It's going to fight to the death?"

Rhaegar's eyes widened, and he instinctively stepped back. He wasn't afraid of Dragonfire, but the thought of Sea Smoke's desperate struggle filled him with concern.



"Roar..."

Sea Smoke chirped with a sobbing sound, its broad wings sweeping back and forth, its robust hind limbs plowing furrows into the ground.

A few paces away, Rhaegar heard the crunching of Sea Smoke's neck and spine. Was it an act of anger or fear?

Watching the dragon's wings pivot like siege hammers, Rhaegar was grateful for the foresight to keep his distance.

"Roar!"

Annoyance surfaced in Cannibal's green vertical pupils, and the dragon's muzzle twisted into a hideous arc.

Sea Smoke rolled, spraying dragon's blood, the smell of which triggered Cannibal's predatory instincts.

Snap--

In a flash, a long, black whip flew across the sky, striking the top of Sea Smoke's head with precision.

"Roar!"

Sea Smoke screamed miserably, its body collapsing into a heavy heap. Between the two silver-white curved horns on its head, a slender whipping mark appeared, stark and clear.

Rhaegar cocked his head, his right hand still holding the dragon taming whip, which shimmered with an ebony light.

It won't listen? Then let's just hit it with a whip.

"Roar..."

After a moment of submission, Sea Smoke's vertical pupils widened in anger, and it struggled even more intensely.

"Doesn't work? One more time."

Rhaegar muttered, and his hand moved swiftly and forcefully. Fire magic power infused the grip, merging man and whip.

Crack-

The whip's length grew several times, like a spirit snake emerging from its hole, biting down on its prey. The whip's ebony light blossomed, and the sinewy body seemed to come to life, strangling Sea Smoke's neck.

The next second, the fine scales on the whip's body trembled and embedded in the gaps of Sea Smoke's scales, locking the dragon in place.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke's cries abruptly ended, and its head slammed to the ground, as if it had lost all its strength. Rhaegar clenched the grip, his body lunging forward with the whip's tugging.

Sea Smoke's vertical pupils suddenly became aware, and its struggling slowed. Rhaegar's gaze was hopeful as he used the dragon taming spell language, "Don't move, stay calm!"

For the first time using the dragon taming whip, Rhaegar was eager to see its effects. Sea Smoke heard the voice, and the dragon taming language echoed in its mind, compelling compliance. With a plop, the dragon fell to the ground.

Rhaegar's face changed slightly as he staggered forward, following the whip's pull. "You're a good dragon, so much strength."

He couldn't help but smile. The Dragon Taming Whip's inscriptions on the grip glowed with ebony light, and the length remained constant. Observing Sea Smoke's state, Rhaegar discerned some clues.

The Dragon Taming Whip combined the divine effects of Toughness, Activity, Binding, and Strengthening Binding Spell. Whip lashes caused dragon pain, while the whip's binding forcibly awakened the raging dragon.

"Worthy of being a dragon taming tool, the effect is outstanding."

Rhaegar couldn't contain his excitement. Ancient Valyria had thrived for so many years, having such magical tools was not unexpected. Putting it on the battlefield, a Dragonlord wielding a dragon taming whip would be invincible.

A flash of insight crossed his mind. "If the Dragon Taming Whip is this powerful, wouldn't the Dragon's Horn that calls upon dragons be invincible?"

He shook his head. The Dragon Taming Whip specialized in controlling dragons. The Dragon's Horn had sparse written records, with no detailed efficacy. It was roughly described as calling for the return of distant partners.

There was a premise: what was the number of partners called for?

Chapter 423: Dorn's Reckoning

"Ancient Valyria's strength lingers on."

Rhaegar sighed with admiration as he loosened the dragon taming whip's hold on Sea Smoke.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke shook its head and gasped deeply, the whip's strangling grip nearly suffocating it.

"Sea Smoke, I won't stop you from searching for Laenor, but you're not allowed to go around attacking anymore."

Rhaegar wrapped the dragon taming whip around his arm and walked fearlessly towards the dragon. Sea Smoke's vertical pupils were filled with confusion as it continued to gasp for air.

Rhaegar held out his hand, palm facing the dragon's muzzle. He understood the bond between dragon and rider, and he didn't want to force Sea Smoke back to Dragonstone Island, but he had to stop it from causing more damage.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke seemed to understand, stretching its head forward despite its neck and spine being clamped down by Cannibal's dark, sharp claws. Cannibal glanced down, revealing its interlocking fangs.

Despite both being dragons, the size difference was staggering. Cannibal's massive wings could easily envelop Sea Smoke, making the younger dragon seem unusually small by comparison—only about a quarter of Cannibal's size.

Rhaegar looked at his Great Evil Dragon and smiled helplessly. "Cannibal, let go of it."

His dragon blood granted him an extra ability: sensing a dragon's emotions. Earlier, his blood had burned hot, representing Sea Smoke's intense hostility. Now, with the blood flowing normally, he sensed no immediate danger.

"Roar—"

Cannibal growled a warning but moved its thick, sharp claws away. Sea Smoke twisted its body and retracted its spread wings.

"Sea Smoke, give me an answer."

Rhaegar's tone was firm. Sea Smoke's vertical pupils flashed with struggle, but after a brief hesitation, it approached, touching its light silver scales to the boy's outstretched palm.

Rhaegar's eyes burned as he rubbed Sea Smoke's muzzle, feeling the cold, smooth texture of its scales, so different from Cannibal's rougher hide.

"Good, obey."

"Roar...."

Sea Smoke roared softly, its body relaxing as it slowly climbed to its feet.

Rhaegar gazed at Sea Smoke, a flash of pity in his eyes.

It was highly likely that Laenor had met an untimely end.

All the current Targaryens controlled a dragon, and his child was yet to be born. Otherwise, he might have attempted to tame Sea Smoke, potentially weakening the House Velaryon in the process.

Rhaegar's mind raced with thoughts. According to intelligence, Laenor was probably killed by his current lover, Cole. This theory was supported by Cole's disappearance and the discovery of Laenor's former lover, Joffrey, hidden in the barracks. As for Corlys, the Sea Snake...

"With Laenor gone, the Sea Snake is without an heir," Rhaegar mused with mixed feelings.

Sea Snake and Aunt Rhaenys were too old, and their granddaughters were almost grown, making it impossible for them to have another child. The Velaryon House had some branches, but with Sea Snake's power-hungry personality, he wouldn't willingly give up control.

"Heh, a generation that fights for power and has no successors," Rhaegar laughed darkly.

"Roar..."

Sea Smoke arched its head, staring warily at the black dragon, then turned and lifted its wings to take off. Cannibal's green vertical pupils flinched as its wide wings spread out.

"Cannibal, let it go."

Rhaegar watched the light silver dragon's figure and spoke out to stop it.

Sea Smoke wouldn't leave the Westeros continent. If it couldn't find Laenor, it would naturally return to Driftmark Island or Dragonstone Island. It just so happened that Jeyne was pregnant, and the two young dragons, Stormcloud and Tyraxes, were not enough to share. Sea Smoke was also an option.

As the dragon's shadow disappeared into the sky, Rhaegar mounted Cannibal and said, "Cannibal, fly!"

"Roar--"

Cannibal rose into the air, soaring westward along the Rainwood.

...

Stonehelm

The gray walls of Stonehelm bore the scars of relentless bombardment, marked by the devastating impact of rolling stones and giant crossbows. Steel spears jutted out from the battlements, lodged deep and immovable.

Atop the towering tower, a new flag bearing the "Black Gate" insignia flapped in the wind, having replaced the "Black and White Swan" banner of House Swann.

"Roar!"

A powerful dragon roar echoed across the landscape, a mud-colored dragon casting a massive shadow as it circled overhead.

"Dracarys!"

The silver-haired Aemond rode upon the dragon's back, a gleeful grin spread across his face as they dove towards the city.

Sheepstealer's chaotic vertical pupils gleamed as it plummeted downward, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire, its flames speckled with mud and debris.

"Dodge! The dragon is coming!"

"Load the Scorpion Crossbows!"

Panic seized the Dornish soldiers on the city walls, their voices rising in terror.

Boom--

Dragonfire swept across the ground, igniting the walls and sending screams into the air as brown flames licked up the stones.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Several powerful scorpion crossbows on the battlements fired their steel-tipped bolts.

"Roar..."

Sheepstealer shrieked, deftly dodging the incoming projectiles with a powerful flap of its wings.

Aemond's eyes sparkled with excitement as he commanded, "Sheepstealer, burn them all!"

The dragon snorted and soared over the city, unleashing another burst of Dragonfire, targeting a new position each time.

Grinning, Aemond looked down at the chaos below, watching the Dornish soldiers scatter.

Upon hearing of House Swann's downfall, he had come swiftly, riding the fierce Sheepstealer and leading two thousand storm warriors.

His smile unwavering, Aemond drew a three-foot-long keeled horn from his back, took a deep breath, and blew it with all his might.

Wooooo~

The solemn sound of the horn cut through the din of battle, its call reaching every corner of the besieged city.

"Charge!"

At the sound, the Storm Knights surged forward, brandishing thick shields as they sprinted towards Stonehelm.

The Dornish defenders, doubly nervous, fired back through the arrow slits with Myr's specialized triple-shot crossbows.

Behind the walls, a dozen stone throwers stood ready, loaded with heavy stones to hurl down upon the attackers.

Boom! Boom!

Rolling stones crashed into the path of the storm knights, causing significant casualties instantly.

"No retreat! Keep charging!"

The commander shouted at the top of his lungs, holding his giant shield high and leading the charge.

Encouraged by his example, the warriors surged forward, braving the rolling stones and crossbow bolts raining down from the walls.

Throughout history, the attacking side had to outnumber the defending side or face certain death. Yet, they continued with courage and determination.

Unconsciously, they glanced up and saw the rotting, mud-colored dragon hovering above, bombarding the city walls again and again.

It was Sheepstealer's presence that imbued the Storm Knights with an unyielding spirit. The Targaryen princes led the way on the battlefield, and the firepower of a full-grown dragon made the assault more manageable.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer shifted to avoid a scorpion crossbow attack and retaliated with a blast of Dragonfire.

Aemond's face beamed with pride, showing no signs of fear or surprise.

His brother had taught him the art of war: use dragon firepower for suppression, then send in the troops to break through, even when outnumbered. Aemond had absorbed this lesson well.

Inside the inner wall, Olyvar Yronwood's expression darkened. He barked orders, "Archers, move out! Coordinate with the scorpion crossbows to bring down the dragon!"

"Yes, my lord."

The adjutant replied and relayed the command.

Soon, a group of well-equipped archers appeared at various high points around Stonehelm. At the signal, they unleashed a rain of arrows.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer spewed Dragonfire before quickly disengaging from the low-altitude combat. The Dragonfire's range was limited, necessitating a dive with each attack.

Though the iron arrows couldn't penetrate Sheepstealer's scales, they managed to harass and distract it.

Sheepstealer's deep brown pupils flashed with curiosity as it glanced around. While the arrows didn't break its defenses, they still caused some discomfort.

"Sheepstealer, Dracarys!"

Aemond dropped his keeled horn and urged the dragon on with a slap to its back.

Sheepstealer grunted and reluctantly swooped down.

Aemond, not one to be gentle, commanded, "Aim at the archers!"

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer hissed and glided sideways over a row of archers hiding behind the women's wall, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire.

Boom-

"Help, I'm on fire!"

"Run..."

Dozens of archers screamed in agony, some burning to death instantly, while others ran around like headless chickens. One unfortunate archer, in his panic, fell off the city wall, meeting a grisly end on the ground below.

At the base of the wall, Storm Knights formed a protective shield wall as they pushed a siege wagon toward the city gate. The wall, riddled with shooting holes, allowed for crossbow bolts to be fired through the gaps, hitting the warriors with deadly precision. Many fell, unable to shield their vital areas from the assault.

Rumble...

Without siege ladders, the Storm Knights resorted to brute force, sacrificing lives to break through the city gates.

Olyvar Yronwood, watching the coordination between the dragon and the army, grew increasingly concerned. "Bring out the old and weak of House Swann!" he ordered, his voice filled with urgency.

The situation was dire, and the city seemed likely to fall. Olyvar hoped the Targaryen boy would be reckless enough to do something that would make him infamous across the continent.

Though his expression was grim, Olyvar remained calm inside. The invasion of the Stormlands was part of a larger strategy devised by Prince Qoren. The primary goal was to seize supplies and, if possible, occupy Stonehelm as a valuable foothold. If the city couldn't be held, they could always retreat.

Prince Qoren's real goal was the Prince's Pass and the Boneway, the two seemingly impregnable routes into the Riverlands. Looting the Stormlands was only a prelude to plundering the Reach.

Dorne was impoverished, and this year's harvest was particularly poor. War was necessary to survive, and it provided an opportunity to gain the support of various hidden allies.

The Iron Throne's control over the Triarchy and the Stepstones Islands meant that Dorne's access to the sea would soon be cut off. With the Targaryen Heir Prince's ruthless nature, Dorne's destruction seemed inevitable unless they acted now.

"Roar!"

Above the city walls, Sheepstealer swooped back and forth, targeting the archers hidden in the shadows.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Scorpion crossbows fired repeatedly, trying in vain to intercept the fierce, rotten dragon.

Aemond poked his head out, scanning the chaotic battlefield below, feeling a surge of anxiety. His attack strategy had seemed sound, but numerous issues had arisen. The siege wagons were ineffective, and the Storm Knights couldn't breach the city gates.

Sheepstealer, while attacking the archers, had to divert his attention to bombard the Dornish soldiers on the walls, spreading his firepower thin. Dornish soldiers retaliated with stones, rolling logs, and flaming oil, inflicting heavy casualties on the Storm Knights.

Aemond's face hardened with frustration as he realized that despite their efforts, the battle was slipping out of control. The Storm Knights fought valiantly, but without breaking through the gates, they were trapped in a deadly stalemate.

Chapter 424: Aemond's Petty Thoughts

"Sheepstealer, focus on the soldiers at the city's head first!" Aemond commanded, abandoning his attempt to attack the archers.

The Sheepstealer's dragon head turned upward, reversing its direction, and it unleashed a torrent of Dragonfire toward the Dornish soldiers defending the city.

Boom...

The brown, mud-colored Dragonfire cascaded down, igniting the oil with a loud bang and setting the rolling logs ablaze. A brilliant blood-red glow illuminated the gray city walls.

"Hahahaha..."

Above the blood and fire, the ugly, rotting mud dragon soared back and forth, accompanied by Aemond's reckless laughter.

Whoosh! Whoosh! In an instant, several steel spears flew towards Sheepstealer, attempting to level the playing field.

The Sheepstealer dodged nimbly, roaring in defiance.

Suddenly, there was a commotion on the walls. Dornish soldiers shoved a dozen old and infirm women and children towards the edge.

The Dornish officer hid behind the women's wall and shouted vilely, "Retreat at once, or we'll kill all the prisoners!"

With that, the dozen old and weak women and children were pushed forward by spears.

Below the city wall, the Storm Knights hesitated and looked up at the group of captives.

Seeing the familiar faces, many of them broke into curses of disdain and anger.

"Dracarys!" Aemond was too lazy to waste time negotiating.

"Roar..."

Sheepstealer swooped down and unleashed a mouthful of Dragonfire onto the city wall.

With a pop, the explosion sent up a mushroom cloud of smoke and fire, engulfing the captives.

Before the Dornish could react, Sheepstealer circled back and sprayed Dragonfire again.

Boom...

Dozens of Dornish soldiers were incinerated, leaving charred remains.

The speed of this attack caught everyone off guard. Soldiers on both sides were stunned, not expecting the captives to die so quickly.

"What are you waiting for? Attack the city!" Aemond crouched on Sheepstealer's back, urging his troops forward.

The siege reached a climax.

The Dornish soldiers defended the city, while the Storm Knights attacked with renewed vigor.

A fierce stalemate formed between the siege wagon and the city gate.

Aemond and Sheepstealer's assaults caused significant casualties.

Despite this, the Dornish held their ground, delaying the Storm Knights' breakthrough.

As time passed, casualties on both sides mounted.

"Roar--"

A pitch-black dragon shadow suddenly appeared, diving headlong through the clouds, trailing rolling green fire.

A cold voice, like that of a waxing moon in winter, rang out.

"Retreat!"



An aura of ashes swept across Stonehelm, causing Sheepstealer to turn its head in fear and flee with its rider.

"What are you doing? Don't run away!" Aemond was confused, struggling to comprehend the abrupt retreat.

The earth shook as infernal green flames formed a massive fireball, crashing into the gray city wall like a meteorite.

In an instant, the wall seemed to melt and collapse, resembling a candle disintegrating under intense heat.

"Roar!"

Another thunderous dragon roar echoed through the battlefield as a blue dragon burst forth from the churning clouds above.

Helaena, her expression firm, shouted, "Dracarys!"

Dreamfyre's sleek and well-proportioned body darted down like a streak, unleashing Dragonfire.

Miserable screams followed as a group of archers hiding in the shadows were incinerated into ash.

It was midday, and three massive dragons hovered in the air, each a different color, like three blazing suns.

Aemond stared in astonishment at his siblings who had appeared out of nowhere.

Rhaegar shot him a stern look and admonished, "What are you staring at? Focus on the battle! I'll deal with you later!"

"Huh?" Aemond stammered, feeling a pang of fear.

Dreamfyre brushed past Sheepstealer, and Helaena, tense and determined, warned, "You're in trouble now."

"Don't..." Aemond extended a hand, trying to explain himself.

Helaena shook her head, her expression cold, and flew away on Dreamfyre, not wanting to waste time on her brother.

The siege was far from over, and there was no time to deal with sibling squabbles.

Aemond turned to Rhaegar with a pleading look, as if to say, "What did I do wrong?"

"Roar--"

Cannibal didn't give him a chance to ponder, ascending high into the air before diving back down with a powerful swoop.

Rhaegar's expression remained calm, his hair whipping about as if it had a life of its own.

Boom--

The black dragon hovered in mid-air, its massive form blocking out the sun before landing steadily on its hind feet just a dozen meters from the ground.

Dust billowed, enveloping the battlefield.

The Storm Knights trembled, momentarily forgetting to continue their assault in the presence of the formidable dragon.

Rhaegar raised his chin and commanded, "Get out of the way!"

The Storm Knights quickly scattered in all directions, abandoning even the siege weapons.

Rhaegar felt a surge of satisfaction and patted the back of his pitch-black dragon.

"Roar--"

Cannibal roared mightily, its powerful tail whipping forward like a battering ram.

With one swift blow, the city gate shattered into rubble.

"Gulp~"

The Storm Knights stared wide-eyed, swallowing hard to suppress their awe.

The solid wood doors splintered into pieces, and the reinforced iron crumbled, reducing the once formidable gate to tatters in seconds.

Rhaegar roared, "The city is breached! Charge!"

"Long live the Young Dragonlord!"

"Long live the prince!"

The Storm Knights cheered and surged into the city with their massive shields held high.

Fighting for the Targaryens was exhilarating.

The dragons made the battle seem almost effortless.

Rhaegar watched in silence, instructing Cannibal to take to the skies for an aerial assault.

"Roar..."

Cannibal let out a low growl, its tail lashing wildly.

Fortunately, the city gate was not as sturdy as it appeared, otherwise, the dragon's wings might have been injured.

Rhaegar gave the dragon a knowing look, indicating he understood its impatience.

He had intended for Dragonfire to clear the way, but Cannibal's brute force was equally effective.

After a moment, the black dragon soared back into the air.

Dreamfyre and Sheepstealer's coordinated attacks had already dealt devastating blows to the defending soldiers.

The spectral green Dragonfire rained down, and the battle quickly turned in favor of the Targaryens.

"Run, the dragons are coming!"

"To the secret passage, quickly!"

The city was engulfed in flames, and the Dornish soldiers' cries of anguish filled the air as they fled, their bodies ablaze.

...

As night fell, Rhaegar, clad in black robes, strode purposefully through the gray city walls. His siblings, Helaena and Aemond, trailed behind him like shadows. Helaena wore a green cloak over her black attire, while Aemond, similarly dressed in green, kept his head bowed, looking defeated.

Helaena remained silent, occasionally muttering to herself. Aemond, feeling his brother's displeasure, dared not utter a word.

The siblings walked past storm warriors who were diligently cleaning up the battlefield. Outside the city, under the moonlight, a massive green bonfire illuminated the night as a black dragon breathed Dragonfire onto a mountain of faceless soldiers.

"Prince, the headcount is complete," a tall officer reported, approaching Rhaegar.

Rhaegar halted and inquired, "How many?"

The officer hesitated before responding, "More than two thousand three hundred Dornish were killed in battle. We captured three thousand five hundred, including dozens of nobles and knights."

Rhaegar frowned. "There were at least ten thousand men besieging Stonehelm."

The officer lowered his head guiltily and whispered, "Hundreds are said to have escaped through secret passages and are still being tracked down. Additionally, a group looted properties near Stonehelm and smuggled them away in advance."

The Dornish, like locusts, had ravaged everything in their path. From Crow's Nest in the north to Mistwood in the east, numerous towns had been plundered.

Rhaegar sighed darkly, recognizing the ruthlessness of the Dornish strategy. "Qoren is truly ruthless," he muttered, grudgingly respecting the Prince of Dorne's tactics.

The officer then asked, "Prince, the dungeon is full. Do we need to build temporary prisons?"

"Are they worthy?" Rhaegar's gaze turned icy. "Detain the nobles and knights. Execute all ordinary prisoners of war."

Nobles were often kept for prisoner exchanges, but Rhaegar had no patience for ordinary soldiers. If they sought death, he would grant it to them.

The officer, feeling the intensity of Rhaegar's stare, quickly retreated. "Yes, Prince."

Rhaegar glanced at his siblings and commanded, "Follow me."

...

Inside the castle, the three siblings walked in silence toward the hospitality hall. Aemond, visibly anxious, finally spoke up, "Brother, why did you suddenly come?" Then he turned to Helaena, pleading, "Sister."

Helaena, clearly uninterested in intervening, edged away, fearing what was to come.

Rhaegar suddenly stopped and turned, his gaze sharp as he addressed Aemond. "Lord Swann was killed in battle, Olyvar Yronwood escaped, and the House Swann captives were burned alive by you," he said, his tone even, merely stating the facts.

"I didn't mean to..." Aemond stammered, his voice small.

"Not on purpose? Then what was on purpose?" Rhaegar's voice rose, and he lifted his hand high.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think that General Dorn would run," Aemond closed his eyes, bracing for impact. Thump.

A breeze brushed past his ear, and the large hand landed not so lightly on his shoulder. Aemond shivered, slowly opening his eyes to find Rhaegar's face calm, his eyes deep and thoughtful.

"Brother," Aemond mumbled.

"Aemond, I rarely beat you; Aegon experienced more of that," Rhaegar began. "In my opinion, you should be a smart kid, as evidenced by the way you lined up your troops and commanded the siege."

Without the help of a commander, Aemond led an army alone to defend Rainwood.

The attack on the city today was also fought with ferocity, even if the casualties were high, the city would fall sooner or later.

In war alone, the boy proved himself far more talented than Aegon, who neglected his education.

Aemond remained silent.

Rhaegar continued, his voice laced with frustration, "Lord Swann died in battle, your reputation stinks, and the House Swann prisoners of war were killed by you. The royal family's reputation will be implicated by your actions."

No matter how powerful a ruler, the loyalty of his subjects is essential.

It was a very dishonorable move for Aemond to deliberately delay the battle and ignore the deaths of his allies in the midst of a war.

Ask yourself, who would serve a narrow-minded tyrant who caused the death of people and the destruction of their homes?

Aemond's selfish desires not only tarnished his future reputation in the Stormlands but also brought dishonor to the Targaryen name.

Aemond's eyes flickered as he sought help from his sister, but Helaena remained indifferent.

Rhaegar cupped his brother's face, his voice icy, "Aemond, do you even know what you're doing?"

Aemond trembled, his lips quivering, "I..."

He knew he was wrong but couldn't control his desire for revenge. A minor lord had disrespected him, and it had always gnawed at him.

Rhaenyra and Rhaegar had their own fiefdoms and the support of the princes and advisors. Even Aegon had a fiefdom and a castle built by their elder brother.

Free city-states like Myr and Lys were out of reach, and the royal family had no land left to divide into fiefs. After much thought, Aemond set his sights on Stonehelm.

When Dorne's rebellion started, with Rhaegar's nature, it was inevitable that he would subdue Dorne. By occupying Stonehelm, Aemond aimed to gain war credit.

Once Dorne was pacified, Stonehelm's harbor, connected to the Stepstones Islands and the Triarchy, would control Cape Wrath, the lower half of the Narrow Sea, and the sea routes of the Disputed Land. It would ensure a prosperous future in seafaring trade.

Chapter 425: Dragon Essence

Rhaegar's gaze was intense, piercing through Aemond, who couldn't meet his eyes.

Helaena, calmly curling her fingers in her hair, stated, "He wants a castle."

"Huh?" Aemond was taken aback.

Helaena's blunt words hung in the air, and she silently looked away.

Rhaegar was on the verge of laughing in anger, "Worthy of being my younger brother, so perceptive."

With control over the Triarchy and the Stepstones Islands, the lower half of the Narrow Sea was securely in Targaryen hands. Nas Island in the Stormlands and Stonehelm in Cape Wrath were strategic points within this route.

Aemond, panicked and at a loss for words, stammered, "No, I was just thinking."

Bang!

Rhaegar raised his hand and smacked Aemond on the head. The sound was sharp and clear.

Aemond winced in pain, covering his head and shrinking back.

Helaena glanced at him, then chose to ignore it. He deserved the beating.

Rhaegar grabbed Aemond's ear, his anger palpable. "If you want a castle, you can talk to me. My father and I haven't treated you so badly that you need to resort to trickery. You're really making the royal family proud."

"Ouch! Ouch!" Aemond was pulled up on his tiptoes, not daring to resist.

Aegon had grown up being whacked by their elder brother, and Aemond vividly remembered those experiences. The worst was when Rhaegar terrorized Aegon by hanging him on the gallows for everyone to see.

"You're really something!" Rhaegar shook him repeatedly, as if he were carrying a chicken.

Of the three younger brothers, Rhaegar thought the most highly of Aemond. He admired the boy's boldness in taming a dragon, seeing in him the same spirit he had had as a child. How could he be so calculating?

Helaena couldn't maintain her expression and turned her back, her words cutting, "If you want a castle, you have to pay the price."

"Sister! ~" Aemond's voice was tearful as he begged for help.

He was only 10 years old, and being handled like this was overwhelming.

Helaena inclined her head, pretending not to hear.

"Don't scream!" Rhaegar growled.

He now wanted to beat this troublesome brother to a pulp. Aemond was really good at getting into trouble!

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

Rhaegar's smile was cold and ruthless. "Let me ask you, who do you expect to clean up your mess when you delay the occupation of the Stormlands and kill House Swann?"

Alicent? Otto?

Aemond trembled, not daring to cry out in pain. He knew his mother and grandfather weren't capable of handling the massive trouble he'd caused.

Rhaegar's smile widened, his arm swinging as he shook Aemond. "If you can't answer, you're expecting Father and me to clean up after you. What a beautiful thought!"

"I was wrong," Aemond whimpered, closing his eyes in apology. He hadn't thought things through. He assumed that once House Swann was gone and the Dornish were driven away, Stonehelm would be his for the taking.

Bang!

Rhaegar raised his leg and kicked, causing Aemond to stumble. "Get lost, there'll be consequences for you!"

"Yes," Aemond responded, grateful for the reprieve. Whimpering, he ran off. "I'll get Olyvar Yronwood back."

Rhaegar shouted, "Get lost!" Aemond didn't dare to look back. Covering his red, swollen, and bloodied ears, he ran away as fast as he could.

"Idiot," Helaena muttered, her heart aching a little. Aegon had always been foolish, and now Aemond seemed infected.

"Isn't that the same for you?" Rhaegar reached out, messing up Helaena's hair.

Helaena's eyes watered, her pink lips pouted, silently accusing: After scolding him, will you scold me too?

Rhaegar rolled his eyes, walking to the main seat in the hall. He sat down, propping his chin with one hand. "Why are you here? How's King's Landing?"

He had bumped into Helaena halfway; she had been riding Dreamfyre with a determined look, speeding towards Meleys. Her presence suggested something significant had happened in King's Landing.

Helaena furrowed her brows, smoothing her disheveled hair. "Dorne is preparing for an all-out attack. I snuck out," she said sharply, detailing the decisions of the Small Council.

Rhaegar listened in silence. It was pretty much what he had guessed. The main force of the Dornish ransacked the Stormlands, while stragglers invaded the Prince's Pass and the Boneway to deplete the population of the Dornish Territory. With Braavos and other forces pushing from behind, it might actually work if the two fortresses were caught off guard.

Rhaegar had a flash of insight into what Qoren Martell's mind might be. First of all, was the Dornish Rebellion necessary? It was necessary!

The Triarchy beyond the Narrow Sea had been conquered, so how could the Dornish Territory, which had been feuding with the Iron Throne for generations, escape?

Rhaegar's initial target of aggression was the relatively barren Dornish Territory. Analyzing Dorne's environment, national conditions, and internal situation revealed a bleak picture.

Recent harvests had been poor, leaving civilians without enough food to eat. Despite this, Dorne had a substantial population, much stronger than the North. Gathering 20,000 soldiers to counter the invasion of the Stormlands wouldn't be a problem, especially if Braavos and other supporters provided food and equipment.

Given that the Dornish regularly violated the border, it was no surprise they would go to war. When the Triarchy was fully controlled, the Iron Throne would cut off sea routes in the lower Narrow Sea.

What should Dorn do? Should they until a fleet of dragons fly to Sunspear to spray Dragonfire indiscriminately?

Fighting now would at least weaken the Iron Throne, destabilize the three city-states, and aid Braavos in their counterattacks.

Rhaegar sighed softly, "People are poor, and land is always the root of struggle." The Targaryens needed new land, and so did the Dornish.

Helaena, somewhat confused, asked softly, "What happens if Olyvar Yronwood escapes?"

Rhaegar waved his hand dismissively, "It's fine, the man can run, but Dorne can't escape."

First, there was the invasion of the Stormlands, and then the movements in the Vulture Mountains. The war had begun to spiral out of control.

Qoren didn't want to fight, but he had no choice. The Iron Throne wanted to avoid conflict even more, but the noble lords on both sides hated each other and wouldn't willingly stop the war.

Rhaegar knew his next steps: lead his army to clean up the remnants of the Dornish forces in the Stormlands and then support the Vulture Mountains. If Qoren remained unconvinced, Rhaegar had three ways to crush him.

Helaena said, "Father is on his way to Blackhaven on his dragon, can we help?"

"Of course," Rhaegar replied.

Helaena hesitated, "But what about the Triarchy? Are you sure you can leave them?"

She was only 13 years old, and the farthest she had ever traveled was the last time she sped to White Harbor. The free trade city-states had a great reputation, and it was said that each one was worth no less than a realm of territory on the continent of Westeros.

Rhaegar smiled, his eyes softening. "Don't worry, Aunt Rhaenys is in charge there."

Then, seemingly to satisfy his sister's curiosity, he shared a bit about the inner workings of the city-states.

"Lys has over two million people?" Helaena's eyes lit up.

Rhaegar nodded with a smile, "Lys is the most populous Free City among the Triarchy. There are more freed slaves than can be counted."

Carefully calculated, the Northern Realm probably had a population of more than 300,000 people, and Dorne had about 500,000. Compared to the Triarchy, it wasn't even as populous as King's Landing, which had a resident population of up to half a million people.

"Such poor countryside," Rhaegar thought to himself.

Helaena smiled and jumped into her brother's arms, her little head nuzzling him affectionately. Having not seen him for a few days, the little girl wanted to be close.

Rhaegar was a bit uncomfortable at first, but he couldn't resist Helaena's enthusiasm. After a while, he noticed the tight bracelet on her wrist.

"You're still wearing this bracelet?" Rhaegar asked.

Helaena arched her head, not bothering to look up.

Rhaegar took her hand. The bracelet was as simple as the silver-gray one from ten years ago, almost tightening around her wrist.

"It's too small; don't wear it," Rhaegar said with some pity. He took off Helaena's bracelet and replaced it with the space bracelet he was wearing.

The space bracelet, imbued with magic, automatically adjusted to the wearer's size and fit perfectly on Helaena's wrist.

Helaena's eyes sparkled as she whispered, "Is this for me?"

Rhaegar was amused, "Keep it safe. It's degrading to keep wearing imitations."

He suddenly remembered he had given Rhaenyra a Valyrian steel necklace while Helaena had only an imitation. At that time, it was still Erryk who paid for it, costing one and a half gold dragons.

Helaena raised a smile and innocently asked, "What will you use if you give this to me?"

"Good question. I have a better one," Rhaegar said, pulling out the space necklace from under his collar and waving it around conspicuously.

The necklace had more space and was easier to carry. Helaena looked at it and realized it was Valyrian steel with a somewhat nice appearance.

She raised a small white hand, admiring the space bracelet and necklace, feeling very happy.

Rhaegar chuckled. With the space necklace, the role of the bracelet was reduced. But a storage tool was still precious. He originally wanted to give it to Rhaenyra as a first gift for the birth of her twins. But stumbling upon Helaena still wearing the imitation bracelet, he didn't want to favor one over the other.

"It's so pretty."

Helaena, as if she had been given the most precious treasure, admired the bracelet for a while. Then, she discreetly replaced the imitation bracelet with the space bracelet.

Rhaegar noticed her actions but didn't say anything. Instead, he took out a piece of broken dragon scale from the necklace.



Helaena's eyes widened in fascination. The dragon scale, even though half-mutilated, was still palm-sized. Dreamfyre's complete scales were only about the size of a palm. The original owner of this tattered dragon scale must have been larger than Vhagar and Cannibal.

Rhaegar pondered for a moment and then made up his mind. "Cut your finger and drop a drop of blood on it."

He had a hunch that the Fourteen Flames Remnant might activate some sort of relic tied to the dragons. With Rhaenyra pregnant and unable to go into battle, Helaena was more suitable to activate this relic.

Zira-

Without hesitation, Helaena took the tattered dragon scale and cut a slit in her finger. Blood oozed out, staining the surface of the dragon scale.

Rhaegar admired her decisiveness.

"Here you go, brother."

Helaena sipped her injured finger and handed back the tattered dragon scale. Rhaegar did the same, cutting his finger, and let the crimson beads of blood drip onto the scale. The two different types of blood flowed together, blending and seeping into the dragon scale.

In the next second, the dragon scale bloomed with bright red light.

"Congratulations, the Fourteen Flames Remnant have been activated. You have obtained..."

[Dragon Essence]

Grade: Legendary (Red)

Effect: Enhances the growth speed of a dragon (only up to adult dragons)

Evaluation: "The size of a dragon grows with age, and one dragon lived to be three hundred years old."

The tattered dragon scale underwent a metamorphosis, transforming into a complete scale covered in strange inscriptions. Uncontrolled by Rhaegar, it lightly landed on top of Helaena's head with a snap.

"Ahh~" Helaena grunted.

Rhaegar's eyes were full of helplessness as he looked at Helaena, who had scrunched up her face, and then at the bronze scales on her skull.

Flipping through the font of the system panel, he could only think, "Foolishness has its blessings."

"How did it turn out like this?" Helaena rubbed her head and removed the bronze scales that had smashed into her.

Rhaegar explained, "It's good stuff. Feed it to Dreamfyre."

The column of effects was clearly described: suitable only up to adult dragons.

Cannibal was around 90 years old, with a body size of more than 170 years old, comparable to Vhagar had long been an adult dragon. Feeding it to Dreamfyre, who was of a suitable age and slightly inferior in size, was just right.

It would quickly raise an adult giant dragon.

#### Chapter 426: Changes In Dreamfyre

The following day, two giant dragons, one black and one blue, soared over the smoke-ridden Stonehelm, their majestic forms casting shadows on the scorched earth below. The ashes spread for miles beyond the city walls.

Suddenly, the ground gently trembled as a large group of Storm Knights arrived on horseback, numbering around two thousand. Leading them was Royce Caron, the Lord of Nightsong.

The Storm Knights set up camp outside the city, and some of the officers entered the castle. Royce, filled with apprehension, climbed the broken gray walls.

Beneath a watchtower facing the sea, Rhaegar stood with his elbows braced against the wall, quietly admiring the flow of the ocean waves. War wore down one's patience, and a beautiful view was more nourishing to the mind.

"Brother, Lord Caron is here," Helaena announced. She was draped in a green cloak, with two strands of silver hair behind her ears, braiding her long silver and gold locks.

Rhaegar glanced sideways to see the middle-aged, stout man with a changed expression. Royce knelt on one knee and said in a muffled voice, "I apologize for failing to fulfill my role as commander, leading to this disaster."

He referred to the fall of House Swann. As fellow Stormlands nobles and garrison families, he felt responsible for their downfall.

Rhaegar rubbed his brow and sighed softly. "It's good that you recognize the problem. I don't have the time to pursue responsibility now." He turned around and leaned against the wall with a natural movement, exuding calm and collected energy.

Royce stole a glance at the Heir Prince's side profile, feeling ashamed. "Prince, I will exterminate the remnants of Dorn that infest the Stormlands as soon as possible."

Helaena observed the exchange, quietly learning her brother's way of handling matters.

Rhaegar's eyes rippled with seriousness. "Olyvar Yronwood fled, the remnants of Dorn are not a big problem. I want to ask for advice on the Vulture Mountains."

Since ancient times, the Dornish territories had frequently clashed with the Reach and Stormlands, with mutual aggression and harassment becoming the norm. This large-scale Dorn invasion of the Stormlands was still very rare.

With three dragons in the Stormlands, it was only a matter of time before the Dornish combat commander was caught and the remnants wiped out. Rhaegar suspected Qoren's actions would go far beyond that, anticipating a massive invasion of the Prince's Pass and Boneway.

Royce's face changed slightly, as if he had thought of a key factor. He quickly replied, "Nightsong lacks soldiers and generals and relies on the support of the Lords of Highgarden. The prince should start from this aspect."

As the Lord of Nightsong, Royce was aware of its vulnerabilities. He was here in Stonehelm, leaving Nightsong dependent on the brothers who stayed behind to watch over it.

As a territory in the Dornish borderlands, Nightsong lacked fertile land by a river or a harbor with well-developed maritime transportation. It wasn't rich by nature. The constant fighting with the Dornish had left the territory large in scope but sparse in population.

To man the fortress at the Prince's Pass, Highgarden would need to provide both financial support and manpower.

Rhaegar remained contemplative, remarking, "Lord Tyrell has long been out of the army."

Though Highgarden's old Tyrell was mediocre and a bit of a money-grubber, he was dedicated to his duties as the liege lord of the Reach.

Royce hesitated briefly before adding, "The combat power of the Reach's army is limited, and it's mostly forcefully recruited. It would be better for you to personally supervise it."

It was well known that the armies of the Riverlands and The Reach were the best equipped but often the least effective. Old Lord Tyrell was old and pleasure-seeking by nature, and was unlikely to lead the army into battle. To fully utilize their combat power, it would be better for the Heir Prince to take over.

Rhaegar's eyes flashed, understanding the deeper meaning in Royce's words. The Reach was very rich. Excluding the Oldtown army that went out to sea to participate in the Battle of the Narrow Sea, there were at least 10,000 soldiers stationed at the Prince's Pass. Properly utilized, this large-scale army could have a great impact.

On a broader scale, once the Dornish Rebellion was quelled, Rhaegar's prestige in The Reach would rise even higher, overshadowing the Highgarden Lords and Oldtown House Hightower.

"Thank you for your advice, Lord Royce," Rhaegar said with a slight smile.

"I wish you all the best," Royce replied, then retired.

Once he was gone, the siblings looked at each other.

Helaena cocked her head and whispered, "Are we going to Highgarden?"

She thought of the Little Rose in Highgarden, who had offered to befriend her.

"Probably," Rhaegar replied ambiguously.

For the time being, there were no less than three places where war had broken out: Braavos attacking Pentos, the Stormlands sweeping away the remnants of Dorne, and the threat from the Vulture Mountains.

"Roar..."

A sharp dragon roar interrupted the siblings' chat. Rhaegar raised his eyes and saw an ugly, rotten dragon swooping in and circling the sea below the watchtower.

"Baa..."

The rotten dragon clutched a goofy goat in its claws.

"It hasn't given up yet," Helaena said softly.

"Roar..."

The Sheepstealer hissed, trying and daring to move closer, curtly stimulating the goat to screech. It seemed to want to exchange the goat for something.

Rhaegar's posture remained unchanged as he couldn't help but smile, "This guy is really smart, just a bit unlike an adult dragon."

Dragons were typically very proud, and the Sheepstealer's behavior was somewhat undignified.

Helaena puffed out her cheeks and reached out her small hand to shake it, "There's no more."

She was speaking to the Sheepstealer. The rotten dragon scowled twice, its vertical pupils in its sunken eye sockets floating in scrutiny, hesitant to leave.

"Roar-"

The two giant dragons flying in the sky gradually descended and let out warning roars. Sheepstealer, caught in the act, hurriedly moved away.

The two dragons closed their wings, their hind feet landing gracefully on the gray city wall.

"Roar..."

Cannibal's green eyes glowed, locking onto the deceitful Sheepstealer. It was clear that a sneaky dragon was never trustworthy.

Dreamfyre roared softly, descending right next to Helaena. Its elegant light blue dragon head reached over her shoulder.

Helaena smiled brightly, petting the tall dragon.

Rhaegar observed the bond between his sister and her dragon, especially noting Dreamfyre's radiant appearance. "Dreamfyre looks very spirited," he commented.

This was the first dragon he had truly come into contact with up close. Slim with brilliant silver lines, its temperament was as outstanding as its appearance.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre's vertical pupils glanced over at Rhaegar. It opened its mouth slightly, a low roar escaping its throat.

Helaena rubbed her face against Dreamfyre, her voice filled with excitement. "Dreamfyre is in high spirits after eating that scale."

Just last night, the siblings had given the [Dragon Essence] to Dreamfyre. Both Cannibal and Sheepstealer were present. Upon seeing the [Dragon Essence], Cannibal had remained calm, as if looking at an ordinary scale. Sheepstealer, on the other hand, had drooled, staring at the dragon scale-shaped [Dragon Essence] with glowing eyes. Dreamfyre had swiped it away with its tail, quickly devouring the scale.

It seemed the [Dragon Essence] wasn't attractive to fully adult dragons but caused those not yet at their peak to go berserk.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre arched its back, its vertical pupils fixed on Sheepstealer, who refused to leave. A pair of light blue wings spread out, giving a clear warning.

Dreamfyre was large, with its head and tail spanning over eighty meters and a wingspan of up to one hundred meters. Though not as large as Cannibal, and smaller than Vermithor and Silverwing of the same age, it was still more than enough to intimidate Sheepstealer.

Caraxes and Meleys were around 60 to 70 meters in size, with Sheepstealer slightly over 70 meters. According to the Dragonlords's ancient records, Caraxes and Meleys were of normal size, while Sheepstealer was exceptional among stout dragons.

Excluding the wild dragons, Caraxes and Meleys had more eye-catching talents despite their size. Caraxes, nicknamed Blood Wurm, had a slender snake-like body, making it a mutant breed with a ferocious bloodthirsty personality and a strong, dominant Dragonfire. Meleys, known as the "fastest dragon," had yet to be surpassed in speed.

Rhaegar, captivated, murmured to himself, "Size is not a decisive factor; the use of talent is what truly matters."

"Roar..."

Just as he was lost in thought, Dreamfyre lunged forward, baring its fangs ferociously.

Sheepstealer immediately dropped the goat and flew away in a cloud of dust. As a wild dragon, knowing when to avoid a fight was also a crucial survival skill.

Helaena watched with delight, pleased with Dreamfyre's newfound assertiveness. Dreamfyre had once been ferocious but rarely messed with other dragons. After swallowing the special scale, it had become very domineering.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre let out a low growl, rubbing its head lightly against Helaena before flapping its wings and flying away.

Helaena was stunned, her expression adorably confused. She seemed to sense Dreamfyre's desire to express itself more fully—spitting Dragonfire, hunting with its powerful jaws ...

It appeared to be a positive growth change.

Helaena didn't hold back and told her brother everything.

Rhaegar simply replied, "That's a good thing."

...

By the afternoon, Stonehelm was bustling with activity. Storm Knights patched the walls and gates while the remaining squires prepared cauldrons for cooking.

"Princess..."

"Princess..."

Helaena walked alone through the kitchen, greeted by passing cooks and squires. She nodded and checked the inventory in the cellar.

After the sacking by the Dornishmen, the cellar and the granary were nearly empty, relying heavily on the dry food the Storm Knights had brought from Crow's Nest. Helaena, showing little emotion, meticulously checked everything.

Her brother was discussing strategy with Lord Royce, so she had volunteered to oversee the cooking. Though it seemed a small task, she believed that every bit of learning was valuable. As she soon found out, cooking for an army was no easy task - it meant making sure the soldiers had enough to eat.

Knock Knock!

While she was making food, a loud noise came from the corridor outside the kitchen. Wiping sweat from her forehead, Helaena suspiciously looked deeper into the corridor. Around a corner, a silver-blond head poked out.

"Aemond?" Helaena murmured, putting down the basin and seeking him out. The cooks around her didn't notice, continuing their work.

Soon, the siblings met in a hidden corner. Aemond looked sullen, deep in thought, and didn't speak at first.

"Ask directly if you have something to say; there's no need to hide it," Helaena said, her eyes clear and honest.

"You ..." Aemond began, then looked around to ensure no one was listening. "I saw you and Rhaegar hugging."

Helaena asked directly, "So what do you want to say? Call off the engagement?"

"No!" Aemond was startled and hurriedly stopped his sister. She was good at everything, but she had a mouth that loved to tell the truth.

Helaena shrugged and gazed at Aemond, giving him a straight look. Aemond tried to retort but gradually drooped his head, saying hopelessly, "You shouldn't be like this. You're almost an aunt."

He had gone to look for the Sheepstealer in the morning and happened to see the two getting intimate on the walls. Worried, he advised, "Rhaenyra is a bad woman. If she knew about this, she'd sell you to a pleasure house in Lys."

Helaena: ...

Worthy of being a child raised by their mother, even the words he said were the same.

Chapter 427: If a Dragonlord Came...

Helaena rubbed her fingers in the dough with a bemused look, "Mother knows about this."

"What!?" Aemond exclaimed in shock.

"How could mother agree to this? She hates Rhaenyra and Rhaegar the most," he questioned, struggling to understand.

Unless his mother is planning to compromise and use her future as a bargaining chip.

Helaena shook her head, "Don't be blind. I did it willingly; mother can't control me anymore." She was being honest to avoid misunderstanding.

"I've liked Rhaegar since I was a child. It's useless for others to object," Helaena explained calmly.

Aemond couldn't believe it, his face turning red with embarrassment, "You're crazy. Targaryen no longer has the tradition of marrying more than one woman. You're being a mistress!"

His words were harsh and full of annoyance. He would rather Helaena marry that fool Aegon. At least then she would have a name and live with dignity.

"Who says I want to be a mistress, my dear brother?" Helaena's demeanor remained unchanged as she continued, "You should know about Lady Jeyne. Do you think a Lady would be a mistress?"

Except when facing Rhaegar, she was intellectually sharp most of the time. Jeyne came from House Arryn of the Eyrie, and her character was just like their family motto: "As High as Honor!"

She was still young and didn't attract much attention. Sooner or later, Jeyne couldn't hide and would take the first step to clash with Rhaenyra, opening up Targaryens to polygamy.

Even if it violated the unwritten rules set by her great-grandfather and the Faith of the Seven, the Faith of the Seven would not dare to say anything more.

A Lady personally pushed for it, along with Rhaegar's heroic conquests, would gradually restore the tradition.

She just had to bide her time and assist flawlessly at the right moment.

Indeed.

Her ambition was to emulate the formidable Queen Visenya Targaryen, not merely to bask in reflected glory, but to forge her own path.

In both the Narrow Sea War and the Dornish Rebellion, she had played pivotal roles; her contributions were undeniable, commanding respect from all.

Aemond caught a glimpse of her intentions and hung his head in dismay.

Bastard!

He had thought himself clever, planning an alliance through marriage with House Baratheon to undermine House Swann.

Yet, he hadn't anticipated that his sister harbored ambitions far surpassing his own, daring to challenge Rhaenyra directly in for the Queen position.

In a moment, Aemond thought of Daeron, that tireless bookworm, who have been cherished since his youth.

"Is Aegon truly the only failure among us?"

Aemond found himself feeling an unexpected sympathy for Aegon, the fool.

Helaena reached up, stroking his head in a gesture reminiscent of Rhaenyra's affection for Rhaegar, her tone flat, "Focus on the task at hand, and stop worrying about the chaos."

Aemond blushed.

After a moment, Helaena abruptly stopped and withdrew her hand, her voice soothing as she spoke to a child, "Defend the city well, and you might just earn Stonehelm."

Stonehelm was gaining importance and had the potential to develop into a significant harbor.

Rhaegar intended to grant it to Aemond at his discretion.

"Sister~"

Aemond clung to the thought, his voice carrying a whine of expectation.

Unperturbed, Helaena sighed and turned away.

She needed to return to her duties, leaving Aemond to ponder his future alone.

Watching her depart, Aemond felt a pang of disorientation, almost as if his regret was physically imprinting itself upon his mind.

He was beginning to regret his decisions.

Had he known, he would have vied for Aegon's favored position and embraced the family tradition alongside his sister.

Now, it was too late.

He was bound to Cassandra, while Aegon seemed similarly engaged.

"Three blood brothers, and none of them likes me."

Aemond dabbed at the corners of his eyes, feigning tears, and murmured, "Mother is blinded by ambition, enamored with the power of House Baratheon and that fool Aegon."

If only he hadn't been coerced into this engagement, he would still be free.

Instead, he watched as his sister threw herself into Rhaegar's arms, clearly having chosen her allies.

Aemond clenched his teeth, "I am no less capable than the others."

With that, he turned and strode outside.

The war was far from over, and he was determined not only to secure Stonehelm but also to earn a reputation that would make an impression.

...

## The Red Mountains

Stretching from east to west, the Red Mountains form a formidable barrier separating Dorne from the Stormlands and the Reach.

This mountain range extends from the north-northeastern edge of the Stormlands near Cape Wrath, encompassing landmarks such as Griffin's Roost in Shipbreaker Bay and extending nearly to Storm's End Castle.

To the south, the Dornish Borderlands are punctuated by the castles of the Borderlands Lords, including the cities of Blackhaven and Stonehelm. The ridge extends further northwest into the Riverlands, where House Tarly's domain, Horn Hill, is nestled in the foothills.

Two main passes cut through these rugged heights: the Prince's Pass and the Boneway. Currently, hordes of ragged Dornish refugees, displaced and desperate, pour into the mountains, splitting at these passes in search of safety.

Dorne's tropical climate subjects its inhabitants to unrelenting heat and humidity. At the height of summer, the scorching sun and searing mountain paths take a heavy toll, claiming the lives of the infirm and elderly.



Without a hint of emotion, the survivors strip the deceased of their sun-bleached clothes - each item a potential lifeline against the cold mountain nights.

The Boneway, also revered as the Stone Way, marks its entrance along the northern Dornish coast.

Guarded by House Yronwood, lords of this critical passage, it weaves through Yronwood, approaching Blackhaven in the north. Tens of thousands journey this route, their faces etched with the hardships of famine and forced expulsion from the more fertile oases by their merciless lords.

These exiles, hopeful yet haggard, gaze upon the red-hued path of the Boneway, imagining it as a gateway to the Dornish borderlands, where salvation - in the form of food - awaits.

Amidst this exodus, a stark contrast emerges. A group of robust figures, not particularly tall but unmistakably sturdy, edges the procession.

Each individual bears the fierce countenance of a warrior, a curved sword at their waist, and a crossbow concealed behind their back.

Just a few dozen kilometers from Blackhaven, these 5,000 strong split from the main group, organizing into five cohorts. They slip into the lesser-known paths of the Boneway.

Compared to the Prince's Pass, known as the "Great Pass," the Boneway had steep and treacherous terrain that made navigation difficult and dangerous.

The paths were narrow and winding, accessible only to the most skilled and daring. In the wider sections, only three people could walk side by side, while in the narrowest areas, a single person had to cling to the rock face to make progress.

This secret route was known only to the Dornish borderlands and the lords who dwelt within the mountains.

"Can we really bypass Blackhaven by taking this road?" questioned a brash man with flamboyant hair, resembling a mercenary.

"Save your breath. This road is tough," replied a man with black hair and brown skin, his leather armor emblazoned with the emblem of House Wyl—a black viper biting a heel.

The brash man snorted, "I don't get you Dornish folks. Why choose this godforsaken path?"

Were it not for the lucrative commission from Braavos, he would not have ventured here, even under coercion.

The group, five hundred strong, moved through a deep, narrow path flanked by sheer rock walls. The brash man, brushing against the hot stone, cursed, "If a Dragonlord's came, we'd be roasted alive."

The man from House Wyl halted and turned to stare at him. His thoughts mirrored the brash man's fears. With the group stretched over five hundred meters, dragonfire could incinerate them from end to end.

"What are you looking at?" snapped the brash man, unnerved by the scrutiny.

"Keep your mouth shut and say something positive," the House Wyl man retorted sharply.

A distinct uneasiness settled over the group as they continued.

Hoo-

Suddenly, a shadow blocked the searing sun.

"What the hell!" the brash man exclaimed, crouching instinctively.

The shadow circled back, revealing the immense form of a dragon, its silhouette darkening the secluded path.

Hearts pounded as faces turned skyward in dread.

"Roar"

A thunderous dragon roar reverberated through the mountains, the sound waves echoing ominously.

Boom-

Golden dragonfire descended like a volcanic eruption, sweeping through the narrow passage from one end to the other, engulfing everything in its path.

Chapter 428: Blackhaven

"No!!!"

"Get out of the way, flee..."

Panic surged through the crowd, their bodies slick with sweat as they scrambled in desperation.

Boom-

The golden dragonfire surged relentlessly, carving a scorching path through the narrow pass, leaving a glowing line against the red-hued mountain rocks.

Someone glanced up in a fleeting moment of clarity, catching a final glimpse of life.

A massive dragon with bronze scales, brown wing membranes, and a fearsome demeanor.

Bronze Fury - Vermithor.

"Seven hells!"

His face twisted in terror as the bronze dragon unleashed its fiery wrath, erasing his features in an instant.

Above, a commanding voice echoed.

"Vermithor, Dracarys!"

"Roar!"

Vermithor, the bronze dragon, roared, its colossal body swooping down, jaws agape, spewing searing golden flames.

The mountains reverberated with cries and wails. Moments later, only charred remnants and lifeless forms remained.

"Vermithor, well done."

Viserys's face was flushed with excitement and pride. Clad in black steel armor, a red cloak billowing behind him, and the House sword Blackfyre at his waist, he exuded an air of

determination and strength. The armor masked his aging form, making him appear twenty years younger—a fearless dragon rider ready for battle.

"Roar!"

Vermithor's vertical pupils scanned the terrain, wings flapping methodically as it hunted down the scattered mercenaries. Once spotted, they were engulfed in dragonfire, the nickname Bronze Fury lived up to its name.

"Haha, let's go."

Viserys, invigorated, grinned widely. "There are still many who need to witness the Wrath of the Sleeping Dragon."

He wiped away the sweat from his brow, though it was not from the heat but the thrill of the battle.

Viserys chuckled to himself, "Fighting with dragons is a bit too exhilarating for me."

But it was undeniably satisfying.

"Roar!"

Vermithor, a bronze sun in the sky, soared swiftly and ferociously towards the other side of the mountain range.

According to the Master of Whisperers, large groups of mercenaries had gathered on the Boneway.

They still needed to be dealt with, one by one.

...

Three days passed quickly.

A large crowd of refugees crossed the treacherous Boneway and gathered at a narrow fortress. This fortress, built between towering rock walls, stood over ten feet high with a massive bronze gate barring the entrance. The cliffs on either side were pierced with a honeycomb of rifle holes, constantly aimed at potential attackers.

Beyond the fortress loomed a majestic castle built into the mountain and towering over the city - Blackhaven, the seat of House Dondarrion.

"Roar!"

A bronze dragon emerged from the castle, its icy gaze sweeping over the refugees below. Their numbers swelled, blocking the entrance to the fortress and threatening its defenses.

The sight of the dragon overhead numbed the refugees; they neither hid nor cried. Occasionally, a child's cry was quickly silenced by an adult. Their situation was dire-no food, no hope. Their only option was to gather at the fortress on the Boneway and endure the scorching sun.

Despair settled over them, a weight heavier than the dragon above.

"Roar..."

"Roar..."

Suddenly, two more dragon roars echoed from afar as two massive dragons emerged from the dark clouds. One was black, the other was pale blue, and they soared through the sky in a synchronized dance.

Whoosh!

The black dragon swooped down, gliding perilously close to the rock walls, its sharp claws scraping the rugged surface. Rhaegar, clad in black robes, murmured, "Cannibal, don't terrorize the refugees."

"Roar—"

The black dragon's eerie green eyes fixated on Blackhaven as it soared upward.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre followed, its light blue wings spreading wide, painting a serene picture against the sky. Helaena's face tightened as she glanced at the foul-smelling refugees below.

"Dragons..."

"Targaryen..."

The refugees stared in awe as the two giant dragons and their young riders passed overhead. The dragons guarded the fortress, preventing any breakthrough of the Boneway. The refugees, unable to breach the defenses, sank deeper into despair under the relentless sun, their hearts cold with hopelessness.

Soon, the dragons disappeared from sight, returning to the unseen, untouchable Blackhaven.

...

Blackhaven, Courtyard.

Vermithor landed first, occupying the limited open space in the courtyard.

Elsewhere, Cannibal and Dreamfyre touched down outside the courtyard. The imposing black basalt walls, though robust, seemed like mere earthen barriers against the dragons' powerful hind limbs. With a slight stretch, the dragons' heads peered over the deep, unseen moat, surveying every corner of the forecourt.

Rhaegar removed his hood and dismounted from his dragon.

Rumble—

The city gates slowly creaked open as a group of soldiers emerged to greet them.

"Rhaegar, my boy!"

Viserys strode forward, elation evident in his demeanor.

"Father, are you alright?" Rhaegar asked, smiling faintly as he approached.

Viserys grasped his eldest son's arm, squeezing the strong muscles with a broad smile. "It's great that you could come."

Father and son had previously agreed that Rhaegar would address the troubles in the Stormlands first.

"Father."

Helaena dismounted and ran forward for a hug, smiling brightly.

Viserys, clad in armor, hugged his daughter as best he could through the iron plates. "Helaena, you should have stayed in King's Landing," he said, a hint of bitterness in his voice.

After Maiden's Day, Helaena had hidden in Harrenhal before returning to the Red Keep and then quietly traveling to the Stormlands.

Helaena's delicate brows furrowed slightly as she explained, "I wanted to find a blue island and ended up running into my brother first."

"You mean Tarth Island?" Viserys asked, slightly puzzled.

Tarth Island, one of the islands off the coast of Westeros, lay north of Shipbreaker Bay, separated from the mainland by a strait. Renowned for its beauty, it featured diverse landscapes like mountains, lakes, plains, and vales. It was also known as the Sapphire Isle due to its nearby azure waters.

Helaena looked slightly confused and replied vaguely, "I just saw a blue island."

"Then you should definitely go and see it," Viserys suggested, raising an eyebrow. He realized that his youngest daughter might be experiencing another bout of mental instability.

Viserys didn't believe Helaena possessed the gift of Dragon Dreams, which were typically triggered by indirect but persistent dreams. Helaena's visions seemed more like sporadic images that suddenly flashed through her mind.

"Father, let's discuss this inside the city," Rhaegar suggested, steering the conversation away.

"Alright," Viserys said quickly. "I'll have Lord Simon prepare the banquet."

Lord Simon Dondarrion, the elderly and meticulously dressed Lord of Blackhaven, nodded in approval. He was a proud and dignified old noble. Alongside him were the Kingsguard brothers, Arryk and Erryk, ever-vigilant in their protection of the King.

The brothers nodded respectfully. "Prince, Princess."

Rhaegar smiled, taking Helaena's hand as they walked inside. Helaena, her freckled face scrunched in a pout, followed reluctantly.

"Don't be upset," Rhaegar said softly. "We'll be heading to Highgarden soon."

"Oh," Helaena responded with a squeak, her thoughts drifting to the strange vision she had of a fishmonger on the blue island.

The group entered the castle courtyard.

"Roar..."

Vermithor lay prostrate, its horned and crowned head raised slightly, emanating a fierce aura. Rhaegar glanced at the bronze beast, noting how Vermithor had regained some of his former ferocity after days of hunting mercenaries.

Viserys, slightly out of breath, spoke proudly, "Vermithor is a true warrior, even more powerful than I imagined."

Riding dragons in battle was a far cry from parades. Rhaegar looked at his father with concern. "Is your health holding up?"

Viserys reassured him with a dismissive wave, "I'm fine. It's just a little exertion, no serious wounds."

At first, Viserys had feared that fighting on a dragonback would reopen his wounds and humiliate him on the battlefield. To his surprise, Vermithor's control of the skies had protected him.

As they talked, they made their way to the castle. Blackhaven Castle, perched on a cliff, had walls facing the Boneway that were covered in vine-like greenery, resembling a green waterfall. Inside, the castle hall was cool, the walls and foliage blocking out the sun.

The old Lord commanded his attendants to prepare a sumptuous banquet.

Before taking his seat, another person arrived hurriedly.

"Your Grace, the military supplies have been reviewed thoroughly," Tyland reported, sweating profusely and panting from his haste.

His blonde hair was disheveled, and his clothes carried a faint odor of sweat, a stark contrast to his usually immaculate appearance.

Viserys inquired about the general situation and then gestured for Tyland to sit.

Tyland nodded curtly, not forgetting to send greetings to Rhaegar.

Rhaegar and Viserys were his superiors, but the Heir Prince was his first priority.

Rhaegar returned Tyland's smile, surprised to see him here. But upon reflection, it made sense. The Prince's Palace was located in the Dornish Borderlands, just past Blackhaven and at the exit of the Boneway. As an overseer and former royal adviser, it was natural for Tyland to be temporarily drafted.

As the meal was being served, Tyland took a moment to report privately.

"Blackhaven has two thousand infantry, eight hundred archers, twenty-six knights, and a stockpile of defensive supplies such as oil," he began. "Outside the city, there are at least ten thousand Dornish refugees. Several side paths have been targeted by mercenaries, but His Grace, riding Vermithor, crushed them all."

Rhaegar listened attentively, analyzing the disparity between their forces and the enemy.

First, Blackhaven had no reinforcements. The Stormlands' army was either supporting the Triarchy or clearing out remnants of Dornish resistance. It would take at least a month to fully restore order and send reinforcements.

However, this was not a major concern. Blackhaven's treacherous terrain and strategic location at the Boneway's bottleneck meant that an army of 3,000 could effectively block 100,000 troops. Additionally, with his father and Vermithor defending the town, it was virtually impregnable.

Rhaegar realized that the Prince's Pass required the most reinforcement. Unlike the Boneway, it lacked natural defenses, and Nightsong did not have a seasoned leader like Lord Simon. Despite his age and questionable reputation, Simon Dondarrion had a history of fierce combat against the Dornish and was more experienced than many of his peers.

As the meal progressed, Viserys took a sip of wine and spoke seriously, "The Sea Snake has lost his son and has mobilized the navy of the Stepstones towards Salt Shore."

#### Chapter 429: Highgarden Rose

"The Sea Snake is a formidable strategist and can mount a counterattack both on land and at sea. I believe his plan is feasible," Viserys said, looking expectantly at his son.

Rhaegar did not reply immediately, contemplating the strategy. The main force of the naval counterattack would comprise the fleet led by the Sea Snake and Aegon on Sunfyre.

Dominating the sea, the fleet would navigate around southern Dorne into the Summer Sea, enter the mainland via the Greenblood River, and launch a surprise attack on Planky Town.

Planky Town, a major Dornish settlement under House Martell's control, is crucial for sea trade. Capturing it would allow the Sea Snake to control the Greenblood River crossing, effectively splitting Dorne in two.

This would isolate Sunspear, Dorne's eastern stronghold, from the western nobles' support.

Seeing his son deep in thought, Viserys refrained from pressing him. Tyland, observing the room, reported confidently, "Lord Corlys proposes we break through either the Prince's Pass or the Boneway, leading our forces straight into western Dorne to defeat the local nobles."

The Greenblood River remains a key strategic divide. If the forces from the Reach and Stormlands can carve a path, they can crush the remaining Dornish defenses with the air superiority of a few dragons.

Coordinated land and naval forces will overwhelm the Dorne.

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow, his tone serious, "The strategy is sound. Following this plan, taking Sunspear will be straightforward."

"I agree," Viserys said, a hint of smugness in his voice. He found the Sea Snake's plan bold and direct. The success of the invasion of the Triarchy had bolstered his confidence in conquering Dorne.

Viserys I would achieve what the Conqueror had not—complete dominion over Dorne.

"I will soon go to Highgarden and raise an army of 10,000 men to attack from Prince's Pass," Rhaegar proposed, still weighing the options.

Viserys's eyes brightened as he asked, "Is the Sea Snake's proposal truly viable?"

Having experienced setbacks in the Small Council, he preferred to rely on his eldest son's judgment.

Rhaegar frowned, hesitating. "The Sea Snake's strategy is excellent, but it feels driven by a thirst for revenge."

"What do you mean?" Viserys asked.

"We can't afford to conquer Dorne."

"It's conquest."

"But after the conquest, we can't sustain it," Rhaegar replied, his tone somber. Father and son exchanged troubled glances.

Rhaegar rested his chin on his hand and sighed. "The Triarchy is not yet stable. If we conquer Dorne, the influx of tens of thousands of refugees will drain our treasury."

This is assuming the old Dornish loyalists remain faithful to the Iron Throne.

History serves as a warning. When Aegon the Conqueror launched the Dorne War, it dragged on for years. The bloody and indiscriminate "Wrath of the Dragon" scorched Dornish towns, yet even on the brink of collapse, the people of Dorne refused to surrender.

Today, Rhaegar was confident he could conquer all of Dorne and install loyal nobles.

However, Dorne is vast, with deserts and sand dunes. If the defiant Dornish retreated into the desert, history would repeat itself, creating a prolonged stalemate.

Dorne would be like a leech, draining the Targaryens' resources. The Iron Throne would have to manage Dorne and guard against constant rebellions.

Moreover, the long supply lines for the army, whether from the Reach or the Stormlands, would stretch through endless desert, making sustained occupation difficult.

Viserys, shocked, replied, "The Triarchy has already surrendered. Now is the perfect opportunity."

"We should capitalize on the morale from the Narrow Sea War and take Dorne in one decisive blow."

Rhaegar considered this. "Father, instead of prolonging the war, why not strike Dorne a decisive blow and then isolate it?"

"The Iron Throne needs to rest and recuperate. Once the Triarchy is stabilized and the Stepstones Islands are united to control sea power in the lower Narrow Sea, Dorne will be isolated and helpless."

"At that point, with the Reach and the Stormlands cutting off Dorne's land and sea links, it will be like catching a turtle in a jar."

There are multiple ways to wage war, and economic pressure can be highly effective. Viserys pondered his eldest son's strategy.

The Targaryen territories already spanned the Narrow Sea, controlling rich and contested lands.

Rather than depleting the country's resources in a protracted fight, it would be wiser to besiege Dorne economically. Dorne's grain production is low, and without maritime trade, it would slowly wither.

After a long pause, Viserys's eyes gleamed with understanding, and he nodded vigorously.

He agreed with Rhaegar's proposal.

Tyland seized the moment to raise his glass with a smile.

"To giving Dorne a hard blow!"

"Cheers!"

Highgarden.



A white marble castle, stood majestically on a flat hillside, encircled by three solid, circular walls. The outermost wall surrounded the entire base of the hill, and between it and the second wall lay a meticulously maintained botanical maze, designed for both entertainment and leisure.

Its unique architecture and lavish decoration made it renowned as the most beautiful castle in all of Westeros. Today, Highgarden welcomed two esteemed guests.

The black dragon led the way, followed closely by the light blue dragon, soaring across the endless plains towards Highgarden.

At the gate of the third wall, two young and beautiful ladies, accompanied by a group of attendants, looked up in anticipation.

"Land!" a clear, young voice rang out like a sparkling stream. Cannibal's green eyes were cold and indifferent as he circled the city walls nonchalantly, finally landing at the gate with a whoosh, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Dreamfyre landed gracefully beside him, and the rider leaned over to assist the dismounting rider. The gathered crowd moved hastily.

Margaery's eyes lit up, her red lips curving into a radiant smile as she stepped forward. "Dear prince and princess, welcome to Highgarden," she greeted warmly, ignoring her maid's attempts to stop her as she took Helaena's hand.

The two girls shook hands and approached the crouching Dreamfyre, whose sulfurous dragon stench was palpable. Helaena wiped the sweat from her forehead and smiled back.

At this moment, Rhaegar dismounted from his dragon. An older, equally beautiful woman walked over and bowed. "Prince Rhaegar Targaryens, I bring you my husband's greetings. It is an honor to have you here." Rhaegar glanced at her briefly, pretending not to recognize her.

Margaery and Helaena stood side by side, smiling as Margaery introduced, "This is Alyssa Redwyne, my father's new wife and the new Lady of Highgarden." Alyssa bowed again, her tone polite. "My father fought alongside you. He sends his regards."

"You're welcome, Lady," Rhaegar replied with a smile. Alyssa, probably in her early twenties, was the daughter of House Redwyne and had been chosen to marry the half-century-old Tyrell. She was known to be a woman of strong opinions.

Margaery, ever cheerful, said, "The sun is fierce. Please, enter the castle. The servants have prepared chilled sweet wine."

Rhaegar nodded, "The guest follows the host."

The Targaryen siblings entered Highgarden under the hospitality of Margaery and her mother. Margaery kindly instructed the guards to feed the dragons with sheep and cattle. Helaena thanked her, and the two girls chatted animatedly as they walked hand in hand.

Rhaegar, though not very engaged in the conversation, enjoyed the view of Highgarden. Despite having visited many times, the castle's beauty never ceased to amaze him. It was like a green paradise, with flowers blooming everywhere, and gardens, pools, and artificial waterfalls adorning the entire castle.

Rare flowers and plants from all over the world flourished in every corner, with stone sculptures, fountains, and marble columns draped in vines and grapevines. Everything was so beautiful and full of life.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Lady Alyssa asked softly. Realizing she was speaking to him, Rhaegar smiled faintly but said nothing. Lady Alyssa picked a petal off a flower and said, "As the Tyrell motto says, 'Growing Strong.'"

Rhaegar, surprised, nodded in agreement. "That's right." Lady Alyssa smiled and continued chatting for a while, maintaining her elegant demeanor.

Rhaegar glanced at Margaery and Helaena ahead of them, then at Lady Alyssa, who stood alone, thinking to himself, "No stepmother has an easy role." Especially if she planned to have children to carry on the family legacy.

...

As they walked and talked, they clarified a lot of information. Old Tyrell was not in Highgarden but was instead in Oldtown, recruiting soldiers on behalf of the Iron Throne. Upon receiving Rhaegar's invitation to visit, he hurried back.

Margaery, with her big, watery eyes, said coquettishly, "Father isn't here, so please stay for two more days."

Rhaegar found her poor acting skills amusing and agreed without much comment.

After leaving Blackhaven, he passed through Prince's Pass and inspected it. Compared to the steep Boneway, Prince's Pass was overwhelmed with refugees, stretching endlessly even from a dragon's vantage point.

With the current garrison, stopping tens of thousands of desperate refugees without reinforcements from The Reach would be difficult. However, there was no immediate cause for concern.

Highgarden was not far from Nightsong in a straight line, and its fortress was not easy to breach. Waiting a day or two would be fine.

Rhaegar asked, "How many troops can we recruit this time?"

Margaery blinked and thought for a moment. "With the help of House Rowan, Caswell, Tarly, and others, we should be able to recruit about 10,000 men, mostly infantry."

Rhaegar nodded, reflecting on The Reach's wealth. During the Narrow Sea War, The Reach had provided 20,000 reinforcements, in addition to a fleet of 10,000 allied troops from Hightower, Redwyne, and the Shield Islands.

However, these troops were not very strong. They had been evenly distributed between Tyrosh and Lys, with the two major battles consuming most of them.

As he considered this, Rhaegar shook his head, dispelling the grim thoughts. The invasion campaign against the Triarchy had resulted in over 50,000 casualties for Westeros, while the Triarchy's losses were estimated at no less than 100,000.

Of those, at least 30,000 were burned to death by Rhaegar himself. The sheer number of deaths weighed heavily on him, contributing to his reluctance to attack Dorne and increase the casualties further.

War affects the human spirit. Not only did the Iron Throne need a respite, but Rhaegar also desired a break.

...

Soon, a feast was held in the sacred forest of Highgarden. Servants spread a shade cloth and set up a banquet by the pool.

Rhaegar and Helaena freshened up, changed out of their dragon-scented clothes, and joined the welcoming party.

"Come this way. There are plenty of ice buckets to cool off," Margaery said, squeezing between the siblings and leading the way with her arms folded.

It was August, and the weather in The Reach was stiflingly hot. Despite the black sunshade laid over the garden, the scorching sun was still difficult to bear. To ensure the guests' comfort, the waiters provided an ice bucket at each table to help beat the summer heat.

Rhaegar, freeing himself from the soft touch beneath his gauze shirt, picked up a red grape and put it in his mouth, admiring the scene. "It's no wonder Highgarden is so wealthy," he remarked.

The sheer number of ice buckets and the generous portions were impressive. The Red Keep's ice cellar was not even one-tenth as well stocked as Highgarden's.

#### Chapter 430: Weirwood Blessing

"Please, have a seat. The guests will be here soon," Margaery said, settling onto a brown stool and smiling warmly at the Targaryen siblings. Her bright, beautiful face, with brown eyes like a fawn in the forest, could make one's heart skip a beat.

Rhaegar glanced at her and felt an unexpected sweetness. It wasn't that he lacked an eye for beauty or had a discerning taste. But when you have endured fire and blood, witnessed charred corpses, heard endless screams, and smelled burning flesh, it's hard to be easily moved.

Rhaegar thought, smiled, and sat down on a round stool.

"Brother~," Helaena said, tilting her head, sensing something unusual. Those with sensitive minds are always a step ahead.

Rhaegar paused, rubbed her little head, and smiled. "Don't worry about me. You're a bit hot. Enjoy the ice."

As a Dreamer plagued by nightmares since childhood, his mind was resilient. The heavy killing had cast a shadow on his heart, but he managed to keep it at bay, like a servant sweeping up the garbage with a broom.

Helaena looked at him seriously, then nodded, trusting her brother's reassurance. If he said it was okay, then it must be okay.

Margaery, who had witnessed the exchange, said admiringly, "You two have a wonderful relationship. Prince Rhaegar, you are especially gentle, even more so than my two late brothers."

The men of Highgarden were known to be softhearted, high-profile gentlemen. Rhaegar's eyes flashed, and he unconsciously raised his glass, taking a sip of sweet fruit wine. Helaena's face flushed as she raised her glass and gulped down the sweet wine.

Margaery watched, perplexed, wondering if she had said something wrong. Her eyes fell on Helaena's freckled face, puzzled by her sudden blush.

Rhaegar felt a nudge under the table from Helaena's foot. How could anyone truly understand the Targaryens?

Guests began to arrive, and the banquet officially commenced. After a round of tedious greetings, some peace was finally restored. Rhaegar's smile grew strained, and he began to drink more frequently.

Margaery laughed quietly to herself. "The prince is still so shy."

Rhaegar smiled politely, bound by his position. The guests this time were of extraordinary pedigree, including members of House Rowan, Tarly, Beesbury, and Redwyne.

Although most were women, they represented the face of their respective Houses. The soldiers under their command had fought for the Targaryens, and Rhaegar had to show his appreciation.

As the singer plucked the strings of his lute, the melodious sound spread, infusing a romantic atmosphere into the hot summer day. Margaery, ever the chatterbox, kept her small, rosy mouth in constant motion. Listening to her lark-like voice always lifted one's spirits.

Rhaegar didn't notice at first, but Margaery had embraced the drunken Helaena, her pretty face pressed against the other's. He had to admit, the sight of the two beauties, one taller and one shorter, was captivating.

"Uh..." Rhaegar's eyelid twitched as he hesitated, unsure whether to intervene. His thoughts drifted to Jeyne, who was pregnant and living in The Eyrie. Before they met, she had an unusual relationship with Jessamyn, a topic of secret discussions among Westeros' nobility.

Rhaegar could attest that the two women shared an intimate, albeit platonic, bond, often sleeping under the same quilt. Occasionally, Jeyne would tease him about inviting Jessamyn to join them, though Rhaegar knew Jeyne couldn't endure such closeness.

"Helaena, you're even prettier than the last time I saw you. Your skin feels like custard pudding, so soft and springy," Margaery praised, finally letting go of Helaena, albeit reluctantly.

Helaena, unaccustomed to such intimacy, blushed deeply and stammered, "No, I'm just happy to be riding a dragon." Her forehead was tense, almost steaming with embarrassment.

Rhaegar put a hand on his forehead, unable to bear watching. She was clearly taken aback.

Margaery smiled, letting Helaena lean on her chest to sober up. She then turned to Rhaegar and said, "I heard that Lord Ormund Hightower is very unhappy about the Oldtown visit and wants to be the commander of the Reach coalition."

Rhaegar's spirits lifted. Intrigued, he asked, "Oh, what candidate does Lord Tyrell have in mind?"

Ever since Alicent married his father and Otto became Hand of the King, the Hightowers had been exerting increasing influence. Even the old Tyrells, known for their stubbornness, wouldn't encourage Hightower's arrogance.

Margaery smiled playfully. "Of course, it's Lord Thaddeus of House Rowan. He and his brother-in-law, Lord Donald Tarly, are both good men and loyal. Though," she added in a low voice, "Lord Thaddeus is a bit chubby; it's doubtful he can wear armor." She giggled happily after her revelation.

Rhaegar understood her point and smiled. "Lord Thaddeus is a good man, but Ormund Hightower will be furious."

The House of Rowan had been a top noble family in The Reach for generations, rivaling House Tyrell in some respects. Thaddeus Rowan, whose sister was married to Lord Tarly of Horn Hill, had both wealth and martial prowess. Not that Ormund, the big-nosed fool, couldn't challenge him.

Margaery's smile widened. "I also heard that the Hightowers are sailing to Myr and Tyrosh, planning to open overseas trading posts."

As the Rose of Highgarden, she naturally harbored animosity toward the Hightowers of Oldtown. Their secretive dealings with the nobles of The Reach had angered the Lords of Highgarden.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed. It was the first time he had heard of this development. The three Free Cities are major ports that dominate maritime trade on both sides of the Narrow Sea, with potential to surpass even Oldtown, the leading port in Westeros.

With the Hightowers' cunning and business acumen, they would undoubtedly thrive in any of the Free Cities. Rhaegar thought to himself, "A vassal who is too rich can be dangerous."

The Hightowers were already affluent, with the Faith of the Seven and the Citadel within their domain, making Oldtown a hub of culture and trade. Rhaegar felt a wave of resistance at the thought of his stepmother, Alicent: "A foolish woman with delusions of grandeur."

As he and Margaery conversed animatedly, a slender figure approached. Lady Alyssa smiled graciously. "Margaery, so many noble ladies are looking for you. I can't keep up with the demand."

Her voice was soft, her demeanor dignified. At first glance, she seemed like a valuable ally. Rhaegar and Margaery looked up simultaneously, their expressions subtly unreadable.

For a moment, there was silence.

Rhaegar cleared his throat. "I'll take Helaena to rest. You two carry on."

"The party has just begun. Won't you stay a little longer?" Lady Alyssa's face paled slightly, her expression turning unnatural.

Rhaegar shook his head. "No, I'll just wander around the garden by myself later."

Margaery stood up, handing the still-dazed Helaena to Rhaegar, and apologized, "Then I'll take my leave."

She walked past Lady Alyssa and joined the group of young ladies. Lady Alyssa, feeling embarrassed, found an excuse to leave.

Rhaegar watched her retreating figure and chuckled. "Who doesn't have a stepmother? Her acting is far worse than Alicent's."

Although Alicent was irksome, she had significantly contributed to the Targaryens and helped manage the Red Keep. With Rhaenyra and him, she maintained a facade of civility.

In contrast, Lady Alyssa clearly lacked the finesse.

"Oh~, " Helaena murmured, her eyes misty. "What happened to Mother?" She thought she had heard her brother mention her name.

Rhaegar picked her up, speaking with a mix of grumpiness and affection. "Nothing, just praising her."

"Oh." Helaena believed him, her eyes closing once more.

Rhaegar, both angry and amused, looked at his sister. Alicent truly had a good husband and good children. Feeling the light and soft touch of Helaena in his arms, he found one more reason to be forgiving of Alicent.

Damn it!

...

It was dusk. The temperature had cooled slightly, and the fiery clouds in the sky resembled splashes of dye, accentuating the magnificent sunset.

In the Godswood, a secluded green courtyard, Rhaegar strolled along the white marble path, his silver hair flowing freely over his shoulders. The path was lined with exotic flowers and plants, with stone sculptures and pools complementing the scenery.

"Hmm hmm hmm," Rhaegar hummed a popular ballad he often played on the harp. He could have taken out his harp and played it, but there was no need. He wasn't particularly fond of the song he was humming; it was just a catchy tune for his amusement.

Before he knew it, a peculiar-looking Weirwood tree appeared at the corner of the garden. Highgarden, a castle that welcomed both old and new gods, allowed for the worship of all deities.

Rhaegar approached the unusual tree, his eyes scanning its grotesque form. The Weirwood's roots spread far and wide, protruding from the ground like veins on the back of a human hand.

The thick trunk split into three parts, coiled like a python, with branches sprouting large red leaves that cast shadows over the land. Each pale trunk bore a carved human face, displaying expressions of laughter, sorrow, and grief.

Rhaegar was captivated by the tree's bizarre appearance. He walked up to it and touched the rough bark. As soon as he made contact, he shuddered, a glimmer of light flashing in his eyes.

After a moment, he withdrew his hand and stepped back, crossing his arms as he gazed up at the towering scarlet crown. "What a thing, the aesthetics are truly deformed," he muttered, before turning and walking away, his pace quickening.

He considered himself a pure Valyrian dragon. A dragon king had no faith. He could pretend to believe in the Seven or the Old Gods, but only as far as it served his purposes.

Rhaegar glanced back at the Weirwood, his eyes wary. When he touched it, he had felt a surge of magic power, fleeting and elusive. It was a sensation he had never experienced before, as if something was hiding from him, unwilling to be discovered. He decided to let it go for now, not wanting to investigate further.

As he walked, a thought crossed his mind. Compared to the meddlesome Seven Gods, the Old Gods seemed to have something intriguing about them, though he wasn't sure how much.

"I haven't had a dream in a while. I'm going back to bed," Rhaegar yawned, making his way slowly back to the castle. The encounter with the Weirwood had unexpectedly alleviated the stress brought on by the war. He suddenly felt that the burdens he carried weren't as heavy as they seemed.

Rhaegar clasped his hands together, muttering, "Old Gods and Weirwood, please bless me." He didn't truly believe it, but he was willing to give it a try.

As he left the garden, the sun had nearly set. Rhaegar's expression was calm, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. He felt relaxed and his mind was active. He had already devised a strategy for Dorne and a plan for dealing with House Hightower.