

G.O Thrones 431

Chapter 431: The Reach Turmoil

Time flies, especially in the tranquil Reach. Several days had passed in the blink of an eye.

On this particular day, Rhaegar rose early as usual, heading downstairs with faint dark circles under his eyes. Margaery was already waiting, her face contorted in surprise as she covered her mouth with her hand. "Prince, what happened? Didn't you have a good night's sleep?"

Rhaegar gave a sideways glance and said, "Don't make a fuss."

He casually gathered his long, silver hair and walked straight to the dining table. Margaery, momentarily speechless, swallowed the comforting words she had prepared.

The host and guest remained silent as they sat down to eat. Rhaegar said nothing as he devoured the monotonous bread and sausage. Margaery watched silently, the milk she was sipping losing its flavor.

The handsome prince from the picture stories was just as striking in real life, but unfortunately, he had a sharp tongue. People often build unrealistic expectations in their minds, and over time, they face a kind of sad disillusionment.

Rhaegar couldn't help but smile, sensing Margaery's gaze. In his daily observations, he had two words for her: chatterbox and drama queen. Ignoring her, she could go on for an hour, finding topics you want to avoid. The best way to handle her was to cut her off firmly, shoving the words back into her warm throat like a mop at the first sign of her chatter.

"I'm done eating."

After drinking his warm milk, Rhaegar gently massaged his dark circles and asked, "Is Lord Tyrell not back yet?"

"Yesterday, Father wrote that he had already set out and would be back in Highgarden soon," Margaery responded, managing her expression and speaking patiently.

"That's good. The front lines won't wait long."

"Don't worry, the Tyrells are your most loyal allies," Margaery said, smiling as she spoke of her father's loyalty and dedication. She mentioned the past friction with Hightower to secure the crown prince's position and his determination to rally the entire realm behind the war effort.

"Old Tyrell is a good man," Rhaegar nodded, his eyes straying to a vase of red roses decorating the table. Highgarden had an abundance of roses and wealth. In the spacious courtyard, roses of all kinds were planted, filling the air with their fragrance year-round.

The roses on the table were beautiful, tied together in a bouquet, their petals bright red and bursting with life. Rhaegar crossed his arms and stared at them, lost in thought.

The red roses were very beautiful, but they seemed too showy and exaggerated. As he gazed at them, one of the roses tilted its head as if dozing.

Pop!

The fragile neck of the rose snapped without warning, and the flower gently fell onto the white marble table. As it hit the surface, a few petals scattered, like bright red dye smeared on white paper. Rhaegar paused for a moment, then looked away.

Margaery noticed and said, "The waiter didn't choose well. How could he bring a rose that's so delicate?"

"Is it the fault of the servant or the rose?" Rhaegar muttered, lost in thought.

It was peculiar. Since the war began, he hadn't had a single dream. But since moving into Highgarden, where everything seemed perfect, his nerves had relaxed, and the nightmares returned one after another. Last night, he dreamt of war—a great fire consuming the flower garden for miles, with the flowers' wails contrasting the beauty of the blossoms and the horror of the destruction.

Clatter...

Light footsteps came from the stairs. Helaena, dressed in a white dress, stood at the top, holding onto the railing. Rhaegar looked up at the sound.

In a trance, Helaena blurted out, "A beast that has escaped its cage is difficult to stop."

Rhaegar frowned, trying to decipher the abrupt sentence. Margaery wiped the milk stains from the corner of her mouth and approached worriedly. "Helena, what do you mean?"

She was very perceptive and sensed the underlying meaning.

Dong! Dong! Dong!

The words had barely left her mouth when three bells outside the castle rang out, heavy and oppressive. Rhaegar and Margaery turned pale and looked out together.

According to Highgarden tradition, one bell tolls for peace, two bells for caution, and three bells for mourning.

Bang!

A muffled sound came from the open carved door. A knight in silver armor, stained with blood, fell to the ground, his face grief-stricken. "Lord Tyrell It's dead!"

"What?" Rhaegar was shocked.

Margaery was even more direct; her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed backward.

Helaena stood nearby, watching the scene with a blank expression.

Thud!

Margaery's head hit the ground, the impact waking her from her faint. She gasped, her head spinning.

Rhaegar chose to ignore it and walked out the door with his knights. Old Tyrell had been his supporter, balancing the wealth of the most prosperous region in the Seven Kingdoms. His death was a severe blow.

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It wasn't long before they arrived at the sept behind the castle. Rhaegar strode in, with Margaery and Helaena trailing behind. In the center of the chapel, several silent sisters with veils were tending to the corpse of an obese old man. Lady Alyssa stood nearby, tears in her eyes. She had married a 50-year-old man while still young and had been widowed after only two days of happiness.

Rhaegar approached the motionless corpse. The old man's face was kind, his hair and beard white, showing he had taken good care of himself. But now, he had a bottle-cap-sized hole in his chest, the dried blood already cleaned.

"A wound from an arrow?" Rhaegar murmured, silent.

There were no other wounds on his body; he had been pierced through the heart and lungs by a single arrow, dying without suffering.

"Father!" Margaery suddenly screamed, bursting into tears as she rushed to the corpse. She fell to her knees in front of the stone bed, weeping bitterly.

Rhaegar slowly backed away, his eyes locking onto the knight. The knight shuddered and hurriedly explained, "The Lord Tyrell and Lord Ormund had a big fight and left Oldtown. On the way, they were ambushed and shot from their horses. We barely managed to retrieve the Lord's body."

Fear flickered on his face as he recounted the ambush. They had faced a group of about a hundred armed with crossbows, while the Old Lord Tyrell traveled with thirteen knights and thirty horsemen.

They were tripped by a horse trap and then attacked with hidden arrows. The old Tyrell, unarmored, was quickly murdered. Without the sacrifice of the thirteen knights, his body would have been riddled with arrows. In the end, only five knights returned with the Lord's body; the rest were all killed.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed in fury as he listened. "Who was behind the ambush? Was there any sign?"

"It seems to be mercenaries from across the Narrow Sea," the knight stammered, inexperienced and confused. Suddenly, he snapped back to reality and produced a one-foot-long steel-tipped crossbow bolt.

Rhaegar took it, examining it closely before laughing coldly. "A three-arrow crossbow from Myr. Good stuff."

There was no doubt—the ambushers were mercenaries from beyond the Narrow Sea. With a strong hand, Rhaegar snapped the arrow in half, suppressing his anger. "Assassinating a Lord of the Realm—how dare they!" he spat.

There are rules to war. No one would be so reckless as to commit an assassination before the battle's outcome was clear, especially not assassinating a lord. This act wasn't about weakening the enemy but provoking them in the most vile way, igniting the war to the end.

Rhaegar left the Sept in a rage without saying a word.

Dong! Dong!

Suddenly, two more bells tolled, signaling the alarm.

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Highgarden, outside the city walls.

A cavalry unit galloped up to the city gate, raising a cloud of dust. Their banner depicted a burning tower on a green background.

"Roar!"

Suddenly, a thunderous dragon roar resounded through the sky, like an explosion in their ears. The hundred-strong cavalry team looked up in shock, staring at the sky. A black dragon burst through the clouds, creating a gust of wind that tore through the sky.

Boom!

The black wings blotted out the sun as the coal-black dragon landed outside the city walls, its stark contrast to the white stone making the scene all the more vivid.

"Roar!"

Cannibal's green pupils were cold as it extended its neck, warning the cavalry with another roar. The horses, terrified, scattered, causing several riders to fall.

"Steady, don't panic," Ormund Hightower shouted, tightening his reins and commanding his subordinates.

At the same time, Cannibal advanced slowly, green dragonfire flickering from its fangs. Rhaegar sat on the dragon's back, looking down coldly. "The Lord has been assassinated. What is Lord Ormund doing here?"

Old Tyrell had left Oldtown after a quarrel with Ormund and had been assassinated en route. The body had just been brought back to Highgarden, and now Ormund had arrived. Suspicious, to say the least.

Facing the terrifying black dragon, Ormund retreated from his horse, his voice shaking. "Prince, the cavalry of Highgarden has requested my assistance."

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the cavalry ranks. A rider in full armor stepped forward, his round shield emblazoned with the golden rose of House Tyrell.

"Deserting on a battlefield?" Rhaegar accused immediately.

The knight shook his head frantically. "It was the Lord who told me to seek help. I went to Honeyholt first, and then to Oldtown."

Rhaegar noticed more than a dozen riders with shields bearing the three hive emblems. It was hard to determine their authenticity.

Turning back to Ormund, Rhaegar asked, "Have you caught the murderer?"

Ormund hurriedly replied, "I arrived too late. All that was left were the bodies of a few Tyrosh mercenaries."

Tyrosh was known for its mercenaries, easily identifiable by their colorful hair dye. Hearing this, Rhaegar clenched his fists in anger and forced himself to remain calm.

"Dorne! Damn war!"

The assassination of the Lord of Highgarden, a long-time enemy of Dorne, during the Dorne Rebellion was a blatant provocation that set the nerves of the entire Reach and even Westeros on edge.

Taking a deep breath, Rhaegar shouted, "Gather the Coalition forces of the Reach and march on Dorne today!"

"Roar!"

Cannibal roared again, sensing its rider's anger, and flapped its wings, ascending into the sky. Despite the chill in his heart, Rhaegar remained focused. The assassination had happened recently; he intended to intercept the mercenaries and uncover how they infiltrated The Reach and knew the old Tyrell's whereabouts.

That night, Highgarden's ravens flew out in large numbers, stirring the entire Reach. Nobles, both great and small, gathered their soldiers and hurried to Highgarden. They were united by a single belief.

Revenge! Avenge the invasion of Dorne.

Chapter 432: Infighting in Highgarden

The next day.

The sun hung high in the sky, its scorching heat intense enough to dry up the stream. But the fervor of the Reach nobles, burning with vengeance, eclipsed even the sun's intensity.

Outside the circular walls of Highgarden, armies stretched as far as the eye could see. Among the troops, various banners flew: a white inverted triangle on a green background, golden cranes on blue, and a red and gold fox's head. These were the noble families directly below Highgarden, who had gathered overnight to offer their support.

It was noon, and the sun was shining brightly. Still, more nobles arrived from all directions, swelling the ranks of the Reach Coalition army. The assassination of the Warden of the South was an affront to all the Reach, stirring up memories of past conflicts with Dorne.

Outside the city walls, tens of thousands of troops gathered, and the atmosphere grew increasingly oppressive. Inside Highgarden, nobles streamed into the great hall, the tension palpable.

Margaery, dressed in a green gauze dress, stood before the assembled nobles and told the story of her father's death. Her speech was eloquent and moving, stirring anger and grief in her audience.

In contrast, Lady Alyssa, her eyes filled with tears, was supported by several noblewomen as she struggled to maintain her composure, her face pale.

By the end of the speech, the ice in the buckets had melted from the heat of the passionate nobles. Ormund, his face stern, interrupted Margaery's flow of words. "Lady Margaery, I understand your grief. Your father was my lord too."

Margaery paused and looked up at Ormund Hightower, who had been the first to arrive after her father's death. His quick arrival was suspicious.

Margaery's brown eyes flashed with suspicion. "Lord Ormund, what do you have to say?"

Once suspicion arises, it must be tested.

Ormund looked around and cleared his throat. "Everyone, we are all deeply saddened by the death of Lord Tyrell, but our enemy is at our doorstep. The Dornish army is in the Red Mountains."

"So instead of mourning our loss, let us discuss the appointment of a commander and send our troops to avenge Lord Tyrell!"

As soon as he finished speaking, a middle-aged nobleman stood up. "House Tyrell has no male heirs, so they cannot lead the combined forces of The Reach." He wore a badge with golden cranes on a blue background, identifying him as a member of House Crane of Red Lake.

This house was directly under House Tyrell and had a close relationship with them. He was in Oldtown at the time of the assassination and was among the first to arrive in Highgarden.

Ormund took a few steps forward. "As we did in Oldtown, we must choose a commander together."

"Then that person should be Lord Thaddeus," another young nobleman with dark hair and eyes spoke up. He was dressed plainly, without ornaments, and carried a large sword at his side.

Someone else spoke up in agreement. "I support Lord Donald Tarly's proposal. Lord Tyrell's intention was to elect Lord Thaddeus."

There were voices of agreement and dissent. Several minor nobles spoke tactfully, saying, "The recruitment meeting did not decide on a suitable commander, and many have yet to agree."

Within a few words, the nobles in the hall were clearly divided into two camps. Some supported Hightower, while others respected Lord Tyrell's wishes. There were also fence-sitters who drank cup after cup of wine and remained silent.

Margaery clasped her hands together, analyzing the situation without saying a word. Her father had gone to Oldtown to recruit soldiers and to act as a deterrent to Hightower, whose aggression had been increasing.

It seemed that the deterrent effect had not been achieved. In fact, Hightower had rejected some of her father's proposals, leading to a verbal conflict.

Margaery knew that this was not the time to assert herself, so she quietly watched the nobles argue. After a long time, Ormund took the lead in the discussion, while Lord Thaddeus was not present. Ormund raised his chin arrogantly. "Lady Margaery, you are a woman and do not understand the cruelty of war. Lord Thaddeus can barely mount a horse. Do you think I am a suitable choice to command the allied forces?"

It seemed like a question, but it was actually a threat. He was clearly bullying the widow and her orphaned daughter, who had no male heir to stand up for them.

Margaery feigned distress and helplessness. "Prince Rhaegar is still investigating the true culprit. We should wait for his return before making a decision."

"The Prince?" Ormund's face changed slightly.

At this point, Helaena, who had been standing in the corner, ran up to Margaery and said softly, "Uncle Ormund, please wait for my brother to return."

Ormund's mouth twitched, and he grudgingly agreed. "Yes, Princess."

Helaena's Hightower blood gave her words considerable weight. Margaery let out a sigh of relief and gave Helaena a look of deep gratitude. The little girl slapped Margaery's perky, round buttocks playfully and looked up proudly. Margaery blushed and tugged at the hem of her dress.

Silence once again fell over the hall.

But this time, the silence didn't last long.

"Roar!"

A muffled dragon roar echoed through the sky, and a dark dragon shadow landed in the inner courtyard of Highgarden.

"The prince is back."

"It's Prince Rhaegar..."

The nobles stood up and looked out of the hall. Through the green waterfall in the garden, they could faintly see the silhouette of a huge black dragon, resembling a mountain of coal.

Rhaegar walked into the hall, his silver hair hanging straight down, his purple eyes cold and unyielding. The nobles immediately sensed there was no good news. The murderer of Lord Tyrell had likely escaped.

Rhaegar did not say anything, and no one dared to press him. In truth, the mercenaries had indeed escaped. Rhaegar had ridden Cannibal through the farmland where the incident occurred, searching all routes from Highgarden to Nightsong and Oldtown, but found no trace of the perpetrators.

Simmering with anger, Rhaegar looked around at the assembled nobles and said coldly, "Is there any other lord who hasn't arrived yet?"

He suspected that there must have been a traitor who had tipped off the old Tyrell location for the assassination. The mercenaries had vanished without a trace, so someone must have helped them. He just didn't know who.

Rhaegar's eyes involuntarily fell on Ormund. Taken aback by Rhaegar's scrutiny, Ormund stammered, "Lord Thaddeus of Goldengrove hasn't arrived yet. He's gathering the northern armies of The Reach. There's also Caswell of Bitterbridge, Footly of Tumbleton..."

Many noble families were still gathering their troops, though they were far away.

Rhaegar's piercing gaze seemed to see through Ormund's innermost thoughts. Uncomfortable but experienced, Ormund changed the subject: "Prince, with Lord Tyrell dead, we should choose a commander and march the army to the Red Mountains to avenge his death."

The other nobles, feeling the invisible pressure of the heir prince, remained silent, but were of the same mind. Avenge Lord Tyrell's death and strike down the Dornish bastards. This was the ardent spirit of the Reach.

Rhaegar saw through Ormund's petty schemes and sensed the strong will of the assembled nobles. He turned to Margaery and asked bluntly, "Who was the commander of the Coalition army Lord Tyrell appointed before his death?"

He had no interest in competing for command of the forces of the Reach. His job was to control the overall situation and use the dragons to attack the enemy. Commanding the soldiers on land would have to be done by someone else. Asking Margaery was also a warning to Ormund.

Margaery did not disappoint, speaking quickly and clearly: "My father decided that Lord Thaddeus would be the commander, and he worked hard in King's Landing to make that happen."

Rhaegar looked at Ormund again, his expression stern. Ormund, suddenly speechless, sat back awkwardly in his chair.

It may be your song, but it's my dance.

Donald Tarly bowed respectfully and asked, "Prince, have the murderers of Lord Tyrell been captured?"

"No," Rhaegar replied, frowning. "The group moved very quickly and I suspect someone was helping them."

The crowd was in an uproar, looking at each other.

Rhaegar remained calm. The murder of old Tyrell was obvious to anyone with eyes to see. There was no need to hide the truth because of so-called concerns for unity.

Donald nodded calmly. "Highgarden has no male heirs, only Lady Alyssa and Lady Margaery. I suggest we strengthen our defenses."

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The people of Dorne are treacherous and cunning, capable of any evil deed. The Mertyns of Mistwood were poisoned and had all their direct descendants killed. The Tyrells are a prominent family, and if their last remaining members were to meet with an accident, The Reach would be thrown into a maelstrom of competition for power.

Hearing this, the nobles' faces darkened slightly, casting uncertain glances at Alyssa and Margaery. Highgarden without an heir was a prize. Whoever married the widow Alyssa or Margaery would control The Reach for decades.

Margaery and Alyssa realized this, their hearts skipping a beat. Margaery crept up behind Rhaegar and gave him a pleading look. Rhaegar looked at her and understood her message: she wanted to be the heir and succeed as the next Lady of Highgarden.

Rhaegar frowned in disapproval. There were already two female lords. The kingdom had six regions, and having one or two female leaders was acceptable, but not three. The title "Lady" sounded novel, but there were countless scandals behind the scenes. Jeyne was strong-willed, intelligent, and determined; with Rhaegar's backing, she had crushed the opposition in the Vale. All she needed was a legitimate heir.

Cassandra, on the other hand, had inherited Storm's End and was essentially a figurehead. She couldn't go to war, and the Stormlands depended entirely on her grandfather Royce and royal support. Her political skills were almost nonexistent, and nobles such as House Dondarrion of Blackhaven and House Swann of Stonehelm resented her leadership.

Aemond

Now that House Swann was gone, Aemond had taken over, which was a mistake that weakened House Baratheon's foundation. Aemond was Cassandra's fiancé, raising suspicions about her involvement. Cassandra couldn't control her vassals or her fiancé.

Either she was truly incompetent, or she was utterly ineffective. It would have been better to choose Maris Baratheon, the second of the Four Storms, to inherit the title.

Rhaegar, lost in thought, ignored Margaery's plea, unwilling to make a hasty decision. A woman's strength lies in her intelligence, but Margaery's cleverness bordered on cunning. Imitating successful people rigidly was not a trait of a successful person.

Seeing Rhaegar's silence, Margaery stamped her foot in frustration and signaled subtly. Several minor nobles immediately stepped forward, first praising Donald's proposal, then hinting at choosing a regent from Highgarden.

"I recommend Lady Margaery. She may be a woman, but she is the only Tyrell in Highgarden at the moment," one person spoke directly.

Others disagreed, arguing, "Lady Alyssa is the widow; she should be the regent."

"With all due respect, Lady Alyssa is a second wife and has only been married to Lord Tyrell for a few months."

"So what? A widow regent is common in many noble houses."

"Lady Margaery is Lord Tyrell's youngest daughter. She is clever and intelligent, making her more convincing."

"They're all women. Who's to say they're not all the same?"

The crowd chattered, the tension palpable.

Donald pondered, "I recommend Lady Margaery. She is more familiar with Highgarden's situation."

House Tarly and House Rowan were in-laws, and House Rowan was a loyal supporter of House Tyrell. Donald's words carried weight. Rhaegar watched silently, more concerned about whether Ormund was involved in the old Tyrell's murder than the internal struggles within Highgarden.

As the wind of opinion shifted, Margaery smiled. Lady Alyssa, who had been quiet until now, gathered her courage and spoke. "My lords, I have only been married to Highgarden for a short time, but by the grace of the Sevens, I am already pregnant with my late husband's child."

Chapter 433: Relics of the Dragonless

Lady Alyssa's words turned the tide and secured her position with a powerful statement of a potential heir. The status of a widow who remarries is very different from that of one who remains unmarried, especially in a house without a male heir. If she were indeed pregnant with a boy, he would be the logical successor.

After some discussion, it was decided that Lady Alyssa would serve as the regent. The attendant summoned the Maester to care for the new regent and escort her to her room for rest.

Margaery's smile froze as she stood in place, feeling a pang of discomfort. A promising situation lost to an unexpected pregnancy. Why did it have to be now?

Rhaegar noticed her expression and said lightly, "Keep an eye on her. Ensure she doesn't get hurt and doesn't contact outsiders."

Margaery took a deep breath and nodded, signaling her understanding. The Tyrell bloodline must be kept pure and protected.

With the internal power struggle in Highgarden resolved, it was time for the nobles of The Reach to take action. Rhaegar, saying nothing further, summoned Donald of Horn Hill to depart. Many nobles were still absent, and it would be prudent to wait until everyone had arrived.

The nobles, unwilling to object, busied themselves organizing the troops they had brought.

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Three days later, Highgarden was a bustling center of military activity. Outside the white walls, armies flying colorful banners stretched across the landscape, numbering between 20,000 and 30,000 men.

Nobles from The Reach had been arriving for the past three days, each bringing their own men and horses. The great nobles arrived with between 1,000 and 3,000 men each, while the lesser nobles brought anywhere from a few dozen to a few hundred. In all, they had assembled a well-equipped coalition army of 30,000 men.

Inside the castle, hundreds of noble lords gathered, each clad in heavy armor. Rhaegar sat at the head of the assembly, with Margaery and Helaena at his side. Lady Alyssa was absent, resting in her bedroom due to her pregnancy.

The Maester had confirmed that she was two months along. The news had spread, causing Margaery's smile to fade like a rose battered by wind and rain.

Rhaegar glanced at her, musing on the old Tyrells' remarkable ability to perpetuate their lineage. True to their family motto of "Growing Strong," they were adept at procreation. Turning his attention to the gathered lords, he observed Thaddeus, Donald, and Ormund, each in their distinctive armor.

Thaddeus was plump, Donald burly, and Ormund appeared idle. The latter two each carried a Valyrian steel sword at their waists, their formidable presence evident.

Rhaegar addressed the gathering in a serious tone. "Lord Thaddeus, the army will be leaving soon, and we need someone reliable to oversee the rear."

"As Regent and heir to the throne, I hereby appoint you Warden of the South, charged with keeping the peace in the Reach."

The title of Warden was an honor bestowed upon powerful lords when a ruling house was in trouble. Lord Jobert Royce of Runestone held the title in the Vale.

Hearing this, Thaddeus dropped to one knee, his round face aglow with excitement. "I swear on the honor of House Rowan that I will not betray your trust."

With a regent above him, the title of Warden of the South was the highest honor a noble could receive. Rhaegar smiled and said, "I'll leave Highgarden in your capable hands. I am confident in your ability to maintain law and order and manage the rear."

"The Reach coalition will advance to the front lines, and I will take full responsibility for the rear."

"I believe in you."

Rhaegar gently raised his hand, signaling for Donald to help Thaddeus to his feet, and smiled warmly. With the old Tyrell gone, The Reach was leaderless. Leading the coalition army to avenge the old Tyrell's death was a pleasure, but maintaining order at the rear was equally crucial.

Thaddeus, with his stature and experience, was better suited to stay behind and serve as the Warden than to go to war.

Rhaegar smiled as he gave his first command. The commander of the Coalition Army would undoubtedly be chosen from two strong candidates. Both men, recognizing the gravity of the moment, straightened their backs and took on their most heroic postures.

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Focusing on Donald, Rhaegar said, "It is said that you are an expert archer and that you have successfully wiped out the Salty Dornishmen in the Red Mountains several times."

The Salty Dornishmen were remnants of the original Dornish inhabitants, having retreated to the mountains and living by hunting. They were short, dark-skinned, and bore a resemblance to the pre-Rhoynar Dorne people.

Donald looked solemn and replied earnestly, "I have organized three raiding parties of over 100 men each and participated in eight counter-attacks against Dorne along the border."

His credentials marked him as a veteran.

"Your bravery is evident to all. You will make a fearless leader of the army," Rhaegar nodded, then turned to Ormund. "Lord Ormund, you have organized sea trade and are more adept at large-scale military operations. You should be the commander of the Coalition Army."

"Yes! I will not disappoint you," Ormund replied eagerly.

"Go out and check the provisions. The army is about to set out," Rhaegar waved his hand dismissively.

Donald frowned slightly. He had hoped to be the commander, but the importance of the vanguard role was not lost on him. In contrast, Ormund's face lit up with a complacent smile as he left the room.

Rhaegar observed everything silently, refraining from lowering himself to explain. The relationship between the lord and his bannerman in The Reach was tenuous, similar to that in the Riverlands, and House Tyrell's rule was not as solid.

Thaddeus had been promoted to Warden of the South, making Donald, as an ally, unsuitable to lead the coalition. Ormund, though a nuisance, was still capable. He would serve as a counterbalance until an heir to Highgarden was established.

"I'm doing this to honor the loyalty of the old Tyrells," Rhaegar thought to himself.

With the rear guard and front commander agreed upon, the vast coalition army in The Reach quickly mobilized like a well-oiled war machine. Each noble lord managed their private army, ensuring readiness. Margaery, too, stepped back to help Thaddeus inventory the military supplies.

The magnificent hall, paved with white stone, suddenly grew quiet. Rhaegar watched the busy servants and noticed a familiar face in the corner of his eye.

He was tall, stout, and had a serious yet somewhat naive expression.

"Prince, I have returned from the Citadel," Tru bowed, his Maester's robe tightly stretched.

Rhaegar smiled and asked, "You've regained your Maester status. Everything went well?"

Tru had gone to the Citadel in Oldtown in June, and it appeared he had regained his lost honor.

"Yes, I got my chain back," Tru showed the Maester's necklace on his chest, adorned with links of black iron, bronze, red copper, gold, silver, and Valyrian steel, each representing recognition in different fields.

Rhaegar was genuinely pleased for him. A wealth of knowledge is another kind of treasure.

"While I was at the Citadel, I saw and heard things that I need to report," Tru said, hesitating.

"Tell me," Rhaegar urged.

"These are just wild guesses, for your reference," Tru began, then took a wooden box from his breast pocket, speaking timidly. "I saw a cargo ship at the Weeping Dock, and the people on board spoke a dialect that was not the common tongue of Westeros."

This dock, rarely used and belonging to the Citadel, immediately raised Rhaegar's suspicions. His eyes narrowed as he recognized the seriousness of the situation. He took the box from Tru and opened it, eager to see what was inside.

"This is the relic of Maester Vaegon," Tru explained. "It was hidden in a false floor beneath his bed. It took some effort to find it."

Rhaegar opened the box, revealing a stack of unsealed letters, a few sheets of parchment covered in scribbles, a Valyrian steel ring, and half a gold mask. The Valyrian steel ring, very light, was a Maester's recognition of his studies at the Citadel. The half gold mask had been a symbol of Vaegon's doctorate, worn on his face for many years.

Rhaegar touched each item, but no voice came to his ears. He sighed lightly, treating it with a normal attitude. He recalled Saera Targaryen's reminder that Vaegon, the Dragonless, had been researching some strange contraptions at the Citadel, and had told him to find them when he had the time.

As a Targaryen himself, he believed that Saera wouldn't say that without reason.

After his great-grandfather's death, the only two children left were Saera and Vaegon. It was not surprising that the siblings were in contact with each other. He took out the letters and checked them one by one. The sender was always Jaehaerys I.

From 78 AC to 103 AC, there was a letter almost every year, inquiring about the rebellious son. The letter from 103 AC was no longer in Jaehaerys's handwriting but in the delicate script of Alicent.

Rhaegar pursed his lips and carefully stored the letters. His great-grandfather had died in 103 AC, bedridden and dependent on his maid Alicent for his daily needs. Unable to write letters himself, he had to ask Alicent to do it for him. This last letter expressed a father's longing for his son and his hope that Vaegon would return to see him before he died.

Unfortunately, the old king's wish was never fulfilled. Vaegon, only having studied for many years, was even weaker than his father and already bedridden. Rhaegar sighed softly, his feelings mixed. The second half of his great-grandfather's life had been somewhat bleak.

His only remaining son, Vaegon, died shortly after his father. The last daughter, Saera, resented her father and never set foot on the continent of Westeros again.

Even at the Great Council of 101, only three bastards were appointed. At the end of his life, his great-grandfather was confused, grabbing Alicent's hand and calling out Saera's name, thinking his daughter had returned from across the Narrow Sea to see him. Alicent, who looked a bit like her, became the old king's servant during his final days.

Therefore, even though she was not married to Viserys at that time and did not have Rhaenyra as a playmate, her position at court was still high.

"Alas," Rhaegar sighed, feeling a lump in his chest. He took a few parchments to examine. The first and second pages were covered in scribbles, depicting a hideous dragon and a strange sea map, respectively. The third and fourth pages contained written explanations.

"The Citadel rejects magic, and there are those with evil intentions towards dragons.

I can't get to the deeper levels of the Citadel. They're not just jealous of my talent, they're also afraid of my background. Don't want me to study the occult? Eat shit, there's nothing I can't learn without you.

Sothoryos is suspected of having a wild dragon. The Citadel sent a fleet to sail far away, but they were destroyed by a huge wave halfway through the journey."

Rhaegar's spirits lifted when he saw the words "wild dragon." The last parchment was the only one with both scribbles and writing.

"To go north, you must go south. To reach the Westerlands, you must go east. To move forward, you must move backward. To see the light, you must pass through the shadows."

Rhaegar frowned, not understanding. "North and South, West and East... Light and shadow."

On the parchment, there was a sketchy map of Westeros, Essos, and Sothoryos. In particular, there were markings for Asshai in Essos, The Land of Always Winter in Westeros, and a small corner of Sothoryos.

"Wild Dragon?" Rhaegar skipped over Asshai and The Land of Always Winter, focusing on the continent of Sothoryos. During his hunt for wyverns, he had found the remains of a dragon and fossilized dragon eggs that had broken out of their shells.

Rhaegar's eyes grew intense as he said, "The Citadel observes dragons and is hostile to them and It is likely that there are dragons in Sothoryos."

Chapter 434: Bloodline Eruption

Rhaegar was stunned as the gravity of the situation sank in.

The Citadel truly harbors ill intentions toward the Targaryens!

He suddenly recalled a childhood dream: Dreamfyre, chained and abused by a nefarious Maester, making it nearly kill him in the process. That unscrupulous Maester was eventually punished, his hands cut off, and sent to the Wall, leading to the removal of the chains from the Dragonpit.

Rhaegar's breathing quickened as he thought of the previous Grand Maester Mellos. That shameless old dog had deliberately mistreated his father, allowing his wounds to fester. Such actions were not befitting a Grand Maester.

Then, a fragment of a memory surfaced—his mother, during labor, being subjected to a Caesarean section by a Maester.

"Why did my mother have such difficult births? Why did she suffer repeated miscarriages?" Rhaegar mused, a phrase from Saera echoing in his mind.

"Winter is coming, and Westeros is too cold for the Targaryens."

Rhaegar hadn't paid much attention to this before, but now it seemed significant.

"Of all my great-grandfather's children, none met a good end, except for those who joined the Citadel or wandered the Narrow Sea."

Aemon and Baelon, both brave and handsome, became dragon riders at a young age. They were close brothers with a bright future ahead. One was assassinated in an accident, and the other died of suspected poisoning. Alyssa, their grandmother, as bold as any man, died of puerperal fever after giving birth to their third child.

Daella, another grandmother, a healthy young woman, died in childbirth from the same fever. Maegelle became a nun and contracted a deadly disease. Viserra broke her neck in an accident. Gael, seduced by a wandering singer, ended her life in despair. Out of thirteen children, excluding those who died in infancy, none of the remaining survived.

"Is that reasonable?" Rhaegar's expression turned as dark as storm clouds, a chill running up his spine.

He clenched the parchment, his knuckles turning white, and spat out a single word: "Citadel!"

He refused to believe in so many coincidences. These coincidences had killed his ancestors one by one and caused his mother to miscarry repeatedly.

Rhaegar added Aemma Arryn's suffering to the list of the Citadel's transgressions.

Tru, craning his neck, hesitated and said, "Prince, the ship I mentioned is very strange. The Lord Tyrell was killed, and the ship also disappeared from the harbor at the same time."

"There are no coincidences," Rhaegar replied, his voice chillingly calm.

Tru felt a cold shiver down his spine as he lowered his eyes.

Rhaegar's expressionless face revealed a hint of long-suppressed melancholy, and his voice suddenly trembled: "The Citadel! I never thought they would go this far!"

Not only his voice but his entire body trembled. His long, silvery-gold hair covered his cheeks, and his porcelain-white skin turned pale and bloodless. A black diamond-shaped mark protruded from his forehead.

Zila!

A tremor flitted across his lips, and a tendril of shadowy black fire escaped as his mouth opened.

Tru recoiled, heart hammering, stepping back with a tremulous shuffle.

The prince's behavior was alarmingly erratic.

"Tru."

Rhaegar's voice cut through the tension, sharp and resolute.

"Yes, Prince."

"Return to the citadel. Gather intelligence. Enlist every dissatisfied Maester and apprentice."

With a slow, deliberate lift of his head, Rhaegar's eyes sparkled like twin amethysts, his tone icy. "If the Citadel fails in its duty to the people, then I will tear it down!"

For too long, the Citadel had stood above the conflict, oblivious to the power of blood and fire.

Now, it faced the twilight of its era.

Tru, witnessing this, felt a chilling halt to his breath, his gaze locked on the heir prince.

On Rhaegar's pale brow, a second black scale emerged alongside the first, pressing out from his skin.

Then a third.

The transformation was far from over.

These three black scales overlapped, consuming his left forehead, resembling a dark, inked tattoo.

Suddenly, the scales writhed as if sentient, and from beneath them sprouted a horn, gnarled like a withered tree branch.

"Hisss..."

Pain speared through Rhaegar's mind, his teeth clenched, head shaking in an attempt to dispel the agony.

His long silver-gold hair cascaded aside, unveiling a visage marred by the grimace of torment.

The pain was unbearable. With every throb, Rhaegar felt as though his skull might burst.

Looking at the system panel.

Rhaegar Targaryen

Talent: Dreamer (Gold)

Bloodline: Dragonborn (+56%)

Runes: Serpent (Blue), Bronze (Green)

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

Relics: Blood and Fire, Dreamscape...

Evaluation: "Extraordinary is not the same as great. Rage burns everything in its path."

With a fleeting glance, Rhaegar dismissed the display, shoving Tru aside as he clutched his head, the pain intensifying with each heartbeat.

His bloodline, in the process of being refined, was causing side effects.

"Brother, clear your mind."

Small, chubby hands reached from behind, their gentle pressure massaging his temples.

Rhaegar resisted at first, but gave in, allowing the soothing touch despite his inner turmoil.

His condition was peculiar. The Dragonborn transformation required a minimum of 50% pure Valyrian dragon blood. At six, his blood purity was only 5%.

He had never doubted the purity of his bloodline. Typically, as one bonds with his dragon, the purity of his blood increases. By the time he was sixteen, he expected it to increase to 25%.

Among his siblings, Rhaenyra shone brightest, Helaena possessed the Dreamer's gift, and Daeron had mastered dragon-taming early on. Aegon and Aemond also excelled, taming dragons earlier than most Targaryens.

Still, none of them reached 50% purity on their own.

With furrowed brows, Rhaegar pondered the anomaly.

"Don't think, brother."

Helaena, her eyes a blend of worry and confusion, whispered, "Don't become a dragon. Dragons die."

"I'm human, how could I turn into a dragon!"

Through gritted teeth, he endured the mounting agony.

Then, curiously, as the "+" vanished from his bloodline indicator, so did the pain.

Relief washed over Rhaegar; his skin was free from scales and horns.

"Fetch me a mirror," he commanded.

Snapping from her daze, Helaena retrieved a small mirror from her space bracelet.

Rhaegar inspected his reflection—porcelain skin, normal-colored lips, still strikingly handsome.

Spurred by a thought, he shifted into his Dragonborn guise. His skin paled, lips turned blood red, and he exuded a sickly aura.

Lifting his hair, he revealed black scales and a horn on his left forehead. The horn was tiny, shorter than a pinky, and awkwardly shaped.

Rhaegar's lips twitched involuntarily as he faced the truth he didn't want to admit: "A deformity!"

It was neither a dragon horn nor a deer's, just a peculiar, misshapen protrusion.

"How could this happen?"

Rhaegar suppressed his Dragonborn state and felt a heavy darkness settle over him. His pure bloodline had given him numerous advantages: increased magical power, easier connection with dragons, a natural intimidating presence, enhanced physical strength, and a longer life span.

Yet now, side effects emerged.

Seeing her brother's sadness, Helaena darted to him like a fawn, enveloping him in a warm embrace. Amused, Rhaegar patted her back, reassuring her that he was fine.

Despite the unrest in Dorne, the defiance of Braavos, and the yet-unpunished Citadel, he remained undeterred. A headache was a minor inconvenience compared to his ability to wield a sword.

Tru approached cautiously. "Prince, your symptoms resemble those of some Targaryen infants who died at birth."

Rhaegar was stunned. Targaryen women often gave birth to deformed fetuses with scales, wings, and tails. His mother had endured multiple pregnancies; after Rhaenyra and before him, several babies had been stillborn or aborted, some resembling scaled creatures.

A strange term flashed through Rhaegar's mind: "Dragon's Blood Backlash".

Fragile embryos couldn't withstand the purity of their blood. Rhaegar tightened his grip on Helaena, questioning himself, "Is it the same thing?"

The Targaryens' ability to control dragons stemmed from their unique bloodline, a potent blend of fire and strength. This bloodline had facilitated Rhaegar's transformation but also brought hidden dangers. Excessive purity could trigger unknown changes.

"There must have been Dragonborns in Old Valyria. How did they manage?"

Rhaegar's focus shifted from the cause to the solution. Ancient Valyrians, adept in pyromancy and blood magic, surely possessed the knowledge to handle Dragonborns.

He mused, "If Dragonborns existed, there must be a way to control their power."

His hand slid down Helaena's back, brushing the dragon whip at her waist. His bloodline wasn't a curse; he simply lacked the means to unlock its potential.

"Get up, my head doesn't hurt anymore."

Rhaegar's voice softened as he stroked Helaena's head, anchoring himself in comfort rather than emotion.

Of course, he wouldn't forget the treachery.

"Mmm-hmm."

Tearfully, Helaena nodded and kissed his cheek. Rhaegar accepted it, feeling the wet warmth.

He looked to the sky. The sun blazed overhead, scorching the earth. In the courtyard, a fountain sprayed water, nourishing the greenery.

"Tru, remember what I said?"

"Always."

"Good. Bring the talents to Harrenhal. I have great plans for them."

Rhaegar's eyes shone with a light as brilliant as the sun he gazed upon.

The ingratitude of the Citadel was astounding. They believed that monopolizing the knowledge of Westeros would allow them to manipulate and deceive at will.

Rhaegar lacked the time and resources to dismantle the Citadel and deal with the ensuing chaos. But he knew one thing for certain: any power another held over him was a bond to be broken.

Determined to end this millennia-old cultural monopoly, he set out to create an institution capable of replacing the Citadel. He would recruit disillusioned Maesters and give them a new purpose.

Tru nodded vigorously and shuffled away, ready to begin the monumental task of undermining the Citadel's hold.

Rhaegar surveyed the empty white hall, then took Helaena's hand and led her into the sunlit courtyard.

"Let's go. The war beyond the Narrow Sea is distant. Westeros needs a war closer to home, with blood and fire!"

He stepped out of the hall.

"Roar!"

Cannibal dragon's green eyes glinted dully as its wings unfurled, casting a shadow over the meticulously tended garden. As it landed, its feet shattered the floorboards, and its tail sent a cascade of greenery flying.

Rhaegar hoisted Helaena onto the dragon's back. His expression calm, he commanded in the High Valyrian, "Spread your wings and fly!"

In an instant, a black dragon erupted from the white castle, soaring over the walls and the human alliance below, heading for the red mountains hundreds of miles away.

"Roar..."

A second roar echoed as a light blue dragon emerged from a lake, pursuing the black dragon like a spectral shadow.

Outside Highgarden, Ormund rode a white war horse, his gaze fixed on the two dragons above.

"Yah!"

Donald approached on horseback, a massive sword slung across his back. He exchanged a knowing glance with Ormund.

With a snort, Ormund drew his sword and bellowed, "The army is breaking camp!"

In a flurry of movement, tens of thousands of horses stirred. The coalition army of the Reach, bearing countless banners, followed the dragons with unwavering resolve.

Chapter 435: The Prince's Pass Meat Grinder

Dornish Marches

A cavalry force of 3,000 men approached, trampling the grass in their path. The midday sun burned fiercely.

The army slowed and halted at a stream. According to the map, they were at the edge of the Red Mountains, dozens of miles from Nightsong, at the entrance to the Prince's Pass.

"Roar..."

Two dragons, one black and one light blue, landed on the riverbank as soldiers carefully tended to sheep and cattle.

In a tent on the hillside, Rhaegar, dressed in black, met with nobles and lords to discuss strategy. They had to decide how and where to fight. Time was slipping away.

Outside the camp, a raven swooped down. A messenger from Nightsong reported that mercenaries had attacked the stronghold with refugees and were in desperate need of assistance.

Ormund read the letter aloud. "Highgarden has sent 3,000 soldiers to reinforce the garrison, but House Caron still struggles to withstand the attack."

"Decades of peace have left some fortresses in disrepair, and the garrison is understaffed," Donald retorted.

"Thirty thousand refugees will soon besiege Nightsong if the fortress falls."

"The Prince's Pass has many fortresses. If we hurry, we can reach Nightsong before the refugees," another lord added.

The room filled with heated debate. The Prince's Pass, unlike the steep Boneway, was wide and fortified with watchtowers and arrow towers, though insufficient against thousands of refugees. Despite strong fortresses guarded by hundreds of soldiers, lack of supplies made them vulnerable to well-equipped mercenaries.

Ormund, halting the arguments, spoke seriously. "Prince, the refugees are heading to Nightsong en masse. We must leave immediately."

The camp was close enough to offer support. Rhaegar studied the map intently. The Prince's Pass was a direct route, and Nightsong sat on a hill at its entrance. Refugees would break through the strongholds and eventually block the entrance.

Rhaegar formulated a plan. When the enemy arrives, there would be no time for further discussion.

His eyes narrowed. "The cavalry will depart at first light, reaching the pass before sunset to confront the refugees."

"Shouldn't we wait for the rest of the army?" Donald frowned, preferring to wait for the infantry.

Rhaegar glanced at him. "Do you doubt that 3,000 cavalry can handle 30,000 refugees?"

Westerosi cavalry, clad in armor and armed with lances, were formidable. A cavalry charge could scatter ten times their number of regular troops, let alone 30,000 refugees.

Donald conceded, "No problem, Prince."

"Then let's move before the refugees reach the pass," Rhaegar commanded, exiting the tent.

He aimed to set the battlefield at The Prince's Pass, preventing the refugees from breaching the blockade and escaping into the Reach.

...

The Prince's Pass

Ragged refugees huddled in the shadows of the mountains, seeking respite from the scorching sun. Their numbers were vast, like a dense ant colony.

Most were emaciated, lying on the ground like corpses, the yellow sand blowing over them. Black smoke billowed from a watchtower on either side of the mountain, its walls crumbling and dilapidated.

Some of the refugees stared blankly, silently praying to their gods. Compared to when they first entered the Prince's Pass, there were fewer strange faces among them. As food supplies dwindled, more refugees starved to death, unable to keep up with the mercenaries.

The mercenaries, joined by a contingent of Dornish soldiers, pressed on toward Nightsong.

...

Meanwhile

In front of the Nightsong barrier, a fortress garrison stood vigilant. Positioned near the entrance to The Prince's Pass, it boasted two arrow towers on either side of the ridge, with soldiers concealed within.

The path narrowed below, fortified with trenches and barbed wire to deter intruders.

Whoo-whoo-whoo...

Suddenly, a solemn horn blared from one of the arrow towers.

At the end of the road, the enemy appeared.

Two thousand mercenaries in light armor, wielding curved swords and crossbows, marched forward. Alongside them were over a thousand Dornish soldiers, clad in yellow-brown armor, armed with curved swords and round shields. Battle was at hand.

As the enemy approached, the arrow towers unleashed a barrage of arrows.

"Charge! Bring down the tower!" the mercenaries shouted in Valyrian. Shieldbearers advanced in front, crossbowmen behind.

They dismantled the heavy palisades, set up wooden ladders, and bridged the moat.

"Release the arrows!" The defenders responded fiercely, raining down flaming arrows.

The arrows ignited the palisades and the oil-soaked trenches, which burst into flames.

"Over the moat!" Sacrificing several men, the mercenaries jumped the narrow trench and began scaling the ridges.

Boom!

Rocks tumbled down, crushing everything in their path. The arrow towers were formidable defensive positions, but the enemy's numbers were overwhelming.

Eventually, the arrow towers exhausted their supply of gunpowder and stones, resorting to defending the gate and shooting arrows.

Woo-hoo-hoo...

As the defenders' arrows dwindled and the arrow towers faced imminent collapse, a resounding horn echoed through the air.

Alongside it came the unmistakable sound of horses neighing.

Three thousand cavalymen charged down the narrow road, banners fluttering in the wind.

"Charge!" Ormund shouted, his spirit high as he held aloft his house Valyrian steel sword Vigilance.

The cavalry surged forward, the first row of soldiers grimacing as they leveled their yard-long lances. The road was so narrow that the mercenaries had no choice but to climb the ridge.

A cacophony of collisions and screams ensued.

After the first charge, many mercenaries lay on the ground, speared like locusts.

"Counterattack! Shoot!" The mercenaries quickly regrouped, forming a defensive line with spearmen and shield bearers at the front to protect their archers.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

The mercenaries fired their crossbows in rapid succession, creating a continuous volley of bolts. The heavy armor of the cavalry rendered the arrows ineffective against their iron plates, but the unarmored horses beneath them took hits to the chest, belly, and legs, causing some to fall with their riders.

"Regroup! Charge!" Ormund shouted. Under the protection of their guards, the cavalry charged again. The rear row became the front, lances poised, while the front row, now in the rear, switched to swords.

"Roar!"

A deafening roar echoed between the mountains. A black dragon soared in, its massive body obscuring the road, wings casting a dark shadow over the battlefield. Rhaegar, sitting on the dragon's back, commanded impassively, "Dracarys!"

Cannibal's cruel green eyes narrowed as it leaned forward, opening its blood-red mouth.

Boom!

Dark green Dragonfire cascaded from the sky, spreading over the mercenary ranks like a living mist. The fire clung to them, growing and consuming like maggots on a bone. At first, the mercenaries did not realize the danger, but soon they were reduced to charred corpses.

"Ah! We're on fire!"

"Run! Hide in the arrow tower, the dragon is coming..."

Panic erupted among the mercenaries. Their formation collapsed as they wailed and tried to extinguish the relentless green fire.

Ormund seized the moment, ordering the cavalry to charge, skillfully avoiding the burning mercenaries and targeting the fleeing Dornish soldiers.

"Roar!"

Cannibal roared again, flapping its wings and gliding low, spitting Dragonfire at the mercenaries scrambling on the ridge.

"No! No!" The mercenaries' cries echoed as Dragonfire engulfed their bodies. Trapped between the cavalry on the road and the dragon above, their fate was sealed.

An unprecedented disaster had befallen the invaders.

"Quickly finish the job!" Rhaegar ordered, stopping Ormund from becoming too engrossed in the slaughter.

"Roar!"

At that moment, another dragon's roar filled the air. In the valley behind the road, a huge fire of orange and blue blazed, adding to the chaos.

Chapter 436: The Soft-hearted Policy

Rhaegar's attention was drawn to a faint, piercing scream.

"Helaena!"

He recognized the sound; it came from Helaena's dragon patrol area. She must have encountered another enemy force.

Glancing down, he saw the battlefield littered with the bodies of fallen mercenaries, their armor and weapons scattered like debris.

"Cannibal, more fire," Rhaegar commanded, patting the dragon's back.

"Roar!"

The Cannibal swooped down, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire along the road, creating an impassable barrier of flames. The panicked mercenaries, caught mid-escape, were forced back by the searing heat.

"Charge!" Ormund bellowed, leading the cavalry charge.

On the ridge, the doors of two arrow towers burst open, and over 300 armed soldiers poured out, intercepting the mercenaries attempting to scale the mountain.

With coordinated efforts from both flanks, the mercenaries on the mountain and those below were swiftly annihilated.

"Cannibal, let's go!" Rhaegar ordered, not sparing a glance backward. Confident in their victory, he directed his dragon skyward.

In the open sea, dragons might face threats, but in a confined place like The Prince's Pass, flanked by mountains, it was a deathtrap for any intruding force. No matter how many soldiers entered, they were doomed.

"Roar!"

The Cannibal shook its head proudly, flapping its wings and soaring high into the sky, heading toward the other end of the road.

...

The Other Side

A small fortress stood nestled in the mountain, strategically built into a narrow passageway. The fortress was divided into two parts. One part, the tower, was embedded in the mountain, its shape resembling an upside-down bowl. On the other side, a stone wall extended about ten feet high,

connecting to the opposite mountain side. The wall, pierced with loopholes, had a thick iron gate at its center—a typical fortified pass.

"Roar..."

The dragon's roar echoed as orange and light blue Dragonfire pounded the city walls.

"Crossbow bolts! Aim quickly!"

"Put out the oil, don't let it catch fire!"

Inside the walls, hundreds of mercenaries screamed in terror, their hands trembling as they held three-barrel crossbows.

The pale blue dragon gracefully circled, setting the walls ablaze, then turned its fiery wrath on the mountain towers.

"Dracarys!" Helaena's face was stern as she watched.

Dreamfyre snorted, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire that ignited the heavy wooden gate.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Arrows shot from the tower's firing holes, aiming for the dragon in midair.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre flapped its wings, ascending, allowing the arrows to strike its chest and belly, scattering sparks. With scales as tough as steel plates, the damage from ordinary arrows was negligible.

"Dreamfyre, don't let them get away," Helaena commanded, her eyes fixed on the mercenaries fleeing the city walls.

"Run! Run deep into the mountains!"

"The crossbow bolts are useless. Run!"

The tower gate was breached, and a group of mercenaries poured out, ignoring the Dragonfire at the gate. At a glance, there were no fewer than a thousand of them.

Helaena frowned, urging Dreamfyre to pursue them. The mercenaries and Dornish soldiers had broken into the fortress and were now waiting for reinforcements and siege equipment. The inclusion of refugees added to their numbers, aiding their assault on The Reach.

"Roar..."

Dreamfyre's pupils were cold as he pursued the fleeing mercenaries, burning them with dragonfire. Though many were reduced to ashes, there always seemed to be more.

Helaena watched anxiously, determined to let none escape.

"Roar!"

Cannibal flew in swiftly, its massive body streaking across the barren red mountains like a dark meteor.

"Dracarys!" Rhaegar commanded, his gaze merciless as he saw the enemies scattering below.

Cannibal's green pupils gleamed with cunning as its wings spread wide, gliding along the mountainsides.

Boom!

Dark green dragonfire erupted, scorching the mountains and consuming the mercenaries who tried to climb.

The Prince's Pass filled with the endless wails and screams of the doomed invaders.

...

Nightfall.

The Reach army had entered the Prince's Pass, reclaiming one fallen stronghold after another.

At the rear, in Nightsong, a council convened.

"The raven has delivered messages to Blackhaven and the Stormlands. The front line must be held at all costs," Rhaegar declared, tapping his fingers on the table. "Five thousand men from the Westerlands and the Riverlands will be assembled at the Prince's Palace."

"Yes, Prince."

"The Reach's coalition forces have broken through The Prince's Pass. We must take the Boneway and the Greenblood River. Dorne will be split into three battlefields," Rhaegar continued, his expression solemn as he analyzed the battle situation.

The Prince's Pass and the Boneway hid mercenaries from overseas and tens of thousands of homeless refugees. The Reach forces would occupy the entrance and the first half of the Prince's Pass with the strategic goal of taking Dorne.

At the end of the Prince's Pass lay the castle of Kingsgrave. The exit led to the impregnable fortress of Skyreach. House Fowler of Skyreach, descendants of the First Men and one of the most powerful and noble lords in Dorne, held many titles, including "Lord of the Great Road" and "Guardian of the Prince's Pass."

Alongside House Yronwood, known as the "Bloodroyals" and "Wardens of the Stone Way," they were the most powerful vassals under House Martell.

Donald suggested, "Prince, we have two unstoppable dragons. We can attack Kingsgrave and then assault Skyreach."

Helaena, listening intently, perked up and nodded eagerly.

Rhaegar thought for a moment and said, "Breaking into the city is not a problem." The combined strength of Cannibal and Dreamfyre was undeniable, even more powerful than Caraxes and Meleys beyond the Narrow Sea.

Rhaegar's finger rested on a fortress on the sand table. "There are tens of thousands of refugees here, blocking the army's path."

"Send troops to drive them away," Ormund suggested nonchalantly.

"Who would even look at a few refugees?"

Rhaegar shook his head. "The number of refugees is immense. Driving them away recklessly would be counterproductive. It would be no different from killing them all."

With discerning eyes, he saw another solution.

Ormund smiled sardonically. "What should we do then, kill them all?"

The sheer number of refugees, many from Dorne, made the task daunting. According to the traditions of Westeros, knights were supposed to protect the weak and helpless, not massacre civilians.

"No, I don't want to repeat the events of the First Dorne War," Rhaegar shook his head again.

Dorne was an extraordinary land. The native Dornish were not distinguished, resembling the short, dark-skinned Dornishmen of the Red Mountains. It was not until the Queen of the Rhoynar Warriors, Nymeria, crossed the sea that the Rhoynar bloodline was integrated into Dorne.

The Rhoynar had once faced the ancient freehold of Valyria in Essos. During the Rhoynar War, Rhoynar water wizards manipulated the river and killed three dragon riders. In retaliation, the Freehold sent 300 dragon riders, devastating the Rhoynar forces.

The Rhoynar fought valiantly, with Garin the Great calling on 250,000 men. However, the 300 dragons proved unstoppable, burning the Rhoynar River dry and slaughtering the Rhoynar forces. Garin the Great was captured and caged, forced to watch his people's massacre.

After this defeat, Nymeria led the remaining Rhoynar across the sea to escape the Freehold's pursuit. To this day, the people of Dorne inherited the Rhoynar's spirit of resistance, fearlessly facing death and war, and defending their territory to the end.

Rhaegar sighed softly and murmured, "If the other six kingdoms had been as resolute as Dorne, the conquerors would never have set foot in Blackwater Bay."

Unlike the other kingdoms, which either fractured internally or succumbed to the dragons, Dorne stood unyielding.

"To conquer a land, you can't rely solely on brute force," Rhaegar said sincerely. As a Targaryen and the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, he understood the complexities of rulership. "Dorne must be mine, but killing alone won't secure it. A blend of kindness and wisdom is essential."

Closing his eyes, Rhaegar hesitated over his decision. Helaena, watching from the side, quietly took his hand and rested her head on his arm. The weight of accomplishing what past conquerors could not was immense.

Ormund, his eyes darting anxiously, urged, "Prince, we must deploy our troops immediately. Perhaps we should drive the refugees toward Kingsgrave."

Rhaegar opened his eyes and asked, "If someone is starving and knows there is food ahead, why would they turn back?"

"If we don't drive them out, our army won't be able to advance without constant harassment."

"But we can't just drive them away," Rhaegar replied, taking a deep breath. Determined, he said, "Provide food for the refugees, designate a place for them to stay, and assign someone to watch over them."

"What?" Ormund's voice rose in disbelief. "These people are from Dorne, and Lord Tyrell has just been murdered!"

Noble honor might keep them from slaughtering refugees, but it didn't mean they would treat them with compassion. Dorne had rebelled; providing aid seemed inconceivable.

"Lord Ormund, please remain calm," Helaena interjected, her face wrinkling with concern as she stood protectively in front of Rhaegar. "If my brother has decided this, he has his reasons."

Ormund's face flushed with frustration, but he looked away, unable to argue further.

Rhaegar remained patient, explaining, "Dorne must pay for its rebellion. With Lord Tyrell's assassination, Dorne and House Martell will face blood and fire!"

Realistically, Rhaegar knew the immediate priorities were attacking Dorne and avenging the old Tyrells.

Ormund's expression brightened slightly at this, and Donald and the others sighed in relief, fearing the heir prince might abandon revenge.

Rhaegar continued, "We will attack both Kingsgrave and the capital, but we must not slaughter or drive away the refugees. Treating them well may yield unexpected benefits."

If one approach fails, try another. Reflecting on history, Rhaegar recalled how Aegon the Conqueror's pride led to significant losses during the First Dorne War, largely due to the resilient common folk of Dorne. He understood the multifaceted reasons behind the failure to conquer Dorne.

The Iron Throne had ruled Westeros for over a hundred years, and the support from the other six kingdoms was no longer an issue. With more than a dozen dragons at their command, the Targaryens were formidable.

Rhaegar outlined his plan: Conquer House Martell, dismantle the rebellious Dornish strongholds, and appease the common people of Dorne. These steps, though not necessarily in order, are key to conquering this land.

Chapter 437: Blackmailing House Hightower and the Citadel

The need for appeasement left the nobles speechless.

Rhaegar surveyed the room and asked, "Any further questions?"

"Appeasement is possible, but who will be responsible for food and medicine?" Ormund asked pointedly.

The noble lords exchanged uneasy glances and nodded. Helping their old enemies, the people of Dorne, was not a task any of them relished.

Rhaegar, anticipating this, replied firmly, "House Hightower will provide the food, and the Citadel will support the Maesters and the medicine."

Ormund immediately objected, "Prince, House Hightower has already paid a heavy price for the war. It is not obligated to help the people of Dorne."

"This is an order!" Rhaegar commanded.

"You can't force me. I'll have to consult with Your Grace," Ormund replied defiantly, his expression unwavering.

"Are you sure?" Rhaegar asked, narrowing his eyes. He gently pushed Helaena, who was clinging to him, aside and approached Ormund.

Ormund glared back but didn't move.

Rhaegar continued to close the distance, his purple eyes gleaming with a chilling light that seemed to pierce through all deceptions.

Ormund swallowed hard and looked away, unable to maintain his defiance.

"The cargo ships of Oldtown have never stopped sailing since the war began," Rhaegar stated coolly, his chest nearly touching Ormund's as he towered over him.

"Oldtown is the center of trade in Westeros. Maritime trade is natural," Ormund stammered in defense.

"Did I say maritime trade should be suspended until the war is over?" Rhaegar asked, his voice dripping with cold menace.

"That was for transporting supplies to The Disputed Lands," Ormund replied, his face pale and sweating.

Since the outbreak of the Narrow Sea War, maritime trade in the Narrow Sea had been heavily restricted. Lord Bartimos Celtigar was stripped of his title and exiled to the Wall for trading illegally with the hostile Triarchy.

Rhaegar's lips curled into a slight smile as he leaned closer and whispered in Ormund's ear, "The cargo ships from Oldtown are sailing to The Disputed Lands and Volantis without permission. How do you explain that?"

"No, that's not true," Ormund protested weakly.

"Oh?" Rhaegar's voice turned icy. "Alicent is the queen, but she is only a queen. How long can you protect her, and how long can she protect you?"

Ormund's fear was palpable, his face ashen and his lips trembling. At the beginning of the war, Oldtown's port had never stopped trading, leveraging the Queen's status and the influence of royal figures like Helaena.

Ormund had secretly purchased large quantities of food from The Reach under the guise of military requisitions, selling it to Volantis at exorbitant prices. And where did Volantis send this grain? To finance new allies, of course.

Rhaegar laughed, patting Ormund's stiff shoulder with a relieved smile. "I don't care about the previous supplies. The port of Oldtown will be closed until the rebellion in Dorne is over. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Ormund replied, his leg muscles cramping up. His face turned a ghastly shade of green as he shivered. "The Citadel will provide food to The Prince's Pass, and I will ask the Citadel to send Maesters to treat the victims in the name of the Lord of Oldtown."

"Very good!" Rhaegar's smile grew even brighter, and he pulled Ormund into a hearty embrace. Obedient nobles were good nobles.

"I've given Alicent face, so now you must give me face," Rhaegar thought.

Ormund, on the verge of tears, forced a smile that looked more like a grimace. He couldn't fathom why the heir prince had suddenly taken such a keen interest in House Hightower. He had always managed to evade scrutiny.

In the bright hall, the noble lords watched the interaction between the prince and Ormund, their faces reflecting a mix of emotions as they suppressed their temper. They knew that prince had dirt on House Hightower, and they were not necessarily clean themselves. Nobility wasn't about who was better, but who was worse.

Thump! Thump! Rhaegar slammed his fist on the table, his face turning cold again. "After dealing with the refugees, the army will immediately approach Kingsgrave and try to break through The Prince's Pass within half a month."

"Yes, Prince," the lords responded in unison.

"Kingsgrave is vulnerable, and the enemy is still at Skyreach," Rhaegar continued. "With two dragons burning Kingsgrave repeatedly; it can't hold out much longer."

...

As the Reach army entered the Prince's Pass, the Boneway and Stormlands were thrown into turmoil.

Royce Caron, upon receiving a distress letter from Nightsong, hastened his efforts to sweep the remaining Dornish forces.

That night, a fleet of ships docked at the port under Stonehelm's jurisdiction, supporting the 5,000 Stormlands troops. The troops divided into two groups, with 3,000 soldiers boarding the ships.

At the same time, an army of thousands, fully equipped, arrived at the entrance to the Boneway, near the Prince's palace.

The moon shone brightly through the hazy clouds.

Roar!

A massive, bronze-scaled dragon with a fearsome appearance soared across the night sky and landed at the Prince's palace.

"Your Grace!"

"Your Grace..."

Viserys, dressed in his black crown robes, dismounted from Vermithor. Three Kingsguard in silver armor and white cloaks hurried forward: Erryk and Arryk Cargyll, and Criston Cole, who had recently returned triumphantly from the Stepstones.

Viserys addressed them with a relieved tone, "First, let's go to the palace and discuss the strategy for attacking Wyl Castle."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"The palace is half-built. Your Grace, watch your step," Cole advised.

The three Kingsguard surrounded the king as they entered the Prince's Palace. Located at the entrance to the Boneway, the palace was strategically situated near mountains and water.

The palace was magnificent, divided into an inner and outer city. The inner city, built of white marble with carved beams, painted rafters, pavilions, and towers, rivaled the beauty of Highgarden. The outer city was still under construction, with only the foundations of the city walls laid.

As Viserys walked, he admired the surroundings, passing a dragon sculpture. "It's well built and in a good spot," he remarked with a smile.

Located at the entrance to the Boneway, the palace served as a crucial staging point for the kingdom's army to invade Dorne.

...

Beyond the Narrow Sea

Pentos, the harbor.

"Kill! Sailors ashore!"

"Prepare the catapults! Destroy the harbor defenses!"

Under the dim night sky, the crescent-shaped bay was a scene of chaos.

Over 30 warships sailed into the harbor, their purple sails casting a sinister hue over the sea. Sailors bustled about, loading catapults with flaming logs to bombard the unprepared defenses.

Within a quarter of an hour, the bay was ablaze, and smoke filled the sky. The emergency bell rang in Pentos, summoning mercenaries from their homes to defend the city.

Someone spotted the invaders' sails and screamed, "Purple ships! Braavos's strongest fleet!"

Since its founding, Braavos had established the position of Sealord and trained a formidable fleet. Alongside this, a fleet of purple-sailed merchant ships operated. Together, these fleets—one for attack, one for trade—had made Braavos a maritime powerhouse.

Boom!

The purple fleet issued orders with precision, launching relentless catapult attacks on the vulnerable harbor.

Whoo-hoo-hoo!

A chilling horn sounded as sailors rushed onto the deck, drawing their curved swords in preparation to go ashore. Against the backdrop of purple sails, the midnight air was thick with murderous intent.

In the harbor, a white stone tower.

Prince Reggio leaned against the window, watching the devastation unfold, and prayed, "Gods, please don't let Braavos get away with this."

Boom!

An explosion rocked the tower. Reggio shuddered, closing his eyes and muttering a prayer.

Looking back at the harbor, he saw the purple fleet had breached the defenses. The harbor was full of burning cargo ships. As the warships docked, sailors poured out, attacking the port with deadly intent.

The Purple Harbor's merit system meant every sailor was a key player.

"Kill! Capture the fat prince of Pentos alive!"

"Archers, cover!"

The garrison, still forming, was quickly overrun by Braavos's seasoned sailors.

Hoo-hoo!

A salty, bloody wind blew as dark clouds obscured the moon, deepening the night. On the vast sea, only the chaotic firelight of the harbor remained.

A sense of fear permeated every corner of Pentos.

"Roar!"

Suddenly, a piercing sound wave spread through the night, as if it could shatter eardrums.

The next moment...

"Dracarys!"

A huge scarlet dragon, long and slender, sliced through the night sky, accompanied by a proud and resonant male voice.

Boom!

Caraxes twisted and glided over the bay, unrestrained, spewing Dragonfire. The scarlet flames cut through the purple-sailed warships like a fiery pillar, destroying the siege equipment on their decks.

"Roar..."

Another dragon's roar echoed through the night, filled with deep, untouchable rage.

The sailors on deck looked up in panic, catching only a glimpse of scarlet.

"Dracarys!"

Rhaenys, her eyes bloodshot, shouted at the top of her lungs. Meleys' wings spread wide, its body blending into the night, transforming into a crimson ghost.

Boom!

The ghostly figure hovered over the harbor, unleashing a torrent of red dragonfire that engulfed the Braavos sailors who had disembarked.

"Dragon!!!"

"How can there be a dragon in Pentos?"

"Break through the defenses and enter the Free Cities for street fighting. Do not meet the dragon head on!"

The Braavos sailors were horrified, but the captains remained calm and urged their men to flee to the city. The dragons had cut off their retreat to the ships, leaving the city as their only refuge.

Daemon, clad in black armor, smiled sarcastically. "Cousin, I'll take care of the harbor. Don't let those guys get away."

Ruling Tyrosh and commanding a Free City as he pleased was exhilarating.

Rhaenys' eyes were filled with grief, and she gritted her teeth. "I'll take care of the harbor!"

"Roar..."

Sensing its rider's fury, Meleys surged forward with unrestrained speed, a red lightning bolt leaving a trail of wreckage and charred corpses in its wake.

Daemon watched with interest, amusement tinging his voice. "A dragon mother who has lost her cub."

When news of Laenor's murder reached the Disputed Lands, Rhaenys, who had lost her son in middle age, nearly went mad.

After a moment, Daemon lost interest. He slapped Caraxes' scarlet scales and commanded in dragon tongue, "Burn them all!"

He had learned the binding spell as well.

"Roar!"

With bloodshot eyes and a habit of screeching, Caraxes charged into the purple battlefield. Soon, the scarlet dragonfire engulfed the bay.

A massacre of blood and fire began silently.

Chapter 438: The Fall of Qoren (I)

The Next Day, at Dawn

The harbor was shrouded in smoke, and the wreckage of the shattered ships littered the sea.

"Roar..."

Caraxes circled the sky, twisting like a snake, patrolling the bay in the morning sun.

In the harbor, the garrison labored to remove the remains of the Braavos sailors.

Prince Reggio surveyed the scene in a daze, as if caught in a dream. Braavos's most powerful fleet of purple-harbor warships had been destroyed overnight.

Daemon strolled over, his black steel helmet under his arm and a smile on his lips. "Did you have a good dream last night, prince?"

Reggio, as if waking from a trance, hurried forward. "Prince Daemon, thank you for your help. You are as great as your ancestor, the Conqueror."

"Oh, it was nothing," Daemon replied, raising his chin, clearly pleased.

During the Century of Blood, the fleet of Volantis had occupied Lys and invaded Myr. When they attempted to conquer Tyrosh, they faced fierce resistance. Conqueror Aegon had ridden Balerion across the Narrow Sea, burning the Volantis fleet and turning the tide of the war. Daemon's rescue of Pentos was a similar feat.

Reggio took Daemon's hand, welcoming him warmly. "Please come to the Prince's Palace. I must treat you well."

"Just hospitality?" Daemon's smile didn't reach his eyes, his tone questioning.

Reggio slapped his forehead and quickly added, "Tyrosh has just regained its peace. I am willing to provide sufficient supplies to forge an unbreakable friendship between our cities."

Daemon's mouth curled up as he listened to Reggio's flattery. Both sides needed resources—one required armed protection, the other, supplies. They formed an alliance.

"Daemon!"

Rhaenys, clad in red armor, approached. After a night of mourning, her face was haggard, her expression downcast. The pain of losing her son was evident.

Daemon raised a hand, silencing Reggio, then turned to face her.

Rhaenys' eyes were red and swollen, but she forced a smile. "Braavos has been repelled. I must return to Westeros."

"Back to Westeros? Does my dear nephew know?" Daemon frowned. The three Free Cities had only just been recovered and remained unstable.

Rhaenys shook her head. "Laenor was killed, and Myr and Lys need you to look after them."

"You really have faith in me," Daemon muttered.

"You are a Targaryen. You will not disappoint Viserys' expectations," Rhaenys said, looking around at the devastation, her heart aching. "I have to find my child. I want to see him alive or at least find the body."

She still couldn't accept her son's death. Such a vibrant life, taken not in war, but by betrayal.

Daemon remained silent, uninterested in responding.

"It's settled then. You watch over The Disputed Lands," Rhaenys declared, ignoring his mood. She embraced Daemon, forcing a smile, then turned and walked away.

Meleys, on all fours, lowered its horned head for the rider to climb.

"Roar!"

Moments later, Meleys soared into the sky, disappearing swiftly over the vast ocean.

Daemon watched, his eyes dark and uncertain. It felt inhumane to be left alone beyond the Narrow Sea. He lowered his head, rubbing his blood-stained fingertips, and muttered, "Dorne rebels, Qoren..."

...

The Prince's Pass, Kingsgrave

Perched on a cliff with treacherous terrain, Kingsgrave stood isolated. At its base, a coalition army from The Reach had set up camp. The encampment stretched for a kilometer, with smoke rising from numerous cooking fires, sheltering no fewer than 5,000 troops.

Donald, heavily armored with a fierce gaze, patrolled back and forth. Since the conciliatory policy was announced the previous night, the commander of the coalition forces, Ormund, had been reduced to a figurehead, removed from the front line and tasked with aiding the refugees.

Thanks to Ormund's troops leading tens of thousands of refugees away, the army reached Kingsgrave without incident.

"Lord, a letter from Kingsgrave," a messenger reported urgently, handing Donald the letter.

Donald read it carefully. An hour earlier, the heir prince had sent terms of surrender to Kingsgrave. Anger flashed in Donald's eyes as he finished reading, cursing under his breath, "Dornish scum!"

The letter, written in clear, elegant handwriting, centered on the Iron Throne and The Reach, attempting to showcase Dornish qualities. Donald handed it back to the messenger with a stern order, "Give this to the Prince."

"Yes, my lord," the messenger replied and quickly left.

Soon after...

"Roar..."

"Roar..."

Two dragons roared repeatedly, their wings spread wide as they circled over Kingsgrave. The scorching sun cast shadows from the massive dragons onto the red cliffs below. One dragon was black, the other light blue, their silhouettes imposing.

Kingsgrave was under full martial law, with ravens dispatched in all directions. The crisis was imminent.

...

Dorne, Sunspear

Inside the Tower of the Sun, heated negotiations were underway. Qoren, crouched on the royal throne, his handsome face twisted in anger, demanded, "The Reach has invaded the Prince's Pass. Dorne needs more supplies."

In the palace of pale marble, a young man with luxuriant blond hair stood tall and calm. "Your army is useless, Prince. The Sealord has decided not to provide any more funds."

"Nonsense!" Qoren glared at him and pointed angrily. "Dorne has sent troops to the Stormlands and the Red Mountains, tying up the Iron Throne's forces."

"That won't help," the young man shrugged. The Sealord's decision was final.

Seeing the other man's hostility, Qoren controlled his temper and asked, "Who murdered the Lord of Highgarden? I gave no such order in Sunspear."

The young man thought for a moment and replied innocently, "It's not helpful to discuss this now."

Qoren's eyes grew cold. "The death of Lord Highgarden has set The Reach ablaze, and it has already reached Kingsgrave. Does Braavos expect to escape unscathed?"

His anger barely contained, Qoren reflected on his plan to use the Iron Throne to eliminate internal conflicts in Dorne, leveraging Braavos's support. Now, everything had gone awry. Braavos had

assassinated Lord Highgarden, placing the blame unjustly on Dorne. The nobles of The Reach, convinced of Dorne's guilt, would not relent.

The young man's patience wore thin, and he retorted, "I received news this morning that the Purple Harbor fleet failed in their attack on Pentos and was burned to the ground by dragons. Do you think Braavos was just watching?"

The loss of 50 ships in one night was devastating, but Qoren remained unmoved. "Can't you see the losses Dorne has suffered? Don't you think Braavos is shameless for withdrawing its support at this time?"

The war had shifted from the Narrow Sea to Dorne, and now, in the midst of conflict, Braavos was pulling out, leaving Dorne to fend for itself.

The young man sneered, "Not only is Braavos no longer funding us, but the remnants of the Triarchy have decided to move their efforts to Slaver's Bay." He paused, adding mockingly, "If you are capable, you can get funding from Volantis."

After the war in the Narrow Sea, Volantis had begun to make subtle moves—first secretly contacting Dorne, then recruiting mercenaries.

Qoren fell silent. Volantis was no better, merely seeking to protect its interests against the Targaryens, using Dorne as a distraction. The same principle applied here. Qoren's war against the Iron Throne was driven by fear that the Iron Throne would unify the lower half of the Narrow Sea and turn its sights on Dorne.

But cunning plans had unraveled, and now, both Braavos and its secret allies were abandoning Dorne to its fate.

Qoren pondered for a moment and then asked quietly, "What does Braavos need?"

The forces beyond the Narrow Sea would not allow Dorne to fall; otherwise, the Iron Throne's Dragonfire would turn toward them next.

The young man replied, "Wait. The Sealord has a plan and is preparing an ultimate weapon."

"An ultimate weapon?" Qoren was taken aback. "What could that be?"

The young man shook his head. "I don't know either. The Sealord is keeping it a secret, causing dissatisfaction among the bankers at the Iron Bank."

The Sealord's secrecy had strained relations, and the Iron Bank had drastically reduced his war budget in protest.

Qoren waved his hand dismissively. "I understand. Dorne will defeat the Reach Alliance on its own, and we'll discuss funding afterward."

Ultimately, Dorne needed to prove its worth as a financial partner. Despite losing over 10,000 soldiers in the Stormlands, Dorne was far from a position where it would lose its funding. With the Red Mountains' natural defenses, the major nobles could easily block the Reach Alliance.

"Then I will take my leave," the young man said, departing the palace under the disapproving glances of the guards.

Once he was gone, Qoren slumped back against the throne, feeling the weight of his predicament. Braavos was clearly sending a warning to prevent him from taking their support for granted.

"Alas, a tough battle lies ahead," Qoren muttered helplessly.

Davos Dayne, the Prince's personal guard, spoke up, "Skyreach and Yronwood are easy to defend but hard to attack. They are supported by Hellholt and Sandstone."

Dorne has many powerful noble lords. In the Red Mountains, there are also House Blackmont and the Starfall, which are located in remote areas. As long as they sail into The Summer Sea and enter the mainland via Brimstone, you can join forces with Hellholt.

Qoren sighed sadly. "Tell Lord Uller to recruit soldiers and be ready to attack at any time. There are no regular troops, but we have many temporary recruits. The people of Dorne are fierce and tough. With the armor provided by Braavos, they are no worse than the seasoned soldiers of The Reach."

"Yes, Prince," Davos replied, nodding before leaving to carry out the order.

...

Time passed quickly.

The negotiations in Sunspear were over, and the Braavos merchant ship docked in Planky Town slowly sailed out of the harbor. The ship sailed down the river, along the estuary, into the Summer Sea.

The sun was scorching, and the sea breeze was salty and damp.

Suddenly, a warship flying the flag of the Seahorses appeared on the horizon.

The lookout on the deck of the merchant ship gasped and cried out in terror, "A warship! A warship of House Velaryon!"

But it was too late. A warship appeared, followed by a second, a third... until a dozen ships came into view, their decks filled with soldiers in full armor.

The Sea Snake, clad in silver-gray armor, stood at the bow of the lead ship, his expression solemn. "The ships are approaching. Attack!"

"Roar..."

As soon as the command was given, a golden dragon glided in, its pale pink wings flapping in the wind.

"Dracarys!"

Chapter 439: The Wild Dragon of the Summer Sea

Boom!

The golden dragonfire descended like a pillar of fire and crashed into the cargo ship. Aegon, clad in silver armor, looked down arrogantly and laughed. "Burn them all! Drunkards and good-for-nothings!"

"Roar..."

Sunfyre, glowing golden, soared through the sky and delivered a devastating blow. The cargo ship, unarmed with scorpion crossbows, was helpless, a sitting target for the attack.

House Velaryon's warships lowered their rams and slammed into the freighter, crushing its cabin.

Woo-hoo-hoo!

A celebratory horn sounded. Soldiers jumped through the rams onto the enemy ship, initiating a lopsided massacre. In moments, the battle was over. The cargo ship burned violently, and bodies sank into the sea.

The Sea Snake watched impassively, his deep eyes cold and unreadable.

"My lord, we have captured a Braavos merchant and are interrogating him," the deputy officer reported, his tone serious.

Feeling the familiar salty sea breeze on his face, the Sea Snake closed his eyes briefly and replied, "Interrogate him harshly."

Dorne and Braavos were allies, and any cargo ship could carry information.

"Yes, my lord."

"Sail on to the Greenblood River!"

"Yes!"

After the adjutant left, the Sea Snake fell into a contemplative silence. His earlier leniency had allowed the Dornish soldiers to regroup in the Stormlands. If he had pursued them relentlessly from the start, perhaps Laenor would not have been killed.

"Roar..."

As the cargo ship sank completely, Aegon rode Sunfyre ahead, exploring the Greenblood River, leaving the fleet behind. The Sea Snake let Aegon take the lead, finding more comfort in his competence than in the reckless Prince Aemond.

Lost in thought, the Sea Snake's mind began to empty. The fleet slowly sailed through The Summer Sea.

Suddenly, a mist rose from the water, blocking out the scorching sun. The Sea Snake opened his arms, inhaling the salty sea air he had known all his life. A hint of nostalgia crossed his dark face.

"Roar..."

A melodious wailing drifted through the layers of fog, echoing across the ocean. The Sea Snake's eyes snapped open, searching for the source of the sound.

A light silver dragon burst through the mist, disappearing in an instant.

The Sea Snake stood dazed, eyes red and lips trembling. "Laenor!"

The dragon was searching for its rider.

The fog obscured his vision, and a wave of sadness welled up within him, making his breathing irregular. When he first heard of his son's death, he felt not grief but anger—anger at the treachery, anger at his son's failure, and anger at his own misjudgment.

Now, seeing Seasmoke searching for his master, the Sea Snake's heart was deeply touched. The emotions he had buried exploded, and he could no longer hold back his longing for his son.

A tear rolled down his cheek, shattering on the silver-gray breastplate.

The Sea Snake closed his eyes, then opened them again, his expression hardening back to its cold demeanor. The sorrow buried in his heart nourished the seeds of revenge.

Crunch, crunch...

His clenched fists creaked, and a murderous intent gleamed in his eyes. "Dorne, House Martell, House Velaryon will not forget," he muttered.

"Roar!"

As if in response to his vow, a majestic dragon roar echoed across the sea. In an instant, the sea breeze blew wildly, and the thick fog dissipated.

The Sea Snake stared into the depths of the fog, eyes wide with shock. A massive creature stirred, then soared southward towards The Summer Sea.

He tried to discern its shape, but the thick fog limited visibility. Soon, the beast disappeared, leaving only a vague impression of its enormous size and dragon-like form.

A moss-green claw briefly broke through the clouds.

"Laena?" The Sea Snake looked around in confusion, thinking it was Vhagar. His gaze followed the creature's departure, further south than the Summer Isles, towards the vast continent of Sothoryos.

"Forget it. The important thing is to capture the Greenblood River." Shaking his head, the Sea Snake refocused on the task at hand.

After a long time, the fleet emerged from the fog, revealing a land covered with tropical trees to the north. The forest bordered a wide river mouth, where turbulent waters flowed into the sea.

The adjutant stepped forward and reported, "Lord, Lemonwood is just ahead. If we follow the river upstream, we will reach Planky Town."

"The Lemonwood garrison is loose. Tell the fleet to attack directly!" The Sea Snake ordered.

The fleet moved at his command, plunging into the estuary. In the Lemonwood, a noble family and a Dorne cavalry unit were stationed along the coast. Their lord, Andrey Dalt, resided in a wooden castle.

"An unidentified fleet has entered the Greenblood River. Send a message to Sunspear immediately for support!" Andrey panicked, his beard trembling with fear.

His subordinate rushed to inform the Maester to release the ravens.

"Roar..."

A dragon descended from the sky, its pale pink wings flapping, releasing fierce Dragonfire onto the wooden castle. Boom! The wood caught fire, turning into the best kind of firewood.

"Sunfyre, block the fleeing soldiers!" Aegon's eyes widened, and he was in perfect form.

"Roar..."

Sunfyre soared through the lemon grove, displaying its magnificent form. The golden scales shimmered and shone like a second sun in the sky, boosting the morale of their troops.

The Sea Snake followed up the attack, brandishing a long-handled curved knife and shouting wildly, "Attack! Straight to Planky Town!"

The calm Greenblood River was stirred up by the winds of blood and fire.

...

The Prince's Pass

On the cliffs of Kingsgrave, the sun stood high, scorching the land. The cliffs cracked from the heat, and the air shimmered with distortion. The terrifying dragon roars had ceased, and the two dragons and the Targaryens were nowhere to be seen.

Kingsgrave, the crypts

Thousands of people - men, women, and children - huddled in the dark underground space, seeking refuge.

"Damn it! Damn the Reach, damn the Targaryens!" A grumpy voice ranted, filled with anger and abuse. The speaker, a man in armor, had thick black curls, olive skin, a small frame, and piercing green eyes. He was Lord Mors Manwoody, Lord of Kingsgrave.

House Manwoody, an ancient noble house of Dorne, guarded the middle passage of the Prince's Pass. Their family crest, a crowned skull, honored their founder, who killed an ancient king of the Reach.

Mors inherited his family's pride and stubbornness. His shouts frightened the old and weak huddled in the cellar, who remained silent and terrified. Even his wife, in a state of shock, sat dazed.

Exhausted from shouting, Mors called for a guard. "Where is the dragon? Isn't it supposed to spit dragon fire and burn down my castle?"

"I don't know," the guard stammered, looking away.

Mors' eyes narrowed. "Tell your Lord what you are hiding!"

The guard looked at Lady Manwoody and bowed his head. "We were in a hurry to hide in the cellar and couldn't find Lady Lysa. Ser Dickon went into the back garden to look for her."

"What!?" Mors roared in anger. "I have a son and a daughter, and you just ran off and lost my daughter?"

The guard's face turned pale. "There are still soldiers in the tower and the tunnel. They should be able to find her."

"You're full of shit!" Mors kicked the guard away, then turned to his wife and slapped her. "You can't even watch the children. I'll deal with you later." Ignoring the guards' attempts to stop him, he rushed out of the crypt.

Back Garden

The so-called garden lacked the fragrance of grass and flowers, hosting only a few roughly planted colorful blooms. The garden was small, without a pool or pavilion. High, thick city walls cast large shadows, befitting the structure of the steep castle.

Mors, his heart pounding with worry and rage, scanned the garden for any sign of his daughter.

Giggle...

In the otherwise ordinary garden, a silver bell-like laugh suddenly rang out.

By a willow tree with a thick trunk and drooping branches stood a stone bench made of polished bluestone. Seated beneath the tree was a handsome young man with silver hair, dressed in a black robe, teasing a little girl of about two or three with a candy.

The little girl had black curls, fair skin, and a small face that hungrily eyed the candy. Sugar was a luxury item, and many noble families could hardly afford it.

The silver-haired boy smiled, dangling the candy in front of her. The little girl reached out to grab it, but he lifted his hand higher. She pouted, her eyes showing disappointment. Then, the boy lowered his hand, and the little girl, undaunted, jumped to try and catch it. Again, he pulled his hand back, causing her to miss.

When her face wrinkled and she was on the verge of tears, the boy finally placed the candy in her mouth, replacing her sadness with a sweet, sticky delight.

"Sweet-toothed little girl," he said, smiling as he bent down to pick her up.

Under the willow tree, another boy, with black hair and olive skin, stood nervously watching. The silver-haired youth glanced at him and asked, "Do you want some too?"

"No, I don't," the boy replied, his face changing as he took a fearful half-step back. He glanced to the left, cold sweat running down his back.

As far as the eye could see, a terrifying black dragon with green vertical pupils loomed over the castle, its gaze indifferent and imposing.

The three children and the dragon seemed to coexist peacefully, a sight that made Lord Mors Manwoody's head spin as he hurried into the garden.

What was even more terrifying was that the silver-haired youth noticed his arrival and slowly removed his black robe, smiling warmly. His demeanor was not that of an enemy, but rather like an old friend after many years.

"Gulp..."

Mors's heart skipped a beat, and he swallowed involuntarily. The youth's smile was as bright as the sun, complementing every plant and flower around, yet it made Mors feel as if he were facing a formidable enemy. Beneath that gentle appearance lay a dangerous aura, making him feel like a thorn was pressed against his back.

Chapter 440: Conquering Kingsgrave

Rhaegar took off his black robe and casually placed it on a stone bench, just as he would in the sacred forest of the Red Keep.

He looked at Mors, who was staring back at him.

Rhaegar appeared calm and natural, surveying Mors with a measured gaze. "Lord Mors, is this how House Manwoody treats their guests, with indifference?"

Mors' expression stiffened, and he cursed inwardly.

You're the indifferent one. You have my children in your hands, and there's a dragon glaring at us. If I had eaten breakfast, I would have shit my pants by now.

Clatter...

A group of soldiers hurried over, armed with crossbows, surrounding the garden. About fifty of them, by a quick count.

Mors regained some confidence and shouted, "What do you want? People of Dorne never threaten children!"

The soldiers' faces tightened, loading their crossbows.

"Roar..."

Before anyone could make a move, a low, rough growl echoed through the garden. The Cannibal stretched its neck, its dragon head looming near the willow tree, green pupils surveying the scene with indifference.

A bunch of little bugs, so fragile.

One glance from the dragon, and Mors broke out in a cold sweat.

"Cannibal, you scared them," Rhaegar said, glancing back at the dragon as if reprimanding it.

The Cannibal snorted heavily, its tail sweeping across the flowerbed, scattering petals in all directions.

Rhaegar smiled, placing the little girl down. "Lysa, go play over there," he said gently.

Lysa stared at the falling petals, her short legs hesitant to move.

Mors watched the scene, his heart in his throat.

Rhaegar spread his hands, sighing. "First, I was knighted this year. I won't harm the young or the old."

"Second, I'm here for peace. You should be a little more polite to a Targaryen."

He patted Lysa's bottom, urging her to go find her parents.

"Father..." Lysa's sweet voice called out, her eyes lingering on the candy Rhaegar held.

That was for my brother. My brother didn't want it.

Mors pursed his lips, torn between calling his daughter back and keeping his word.

He glanced at his son under the willow tree, his expression growing even darker.

They've got them all.

Rhaegar's voice remained calm. "Surrender. For the sake of your children, don't resist."

"No way!" Mors exploded, pointing at Rhaegar. "You think you're Visenya, but I'm not some weak bitch from the Vale!"

During the Conqueror's War, Queen Visenya had ridden Vhagar to The Eyrie, single-handedly subduing the Vale. Her achievements were legendary.

Rhaegar frowned slightly, meeting Mors' guilty eyes. "The Vale is my mother's home, and your words are vulgar. I'm afraid I won't be able to control myself and kill you," he said seriously.

Mors bristled, the last trace of defiance making him glare back at Rhaegar.

"Alas, I've said I came for peace," Rhaegar sighed. As a sign of good faith, he removed Truefyre from his belt and placed the sword's hilt against his black robe, a symbol of war that he wore for major battles. Removing both was a gesture of sincerity.

The entire audience watched with bated breath. Dickon's breathing quickened as he eyed Truefyre. He was only a few steps away from the stone bench, and he could grab the sword in an instant.

Rhaegar didn't even glance at him, his every move exuding confidence.

Mors' face darkened as he gritted his teeth. "Even if you are the reincarnation of a conqueror and Visenya herself has possessed you, Kingsgrave will never surrender!"

"Don't be so quick to judge. What room for resistance do you have?" Rhaegar asked, rubbing Lysa's little head. "House Martell is too busy to worry about Kingsgrave. It's just a throwaway city. Why bother preserving the House Manwoody name?"

His tone was flat, as if discussing a trivial matter. He could easily burn Kingsgrave to the ground with his dragons, but subduing House Manwoody held more value.

Mors didn't answer but gave a subtle wink. Then, with a loud shout, "Lysa, come back to your father!"

In an instant, Dickon sprang up, pouncing on Truefyre like a hungry tiger.

Click!

The soldiers raised their crossbows, aiming at the silver-haired youth under the willow tree. Rhaegar remained calm, unshaken by the unfolding events. He didn't care if Dickon took Truefyre.

Lysa, startled by the roar, stood frozen. Rhaegar gently turned her towards Mors, whispering, "Go to your father, you little fool."

Lysa, confused, shuffled forward.

Swish!

Dickon drew Truefyre, the black blade glistening with a myriad of stars, and pointed it at its original owner. Rhaegar smiled faintly, looking past Manwoody and his son, and said calmly, "There's something, but not much."

"Roar..."

Cannibal growled, pressing its jaw against the crown of the willow tree, dark green Dragonfire accumulating in its mouth. Behind the thick willow, the dragon's massive body loomed, casting a shadow that covered half the castle.

At that moment, Rhaegar slowly stood, the smile vanishing from his face.

He didn't attack immediately. Instead, he watched as Lysa walked clumsily halfway across the room. Then he whistled.

"Zila!"

The ruby at the end of Truefyre's hilt glowed red, and heat spread from the hilt to the tip of the sword.

"Ah!"

Dickon screamed, his palm nearly burning through, and Truefyre fell to the ground.

Rhaegar reached for his belt with his right hand, a dark light flashing like lightning and striking Mors in front of him.

Crack!

The black dragon-taming whip wrapped around Mors' neck, tightening and then suddenly retracting. Mors was yanked back like a fish on a hook, pulled towards Rhaegar at lightning speed.

"Come on!" Rhaegar called out, raising his right foot.

Mors landed at his feet, cushioning his fall.

"Stop!"

"Let go of the Lord!"

Dickon was horrified, and the soldiers cried out in unison.

"Roar..."

Cannibal's green eyes flashed with malice, and a burst of Dragonfire engulfed all the soldiers in the garden. The wailing stopped abruptly, replaced by a loud cry.

"Waa waa..."

Three-year-old Lysa cried out in fear, running back on her short legs.

Rhaegar, stepping on Mors, tightened the dragon whip and said with regret, "Look what you've done."

He had taken off his black robe, showing he had no intention of killing anyone.

Mors, terrified but still stubborn, insisted, "I won't surrender. Don't waste your time!"

At that moment, he finally understood why the Vale had surrendered to Visenya. A dragon flies into your backyard, and the dragon's owner is holding your child. You try to fight back, but the dragon's Dragonfire burns all your soldiers. And the most outrageous thing is that you can't even defeat the dragon's owner. You are captured like a pig.

Rhaegar smiled.

He let go of the tightening dragon whip, hanging it back on his waist. Ignoring Dickon's angry, hateful gaze, he picked up Truefyre from the ground.

Finally, he lifted the black robe with one hand and the sobbing Lysa with the other. Looking down at Mors, he said, "No one can help you. Think of your children. They still have a bright future."

He was giving Mors a choice. The black robe or his daughter?

Mors got up unsteadily and said, "What do you want? I am a noble of Dorne, and I have my own Lord. I cannot pledge my loyalty to the Iron Throne."

"Qoren is nothing but a warlord using this war to weaken the noble families," Rhaegar replied, hitting the nail on the head. He then offered an olive branch: "Serve the Iron Throne, and I will make you a Lord, expanding the territory of House Manwoody."

He pinched Lysa's nose gently and added with a smile, "Fight for the Iron Throne, and your son can become my squire, while your daughter can be sent to Dragonstone to be a companion to the Princess of the Targaryens."

Quite generous terms.

Mors paused, skeptical. "Are you sure? On what basis?"

He couldn't believe such an opportunity had just fallen into his lap. If Dorne surrendered to the Iron Throne, it would break its back and face rejection from its sworn enemies in The Reach and elsewhere.

Rhaegar replied calmly, "My child is about to be born, and there may be a daughter as well." Half-true, half-false, but sincere in spirit.

Mors looked at his children and glanced at the terrifying black dragon. His heart sank. He had no energy left to resist. He gritted his teeth and asked, "You will keep your oath?"

"Of course."

"I will not bow to the Iron Throne, but I can bow to you."

"Why?"

"Seeing you, I see the conqueror of a hundred years ago. Calm and composed, decisive and tolerant. I want to offer you my loyalty."

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed. He understood that Mors probably didn't trust the Iron Throne and was joining him personally, not the institution. Rhaegar smiled and said, "Swear it."

He knew that as the future king, the House Manwoody would remain a vassal of the Iron Throne. All of Dorne would eventually bow to him.

Plop!

Mors knelt on one knee, lowering the proud head of House Manwoody, and said solemnly, "I swear by the old and new gods to serve Rhaegar of House Targaryen, to honor him, and to fulfill his mission at all costs!"

The oath was sacred and irrevocable, and Mors spoke it in one breath.

Rhaegar's expression remained impassive as he took the hilt of Truefyre and turned it towards Dicon. "Hold it. This sword."

Despite his burned hands, Dickon obediently took the scabbard.

Swish!

Truefyre was unsheathed, its cold light flashing.

Rhaegar held Lysa in one arm and placed the sword on Mors' shoulder with the other. "I swear by the old gods and the new that I accept your loyalty. You will be the cool breeze of summer and the oar of a far-reaching ship. You will honor your oath and never be stained by the filth of the world. You will always have a place by my hearth, today and every day."

Then he pressed the black blade against Mors' shoulders.

With a snap, Truefyre was sheathed.

Mors took a deep breath, accepting the fact that he was now a Targaryen vassal. He was scared but also excited. He stood up and bowed. "My Prince, Kingsgrave will fight for you. Please give your orders."

Rhaegar glanced back and said sternly, "Open the gates. Kingsgrave will serve as a staging post for the army."

Mors gritted his teeth and said, "Yes, Prince!"

He walked straight out and ordered the soldiers to open the gates of this dangerous city.

Below the cliffs, the Reach forces had been waiting for a long time.