

G.O Thrones 601

Chapter 601: Cannibal's Life Mark

Sleeping volcano.

"Roar!"

The sound of the furious neighing echoed for miles, reverberating endlessly across the landscape.

At the base of the low volcano, two dragon shadows—one black, one blue—clashed fiercely.

"Roar..."

The blue Thunderstrider's pupils narrowed in tension as its claws tore into its opponent's chest, spilling hot dragon blood.

Crack!

Iragaxys, twice the size of its sibling, loomed over it, pinning it down with its ferocious snout locked around Thunderstrider's throat.

"Roar!"

Thunderstrider screamed in pain, struggling more violently as it spewed blue Dragonfire in all directions. But its aim was wild and unfocused.

The two young dragons, locked in a deadly embrace, plummeted from the sky to the scorched earth below, biting and tearing at each other like frenzied loaches.

Scales scraped across the dry ground, and Dragonfire scorched the already parched soil.

A long, sharp roar filled the air.

If the young black dragon could defeat the wild Thunderstrider, then Caraxes wouldn't have to worry about being too harsh.

Time passed slowly.

...

The night gradually faded as the first rays of light appeared in the east.

Daemon raised his hand to block the light and noticed that the dragon fight below was nearing its end.

The young black dragon, with its superior size and ferocious nature, had pinned the wild Thunderstrider's neck.

"Roar..."

Thunderstrider, though resilient, fought back desperately, but its defiance only fueled Iragaxys's ferocity.

Iragaxys had initially sought only to defeat its sibling, as it would any other dragon. Now, its pupils narrowed to slits, and blood trickled down its snout.

"Get ready, Caraxes," Daemon ordered, his voice dripping with contempt.

"Roar..."

Caraxes's throat trembled as its large wings clamped down on the rocky terrain, allowing it to leap nimbly over the steep cliffs.

Below, the two young dragons were still locked in their fierce battle, their cries of anguish echoing through the air.

Daemon raised one arm, prepared to give the final command.

Suddenly, a gentle breeze brushed his face.

The rays of the rising sun pierced through the layers of mist, stinging the eyes of both man and dragon.

Then, the ancient, heavy sound of a horn blared, like thunder breaking through the darkness, shaking the lonely world.

"Roar!?"

Caraxes was the first to react, its pupils dilating as it stared into the distance.

Daemon, startled, turned his gaze toward the ruined Free Cities.

Roar!

The horn's sound continued in waves, overlapping rhythmically like a powerful surge.

Daemon's eyes widened as a towering volcano came into view, a sentinel that had withstood the wind and rain for countless years.

Rugged, majestic, unmovable...

A flood of adjectives filled his mind, composing an ancient melody.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys suddenly looked up, abandoning its frenzied attack.

"Roar..."

Thunderstrider's voice was weak as it broke free from its sibling's crushing grip, slowly rising into the air on battered wings.

The two young dragons flew away, one after the other, kicking up gusts of wind as they ascended.

Daemon's silver hair fluttered in the breeze, his face etched with concentration. "This horn sound..." he murmured.

...

"Roar!"

A black dragon shot straight up into the sky, its deep, powerful roar resonating through the misty air, spreading a pure, commanding sound across the heavens.

Whoo-hoo-hoo!

Rhaegar straddled the dragon's back, gripping an ancient horn in one hand, and blew with all his might.

In an instant, his pores opened wide.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

His heart pounded forcefully, pumping hot blood through every vein in his body. Rhaegar's eyes were closed, fully immersed in the moment.

Hum—

The Dragonborn state manifested, with horns and dark scales appearing on his forehead, while wisps of pure black flames spread from his chest.

“Sigh-ga...”

Cannibal's green pupils gleamed with defiance as it shot toward the hazy sun, its body straight as a blade.

Rhaegar was oblivious, letting the sunlight bathe his face, setting off his silver-blond hair like a shimmering curtain.

Whoo-hoo-hoo...

The rhythmically played horn sent waves of sound rippling through the air.

”Roar...”

"Roar!"

"..."

The roars of several dragons echoed in response, each in a different tone.

Poof!

A massive, scarlet beast with the length of a serpent crashed through the mist-shrouded western mountains, its head raised high and menacing. Daemon, perched on its back, looked small and insignificant by comparison.

Roar!

Iragaxys and Thunderstrider appeared next, intertwining and spinning like swallows in flight.

Whoo-hoo-hoo~

Before he knew it, dragon-shaped inscriptions appeared on the huge black surface of the horn. They glittered like stars, circling around Rhaegar.

There were no fewer than hundreds of them.

"Roar... Roar..."

Rhaegar felt as though he could hear the dragons' roars, even in his trance.

Pop~~

In an instant, the hundreds of dragon-shaped inscriptions vanished, disappearing like a flash in the pan.

Rhaegar frowned slightly, reluctant to let them go.

[This exploration mission is now open. The target is the Dragonhorn.]

A system prompt suddenly announced the start of an explorer mission. Rhaegar's frown eased, the roaring of dragons fading from his ears, and his eyelashes fluttered open.

[Rhaegar Targaryen]

Talent: Dreamer (Gold)

Bloodline: Dragonborn (+63%)

Runes: Bronze (Green), Serpent (Blue), Dream Eater (Purple)

Blood Magic: Binding Spell (Blue), Dragon Dance (Purple)...

Relics: Blood and Fire, Dreamscape, Pure Water

Special Items: Space Necklace, Dragonhorn (Unclaimed)

Comment: "Ancient Dragonlord bloodline, reclaiming the noble power."

The system panel had been significantly altered.

The numbers in the bloodline column were jumping wildly, showing rapid refinement of his bloodline. Additionally, a new column for "special items" appeared—something that had never happened before, even with the acquisition of the space bracelet, Valyria steel sword, or dragon taming whip.

Rhaegar was momentarily dazed as exploration information populated the panel.

[Dragonhorn]

Exploration progress: 10.6% (Special Status)

The progress increased rapidly, as though fueled by adrenaline. Rhaegar gradually regained his senses, the warmth of the Dragonhorn returning to his lips.

"Dragonhorn... still without a master?"

Rhaegar felt a chill run down his spine as he gripped the horn, feeling the heat of Blackfyre coursing through his body.

Whoo-hoo-hoo!

With a sense of relief, Rhaegar played the "Dragon Dance."

Caraxes was almost frantic, its body growing rapidly as it swayed and spewed Dragonfire.

"Quiet, Caraxes!" Daemon shouted, jostled on the dragon's back as he struggled to control the beast beneath him.

"Roar..."

Caraxes soared and dove, plunging into the raging Dragonfire as if celebrating a baptism of fury.

Then, the two young dragons launched their attack.

"Roar!"

"Roar..."

Each over ten meters long, the dragons opened and closed their wings, their black and blue Dragonfire coloring the sky with their uncontrollable desire to fight.

Rhaegar knew nothing of this.

...

The Free Cities.

A new day dawned, and soldiers surged from the crumbling walls.

"Hurry up! Surround the area!" The Sea Snake, clad in armor and armed with a sword, barked orders. His face was a terrifyingly dark shade of blue.

Last night, the black dragon went mad. When they sent someone to investigate, they found the ruined palace had collapsed into a sea of flames, and the king was nowhere to be found.

Orderly footsteps echoed all around as thousands of sailors climbed the city walls, setting up crossbows and laying traps. However...

"Roar!" A thunderous, muffled roar split the air. The sun was swallowed by darkness, and the temperature plummeted.

The Sea Snake immediately looked up, nearly dropping his sword.

Roar! The black dragon soared into the sky, then plunged down like a meteor, its wings spreading like a dark curtain. On its back sat a silver-haired figure.

Woo-hoo! Rhaegar, covered in flames, blew a massive horn that was two meters long. The dragon-shaped inscription on the horn's surface vanished, and the tiny letters encircling it glowed with an eerie light.

"The Dragonhorn, held by a Dragonlord..." Rhaegar murmured, sensing its power.

A trickle of blood flowed from his lips, staining the tiny letters and seeping into every inch of the black horn.

Hum— Rhaegar's purple eyes gleamed as he suddenly understood. He communicated with the dragon beneath him, forging a unique bond.

Roar! The Cannibal and its rider were in perfect sync. As the Cannibal swooped down, the curved gray horn pierced a scale on Rhaegar's side. The black scales shattered, and bright red dragon blood flowed out.

With a casual wave of his hand, Rhaegar caused a drop of dragon blood to float over, merging it with the Dragon Horn.

Roar! A loud dragon roar echoed, not from the Cannibal, but alone in Rhaegar's ears. A trace of black fire spread through the Dragon Horn, and tiny characters and red rubies formed a halo, condensing into a dragon-shaped inscription carved by a sword or axe. It was completely black, like charcoal, resembling the Cannibal.

Suddenly, the Dragon Horn flashed with a dark light.

[This exploration is complete. Please pick up the lost treasure], an ethereal voice announced as Rhaegar lifted his gaze to the system panel.

[Dragon Horn] Exploration Progress: 100% (Completed)

'Special Status, is that a designation?' Rhaegar wondered, poking at a red halo the size of a watermelon beside his feet.

Pop!

The bubble-like halo exploded, transforming into a small cluster of bright light that rushed into his forehead.

[Relic successfully picked up, testing...]

[Testing successful. Determined to be a legendary relic, passed down through generations.]

The voice prompt echoed as a red dragon scale, named "Passing on the Torch," appeared in Rhaegar's mind. The dragon scale was the size of a palm, rough and scratched.

Rhaegar pondered for a moment and checked the small reminder that activated the relic.

"Special relics, only for special bloodlines," it stated, emphasizing the unique importance of the Dragon Horn.

'Special Bloodline? What kind of bloodline?' Rhaegar thought, stunned, as his body followed the Cannibal's dive, cutting through the wind.

Hum—

Though still contemplating his doubts, his body became enveloped in black fire, with faint signs of a dragon taking shape. The red dragon scales trembled slightly before shattering into dust.

Suddenly, the system prompt sounded:

[Congratulations, the legacy has been activated, and you have obtained... Blood Dance.]

Level: Epic (Purple)

Function: Awaken the ferocity of the dragon and complete a Blood Dance and fire.

Comment: "The Dragon Dance and the Dance of the Blood are the two core blood magic skills of the Dragonborn. They are the key to controlling dragons."

Rhaegar's eyes widened as he realized that both dragon control songs belonged to the Dragonborn. Subconsciously, the tune he was playing shifted to the "Blood Dance."

Woo-woo-woo-woo~

Rhaegar's heart trembled as the black fire within him suddenly contracted, leaving his body to wrap itself around the Dragon Horn.

"Roar!" The Cannibal's green pupils narrowed as it dove with unstoppable force, spitting out terrifying Dragonfire.

"Roar!" Dragonfire rained down from the sky, further devastating the already ruined Free Cities.

"Roar... Roar..."

"Roar..."

Caraxes was the first to follow, circling low over the Free Cities like a serpent, unleashing a continuous stream of dragonfire.

The two young dragons flanked the city, one on the left, the other on the right. As dragons howled in agony, black and blue Dragonfire rose in succession.

For a time, the dragons danced together, united by the shared origin of blood and fire.

Chapter 602: Even Distribution of Spoils

"Roar!" A black dragon steps onto the cliff by the sea, spreading its wings and soaring into the sky.

Out on the sea, a fleet bearing the flag of House Velaryon sets sail. Behind them, the ruins of the Free Cities of Tyria are shrouded in smoke, which billows up towards the sky. In the distance, the mournful wails of ghosts echo through the air.

Drizzle...

A heavy rain begins to fall, washing away the tainted dragon blood that should have died long ago.

...

The next day...

The Smoking Sea. A dense fog obscured the horizon.

"Roar..."

On the deck of the long Sea Snake, a young dragon with dark blue scales curled into a ball.

"It's okay," Rhaegar murmured, gently stroking its scales. "Good boy! Poor little thing."

"Roar..."

Thunderstrider blinked and approached its dragon's snout, rubbing against it with a pitiful whine.

The young dragon, over ten meters long, bore deep claw marks across its chest and lower abdomen, each wound tearing through its scales. The worst injury was on the side of its neck, where blood flowed uncontrollably. These were the scars of a fierce battle with another young dragon.

"They're young, but they all have quite the temper," Rhaegar remarked, winding a Rune Serpent around his finger as he glanced up at the sky. Above the fog, a black dragon's shadow loomed over the fleet like a massive, ominous umbrella.

"Roar!"

A black young dragon flew beneath, playfully weaving around the masts of the fleet. After the violent clash, the dragons had finally calmed down.

"Cough, cough..."

A salty sea breeze blew through, causing Rhaegar to cough a few times. Thunderstrider twisted its head, its pupils flashing with confusion.

"Your Grace!"

The Sea Snake's voice came from behind, accompanied by a large group of people. Rhaegar pursed his lips and asked, "Is everything ready?" He turned, revealing the face beneath his hood.

The Sea Snake, who had been full of energy, now seemed deflated, like a firecracker that had fizzled out. He saw the young king standing tall, with long, silver-gold hair cascading naturally down his back and deep, intelligent purple eyes. However, Rhaegar's skin was pale as paper, and his cheeks were slightly gaunt. Standing in the sea breeze, draped in a black robe, he exuded a sense of fragility, as if a gust of wind might topple him.

The Sea Snake swallowed nervously. "Your Grace, are you all right?" he asked. Since yesterday, the king's radiant beauty had noticeably faded.

Rhaegar touched his cheek and replied with a bold yet careful smile, "It's nothing, just a harmless aftereffect."

"Harmless?"

The Sea Snake was dumbfounded, wondering what kind of pain the king was enduring. In just one night, he had lost so much weight. Rhaegar only smiled, offering no further explanation.

He opened the system panel:

[Rhaegar Targaryen]

Talent: Dreamer (Gold)

Bloodline: Dragonborn (+67%)

Runes: Bronze (Green), Serpent (Blue), Dream Eater (Purple)

Blood Magic: Binding Spell (Blue), Dragon Dance (Purple), Blood Dance (Purple)...

Relics: Blood and Fire, Dreamscape, Pure Water...

Special items: Space Necklace, Dragonhorn (Special)

Comment: "A rare descendant of true dragons, still needs time to grow into his power."

First, in the bloodline column, the bloodline was rapidly purifying. Rhaegar's eyes flashed as a cluster of dark flames flickered in the depths of his pupils. This refinement had gradually allowed him to master the state of Dragonborn and better control his flames.

Secondly, the Dragonhorn had now recognized its master. When blown, it summoned dragons. But that was not its only power. Through the "Dragon Dance" and "Dance of Blood," it could also calm and inspire the dragons' fighting spirit, enabling them to unleash their full strength on the battlefield.

Rhaegar wiped the space necklace around his neck, where the exquisite giant horn was placed. Its surface, glistening with a metallic sheen, bore three dragon-shaped inscriptions of varying sizes. One was completely black, the mark of the Cannibal. The other two were black and blue, representing Iragaxys and Thunderstrider. When dragon blood dripped into the horn, it left an imprint inside, enabling communication regardless of distance. The message was transmitted when the horn was claimed by its owner.

The top Dragonlord families would imprint the marks of their dragons on these horns. This practice was not only convenient for recalling distant companions but also crucial for controlling the house's dragons, preventing them from being stolen or hunted.

Rhaegar had used dragon blood to subdue the Dragonhorn and played the complete "Dance of Blood," incorporating the three dragons' birthmarks in succession. This process had taken a toll on him, leaving him visibly exhausted.

'Without guidance, it's like walking on thin ice,' Rhaegar thought to himself with a sigh, but there was nothing he could do.

"Your Grace, please take a look."

Noticing the king's silence, the Sea Snake gestured to the sailors, who promptly brought over several large boxes. As the boxes were opened one after another, they revealed mostly old antiques. The Sea Snake carefully lifted a model of a sailing ship from within, his eyes alight with excitement. "This is a model of a ship from ancient Valyria. It's said that the sails were woven with magic, allowing them to withstand the strongest winds and waves."

"If you like it, you can keep it," Rhaegar said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The model did indeed contain a faint trace of magic, but replicating such craftsmanship would be nearly impossible. Besides, the Targaryens commanded both the skies and the earth, and they had little use for the seas. Ancient Valyria had produced many ships and boasted countless magicians, yet none had ever conquered a continent with them.

"Thank you very much, Your Grace!"

The Sea Snake, who rarely smiled, tucked the model ship away as if it were a priceless treasure. While the Dragonlords might not value ships, House Velaryon, with its blood tied to salt and sea, coveted them dearly.

"Next," Rhaegar whispered.

No matter how impressive the ships were, the fleet would always remain a vassal of the Targaryens. Now that he possessed the Dragonhorn, any internal family threats had been neutralized, and he no longer feared that a marriage to a vassal would make them too powerful. Instead, he worried they might not be strong enough to keep pace.

Reinvigorated, the Sea Snake ordered another item to be brought forward—a half-round shield, black as ink and difficult to discern. Rhaegar's sharp eyes recognized it immediately. "A shield of Valyrian steel."

"That's right," the Sea Snake confirmed, holding up the shield and tapping its concave surface. "It's a shame to see such a treasure in the hands of deformed dragonlords descendants."

Tyria was a desolate city, its people once well-equipped but now worn down by the passage of time. Like this half-shield, much of their former glory had faded.

Rhaegar glanced at the shield. It was no larger than a washbasin and contained only a small amount of steel. He reached out to touch it, but it didn't trigger any reaction.

The Sea Snake took a step back and opened a sturdy wooden chest.

Clang!

The lid hit the deck, revealing a dozen fossilized dragon eggs and various precious ores. But what truly caught Rhaegar's eye was a curved longsword.

"Dragonclaw!" Rhaegar exclaimed, his voice tinged with surprise and delight.

The Dragonclaw was just as Rhaegar remembered it, with its rippling blade, Dragonbone handle, and serrated edge. However, the sword was now bent in the middle, as if it had been violently gripped. The cold steel was marred by nicks, dust, and cobwebs, yet despite its wear, it remained as sharp as ever.

"My old friend," Rhaegar murmured, a smile of genuine happiness crossing his face as he gripped the familiar, warm Dragonbone hilt once again.

"Daemon found all of this in a dragon's nest," the Sea Snake revealed, not withholding anything. He then pulled a glass bottle from his coat. "And this—Daemon also instructed me to give it to you."

Rhaegar, still lost in the joy of rediscovering the Dragonclaw, glanced at the glass bottle. Inside was a small amount of blood, warm to the touch and unmistakably dragon blood.

"He's really something," Rhaegar chuckled, shaking his head as he gazed toward the scarlet dragon shadow looming in front of the fleet. The contents of the bottle were the blood of Caraxes.

Daemon's intention was clear: he wanted the Blood Wyrms' mark to be imprinted on the Dragonhorn—a gesture symbolizing loyalty or a return to the family fold.

"Who says that good uncles don't have hearts?" Rhaegar remarked with a smile as he carefully stowed away the dragon blood, planning to wait until the aftereffects had subsided before using it.

The dragon's imprint on the Dragonhorn was not a slave mark. It served as a means of communication and an aid in moments of extreme emotional turmoil. However, it did not grant absolute control over the dragon. In ancient Valyria, the relationship between dragons and their riders was understood as follows:

The bond between the rider and the dragon was stronger than the Dragonhorn's call. The call, in turn, was stronger than the "Dance of the Dragon" and "Dance of the Blood" commands used in battle. This hierarchy maintained the status of the dragon rider. Anyone who believed they could control a dragon solely through a magical item was a fool.

Besides, who but a true Dragonborn could blow the Dragonhorn? If your bloodline isn't pure enough, you would perish at the mere touch of fire.

Chapter 603: I'm Going to Complain!

Two months later.

It is October, and the climate on both sides of the Narrow Sea remains warm.

In Lys, at the harbor...

A large fleet sails in, its dozen warships all bearing signs of damage, as if they had weathered a fierce storm at sea.

"Roar..."

The pitch-black wings of a dragon swept over the Free Cities, sending countless residents into a panic.

...

Topless Dragonpit.

The Cannibal folded its wings and landed with a loud crash, kicking up a cloud of dust. Several Dragonkeepers hurried over, holding bamboo sticks, trying to drive the dragon back to its lair.

"Roar..."

Cannibal paid no heed, shaking off the meddling, foolish humans and finding a corner to lie down in the pit.

"Don't worry about it, and don't bother entering the Dragonpit in the future," Rhaegar said, his expression indifferent, dispelling the Dragonkeepers' doubts. After a long sleep in the Lands of the Long Summer, the Cannibal's appetite had grown insatiable, and it had quickly reached nearly 170 meters in length. The bond between the man and the dragon was strong, and they both sensed the trend of continued growth.

Bang! Bang!

Cannibal snorted heavily, swung its tail, and patted the ground contentedly. The dark and cramped Dragonpit could no longer contain it.

"Welcome back, Your Grace," one of the Dragonkeepers said, his eyes sharp as he sensed the giant beast's resistance. He respectfully stepped aside.

Rhaegar waved his hand, looking at the people who had come to greet him.

"Father!"

Aemon's face lit up with excitement as he cheered and rushed toward him. Rhaegar's eyes twinkled as he bent down to pick up his spirited second son. He asked seriously, "Have you been listening to your mother and finishing your lessons on time?"

"Of course," Aemon replied, tilting his head and patting his chest confidently. He was the cleverest of the siblings.

"Your Grace, welcome back," Baela said, more mature now, offering a graceful bow.

Rhaena followed her sister's lead, adding with a wry smile, "Your Grace."

"All is well. Go see your father and grandfather," Rhaegar said with a smile, his eyes now fixed on the approaching figure.

Rhaenyra's eyes were red with emotion as she walked up to him, restraining the urge to embrace him. Her hands twitched helplessly. They had been apart for half a year, and every night she had struggled to sleep on her lonely pillow. Her thoughts had often spiraled out of control, but she had been uncertain of his feelings. A thorn had lodged itself in her heart.

"I'm home," Rhaegar said, his voice soft yet powerful, as if he could read her very thoughts.

At these simple words, Rhaenyra could no longer hold back. Tears streamed down her face.

"Rhaegar, I've missed you so much," she choked out, her voice thick with emotion. Without hesitation, she threw herself into his arms like a young bird returning to its nest.

Rhaegar gently released Aemon, who had been clinging to him, and opened his arms wide to embrace her. They held each other tightly, savoring the warmth of their reunion.

"I've missed you too," Rhaegar whispered, a smile playing on his lips as he relished the moment.

Plop!

Aemon fell to the ground with a thud, his face scrunched up in pain. Watching his parents reunite, he pouted in frustration.

Baela grabbed his ear, pulling him along without ceremony. "Ugliest sight in the world. Let's go," she muttered.

Aemon, too aggrieved to protest, followed silently as the younger children began to wander off, eager to find the Blood Wyrms heading toward the beach.

...

Midday.

The sun shone brightly in a clear sky.

At the Topless Tower, in the warm greenhouse...

"Here's your whip back." Rhaenyra's gaze never left his as she traced her fingertips along his neck, pulling out the dragon-taming whip.

"You can keep it," Rhaegar replied, shaking his head with a hint of pride. 'I have something better,' he thought. He had managed to retrieve a dragon's horn from the Smoking Sea, enduring countless hardships along the way. Though the return journey had been relatively calm, they had faced numerous storms and attacks.

"You keep it. I can't use it." Rhaenyra refused to accept his decision, pressing the whip back into his arms. "You can't wield a dragon's horn lightly. This is more practical."

As she spoke, she gazed at his gaunt face, pale as paper, and wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye. Rhaegar's lips tightened slightly as he lay on his side on the flower bed, resting his head on her soft, bouncy thighs.

The journey had lasted half a year, with three of those months spent alone in the Smoking Sea. The oppressive atmosphere had driven nearly everyone mad. Rhaenyra's eyes glistened with unshed tears as she gently touched Rhaegar's cheek, afraid that he might slip away if she wasn't careful. Even in her worry, her beauty was undeniable.

Rhaegar had dressed to welcome her back, and after their return to the Topless Tower, she had changed into her usual attire—a black strapless dress, a Valyrian steel necklace adorning her neck, and her silver hair braided into an intricate plait. As she sat in the conservatory, bathed in the morning sun, her white toes rested on the glass floor. The intimacy of the moment gradually calmed her heart.

"You've worked hard," Rhaegar murmured, his face buried against her flat stomach, his voice muffled. The vast Seven Kingdoms and both sides of the Narrow Sea were not easy to govern. Many plotted in secret against the royal family, hoping to weaken its power.

As these words left his lips, Rhaenyra's toes curled, and she lowered her head in shame. Rhaegar sensed something amiss and asked without looking up, "What's wrong?"

Rhaenyra bit her lower lip nervously. "Braavos... and Dorne..." she began, explaining the major events that had unfolded over the past six months. Her beautiful eyes held a steely determination.

Rhaegar listened intently, wrapping his arms around her slender waist and taking a deep breath. The situation was better than expected—the sky hadn't fallen.

There had been two wars.

Braavos had allied with Pentos, clashing with the fleets of Velaryon and Gulltown in the Narrow Sea. Sheepstealer and Tesseract had gone into battle and achieved significant victories. A month ago, when word came that Rhaegar had safely emerged from the Smoking Sea, Braavos had been the first to withdraw its troops, and Pentos quickly followed, raising the white flag.

The situation in Dorne, however, was more challenging. The Steward of Dorne had been assassinated, and the young Prince Qyle nearly taken hostage. Fortunately, the situation had been stabilized. Yet, a resistance group, calling themselves the "Orphans of the Greenblood River," had risen in rebellion. After failing to capture Sunspear, they retreated into the desert, disappearing from sight. From time to time, they would raid minor noble families, causing chaos throughout Dorne.

Rhaegar rubbed his cheek and whispered, "Don't worry about it. Let them play their games." Braavos and Pentos were too established to risk another war. Dorne had always been a rebellious region, and divided opinions about the Iron Throne were nothing new. A few years of internal unrest would likely shift Dorne's focus inward, weakening its hostility towards the outside world. The Targaryens would only grow stronger.

And as for Dorne, how long could its barren lands sustain such defiance?

"I'm afraid I haven't done enough," Rhaenyra sniffed, her voice muffled with emotion. "They bully me when you're not here," she added.

Rhaegar was taken aback by her words, his head snapping up in surprise. The tone of her grievance struck him hard—who dared to trouble her?

"Who?" Rhaegar asked bluntly, his voice tinged with anger.

Rhaenyra hesitated, her gaze dropping in shame as she shook her head vigorously.

"You have to tell me," Rhaegar insisted, his brow furrowing deeply. He made a convincing show of his rising annoyance. "I need to know so I can stand up for you."

Knock, knock, knock!

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by Laena's voice: "There is a letter from King's Landing that requires Your Grace's attention."

Rhaenyra, on the verge of voicing her grievances, held back at the sound of Laena's voice. "Come in," she said, her tone subdued.

Creak, creak—

Laena pushed the door open, her boots clattering against the glass floor. She glanced at Rhaenyra, then at Rhaegar, before calmly handing over the letter. "The Regent's letter, please take a look."

Rhaenyra blinked and took the envelope, opening it with a frown.

"Regent?" Rhaegar's voice bristled with anger. He wasn't deaf or blind—he knew something was wrong. "Which Regent?"

Laena's mouth curled into a slight smile as she replied, "Of course, it's the Prince Regent, Aemond."

Rhaegar's vision darkened, and he nearly lost his breath in fury. No wonder Rhaenyra seemed so troubled. It seemed some people had a death wish after all.

Laena continued, "After Aemond burned the Braavosi and Pentoshi fleets, he volunteered to take on the role of Regent and negotiate on behalf of the Iron Throne with the two Free Cities."

"Who gave him that authority?" Rhaegar asked, incredulous. He turned sharply to Rhaenyra, his eyes questioning.

Rhaenyra met his gaze squarely and replied, "No one. He appointed himself."

"That bastard," Rhaegar muttered, his back molars grinding in frustration. "I'll deal with him when I get back." Then he added, "What does the letter say?"

He braced himself for anything—a wayward brother who couldn't be bothered to follow orders was the least of his concerns.

Rhaenyra, feeling lighter after venting, handed the letter to Laena. "Read it for me," she said, her voice calmer.

Laena rolled her eyes but complied, reading the letter aloud. Her actions didn't go unnoticed by Rhaegar, who watched with slight surprise. He glanced up and down at Laena, noting how much better she looked since they had set out. Even in her loose-fitting white dress, with her pregnancy showing, she couldn't hide her capable and commanding presence.

Ignoring his scrutiny, Laena continued reading the letter.

Daemon had returned and captured a strong, beautiful young blue dragon. The couple had decided that the dragon would belong to the unborn child Laena was carrying.

"Civil unrest in Qohor... Bartimos was seriously injured in an assassination attempt... rescued..." Laena's voice grew more somber as she read on.

Rhaegar's expression darkened by the time she finished. "That fool Bartimos had to push through policies that wasted manpower and harmed the people!" he spat. Otto and Bartimos had ruled Qohor together, but Bartimos had forced the people to repair the city walls, raised taxes, and imposed a city gate tax, sparking riots. The Dothraki cavalry, ill-suited for street fighting, had withdrawn from the Free Cities, camping in the forests outside the city. Qohor had fallen in a single night, and Bartimos, the instigator, had barely escaped with his life.

Aemond had already returned to Qohor, sending word for Rhaenyra to return to King's Landing and allocate supplies for support.

"What nerve," Rhaenyra muttered, seething with anger. 'Does he really think he's Regent and can order me around?' Aemond was utterly disrespectful, disregarding her authority.

"The focus should be on Qohor," Laena interjected quietly.

Rhaenyra's almond-shaped eyes widened in fury, and she let out a bitter laugh. "Do you really think those rabble can stop Sheepstealer?"

Given Aemond's vindictive nature, she feared the riots would become more of a massacre than a rebellion.

Laena nodded in agreement, realizing she had no argument.

Rhaenyra turned to Rhaegar, gently squeezing his face. "What do you think?"

"You don't sound like you're looking for a solution," Rhaegar said with a sigh, taking her small, jade-like hand in his. "I'll return to King's Landing tomorrow, visit my father first, and then deal with Qohor."

"You promise?" Rhaenyra asked, pressing her finger against his cheek.

"I promise," Rhaegar replied, raising his hands in surrender. Closing his eyes, he leaned back into his previous position. After half a year of constant turmoil, he deserved a moment to relax.

Chapter 604: Too Bitter

The Next Morning, Dragonstone.

A dragon as black as coal soared down The Gullet, landing at the end of the stone steps and the Long Bridge with a resounding thud.

Bang!

Rhaegar slid off the dragon's back, feeling a bit unsteady on his feet. It wasn't just the lingering effects of recklessly using the Dragon's Horn; Rhaenyra was partly to blame as well.

"Yawn..." Rhaegar muttered, dark circles under his eyes. With a sigh, he added, "Dragons are getting more and more difficult to deal with." He hadn't slept all night and had to rise early to return to Dragonstone. 'If this keeps up, I won't live to be a hundred years old,' he thought.

"Roar!"

"Rhaegar, it really is you!" Rhaenys exclaimed in surprise as she dismounted from the dragon's back.

"Roar..." Meleys growled, lowering itself into a combat stance.

Rhaenys froze for a moment before noticing the dark dragon gazing at them from afar. The Cannibal was already special, but this one was larger than Vhagar, the oldest and biggest she had ever seen.

On closer inspection, it seemed even bigger. It stood at the end of the Long Bridge of Stone Steps, almost as tall as the Stone Drum Tower, Meleys, on the opposite side, wasn't even half as tall as its opponent.

While Rhaenys was lost in thought, Rhaegar approached her and greeted her. "I'm back, Aunt."

"Good to have you back," Rhaenys replied, her eyes still fixed on the dragon. "Your dragon has grown so much."

'Could there still be wild dragons in the Smoking Sea that encountered the Cannibal's poisonous maw?' she wondered.

Rhaegar chuckled lightly. "Just some opportunities."

The fire essence ore mined at the base of the Fourteen Flames had been entrusted to the Sea Snake for transport back to Dragonstone. It would be buried deep within Dragonmont and carefully rationed to the dragons.

“You haven't had breakfast, have you? Come with me,” Rhaenys said, taking her nephew's hand and leading him toward the Stone Drum Tower.

The climate in Westeros was quite different from that across the Narrow Sea, and by October, the chill had already set in. A morning meal of mutton would warm them up for the rest of the day.

...

Stone Drum Tower

A few small dishes were set on the table, and a servant poured a cup of hot milk. Rhaegar ate heartily, savoring the aroma of the roast lamb. 'Aunt Rhaenys really knows how to eat; no wonder she's the matriarch of the wealthiest family in the Seven Kingdoms,' he thought.

“How did it go? Was the Smoking Sea dangerous?” Rhaenys asked, taking a sip of her fruit wine.

“Everything went well, and Lord Corlys had a fruitful trip,” Rhaegar replied, understanding her concern and answering with certainty.

Rhaenys let out a huge sigh of relief.

Rhaegar gulped down the milk in one go, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and asked, “On the way here, I noticed a lot of sunken ships just outside The Gullet. They all showed signs of burning.”

Rhaenys didn't hesitate to explain, “Those were the ships of Pentos, burned by Daeron on Tessarion. Some also sank in the Bay of Crabs, but those were Braavosi ships. The brothers acted decisively and achieved a great victory.”

“I see,” Rhaegar nodded and stood up. "Aunt, I have to go," he said.

“But you've just finished eating,” Rhaenys protested, frowning.

“It's fine. I have something important to do, and I need to get back to King's Landing,” Rhaegar said as he walked out.

With a loud noise, the castle gate opened, and a figure hurried in. Rhaegar noticed and asked, "Ser Alfred, is something the matter?"

“Yes, Your Grace,” Alfred responded. He was a tall, middle-aged man who had served on Dragonstone in his youth and commanded a high level of seniority. His once-black hair was now streaked with white at the temples, and wrinkles gathered around his eyes, giving him a serious demeanor.

Alfred quickly approached the throne, adjusting his uneven breathing as he reported, “Your Grace, Addam of Hull led the army back to Driftmark. The Gullet cannot do without a fleet to patrol it, so I request the appointment of the Royal Fleet.”

Rhaegar turned his head, puzzled. "Addam went back to Driftmark?" He had the impression that Addam was a reliable man.

Rhaenys glanced at Alfred and bluntly explained, "Aemond wanted to press the advantage, but the two Free Cities had already surrendered, and Addam refused Aemond's order."

War is complicated, and a single decision can shift the entire situation. The enemy hadn't initiated the attack but had provoked conflict within the Narrow Sea. Aemond took the initiative, making the situation morally ambiguous. Crossing the Narrow Sea for revenge was already considered a full-scale war. Addam was more reasonable, heeding the warnings of Rhaenyra and Rhaenys, and firmly opposing the escalation. Aemond tried to persuade him with both threats and promises, but Addam stood his ground.

"A tough nut to crack, isn't he?" Rhaegar laughed, his opinion of Addam rising even further. It was hard not to appreciate an advisor loyal to the crown.

"Your Grace, what are your thoughts?" Alfred asked earnestly, hoping to make a significant impact.

Rhaegar's smile faded as he asked, "Ser, why didn't you lead the Royal Fleet when the Velaryon fleet went into battle?"

Alfred was taken aback and stammered, "Your Grace wasn't there, so I couldn't request the position."

"And taking the Free Cities' fleet by surprise with force would have been disastrous," he continued.

That was evident during the battle led by Addam against the Velaryon fleet. There were too many enemies, and the dragons couldn't burn them all quickly enough. To win, the fleet needed to open up the situation.

"Alright, there's no need to say more," Rhaegar interrupted, raising his hand with a sigh. "I understand your feelings, but the Royal Fleet is not to be moved lightly. Focus on increasing patrols."

"But, Your Grace..." Alfred began to argue but was cut off by Rhaegar's cold dismissal.

Rhaegar walked away in large strides, not wanting to engage further. 'He had no desire to get involved in a situation that could escalate, yet he planned to take credit for the victory once the battle was won. Ser Alfred was, after all, a seasoned veteran.'

...

Rhaegar stepped out of the Stone Drum Tower, the warm sunshine spilling over his face. He raised a hand to shade his eyes, muttering to himself. He hadn't spent much time with Ser Alfred, who had mostly served Rhaenyra, the Princess of Dragonstone. Yet, lately, Alfred had been lingering around him at every opportunity, clearly eager to make a name for himself.

Rhaegar frowned, a nagging sense of familiarity tugging at him. 'Where have I seen that face before?' he wondered. Perhaps it was in a dream from long ago. Unable to place it, Rhaegar eventually gave up trying to figure it out.

...

At the base of the mountain, Dragonmont.

The Cannibal crouched on the ground, idly flicking its tail.

Tap, tap...

The familiar sound of footsteps caught its attention, and it slowly opened its green, vertical pupils. Rhaegar stepped into the sunlight, cradling a black dragon egg in his arms.

"Roar... Roar..."

A dozen poorly dressed Dragonkeepers followed closely behind, struggling to control three ugly baby Wyverns with green-and-white mottled stripes, their movements restricted by heavy chains.

The elder Dragonkeeper, his face smeared with blood, spoke solemnly, "Your Grace, Wyverns cannot be kept on Dragonmont. They will disturb the dragons."

"Roar..."

One of the ugly hatchlings let out a shrill cry, attempting to lunge and bite at anything within reach.

Rhaegar waved his hand dismissively, understanding the concern. "Lock them up and feed them the cheapest fish."

Wyverns were fierce but lacked intelligence. The clutch of dragon eggs had originally been brought back from Sothoryos as a potential food reserve. If they hatched, they would try to raise them, but the daily expenses couldn't be too great—the dragons already consumed a staggering amount. Feeding them fish would suffice.

The elder Dragonkeeper nodded emphatically, relieved. "I will not let you down, Your Grace."

He then signaled the other Dragonkeepers to drag the Wyverns away, striking their heads with bamboo sticks to keep them in line. Without this deterrent, they risked being bitten.

Rhaegar watched for a moment before climbing onto the back of the Cannibal. The unexpected hatching of the Wyvern eggs was a welcome surprise. If they developed well, the adult dragon's food supply would be secure. And if the Wyverns could be tamed, they might even become formidable assets in battle.

...

Midday.

The Cannibal soared back to King's Landing, circling the city twice as the people below erupted in cheers. The blockade of The Gullet had kept many informed about the ongoing war, and the King's return from across the Narrow Sea was a much-needed boost to their spirits.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal let out a powerful roar before descending and landing in front of the Dragonpit.

Moments later, a white chariot rolled into view.

...

Red Keep, the King's chambers.

“Ha-ha-ha...” Viserys lay pale and panting in his bed, his laughter tinged with weariness. “There’s medicine. How long will it take to cure me?”

Rhaegar sat by the bedside, gently wiping the sweat from his father’s forehead. Grand Maester Orwyle and Maester Munkun stood nearby, one grinding the juice of the Soul Restoring Orchid, the other poring over medical texts.

Maester Munkun frowned as he read, then hesitated before speaking. “The herb will certainly help, but the strain on King Viserys’ spirit is taking a toll on his body. It will take time for him to recover fully.”

The truth was, Viserys was over fifty, and in the relatively underdeveloped continent of Westeros, his health was fragile. Rhaegar understood the implication and replied pragmatically, “Don’t rush it, but ensure my father can return to a normal life. He can’t linger like this.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Maester Munkun assured him confidently.

Orwyle finished grinding the juice, mixed it with the medicinal powder, and brought it to the bedside. “I’ll feed Your Grace.”

“Thank you,” Rhaegar said, helping his father sit up and parting his trembling lips.

Orwyle, though less knowledgeable than Munkun, was diligent in his duties. He gently fed the medicine to Viserys, whose frown deepened as he tasted the bitterness. “I’m not drinking anymore, it’s too bitter,” Viserys muttered.

“Just drink it, Father. The kingdom needs you,” Rhaegar urged, offering a sweetened broth that Orwyle had prepared. The sweetness seemed to cut through the bitterness, or perhaps it was the comfort of his eldest son’s voice. Viserys’s brow relaxed slightly as he lay back in Rhaegar’s solid embrace, breathing a bit more easily.

“Let’s step outside for now,” Rhaegar said, carefully laying his father back down before motioning for the Maesters to follow him. Five fresh, ripe Soul Restoring Orchids would more than suffice to heal the damage to his spirit. After that, it was just a matter of time.

...

With a long-standing worry finally resolved, the pent-up emotions of years began to ease. Rhaegar made his way to the Princess’s bedroom.

Knock, knock, knock!

He knocked on the door, and a response came almost immediately.

"Come in, brother."

Rhaegar smiled faintly and reached out to push open the door.

“You’re finally back,” Helaena said, kneeling on the carpet with a radiant smile. Her fair face, free of any powder, glowed with natural beauty, her silver hair cascading around her cheeks, making her all the more striking.

"I brought you a present," Rhaegar said, tilting his head as he playfully bounced a black dragon egg in his hands.

Chapter 605: Sheepstealer Shows Off

"A dragon egg?" Helaena frowned, picking up the small garment she was sewing.

Rhaegar's lips curled up slightly as he placed the black dragon egg in the prepared baby cradle.

"The egg of Dreamfyre, remember?"

It had once belonged to him, but unfortunately, it did not hatch.

Helaena nodded, suddenly recalling the origin of the dragon egg. Rhaenyra had snatched it from the hands of her uncle, Daemon. Aegon had not yet been born at that time.

Rhaegar sat down with a thud, ran his hand over Helaena's swollen belly, and smiled. "Once Father has been cured, the baby will be born." He predicted it would be a boy.

Helaena's eyes twinkled, and she slowly lifted the corners of her mouth. "I'm leaving for Qohor tomorrow."

Rhaegar waited patiently for the conversation to continue. "Where's Aegon? I haven't seen him."

"At Harrenhal. He's fallen in love with the Hall of a Hundred Hearths."

"Oh, that's a great place for parties."

"His second wife is pregnant, and the Maesters think it's a boy."

The siblings chatted about Aegon's good fortune. Helaena's face grew serious as she leaned into Rhaegar's ear and whispered, "Aegon's wife was very jealous. She secretly sent letters to his mother to complain, but when Aegon found out, he banished her to the Stepstones."

After she finished, she tilted her chin up slightly, like an arrogant kitten begging for praise. Rhaegar hesitated for a moment, rubbed her plush head, and thought, 'This kid really dares to love and hate.'

Even after the conflict between the Blacks and Greens ended, Aegon's shadow still loomed over Hightower. Alicent's status had plummeted, and she was unable to help her niece, who had fallen out of favor.

After a while, Helaena yawned and lay unceremoniously on his strong thigh. "The baby is due in three months. You have to be careful."

Rhaegar smoothed her hair, enjoying the rare peaceful afternoon. Helaena closed her eyes, nestled her little head in his arms, and snuggled up with a soft sound as her nose turned red.

King's Landing was known as a leaky rat's nest. Any Targaryen king who lived there would be subject to countless prying eyes. A young girl staying behind in the Red Keep would have a hard time sleeping every night.

Rhaegar adjusted his breathing to calm his racing heart. He called up the system panel.

[Rhaegar Targaryen

Talents: Dreamer (Gold)

Bloodline: Dragonborn (69%)

Runes: Bronze (Green), Serpent (Blue), Dream Eater (Purple)

Blood Magic: Binding Spell (Blue), Dragon Dance (Purple), Blood Dance (Purple)...

Relics: Blood and Fire, Dreamscape, Pure Water...

Special Items: Space Necklace, Dragonhorn (Special)

Comment: "The excessive depletion of magic in the blood will cause even true dragons to fall into a deep sleep."]

Rhaegar scanned the list and then lowered his eyes in silence. The aftereffects of recklessly using the Dragonhorn could linger for a year or even several years. Although it did not affect the foundation, there was still some weakness. The fire magic in his blood had become diluted and was slowly recovering day by day. Perhaps he needed to find a place with an abundance of fire magic. For example, Dragonmont on Dragonstone.

"Brother~"

Helaena's eyes were tightly shut as she suddenly whispered, "Aemond will be in danger."

...

That night...

The king's chambers.

"Here, be careful." Alicent's eyes were calm as she helped her husband turn over, then wrung out a towel to wipe his body.

"Sssh..." The wet towel touched a cut on his back, and Viserys let out a sharp breath of pain.

"Sorry, sorry." Alicent was startled and quickly took out some ointment, carefully applying it to the wound.

The evening breeze blew through the curtains, filling the bedroom with the scent of herbs. Viserys, bloated and covered in cuts and bruises from his long stay in bed, lay still. Alicent moved with practiced skill and gentleness, accustomed to this routine.

"You've worked hard," Viserys said between clenched teeth, his words labored.

Alicent paused for a moment, then continued applying the ointment as if nothing had happened. After all these years, she was used to it.

Viserys glanced up and whispered, "The children have all grown up."

"Yes," Alicent responded, her tone indifferent.

"When I regain my strength, I'll ride Vermithor and show you around Oldtown." Viserys lay back down, smiling as he chatted idly.

Alicent's expression shifted slightly, though her inner thoughts remained hidden. "It will get better; everything will get better," Viserys murmured, his eyes closing as he drifted off like a sleepwalker.

...

A few days later...

Essos, Qohor.

"Roar!"

An ugly, rotten mud dragon soared above the Free Cities, its brown wings flapping as mud-like Dragonfire sprinkled down in fine droplets. The city below was deathly silent, blanketed in brown, mud-colored Dragonfire and charred black earth. Most of the buildings had been destroyed, and the once-majestic temple built against the mountain lay in ruins. The common people had taken refuge in cellars, as if the end of the world had come.

Outside the city gates, in the Forest of Qohor, a large banner bearing three red dragons fluttered above the military camp, where a crowd of Dothraki vented their anger. The chaotic sounds carried into the tent, stoking Aemond's already simmering rage.

Bang!

Aemond's face turned pale as he kicked over the sand table, scowling menacingly. "These damned pariahs—they're so fearless!" he growled. His dragon had been burning the city for days, yet no one had opened the gates to surrender. The Dothraki cavalry, ill-suited for siege warfare, spent their days idly gathering and causing chaos at the Khal's signal.

"Vulgar barbarians, lowly scum," Aemond muttered as he glanced outside the tent. He saw two Dothraki men brandishing swords and hacking at each other over a woman with her breasts bared. Zilla—one man's artery was cut, and blood gushed like a spring. The victor let out a wild cry, ignored the blood and filth on his face, and mounted the corpse to claim his prize. The sight made Aemond's blood boil; he wanted to gouge out his remaining eye in disgust.

"Don't let your anger cloud your judgment. The advantage is still on our side," Otto advised calmly, stepping aside and twirling the ring on his thumb. The situation was indeed tricky—the people of Qohor were enraged. But they had a dragon on their side.

Aemond sneered, "What do you think will compensate for a city-state lost for nothing, Grandfather?"

"We have all the time in the world. They don't," Otto replied with a knowing smile. "There's plenty of gold in the city, but not enough food."

Ser Cole, who had been standing guard at the door, entered and grunted, "Prince, there's something going on with the other Free Cities. We should cut some of their routes—for example, Braavos, Pentos, and the closest one, Norvos. These three cities are in league and secretly inciting riots in Qohor."

Aemond snorted derisively. "If they dare come, they'll be torn apart and fed to the dragons."

"Yes, that's what those pariahs deserve!" Bartimos, lying on the floor in the corner, stretched his bandaged, bloodied belly and loudly complained about the injuries he had suffered. He had nearly had his intestines ripped out and his penis cut off, left to dangle from a gallows.

His grumbling only fueled Aemond's anger. With a crash, Aemond picked up a carved stone emblem and smashed it over Bartimos' head, pointing a finger and shouting, "Shut up, you brainless, ugly toad!"

Bartimos screamed in pain, blood pouring from the fresh wound. Without hands, he could only use his sleeves to cover it, a pitiful and comical sight. No one intervened; they simply watched, indifferent. The rich and powerful were to blame for their high-handed policies, squeezing the last drop of blood from the common people. Bartimos, after all, had been mainly responsible for the riots in Qohor.

...

In the afternoon, the sun shone brightly. A black dragon soared through the endless white clouds, casting a shadow over a vast, lush forest before descending into a hidden clearing. With a rumble, its massive body crushed tree trunks beneath it, sending up a cloud of dust.

"Wait for me, Cannibal," Rhaegar said gravely as he looked down at the deserted camp of wooden palisades below. He dismounted the dragon, his expression tense.

The large camp was eerily empty, with nothing but horse manure, hoof prints, and the stench of excrement lingering in the air. Rhaegar's brows knitted in disgust as he held his breath and surveyed the area.

"Your Grace?"

The curtain of the main tent was lifted, and Otto and Ser Cole emerged, one after the other. Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he took in Otto's aged face—he almost didn't recognize the former royal chancellor, once so meticulous about his appearance.

"Your Grace, why have you come?" Cole asked, his voice tinged with confusion. He stood stiffly in white robes and silver armor, his posture rigid.

Rhaegar, in no mood for pleasantries, went straight to the point. "Where is Aemond?"

"Prince—" Cole began, but Otto cut him off, speaking in a low tone. "Aemond led the Dothraki cavalry to attack the city. He's been gone for over an hour and a half."

Rhaegar's face fell with disappointment. Without another word, he turned to leave. "Guard the camp. I'll go find him."

No matter the situation, he needed to see Aemond first. Something was off in Qohor—there was a conspiracy brewing.

As the king rode away on his dragon, Otto watched him with deep, calculating eyes. 'He really came and went in a hurry,' he mused.

His grandson Aemond was a capable warrior, but not a trustworthy commander. The situation in Qohor was already precarious, muddled by the power struggle involving the Free Cities and House Targaryen. If they weren't careful, they could be drowned in the chaos.

What did the king's arrival signify? Would it be a crackdown on the Free Cities or the official declaration of war on the continent of Essos?

...

Meanwhile, Qohor was under siege.

"Release the arrows!"

A large number of Sellswords, their hair dyed in various colors, stood atop the city walls. They operated scorpion crossbows and drew back their bows, unleashing a hail of arrows. The Unsullied army that had once defended the Free Cities had long since been wiped out.

"Ooooooooooooo—"

The battle cries of the invaders echoed through the air as they launched a relentless assault. Lacking proper siege weapons, they were forced to rely on brute force, using simple wooden ladders to scale the walls and battering the city gates with makeshift wooden stakes.

"Get out of the way!"

Amond's voice rang out, cutting through the chaos, followed by the arrogant roar of his dragon.

"Roar!"

The agile form of Sheepstealer darted across the city walls, unleashing Dragonfire that burned a line of Sellswords like beads on a string. With each pass, the walls became littered with charred corpses.

Rumble.

Seizing the opportunity, Sheepstealer landed heavily on the city gate, its bony frame quivering as it swung its dragon tail like a chain.

"Ahhh!"

"Run! The dragon is coming!" Panic spread among the Sellswords as Sheepstealer's tail struck, shattering a dozen of them into bloody fragments. The dragon, ugly on the outside and vicious on the inside, spread its claws wide, displaying its menacing majesty.

"Break down the gate, you idiots!" Amond could hardly bear the sight of any delay and urged the dragon on with frustration.

"Roar!" Sheepstealer grunted in protest, shaking its skeletal frame. But the two were deeply attuned to each other, long accustomed to their shared ruthlessness. Amond tugged hard on the reins, asserting control over the disobedient Mud Dragon.

Sheepstealer reared its head, lifted its scaly tail high, and slammed it down with full force on the city gate.

Rumble.

The impact resounded with a thunderous crash, causing the sturdy gate to shake violently.

"Again!" Amond's expression brightened with anticipation, sensing the gate's impending collapse.

Proudly, Sheepstealer raised its head, snatched a hapless Sellsword in its jaws, and swallowed him whole. Then, with renewed vigor, it swung its tail once more.

Rumble...

After several successive strikes, the city gate, pounded relentlessly, began to crumble. The heavy bolt shattered with a loud crash, signaling the breach.

Chapter 606: Black Goat and Faceless Men

The war raged on, growing ever more brutal by the hour. As the Sheepstealers soared towards the temple, the fiercest battles erupted between the armies.

"Ooooo~"

"Where are the sellswords...?"

Thousands of civilians were dragged from the cellars, subjected to unspeakable inhumanity. Soon, the city was overwhelmed by wails, screams mingling with flames and billowing smoke.

Whoosh—

A gust of wind swept through, carrying the acrid smell of ash, and suddenly the earth was shrouded in shadow.

"Pull out one person."

A cold voice, filled with an oppressive air that seemed to look down on all living things, echoed through the chaos.

The next moment...

"No, no, no!"

A Dothraki, caught in the midst of committing atrocities, looked up and let out a miserable scream.

Pop.

A massive, charcoal-black dragon's claw slammed down from the sky, crushing the man into pulp and splattering his remains onto a nearby roof.

"Roar...?"

The Cannibal's eerie green pupils rotated as it struggled to rise from low altitude, dragging one hind leg. It had grown too large, too quickly, and its strength was uncertain. It hadn't noticed and had overdone it.

Rhaegar slapped his forehead, muttering something in his native tongue.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal, defiant, opened its jaws in a cruel arc and swooped down again, snatching several Dothraki on horseback. It shook its dark wings and swiftly left the battlefield.

Everything happened so quickly that those below only saw a dark shadow—a monstrous dragon—before hearing the howls of fear that barely sounded human.

Since all those who disappeared were Dothraki, the local civilians fell to their knees. They wept and prayed aloud, believing they had encountered a true god.

...

The masked temple of worship stood in ruins. The beautifully laid-out forecourt was reduced to ashes, the once-lush canopy of trees now stripped bare, with two dried monkey carcasses hanging from the charred branches.

Rumble—

The Sheepstealer folded its wings, one hind leg crushing the shattered courtyard wall beneath it.

"Guard the gate. Don't let anyone get close," Aemond commanded, barely able to contain his impatience. Drawing his Scarlet Forger, he leapt off the dragon's back.

He was determined to find those damned bearded priests, cut off their heads, and shove them down the toilet. 'And those holy women,' he thought, 'so clean on the outside, yet undoubtedly whores in the sack. They deserve to be thrown to the Dothraki and reduced to the role of a stable toilet.'

“Roar!”

The Sheepstealer let out a deafening roar, shifting its massive body forward, its pupils dilating with alarm. As a wild dragon, its primal instinct was survival.

"Get out of my way!" Aemond snarled, bypassing the dragon's flayed and broken tail as he charged menacingly into the temple.

The priests, who had plundered the people's wealth, had likely only ever faced Sellswords. But Aemond feared no one in this world, save perhaps his brother Rhaegar and his uncle Daemon. Even Ser Cole, a multiple Tournament of Champions winner, was merely a stone on which to sharpen his sword.

“Roar!”

The Sheepstealer, squinted and slowly lay down on the ground, watching as Aemond stormed ahead.

...

Entering the dilapidated temple, Aemond held the Scarlet Forger tightly, his single eye scanning the surroundings with vigilant intensity.

"Come out, you scum!" he shouted defiantly, his voice echoing through the windswept hall. His eye swept across the fluttering door curtain, searching for any sign of movement.

But after a long moment of silence, there was nothing. No sound, no response.

Aemond's lips curled into a sneer. "A bunch of gutless sewer maggots," he muttered. Without wasting any more time, he kicked open a wooden door that led to the backyard and headed directly for the secret passage.

As a proud Targaryen, Aemond held disdain for anyone who wasn't a dragon rider. Whether commoner or noble, in his eyes, they were all just ants to be crushed underfoot.

Bang!

He reached the withered backyard and kicked open the hidden entrance to the secret passage. The dim, damp tunnel was dimly lit by wall lamps, their weak glow casting eerie shadows on the walls. Aemond glanced around briefly before drawing his sword and stepping into the passage, staying close to the wall as he advanced.

Tick-tock, tick-tock...

Water dripped through the gaps in the stone ceiling, the sound sharp and crisp as it hit the floor. Aemond's impatience grew, and he quickened his pace. The tunnel was long and narrow, with no unnecessary twists, leading him ever deeper underground.

After what felt like a quarter of an hour, the passage suddenly opened up into the outside world, revealing a lush green meadow. Aemond squinted against the blinding sunlight, his eye filled with disgust as he stepped out of the cave.

Birds chirped and animals cooed around him, their sounds irritating in the silence.

"Baa!"

A herd of goats nibbled at the grass, led by a strong black goat. Aemond paid them no mind, his gaze fixed instead on a red-roofed temple built into the hillside. 'So this is where they're hiding,' he thought with a smirk, certain that the bearded priests had taken refuge there.

Without hesitation, Aemond strode toward the temple. Clang! Clang! With two swift sword slashes, he broke through the tightly shut wooden doors.

"Ahhh!"

A dozen red-robed priests cowered inside the main hall, screaming in terror as if the devil himself had come for them. At the front of the hall, a statue of a black goat loomed over two bloody corpses laid out as offerings. Aemond's eye caught the colorful gauze skirts beneath the bodies—those of the temple's so-called holy women.

These skirts, designed without ties or crotches, allowed the priests to defile the women and believers at will.

"Don't kill us! They forced us!" several nuns in tattered colorful dresses cried, falling to their knees in desperate pleas.

But Aemond's face remained cold and expressionless. There was no mercy in his heart for these whores.

"He's only one man—kill him!" one of the red priests shouted, emboldened by the absence of the dragon.

...

Pop!

Before the priest could react, the Scarlet Forger flashed, and his head was severed from his neck.

The room fell into stunned silence. The remaining priests, who had initially considered resisting, were now frozen in fear. Aemond's single eye was cold and calculating as he wiped the blood from his sword on the lifeless corpse. "Anyone else?" he asked, his voice dripping with indifference.

'How presumptuous,' he thought, 'A bunch of fat pigs like you daring to resist a true dragon.'

"We surrender!" croaked an elderly priest with a hunched back and a grey beard, his voice frail and trembling. The other priests, too terrified to speak, clustered around the old priest for protection.

Aemond sneered. "Surrender? You are prisoners, slaves waiting to be slaughtered."

The old priest closed his eyes helplessly, silently praying to the black goat of his faith. But Aemond was unmoved. Brandishing his sword, he demanded, "Tell me who is helping you in secret, and I might let you live."

"The black goat god will not allow us to betray our allies," the old priest replied, his voice calm, his expression even more devout.

"Oh?" Aemond's patience was wearing thin, his demeanor growing colder by the second.

"I know!" a sudden voice rang out, breaking the tension. A silver-haired woman stepped forward from the group of holy women. Aemond turned to see the silver witch, the one who had once performed a divination for him. Like him, she was a descendant of a Dragonlord, barely acceptable in his eyes.

The silver witch's gauze dress still exuded an air of purity as she spoke sternly, "I can tell you the truth—it's behind the main hall."

"Lead the way!" Aemond's eye gleamed with interest. He had been dissatisfied with the result of her last divination, but he couldn't deny that she possessed some power.

"Follow me," the silver witch said, swaying her hips as she walked barefoot around the black goat statue.

"Wait!" the old priest cried out, his voice filled with desperation as he reached out to stop them.

Swish—

Aemond swung his sword, severing the old priest's hand.

"Ahhh!" the priest screamed, his eyes bloodshot as he clutched his bleeding stump, wailing in agony.

Aemond's face remained stony as he continued to follow the silver haired witch. Rumors had long circulated about the strange magic of the Masked Temple, a power bestowed by the black goat deity. Having just received the 'Bronze' rune from his brother Rhaegar, Aemond was more interested in magic than ever before.

...

On the far side of the field, the Cannibal soared above the Masked Temple, its sharp eyes spotting the Sheepstealer feasting below.

"Roar!"

Without waiting for its rider's command, the Dragoneater's natural instincts took over, and it let out a thunderous roar. The Sheepstealer looked up, startled, and saw the massive form of the Cannibal—twice its size—with a hideous maw spewing wisps of green fire.

"Roar!"

Panicked, the Sheepstealer flapped its brown wings and took off, rolling and scrambling to escape. It sniffed the air frantically, searching for its lost rider.

"Let's follow them," Rhaegar commanded, his brow furrowed in concern. Something felt off.

The Cannibal's green vertical pupils glinted with cunning as it pursued the Mud Dragon at a leisurely pace, its enormous wings casting a menacing shadow.

“Roar!”

The Sheepstealer, terrified by the predator looming behind it, fled with all its strength.

...

In no time, two dragons descended upon the meadow behind the mountain. The Sheepstealer, terrified, dove into the forest, abandoning even its favorite goat, and huddled in fear, shivering.

"Alright, enough scaring it," Rhaegar said, sliding off the Cannibal's back. He approached the red-roofed temple cautiously.

Creak.

The long-closed door groaned as it swung open, sending a cloud of dust into his face.

“Ahem...” Rhaegar coughed, waving a hand to clear away the cobwebs clinging to the curtain. As he stepped inside, he surveyed the lobby, taking in the scene with a sharp eye. The place was in shambles—the wooden floor thick with dust, the black goat statue in the center shrouded in cobwebs, its eerie, vertical pupils seeming to follow his every move.

"It doesn't look like anyone's been here," Rhaegar muttered, though his instincts told him otherwise. There was something unsettling about this temple, a creeping sensation that made his skin crawl. It felt as though unseen eyes were watching him from the shadows, yet no matter where he looked, he found nothing.

Silently, Rhaegar drew Truefyre, the blade glinting ominously in the dim light. His toes scraped the dusty floor, leaving marks as he advanced. His gaze swept the room intently. The dust patterns varied in thickness, creating the illusion of something being cut.

Whoosh!

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a shadow darting in the corner of the hall. Rhaegar whipped his head around, only to find the space empty.

“Truly strange,” he murmured, tightening his grip on his sword. The flame at the blade's tip flickered and glowed more brightly. He knew he couldn't afford to retreat—Amond was missing, likely somewhere in this very temple.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed with determination as he approached the statue of the black goat. With a quick motion, he pulled down the curtain from one side and draped it over the statue, concealing it completely.

...

Then, suddenly, his expression hardened. "If you don't want your heritage to be extinguished, get out of here!" Rhaegar commanded fiercely. As he spoke, a trace of black fire flickered in his eyes, and black scales and horns began to form on his forehead.

Since the magical tides had surged, the magic and wizards he had encountered had become increasingly diverse. The Song of Ice and Fire had broadened his horizons in ways he hadn't imagined. Regardless of whether the Black Goat was tied to the strange and supernatural, it was still just a remnant of an ancient Valyrian fire peak mine, organized by the beliefs of slave revolts.

It didn't deserve his respect.

After a tense moment, the Black Goat statue remained inert, still as lifeless as any ordinary object. Rhaegar stood his ground, and the elusive shadow that had flitted across the room earlier was nowhere to be seen. The air even seemed fresher, with less dust swirling in the hall.

"Keep your hands off my business," Rhaegar muttered, dismissively snorting as he walked past the shrouded statue and made his way toward the back hall of the temple.

As soon as he stepped across the threshold, he heard a familiar voice.

"Where is the person you were talking about?" Aemond's tone was icy, as though he were interrogating someone.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he noticed the scene before him. Opposite Aemond stood a beautiful woman with cold, silver hair cascading down her back. There was something unsettling about her, something that made Rhaegar hold his breath and observe silently.

The back hall was thick with the heavy scent of incense, and in the dim light, stone carvings lined the room—statues of the compassionate Mother, the shackled Harpy, the unique night lion of Yi Ti, and many others. It was as though every major deity was represented here, including the Lord of Light and the black goat from the front hall.

Just then, the cold-looking woman lifted her silver hair and moved closer to Aemond. Rhaegar frowned slightly, sensing that she wasn't trying to seduce him.

With a sharp rip, the Maiden tore off her face, revealing a flaccid, human skin mask that fell away to expose the face of an unremarkable man beneath.

Chapter 607: Dead Volcano – Recasting Dragon Claw

In a flash of lightning and fire, the hairpin pierced Aemond's throat.

"Faceless Men!" Rhaegar's murderous intent surged as he reversed Truefyre and plunged it into the floor.

A wisp of black flame sprang forth, racing away like a tongue of fire. A distant roar of rage echoed from midair.

At that moment, Aemond's eyes were dull, his grip on the sword slack. He did not feel the wind as it blew, bringing the hairpin ever closer. The Faceless Men remained calm, long since indifferent to death. Suddenly, a cold light reflected in his eyes. Instinctively, he moved to the side to avoid the unknown danger.

Bang!

The black flame was faster, wrapping around the Faceless Men's feet and up their waist, tightening like a vice. The Faceless Men screamed, dropping the hairpin from their grasp.

"Die!" Rhaegar roared, drawing Truefyre, and plunged it through his unprotected chest. Blood sprayed as flames licked at the wound.

The Faceless Men fought to the death, gripping the black sword in one hand while kicking the hairpin towards Aemond's face. The hairpin shot forward with the speed and precision of an arrow loosed from a bow.

Rhaegar's expression changed as he reached out to intercept the silver hairpin.

Clang—

The hairpin struck Aemond's black eye patch, shattering the fake sapphire eye beneath it. The force was so great that the useless gem instantly crumbled. Taking advantage of the brief pause, Rhaegar seized the hairpin's end.

"Fortunately, he already lost an eye!" Rhaegar's eyes were sharp as a falcon's. He flipped the hairpin in his hand and drove it into the Faceless Men's brow.

Pop!

The hairpin pierced through soft flesh, shattering the hard skull beneath. The Faceless Men's eyes widened as layer after layer of the fake human skin mask peeled away. His body collapsed backward, hitting the floor with a muffled thud.

Rhaegar drew Truefyre sideways and looked down at the Faceless Men, whose eyes remained wide open even in death.

Rhaegar used his sword to lift aside the pile of fake skin masks, but for a moment, he couldn't discern which face was real. It was just as the House of Black and White had said: 'A nameless and faceless men.'

"Luckily, I arrived in time, or else you would have been in trouble." Rhaegar let out a sigh of relief after confirming the death was real. He glanced at Aemond, who was still making a strange face, caught in the effects of the drugged air.

"You are lucky to be alive," Rhaegar remarked with a smile, grabbing Aemond by the collar. The eye patch had a hole in it, and the fake sapphire eye was half-broken.

His gaze fell on the Valyrian blade strapped to Aemond's waist, the leather sheath revealing part of the blade. The earlier blinding light that had startled the Faceless Men had come from this blade.

Rhaegar's expression was peculiar as he patted Aemond on the cheek. "Your one eye has saved you twice."

Aemond remained unresponsive, still lost in a daze.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed slightly, a kind smile playing on his lips. "Let me help you wake up, my friend." With one hand, he grabbed Aemond by the collar and made a fist with the other.

Bang!

Rhaegar's hard punch landed squarely on Aemond's unprotected right eye. Aemond let out a muffled grunt, his body leaning backward.

"That wasn't even close!" Rhaegar pretended to be disappointed before going in for another strike.

Bang! Bang!

His fists rained down on Aemond's numb face, each blow heavy and deliberate. While this was a chance for Rhaegar to exact a bit of revenge, his true intent was to save his brother from the daze he was trapped in. After all, they were brothers, and even though Rhaenyra had given him strict instructions before leaving, Rhaegar knew he had to be careful.

Bang! Bang!

The thought crossed Rhaegar's mind as he swung his fists without mercy. Aemond's nose bled, and his face grew bruised as the punches continued. Stars began to dance before his eyes.

"Stop! Stop..." Aemond's voice broke through in terror as his eyes suddenly cleared, struggling to escape the assault.

Bang!

Rhaegar's next punch connected with a sharp crack, breaking Aemond's high, straight nose.

"Uhhh!" Aemond's breath caught, and his eyes rolled back as he fainted.

"Oops, you're awake?" Rhaegar exclaimed in surprise, quickly catching his unconscious brother in his arms. The sight of blood trickling from Aemond's nostrils was almost heartbreaking.

"Let's go, brother. I'll take you back." Rhaegar suppressed a smirk as he hoisted the limp Aemond and began to carry him out of the temple.

...

Soon, they emerged through the temple doors.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer crawled out from behind the temple, its dry, weathered dragon head extending forward, eyes locked on the unconscious Aemond.

"Stand down," Rhaegar commanded in High Valyrian, reassuring the beast, "Be quiet, all will be well."

"Roar!" Sheepstealer, understanding the command, shook its tail and backed away. Moments earlier, it had sensed its rider in danger and roared in haste, uncertain if the foolish rider had heard it.

Rhaegar glanced at Sheepstealer's rugged form before shifting Aemond's weight on his shoulders. Fortunately, Aemond had become only the second person in House Targaryen's history to ride a wild dragon. Likewise, he was also the first to be sought out by one.

By taming a wild dragon at such a young age, Aemond had ensured he would never again be seen as a wild man without a dragon...

Pentos.

The Prince's Palace, cliffs at the rear.

A group of richly dressed nobles gathered at the foot of the city walls, their eyes fixed on the vast, smoke-covered coast. They were utterly engrossed, as if coveting the lands across the Narrow Sea.

Boom!

A scarlet behemoth soared low over the sea, its wide, fleshy wings flapping mightily as its forked tail split the waves. The dragon's long, serpent-like body swayed with each movement, its ferocious, menacing head a hideous sight.

"A dragon!" someone exclaimed in alarm. The scarlet beast leaped into the sky with a mighty thrust, its tail sweeping the waves, splashing water over the assembled crowd. Drenched, the dignitaries couldn't conceal their excitement as they wiped the seawater from their faces.

"Roar..."

Suddenly, a deep, resonant dragon roar echoed through the air. A massive, dark green dragon burst through the clouds, revealing its weathered, enormous head. As soon as it appeared, its vast wings cast a shadow over the sky as it chased after the slender Blood Wym.

Daemon smiled faintly and leaned back, spreading his arms wide.

"Roar..." Caraxes flew steadily and swiftly, carrying its rider higher and faster.

Laena, beaming with pride, shouted as she chased after them, "Dracarys!"

Boom!

A torrent of orange dragonfire mixed with thick black smoke erupted, blocking Caraxes' path. Caraxes' pupils narrowed as the dragon charged headlong into the searing flames. In an instant, man and dragon broke through the blazing fire and dove downward. Covered in ash, Daemon shook his head with a laugh. Thanks to the Targaryens' fire resistance, Laena might have accidentally killed her husband if she hadn't done so already.

"After them!" Laena's face flushed as she pounded on Vhagar's back, whose dark green scales were as tough as iron plates. Vhagar growled, and with a powerful lunge, overtook Caraxes by sheer force and momentum.

With a rumble, the two dragons—one green, one red—soared past the castle perched on the cliff, sending gusts of wind so fierce that the nobles below struggled to stand upright. The dragons circled the sea twice before slowly descending outside the castle.

...

Night had fallen.

The Prince's residence hosted a grand banquet, welcoming two old friends as honored guests.

At the head of the table, Prince Reggio, his large belly straining against his tunic, frequently raised his goblet in a toast.

“To our Prince of Tyrosh and his wife, Lady Laena!” he declared. “To you both!”

The gathered advisers and nobles echoed the toast, raising their glasses, careful not to show even the slightest hint of neglect. Reggio downed his wine in one gulp, then turned to Daemon, who was seated across from him. With a sincere expression, he said, “Prince, you and I are both princes, and we shall be as brothers.”

“I have a grand venture in mind and would be honored if you joined me in making a fortune together!”

“Oh? I’m honored,” Daemon replied with a smile, glancing at his wife beside him.

Six months ago, Braavos and Pentos had formed an alliance, aiming to spy on The Gullet and control the Narrow Sea, only to be thwarted by his two nephews’ forceful retaliation. Now, six months later, it was time to usher in peace.

The couple, after negotiations led by the Sea Snake and Rhaenyra, had come to meet with Prince Reggio of Pentos. Reggio, an old friend and a shrewd businessman, had immediately welcomed them with open arms upon seeing the two dragons descend from the sky.

Reggio gulped down another glass of wine and leaned in, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “I’ll let you in on a secret. Someone paid me a hefty sum to organize a fleet to transport food and medicine to the Basilisk Isles.”

“That place is part of Sothoryos, a chaotic land with little to no governance,” he continued. “I have no idea who’s behind this, but could it be they’re looking to establish a trading post?” Reggio laughed heartily, already anticipating the profits.

“Good luck,” Daemon replied, raising his glass in a toast, all while gently stroking his wife’s rounded belly with his palm. ‘She shouldn’t have come,’ he thought. ‘Riding a dragon isn’t exactly the safest thing.’

Laena, sensing his concern, took his hand and smiled. “Don’t worry, I’m fine,” she reassured him with a pat on her belly, covered by a flowing white dress. She then whispered in his ear, “He’s doing well, too.”

“In a few days, we’ll head back.”

Though Prince Reggio’s hospitality was too generous to refuse, Daemon had little desire to linger in Pentos. Yet, the allure of solidifying alliances and winning over the people was tempting. Besides, it had been far too long since the couple had ridden their dragons together.

...

Half a month later.

Deep within the mountains of the Forest of Qohor...

“Roar!”

A massive, brown-and-tan beast soared through the sky, its scrawny body cutting through the lush canopy below. In its hind claws, it clutched a howling black boar. The dragon's sharp talons pierced the boar's flesh, and with a swift motion, it flung the disemboweled carcass into the air.

Boom!

The dragon's dried-up head snapped wide open, devouring the boar whole in a single gulp.

Meanwhile, deep within the forest:

The Cannibal lay sprawled, its grotesque dragon head resting lazily on a bush, hot breath stirring the leaves around it. Nearby, a low hill rose from the earth. As his thick tail swept across the ground, it revealed the entrance to a hidden cave at the hill's base.

...

In the dark cave, a three-legged furnace cast a red glow, illuminating the space with a fiery hue.

Clang! Clang!

Two old men, their hair thinning and white stubble marking their age, swung their forging hammers in rhythmic unison, striking the molten sword blanks with precision.

"Masters, are you sure you don't want to reconsider moving?" Rhaegar asked as he moved a chair closer, absently playing with the polished Dragonbone hilt of a sword.

Silence was his only answer, save for the relentless clang of hammers against metal. The two old smiths kept their mouths shut, focused solely on their solemn work.

"Who cares what they do? They're just a bunch of smiths," Aemond said dismissively.

Rhaegar glanced at him but said nothing. Aemond's face went pale, and he fell silent. Though half a month had passed, the bruises on his face had only just begun to fade, except for the bandage stuck to his nearly crooked, broken nose.

Rhaegar turned his attention back to the smiths, patiently observing their superb craftsmanship. As they chanted in High Valyrian, the sword embryo was quenched in water. White smoke billowed up, obscuring the view for anyone uninitiated in the art of forging.

The sword submerged in the water was the Dragon's Claw, a blade that had been lost in the Smoking Sea and claimed by the wild dragon Morghul, who had stored it in its lair. After many twists and turns, the sword had finally returned to Rhaegar's hands, just in time for the capture of Qohor and its subsequent reforging.

"My grandfather wants to return to Oldtown," Aemond muttered, his face long with reluctance.

Rhaegar frowned. "What's the point of going back? Our priority is to govern Qohor."

Qohor was in dire straits after the Dothraki raid, nearly destroyed in its entirety. Only the intervention of the Cannibal had driven the raiders away, sparing the civilians from complete annihilation.

Aemond crossed his arms. “What else is there to do?” His thoughts drifted to retreating and waiting for his position as Triarch of Qohor. Bartimos, a narrow-minded villain, had already been driven back to Claw Isle, while Cole, lacking in governance, had reluctantly recruited some Dothraki to train an army.

Hearing this, Rhaegar understood what needed to be done and said calmly, “Do as you wish. Qohor is under the watchful eyes of many, and it needs a cunning mind to take root.”

Another thing was that Qohor, though sparsely populated, was rich in resources. Like the cave they stood in, which was actually a long-dormant extinct volcano. The smiths of Qohor had discovered this place generations ago, and it had become a sacred site for forging ever since.

Rhaegar could feel the abundant fire magic beneath the earth. There had to be magma deep within the rock formation. This extinct volcano significantly increased Qohor's value—it was an ideal nesting place for dragons, and with it, the Targaryens may have found a sanctuary to thrive and reproduce.

Chapter 608: The Grief of Laena

The weather was fine, with the warm sun shining brightly.

Boom—

Two dragons, one following the other, emerged from the sea beneath Pentos and soared into The Gullet. Daemon's lips curled up slightly as he savored the salty sea air.

"Roar..."

Dragons and humans share a similar temperament. Caraxes crossed the sea, sending up cool waves in its wake. Above the clouds, Vhagar flapped its wings and ascended higher into the sky. Its massive body pushed through the clouds, revealing the sagging folds of skin along its jaw.

Laena smiled, loosening some of the saddle clasps around her waist. She was seven months pregnant, and her stomach was clearly visible. The straps couldn't be as tight as usual.

Gulp—

Her stomach made a noise, as if it were hungry. Laena's face paled slightly. She had been pregnant twice before and sensed that something was wrong.

"Daemon, slow down!" she shouted, clutching the handlebar with both hands as she leaned forward.

Then she removed her leather gloves and reached beneath her red skirt, feeling the wet, bloody stains. Laena's head buzzed, and she had only one thought:

"The water has broken!"

...

Midday

Driftmark, High Tide

“Ahhh!” A woman's scream of agony echoed from the Lord's chambers.

“How could this happen!?” Daemon stood outside the door, his face dark with anger. Laena had gone into premature labor, just as she had with her previous miscarriage.

“Father!...” Noisy footsteps echoed in the hallway as Baela and Rhaena rushed in, their faces pale with fear. Their fiancés, Daeron and Aemon, followed closely behind. A truce had been reached with Pentos, specifically to end the war between Braavos and Pentos. Upon learning that their parents had returned to Driftmark, the sisters had begged Rhaenyra to send an escort.

“How is my mother?” Baela asked, her voice flustered and panicked as she spun in a frantic circle.

Daemon glanced at his eldest daughter, opening his mouth to speak. “She...”

“Ah, Daemon...” A scream suddenly pierced the air from within the chamber, and Laena called out to her husband in a pitiable voice. The pain in her trembling tone was unmistakable.

Daemon’s face turned cold as he held Baela back, preventing her from rushing into the room. He scolded sternly, “Who told you to come? Go back!”

Childbirth was a gamble against death. His daughters were too young to witness such a cruel scene.

“Why!?” Baela’s eyes widened, brimming with tears. “Mother is calling you. The attendants said she went into labor early!”

Rhaena gripped her sister’s clothing, shaking her head in silent agreement.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. Don’t look at anything you shouldn’t!” Daemon was distracted as he grabbed his eldest son-in-law, Daeron, by the shoulders and pressed his forehead against Daeron’s. “Take them back to their room. Can you do that?”

His voice trembled as he struggled to restrain his emotions.

Daeron hesitated, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his handsome face. “I will,” he finally replied. He took one of the girls by the hand and signaled for them to leave together. Every time Rhaenyra gave birth, Rhaegar had insisted that the children and their nephews stay away from the door. Daeron didn’t fully understand, but he respected his brother’s wishes.

“No! I’m not leaving!” Baela struggled fiercely, tears streaming down her face.

“Go,” Aemon urged, pulling her hand gently. “We’ll only worry your mother if we stay here.”

Daeron nodded to his uncle, then led the girls away.

Soon, only Daemon and a maid, who kept changing the water, remained outside the door.

“Ahhh!” Laena screamed in agony, leaning over the edge of the low bed, her legs spread wide in a desperate attempt to birth the child. The two Maesters were

drenched in blood, their faces pale with terror. It was another difficult birth, and the aftereffects of her previous labor had left her womb torn and bleeding profusely. With the limited skills of today's healers, there was nothing more they could do.

One of the older Maesters, his hands trembling, rose unsteadily and left the room. Daemon, his face grim, hurriedly grabbed the Maester by the arm. "What's the situation?" he demanded.

"It's not good," the older Maester replied, his voice heavy with truth. "The baby is in the breech position. I could attempt to push for the birth, but the mother is bleeding heavily."

The amount of blood loss would almost certainly lead to death.

Bang! Daemon slammed his fist into the wall, frustration boiling over. "She was fine just the other day! We even rode dragons this morning!"

Since they had left the Smoking Sea, Laena had seemed much improved. If she hadn't been, she wouldn't have gone to Pentos.

The old Maester gritted his teeth and continued, "The fetus is healthy, but the mother is the issue." He paused, then added, "A person's physical state is closely tied to their state of mind. The lady had been holding onto hope, and her condition appeared to improve. But she was concealing her injuries. Now, with the fetus fully developed and requiring more nutrients, her weakened body can no longer cope."

Daemon's brow furrowed deeply as he struggled to suppress his anger. "I don't understand what you're saying. Can the baby be delivered safely or not?"

"We'll do our best," the Maester replied, his tone uncertain.

"I want a definite answer!" Daemon's voice shook as he listened to Laena's screams, feeling as though his heart were being torn apart.

The old Maester slowly lowered his head. "We can only do our best," he repeated, his voice barely a whisper.

Daemon, stunned by the response, shoved the man in a daze. "Get in there. My wife needs your help."

The old Maester nodded silently and returned to the room.

...

Time passed slowly, each moment marked by the echoes of his wife's wails. Daemon paced back and forth, his mood sinking lower with every cry.

Boom—

A fierce gust of wind rattled the windows of High Tide, shaking them slightly. Daemon glanced out the window just in time to see a scarlet dragon land in the forecourt with lightning speed.

In a short while, Rhaenys hurried up to him, her face etched with worry. "How is Laena?" she asked anxiously.

Daemon remained silent, shaking his head wordlessly.

Rhaenys's expression shifted, and she forced a smile. "Corlys will be back soon. He's setting out from the Mud Gate."

The couple had been in King's Landing to visit Viserys when the news reached them, and they had rushed back. Rhaenys's red armor still clung to her, carrying the scent of dragonfire.

Daemon said nothing, his eyes dark and uncertain.

"Ah! Come out..." Laena suddenly wailed from the room, pounding her arms against the bed in agony.

Rhaenys's eyelids twitched, and she spoke quickly. "Last time Laena had a difficult birth, Rhaegar saved her."

Daemon's eyes flickered, his voice heavy with contemplation. "What are you suggesting?"

Rhaenys gripped her cousin's arm, her tone serious. "Someone has to help Laena. Rhaegar is far away in Qohor. Do Rhaenyra or Helaena know any healing magic?"

The two sisters were the ones her nephew trusted most; it was possible they knew some arcane magic.

Daemon closed his eyes, his voice dry and filled with despair. "It's no use. It's too late."

Rhaenyra was in Lys, and it was unclear whether she knew any healing spells. Helaena was hurrying back from King's Landing, but even at Dreamfyre's speed, it would take her at least half a day to arrive. And she was pregnant, unable to ride a dragon.

Rhaenys's pupils fluttered as she struggled to maintain her composure, leaning against the wall to keep from collapsing. She knew her daughter's condition well; Laena had been sickly for months. A sudden improvement might have been unnatural.

"Prince!" The old Maester hurried out of the room, the sound of Laena's screams gradually fading behind him.

Rhaenys immediately asked, before Daemon could speak, "What's the situation?"

The old Maester's face was grim as he shook his head. "It's not good. The womb is severely torn, and a normal birth is impossible."

Daemon and Rhaenys felt their hearts sink at the familiar words.

The Maester continued in a somber tone, "While there's still time, and the fetus is still alive, the best solution is to perform a Caesarean."

"Can the mother be saved?" Daemon asked, his chest tightening as if crushed by a mountain. For the second time in his life, he pleaded, "Can the mother be saved?"

The old Maester, with regret etched into his features, whispered, "We can only guarantee the safety of the fetus."

Daemon opened his mouth, but his throat felt as if it were filled with sand.

“Make a decision quickly. The mother won’t last much longer,” the old Maester urged, his voice tinged with sorrow. He had watched Laena grow up, and now he was tasked with deciding her fate. It was a burden no one should bear.

“No, I cannot choose,” Daemon muttered, his voice breaking. His steps faltered as if he were walking on air. This was his wife, the woman who had nearly died for him. Her life was hers to give, not his to take.

“Do it!” Laena’s voice rang out from inside the room, sharp and resolute. Her screams followed, piercing the heavy silence.

Everyone outside froze, eyes snapping to the door.

Inside, Laena lay drenched in sweat, utterly exhausted. She gritted her teeth and cried out, “Cut me open! Let the baby out!”

“Don’t shout! You won’t survive it,” the Maester beside her urged, his voice filled with alarm as he tried to soothe her.

Around the bed, the maids were in tears, some holding basins of water, others clutching towels, helpless in the face of such agony.

From his vantage point outside the door, Daemon could only make out the blurred silhouette of his wife. The old Maester, standing in the doorway, locked eyes with Daemon, his expression grave.

Laena, pale as death, summoned the last of her strength and shouted, “Daemon, save the baby!”

Daemon’s body shook violently. He stumbled back, nearly losing his balance.

“Prince...” The old Maester’s voice was urgent; he needed an answer.

“Listen to her!” Rhaenys interjected, pulling the old Maester inside the room. Her voice was laced with pain. “If her husband can’t make the decision, I, as her mother, will.”

There was no time for hesitation—delaying any longer would risk both lives. Someone had to act.

The old Maester, as if finally given direction, nodded firmly and instructed his assistant to prepare a cup of poppy milk.

...

Daemon’s eyes were vacant, his limbs weak as he leaned heavily against the window. Time seemed to crawl, and he found himself disoriented, unable to discern north from south or east from west. His mind was a blank slate, the only sound anchoring him the persistent buzzing in his ears.

The sun slipped from its zenith, casting an indelible gloom over High Tide.

“Roar!” Vhagar’s mournful cry echoed through the skies, the old dragon circling the castle in sorrow. Its lament could be heard for miles, a sound so haunting it seemed to pierce the very heart of the fortress.

Daemon, lost in his thoughts, looked up at the beast above. The dragon's wail replaced the screams of his wife, stabbing into his soul like a dagger.

Then, as suddenly as it began, Vhagar's wailing ceased.

"Wa wa wa~~"

From the room behind him, the loud cry of a newborn rang out. Daemon's fingers, gripping the windowsill, trembled, and he turned his stiff neck toward the sound, his vision blurring.

Tap, tap...

A figure approached, familiar yet almost ghostly. It was tall, strikingly reminiscent of Laena.

"Laena..." Daemon's throat tightened, rendering him speechless. It really did look like her.

"Daemon." A voice called out, and a warm hand touched his cheek, bringing him back to reality. His vision cleared, and the figure vanished, replaced by Rhaenys, her expression stoic.

Rhaenys walked toward him, her steps heavy, holding a swaddled baby in her arms. "Look. It's a boy."

Daemon stared blankly, muttering, "Where's Laena?" This morning, they had flown together on dragonback, drawing envious gazes from Prince Reggio.

"She's gone where she needed to go," Rhaenys said, tilting her head as she took a deep breath. "She didn't say much, but I believe there was much she wanted to tell you."

Daemon squeezed his trembling hands together, trying to steady himself. "What did she want to say?"

"She couldn't say it, so I'll speak for her." Rhaenys glanced at the pale little face in the swaddling clothes and continued, her voice tinged with a strange detachment. "This is the son you've always longed for. Laena fulfilled her duty to the Targaryen's bloodline. She did it."

She thrust the swaddled baby into Daemon's arms, her tone edged with bitterness. "Even if it cost her everything—wasn't that what you wanted?"

Chapter 609: The Green Dragon and the Scarlet Dragon

The sun was setting, casting long shadows over the rising tide. Waterbirds darted across the beach, snatching fish from the waves and landing on the rocks to peck at their catch.

Splash!

Daemon walked aimlessly along the shore, each step heavy and uncertain. He didn't know why he was walking—only that he needed to keep moving, as if chasing someone's fading footsteps.

Plop.

Suddenly, his foot slipped, and he stumbled, collapsing into the soft gravel. His mind in a fog, Daemon unfastened the Dark Sister from his waist and used it to support himself as he tried to stand. But after a few steps, his legs gave out, and he sank down onto a reef.

“Hoo...”

Daemon sat there, resting his hands on the hilt of his sword, his forehead pressed against the cold metal. The chill of the Dark Sister sent a sobering pain through him, but no sound escaped his lips. His heart was a storm of emotion, yet his face remained impassive. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the sword, his eyes closed, waiting for the unshed tears to dry.

The waterbirds, having eaten their fill, chirped merrily as they flew back to their nests. The setting sun dipped halfway below the horizon, splitting the sky and sea with a line of fire. Daemon sat in the deepening shadows, a dark figure against the dying light.

Clatter...

He didn't know how long he sat there, but eventually, the waves lapped at the beach.

“Daemon!”

The Sea Snake's voice cut through the sound of the surf. He leaped from a small boat and hurried onto the beach, ignoring the rolling waves. Daemon slowly lifted his head, seeing the Sea Snake's wind-beaten and dust-covered face.

“Why are you here alone?” the Sea Snake demanded, his voice filled with concern.

“Hasn't Laena given birth yet?”

“She has,” Daemon replied hoarsely, lowering his head again.

“What do you mean?” The Sea Snake's heart skipped a beat as a sense of dread washed over him.

Daemon said nothing, only shook his head sadly.

The Sea Snake staggered back, his expression shifting from concern to horror. His sharp mind quickly grasped the situation, and he realized the truth.

“How could this happen...” he muttered, his voice filled with disbelief.

When he looked down again and saw Daemon's lost expression, a surge of anger overtook him.

Bang!

He grabbed Daemon by the collar, lifting his sturdy frame off the ground. The Sea Snake glared at him, his voice breaking as he shouted, “What happened? Laena wrote to me just yesterday, saying she was returning to Driftmark!”

His eyes reddened with grief. “Say it! My daughter only said yesterday that she was coming home!”

After a moment of violent shaking and shouting, Daemon finally regained a semblance of clarity.

“She's back,” Daemon said quietly, his voice tinged with sadness. “And she's brought your grandson.”

Bang!

“You damned bastard!” the Sea Snake roared, punching Daemon and throwing him into the cold sea. Without a second glance, he turned and stormed back to the castle.

“Cough, cough...”

Daemon collapsed, choking on seawater. As he lay there, he watched the Sea Snake’s figure in the distance, first striding, then breaking into a run. He could still hear the man’s curses, loud and unrelenting, echoing across the beach. It was as if he had unleashed every curse he had ever known.

...

In the blink of an eye, night had fallen. The cold wind swept across the beach, but it couldn’t dispel the heavy sadness that lingered there.

Boom—

A massive ball of orange and yellow dragonfire erupted into the sky, mingled with thick black smoke. It turned into a towering bonfire that lit up the night, casting long shadows over the sands.

Daemon stood at a distance, his eyes hazy as he watched the old dragon, Vhagar, unleash its flames. “Roar!” Vhagar’s mournful cry echoed as it crouched down, its massive body forming a protective wall as it escorted its master on this final journey.

Daemon extended a hand, letting the sea breeze slip through his fingers. But a sudden squirming movement in his arms drew his attention away from the wind.

He looked down at the infant cradled in his arms, curled up in a swaddling cloth. The baby’s face was a little pouty, its tiny mouth moving as if searching for something. Despite being born prematurely, the child looked healthy, with skin as soft and pale as an eggshell and sparse silver hair. Its large, lilac eyes stared up at Daemon, full of life.

Daemon was captivated, and without thinking, he offered his finger to the baby’s mouth. “Ba-chii ba-chii~~” The baby accepted without hesitation, sucking on the salty fingertip while gazing up at its father with wide, curious eyes.

“Laena is gone,” came a cold voice from behind. Rhaenys had approached silently. “You need to take up the responsibilities of a father.”

Daemon glanced at her but said nothing. He could sense the blame in her words—blame for not fulfilling his duties as a husband.

Rhaenys kept her gaze fixed on the distant flames, watching the dragonfire wane from its initial blaze. She only turned to leave after a brief pause, offering a final reminder: “It’s windy tonight. Don’t let the baby catch a cold.”

Then she returned to the castle, leaving Daemon alone with the child. He remained rooted in place, feeling the wet warmth of his fingers, as if he were the last person in the world.

Rustle...

Footsteps approached from behind, but the person did not speak. Daemon assumed it was Rhaenys, returning to take the children back to bed.

“Father,” a small voice broke the silence.

Daemon turned, surprised to see Baela standing there. “Baela, why are you here?” he asked, puzzled. She should have been put to bed by now.

Baela didn’t answer, her eyes locked on his face. Daemon sighed, weariness evident in his voice. “Go back to bed.”

Still, Baela said nothing, her gaze intense. It was only then that Daemon realized something was wrong.

“I hate him!” Baela suddenly cried, pointing at the baby in his arms.

Daemon was taken aback, disbelief coloring his tone. “What?”

Baela’s voice was cold, her words sharp. “You and that boy in your arms. You’re the ones who killed our mother.”

Her accusation cut through the night like a blade. In her young mind, the death of her beloved mother was the result of her father’s desire for the son he now held.

Tears welled in Baela’s eyes, but she held them back, her voice trembling with emotion. “Now you’ve got what you wanted. I hope you’re satisfied.”

With that, she turned and ran, not looking back.

Daemon felt as though he had been struck by lightning, a heavy hammer dropped onto his chest. He watched, helpless, as his daughter ran further and further away—away from High Tide, into the night.

“Where are you going?” Daemon called out, worry gnawing at him, but his pride kept him rooted to the spot.

There was no response, only the echo of her footsteps fading into the darkness. The last thing he heard, faint yet clear, was a defiant shout: “None of your business!”

“Roar...” The old dragon let out a mournful cry, lifting its head toward the sky.

Daemon froze, his hair whipping in the night wind, strands covering half of his face.

Boom...

A sudden gust of wind howled past, nearly knocking him over. Daemon stumbled, tightening his grip on the baby in his arms.

“Ho ho...” A familiar figure approached from behind, heavy breaths accompanying each step.

Daemon’s body stiffened, his eyes widening in surprise.

“I’m sorry to hear the bad news.” Viserys’s voice was hoarse as he caught his breath, his concern etched into every word. “My brother, are you okay?”

Daemon’s mouth opened slightly, but no words came. They lodged in his throat, choking him with their weight.

“Owww!” The baby squirmed and wriggled in its swaddling clothes, its high-pitched cries of discomfort piercing the air.

Daemon barely registered the sound, his focus shifting from Vhagar, who continued to howl mournfully, to the massive bronze dragon that had landed on the beach.

“Roar...” Vermithor’s eyes narrowed, pupils slitted with unease, as it stared at the old dragon. Flames flickered deep in its throat, ready to unleash. Yet Vhagar paid no attention, lost in its sorrow.

Normally, an unprovoked dragon like Vermithor would have roared and bared its sharp teeth. But tonight was different. Viserys glanced back at Vermithor as they walked. “Dragons have their own temperaments,” he remarked. “It’s been a long time since it flew.”

Thanks to the special herbs retrieved by his eldest son, Viserys’s body and spirit had slowly begun to recover. But when he received the message from his youngest son, Daeron, he knew an irreversible tragedy had struck their house. A tragedy not unlike the one he had endured now befell his younger brother, Daemon.

Daemon’s pupils trembled as he took a tentative step forward, cradling the baby in his arms. He moved toward his brother, one step at a time, the firelight casting their shadows together.

One second, two seconds...

The brothers drew closer, their figures merging as they neared each other.

“Brother...” Daemon’s voice quivered, and he collapsed into Viserys’s arms, like a reed shaken by the wind.

Viserys, though not strong, withstood the impact and wrapped his arms around his frail younger brother. They held each other tightly, just as they had when they were children.

Daemon buried his face in his brother’s shoulder, his voice trembling, barely holding back the flood of emotions. “She’s gone, just like your Aemma.”

“I know,” Viserys replied softly, his voice heavy with sorrow. “I know it all.” He sighed deeply, as if comforting a child. “Everything will pass.”

Daemon’s breath came in ragged gasps, his body trembling, barely able to stand. A hoarse growl escaped his throat. “The gods are always so cruel... But at least they left us hope.”

Viserys tightened his embrace, feeling the warmth of his brother’s tears seep through to his chest. As he had said before: Time would wash away the sorrow, leaving those who remained to remember. At least, for the sake of their children, they could find hope again.

...

A few days later.

Lys, Topless Tower

“Ahhh!” A piercing scream echoed from one of the rooms.

Maids hurried in and out, carrying basins of water and towels. Outside the door, Rhaenyra paced anxiously, her nerves fraying with every passing moment. The woman giving birth inside was Mysaria, the White Worm.

Though only seven months pregnant, Mysaria was delivering early—before Rhaenyra herself.

“Ah! Push!” Mysaria’s desperate cries rang out from behind the curtain, her voice filled with pain and determination. Rhaenyra couldn’t see through the thick fabric, but she could hear every agonizing sound.

People from humble beginnings often possess a fierce resilience, and Mysaria was no exception. She had chosen to give birth in the bathtub, using the same method as her former prostitute companions.

“Why is this taking so long?” Rhaenyra muttered, sweat beading on her forehead as she turned restlessly outside the door. In the past, others had always waited for her during such moments, but now she found herself on the other side, waiting and worrying. The experience brought a new understanding of the anxiety that often accompanied such situations.

“Wa wa wa~~”

Just as she voiced her impatience, the cry of a newborn rang out. Rhaenyra paused, a smile spreading across her face. “It’s born,” she murmured with relief.

After all, this was the child of her uncle Daemon, potentially to be incorporated into the Targaryen family tree. Mysaria, the White Worm, was also her trusted confidante, and the birth of this child meant an additional ally in her circle.

Tap, tap...

As she reached to lift the curtain and enter the room, hurried footsteps echoed down the hallway. Ser Lorent of the Kingsguard rushed forward, clutching an opened letter in his hand. “Your Grace, a letter from Driftmark!”

Rhaenyra’s heart skipped a beat as she quickly took the letter, her joy giving way to sudden apprehension. She unfolded the paper, her eyes scanning the black words on the white page.

The letter detailed the events at Driftmark, and with each line, Rhaenyra’s joy evaporated. Her face turned ashen, and she felt the weight of despair settle over her. The words seemed to bleed with the sorrow of her dearest friend.

“Laena!” she whispered, the letter slipping from her trembling hands. Her legs gave way, and she collapsed backward.

“Your Grace!” Ser Lorent cried out, rushing to catch her as she fell. He supported her, but Rhaenyra’s eyes were vacant, and her strength had deserted her. She could no longer stand.

...

At the same time.

The Vale, The Eyrie.

Rhaegar stood by the tower window, draped in a loose robe, gazing out at the misty expanse below. The rebellion in Qohor had been quelled, and he had already sent word to the Vale that he would be arriving soon with his eldest son.

Creak...

The door opened behind him, and Jeyne entered, her expression grave. She clutched a piece of paper tightly in her hand.

Rhaegar turned, his eyes widening in surprise as he saw her face. Without a word, she handed him the paper. Rhaegar took it, his heart pounding as he began to read.

...

Behind the Bloody Gate, on the narrow path leading to The Eyrie...

“Roar!” A young dragon with a silvery body soared overhead, disappearing into the misty heights of the Giant’s Lance.

“Prince!”

“Prince Baelon...”

Dozens of nobles from the Vale cheered, pounding their chests in excitement as they watched the dragon’s flight.

A carriage pulled up near the cliff, stopping at the path overlooking the Narrow Sea. The door opened, and Baelon, with his short silver hair glinting in the sunlight, stepped down onto the ground, carefully balancing on a stool.

“Come,” he said, reaching back to help his sisters, Dany and Anna, down from the carriage.

“Brother, look!” Anna, full of energy, pointed excitedly at the nobles who had come to greet them, her pale fingers trembling with enthusiasm.

“Shh, behave yourself,” Baelon whispered, gently nudging Anna’s head. Taking a deep breath, he led his younger sisters toward the overly enthusiastic nobles. This was part of the plan they had discussed with their father: by returning to the Vale with his sisters, Baelon would work to win over the nobles.

“Hooray, hooray, long live the Prince!” The nobles of the Vale were ecstatic, thrilled to see the heir to the throne, who bore such a striking resemblance to the King in his youth.

Some among the crowd, aware of the siblings’ unique bond, shouted excitedly, “Hooray! Conqueror III!”

Baelon's expression darkened. Without a word, he hastened his pace, pulling his sisters along with him. The reference was to Conqueror I, known to all. Conqueror II was Rhaegar, who had emulated the achievements and marriages of the original Conqueror, albeit with a hint of jest in the title.

"Roar..."

A light gray dragon shadow passed over their heads, its massive form stirring up thick clouds of fog. A young maiden with a crooked nose suddenly burst from the back of the group, waving a bamboo stick in her hand as she chased after the dragon. "Stop, you little dragon!"

The appearance of the maiden and her dragon silenced the nobles, their cheer turning into a momentary hush. But only for an instant.

...

The Eyrie.

Rhaegar stared at the letter in disbelief, his eyes wide with shock. He could scarcely comprehend the words before him.

"You never know what will happen in life," Jeyne murmured, gently leaning into her husband for comfort.

To think that someone so full of life and strength, a true dragonborn woman, could die on the birthing bed...

Rhaegar's throat tightened, and with great difficulty, he whispered, "I saved her once."

Chapter 610: Roar of a Dragon

Time flies.

It is the early spring of 131 AC. King's Landing, now entering its tenth year of a long summer, is alive with the sounds of birdsong and bustling activity.

Mud Gate, the docks.

"Hurry up, don't waste any time!"

"..."

Merchant ships from all corners of the world dock one after another, their sails bearing the crests of distant lands. Merchants disembark eagerly, urging their sailors to unload the goods swiftly. Today marks the first day of spring, and word has spread that the king is hosting a grand banquet for all visiting guests. The merchants, keen to open new trade routes, reveal their impatience with every command. "Move faster, or you'll all be fined!" they bark, their faces twisted with urgency.

Grumbling ensues.

...

Dum dum dum!

The bells of the Sept ring out, and the people in the city pause to cross their fingers in reverence. Meanwhile, attendants at the Red Keep rush back and forth, ensuring every guest is welcomed and entertained.

Boom—

Two massive golden beasts soar overhead, their passage stirring the wind and setting the bronze bells to chime, elevating the festive atmosphere to its peak.

“Roar!”

A golden dragon streaks across Flea Bottom, its scales gleaming under the bright sun as it flaps its pale pink wings. The majestic creature circles the city twice, a proud display of power, before reluctantly landing.

“By the new gods!” The elderly Lyonel stood in the courtyard of the Red Keep, a deep sigh of relief escaping his lips. “Finally, someone has come to help me,” he muttered, watching as richly dressed merchants streamed past him.

Led by the royal bodyguards, the guests made their way into the Throne Hall and Banquet Hall, eager for the day’s grand events.

...

At this time, in the Council Chamber:

A group of senior advisers sat upright, their faces familiar and seasoned by years of service. Viserys, seated at the head of the table, took a sip of wine to break the silence. “Rhaegar, the Small Council is about to begin.”

Despite his advancing years, Viserys had recovered well after a long period of rest. Dressed impeccably, he concealed his receding hairline and unkempt stubble—a choice Alicent insisted upon, unwilling to let him neglect his appearance even as age took its toll.

Across the table, the Sea Snake sat diagonally, his gaze fixed on the young king standing by the window. He toyed with a pale stone ball in his hand, its rhythmic clinking a sharp contrast to the tension in the room. His furrowed brow betrayed his impatience.

“I’m coming, Father,” Rhaegar replied, turning away from the window with a smile. “Look outside—the city is ablaze with flowers and flames.”

He had aged a few years, his demeanor now more composed and reflective. The way he leaned against the window frame, tall and unyielding, suggested a calm that would not be shaken, even if the sky were to fall.

Viserys raised an eyebrow, displeased by the choice of words. “That’s not a comforting thought.”

“But it’s true,” Rhaegar countered, walking over to the council table. He pulled out the chair that symbolized royal authority and settled into it, a faint smile playing on his lips. “As we both can see, a golden age is upon us.”

The advisers exchanged glances, trying to discern the king’s deeper meaning. The Targaryens had conquered the three Free Cities of Myr, Tyrosh, and Lys, as well as the Stepstones, effectively controlling the shipping lanes in the lower Narrow Sea. Over the years, these territories had generated wealth comparable to decades of trade. Controlling the lower Narrow Sea was like holding a never-ending source of riches.

Rhaegar leaned back in his chair and smiled. "As is tradition, let's discuss any challenges we've faced this year."

The harvests had been bountiful, and the treasury was overflowing with gold. The Sea Snake set down the stone ball, ready to speak when Tyland interrupted.

"Your Grace, I have something to report," Tyland said, seizing the moment.

The Sea Snake rolled his eyes but remained silent, waiting for Tyland to finish.

Tyland adjusted his garments, his expression serious. "The economy of Volantis has always been stable, but recently, we've noticed some unsettling fluctuations."

"Oh? Go on," Rhaegar said, intrigued.

Tyland, the Minister of Civil Affairs and Regent of Volantis, was an experienced adviser with significant influence. His third son, Maekar, was studying under him, further solidifying his status as a loyal pillar of the royal family.

"Your Grace, it appears this issue is tied to the resurgence of Slaver's Bay," Tyland explained, his face darkening. "Slaver's Bay has long profited from the slave trade. Now, with its revival, they've begun aggressively dispatching slave ships to raid passing merchant vessels, aiming to rebuild their economy swiftly."

He continued, "Once captured by a slave ship, merchants at sea face grim fates. At best, their goods and women are seized; at worst, the men are shackled and forced into hard labor in Slaver's Bay."

Rhaegar nodded thoughtfully, stroking his chin. Slaver's Bay had never been a simple threat. Its capture had once crushed the morale of the slave owners, but now it seemed they had been biding their time, preparing for a significant resurgence.

"Your Grace, I also have something to address," the Sea Snake interrupted, rising to his feet with a majestic posture.

Rhaegar blinked, and with the recent rumors in mind, he could already guess what Lord Corlys was about to say. Tormund, the Master of Whisperers, nodded subtly in approval, glancing sideways at Rhaegar.

Understanding the unspoken signal, Rhaegar smiled warmly. "Please, Lord Corlys."

The old man had endured the loss of both a son and a daughter, and now his legacy rested on the shoulders of his grandchildren. Yet, despite his personal grief, he remained ambitious, intent on forging a new future. As the Master of Ships, Corlys Velaryon had played a crucial role in the kingdom's maritime success, with trade flourishing to the point that even ships from distant Asshai sailed thousands of miles to reach Westeros.

"Your Grace, my concern is closely tied to what Lord Tyland has just mentioned," Sea Snake began, his tone grave. "You're likely aware that not long ago, a brutal war erupted in the Basilisk Isles off the coast of Sothoryos. The bloodshed was immense."

"Of course," Rhaegar replied, his expression darkening.

The Basilisk Isles were notorious for being a haven for pirates, slave traders, and other unsavory characters—a chaotic and filthy place. Two years ago, remnants of the Triarchy set their sights on these lawless lands, aiming to claim them. The scattered islands along the coast of Sothoryos were their prime target.

However, the pirates and slave traders didn't surrender easily. Although they eventually lost the Basilisk Isles, they continued to cause trouble in secret—fires, poisoned wells, and relentless sabotage. A formidable admiral, known as the “Governor of The Summer Sea,” emerged, leading raids on supplies meant for the Basilisk Isles. The conflict became a prolonged and bloody stalemate.

“The Governor of The Summer Sea is dead,” Sea Snake announced, his voice low and somber. “The remnants of the Triarchy have fully occupied the Basilisk Isles. The Iron Bank lent them a vast sum of money, allowing them to purchase materials for fifty large ships from Pentos.”

The Triarchy's ultimate goal was to rebuild a free trade city on the continent of Sothoryos.

Rhaegar's expression remained unchanged as he asked seriously, “What specific news do you have?”

“The Triarchy has enlisted powerful allies,” Sea Snake replied, his face grim as he clenched his fists. “The Ironborn from the Iron Islands have rallied under their king, Dalton Greyjoy, and joined the fight.”

“It's said the waters of The Summer Sea have turned red with blood, and thousands of sharks have lingered in the aftermath,” he added, his voice heavy with the weight of the news.

Rhaegar frowned slightly and glanced at Tyland and then at Otto Hightower, who sat second on his right.

Tyland, looking puzzled, responded innocently, “My brother hasn't sent me any news. He's too preoccupied with his own pleasures.”

Otto Hightower, his temples graying, stood up and spoke quietly, “The Ironborn are a treacherous people. The young Lord of Oldtown was too intimidated to stop them.”

“The Ironborn have crossed The Summer Sea, and Oldtown is focused on defending itself,” Rhaegar's eyes grew darker, though he chose not to press the matter further..

He had known about the Ironborn uprising for six months, but since they hadn't attacked Lannisport or plundered ships in the Narrow Sea, few had taken the threat seriously. Rhaegar had anticipated trouble, but he never imagined the Ironborn would involve themselves in such complex diplomacy.

“Thank you for your counsel, Your Grace,” Otto said seriously, his tone casual but firm. “Dalton Greyjoy is a naturally wicked man. After the Great War, he passed through the Summer Isles, slaughtering most of the population to resupply his fleet. Such behavior is beyond reprehensible.”

Rhaegar could no longer remain seated, his concern finally pushing him to act. Beyond the three continents of Westeros, Essos, and Sothoryos, many islands dotted the world's oceans. Among them, the Stepstones and the Summer Isles were the most prominent. The Summer Isles, located in The Summer Sea, were north of the Arbor, which belonged to House Redwyne, and were surrounded by vast oceans on all other sides.

Rich in tropical resources and minerals, the islands were inhabited by tall, dark-skinned people. Though their civilization was relatively primitive and isolated, they had now suffered a terrible and undeserved fate.

The Sea Snake continued, his voice seething with fury. "Dalton Greyjoy is a natural-born brute. He earned the name 'Red Kraken' in his teens, and now he's been raiding merchant ships near the Stepstones under the banner of the Alliance."

He's taken refuge with the Kingdom's enemies and dared to plunder ships belonging to House Velaryon. Both offenses are equally serious and a direct challenge to the Sea Snake.

Corlys Velaryon, though advanced in age, was far from ready to be disrespected by a young upstart like Dalton Greyjoy.

"He is indeed a troublesome and ruthless character," Rhaegar mused, his mind already turning over possibilities. "Aunt is on Driftmark Island. In a few days, she'll accompany me to Sunspear, and on the way, we'll pay a visit to this Red Kraken."

Dorne remained mired in civil unrest, split between its eastern and western factions. Prince Qyle, a loyalist to the crown, had been seeking support. Rhaegar had also been concerned about the wild dragon Uragax, currently on the continent of Sothoryos, and he intended to check if its injuries had healed. Wild dragons like Uragax were particularly cunning and even more ruthless with their own kind. Uragax's stunted growth meant it would take longer to recover, and once healed, it might migrate to Dragonstone to nest.

Moreover, the Master of Whisperers had heard rumors from fishermen who claimed to have seen a large white dragon near the Sea of Dorne. Though the morning fog had obscured their view, they were adamant about its size. The only dragon likely to roam near the Sea of Dorne was the light silver Seasmoke, but Seasmoke was a fourth generation dragon, not nearly large enough to be described as "very."

Rhaegar feared that a wild dragon might be causing trouble and was determined to investigate. Dealing with Dorne, the remnants of the Triarchy, and the Red Kraken could all be managed along the way.

"Your Grace is wise," the Sea Snake said, satisfied with the plan as he took his seat.

Rhaegar smiled slightly, his mind still pondering the many challenges ahead.

"Your Grace, there is also the matter of Volantis," Tyland interjected, standing quickly. "If we allow Slaver's Bay to continue its unchecked plundering, trade will collapse."

Volantis was already lagging behind the three Free Cities across the Narrow Sea in terms of trade. If this continued, Tyland's position as Regent of Volantis would be in jeopardy.

Rhaegar sighed, clearly frustrated. “Lord Tyland, the resurgence of Slaver’s Bay is inevitable. At most, I’ll order Aegon to patrol the area on dragonback for a while, as a warning to the slavers.”

While many of the plundered merchant ships weren’t from Westeros, Slaver’s Bay remained a lucrative hub with a virtual monopoly on the slave trade. Rhaegar had no intention of launching an attack, preferring instead to infiltrate external forces. The truth was, his House was both too strong and too weak.

They were strong enough to occupy the three Free Cities and Qohor across the Narrow Sea, effectively doubling the kingdom’s territory. But they were weak in that there were too few dragonriders to hold even more land. They could only watch as other ambitious powers rose.

Rhaegar shrugged. Expanding the kingdom’s power from its current territory would take at least another decade. But when his many children grew up, they would bring the world “a little” shock.