

G.O Thrones 621

Chapter 621: Baelon and the Children of the Forest

The Riverlands: High Heart.

A towering hill in the Riverlands, nestled between Riverrun, Harrenhal, and Pinkmaiden Castle. Halfway up the hill, a group of three banners bearing the red dragon pitched camp.

"Kermit, it's your turn to play," said one of the tentmates as the three half-grown boys sat in a circle, playing cards.

The red-haired boy whose name was called looked torn, his eyes darting back and forth between the other two.

"Hurry up and play, we're going to eat dinner soon," Baelon urged with a smile, nudging his new friend.

"Yes, yes, play," chimed in the other boy, a short one with black hair and dark eyes, his face breaking into a bashful smile. If you looked closely, you could see that beneath the harmless doll-like face, there was always a hint of restlessness.

"Don't rush me, Ben!" Kermit threw a card down and kicked his best friend.

Benjicot yelped in pain and innocently hid behind the heir prince.

"Don't bully him, you sly fish," Baelon teased, clearly fond of the introverted Benjicot, as he playfully chided Kermit, who shared his interests.

Of the three boys, the eldest was already nineteen. His grandfather had been the late Lord Tully, and his father, Elmo Tully, was now the current Lord of Riverrun.

Benjicot, standing next to Baelon, was no slouch either. He hailed from the ancient House Blackwood, his father being Samwell Blackwood. He was two years older than Baelon and had just turned twelve that year.

As the three finished their round of cards, Harwin Strong, known as the "Breakbones," lifted the tent flap and laughed, "Time to eat, boys."

"Okay," Baelon said, rising and clapping his hands. He took the lead as Kermit followed on the left. "I'll go find Oscar. We'll continue playing cards later," Kermit added.

...

That night.

The moon shone brightly, though dark clouds veiled much of the sky. Inside his tent, Baelon lay with his head resting on someone's thigh, drifting into a deep sleep. The boys had played late into the night, and after dinner, they had gone hunting together. Exhausted, they fell into slumber quickly.

Whoosh.

A cool night breeze swept through the tent, brushing against Baelon's cheeks like a gentle hand. He frowned, turning over to avoid the draft coming from the entrance.

But that wasn't enough.

Suddenly, the air around him felt unnaturally still. Baelon stirred, opening his eyes groggily, his senses tingling with unease.

"..."

His vision was still blurry, but an odd murmur echoed in his ears. The sound was both near and distant—loud and soft, thick and thin—like the whispers of 10,000 voices all at once.

"What's that noise?" Still half-asleep, Baelon sat up, rubbing his eyes, and climbed out of the tent.

"Quack, quack, quack..."

Complete silence greeted him, save for the rasping call of a lone crow perched high in the treetops. The world around him felt distant, as if he were walking between dreams and reality.

Compelled by something he could not name, Baelon began to move, stepping slowly up the hill, unaware of how much time had passed.

At last, his surroundings opened up, revealing a strange sight. At the top of the mountain stood 31 weirwood stumps, arranged in a perfect circle—an eerie, ancient altar.

"Run, someone is coming..."

"Someone, with a sword..."

"..."

As soon as Baelon took in his surroundings, the whispers in his ears grew louder, as if they were being screamed.

Whoosh.

The next moment, a piercing night wind blew, completely dispelling his sleepiness. In the distance, through the darkness, clusters of firelight suddenly appeared.

"Who's there? And who are you?" Baelon called out.

He couldn't open his eyes against the wind, so he shielded his face with his arms, peeking through the gaps. Torches and figures were gradually approaching the foot of the mountain.

Tapping, tapping, tapping...

Light footsteps sounded behind him. Baelon quickly turned, eyes wide. In the dark, the stumps of the Weirwoods, arranged in a circle, resembled wordless tombstones, giving off an eerie, strange atmosphere.

Less than four feet tall, it was covered in green bark armor, wearing a helmet inlaid with large antlers. In its hands, it held a spear made of stone and wood, primitive and unadorned.

Hum...

Before Baelon could open his mouth, the whispering in his ears vanished. He strained to listen for those inexplicable sounds again, but all he could hear was the howling of the night wind and the chirping of insects.

"Who else is coming?" Baelon whispered, confused. He quickly turned his gaze back to the fire at the foot of the mountain. It was dense, like ants swarming.

"No, they're coming for me!" Baelon suddenly realized, a shiver running down his spine. He turned and bolted toward the camp halfway up the mountain, shouting all the while to alert the soldiers on patrol.

...

It was the middle of the night.

"Kill! The eldest son of the Dragonlord is at the top of the mountain!"

"Cut off the heir prince's head and teach that shit-for-brains king a lesson!"

...

The night wind howled, shaking the flames of the bonfires scattered in the darkness. It was unclear how many were in the chaotic army that charged up High Heart, hacking and slashing indiscriminately at the combined forces of the royal guard and the Knights of the Riverlands. The defenders numbered less than a hundred and were on the verge of collapse.

Inside the tent, Baelon was panting alongside the other boys.

"Prince, you must evacuate through the back of the mountain," Lyonel said gravely, unsheathing his long-unused two-handed sword.

"Who are they?" Baelon asked, still relatively calm despite the chaos. He noticed the attackers had an accent from the Riverlands.

Lyonel's voice was deep. "They are those who oppose your father."

After saying this, Lyonel lifted the tent's curtain and locked eyes with Samwell Blackwood, who stood guard at the entrance.

"What can I do for you, my lord?" Samwell asked, his eyes steady and his posture as straight as a sword.

Lyonel did not hesitate. "Protect the prince. I've already sent a raven to Harrenhal for reinforcements," he said solemnly.

"Don't worry," Samwell responded without hesitation. He entered the tent, grabbed the dazed Baelon by the arm, and tossed a long sword to his son, Benjicot.

"Give me a sword," Kermit demanded, grimacing as he thought of his father leading the resistance outside. His own sword was still in his tent, and he stood weaponless.

Samwell glanced at him, then drew a dagger from his belt and tossed it to the boy. "Follow me."

...

The group rushed out of the tent, weaving through the war-torn camp and escaping down the back of the mountain. Behind them, the sounds of fighting and screams echoed through the stillness of the midnight air.

"There are people here! Follow me!" Samwell shouted.

Several soldiers with strange accents charged at them, drawing their bows and firing without hesitation.

Whoosh!

An arrow flew past, grazing Baelon's cheek and leaving a bloody cut.

"Protect the Prince!" Samwell bellowed, charging ahead with his sword raised. Kermit followed closely, hurling his dagger, which struck a soldier in the thigh.

A brutal melee ensued.

"This one has silver hair!" one of the attackers yelled.

Two soldiers were blocked, while two others charged straight at the boys. Oscar was struck by an arrow and fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

"Cut off his head, and we'll get paid!" one soldier snarled, slinging his bow and drawing a serrated knife.

"You're Ironborn!" Baelon muttered, retreating slowly, his eyes wide with realization.

"So what?" The Ironborn laughed maniacally, licking his cracked lips.

"No more talk. Just do it," the second Ironborn growled, stepping forward with sinister intent, eager to claim his prize.

“Say goodbye to your king, boy,” the Ironborn sneered, extending his filthy hands—fingernails caked in dirt—towards Baelon.

It was a critical moment.

“Get out of the way, you stinking fish-eating Ironborn!” Benjicot, who had been trembling, suddenly snapped. His face went pale, but his eyes flared with a near-mad, red glow as he charged forward.

As soon as the shout left his mouth, Benjicot hurled a stone and leapt.

Bang!

The Ironborn swung his sword to block, but the next second, the stone smashed into his head, leaving his cheek a bloody mess mixed with brain matter. Benjicot rolled across the ground, a curved knife lodged in his shoulder blade. Despite the injury, he sprang up like a wounded beast.

“Damn you, Ironborn!” he spat, blood dribbling from his mouth. His baby face twisted into a fierce expression, a bloodthirsty grin curling at the corners.

Like a monster unleashed after too long in chains, Benjicot lunged at another Ironborn soldier.

“Freak boy,” the Ironborn muttered, shocked, scrambling to grab his bow and arrow.

Pop—

A sharp sword pierced his groin. With a brutal twist and tug, Baelon removed the root of his agony.

“Ahhh!” The Ironborn’s eyes bulged, his scream echoing as blood spilled.

Without hesitation, Baelon drove Dragon Claw blade into the man’s tilted chin. Blood sprayed as the water-rippled blade sliced through bone, protruding from the back of the soldier’s skull.

“Let’s go help Lord Sam,” Baelon called out to Benjicot, his voice trembling as he took in his first kill.

“No!” Benjicot’s eyes widened as he yanked Baelon, dragging him further down the mountain.

“What are you doing? We have to help!” Baelon protested, panic rising in his chest.

“No!” Benjicot growled through gritted teeth, panting hard. “We need to get to Harrenhal.” His eyes were still wild with rage, but somehow, he’d regained his senses.

Baelon struggled, breaking free from Benjicot’s grip. He took advantage of the darkness, slipping into the undergrowth and heading downhill.

Glancing back, he saw the fire spreading across the hilltop. The distant clash of steel on flesh still echoed in the night.

Then, through the smoke, a tiny flicker of fire appeared in the distance. The whinny of a warhorse followed, and at the front of the approaching cavalry, Baelon spotted a silver trout banner, rippling with red and blue stripes.

As the first light of morning broke through, dispersing the cold and dark clouds of the night, Baelon stood transfixed. He swallowed, trying to moisten his dry throat.

Reinforcements had arrived.

...

A month later.

King's Landing, Dragonpit.

"Roar!"

Syrax crouched low, stretching its neck as a deafening roar reverberated through the cavernous pit.

"Quiet, Syrax," the Dragonkeepers murmured, gathering on either side of the massive golden beast, their hands outstretched in calming gestures. Syrax, emotionally sensitive, trembled but gradually lowered its head, the roar subsiding into a deep growl.

A short distance away, in the shadows of a dark dragon pit...

Cough...

Rhaegar emerged, covered in dust, coughing as he shielded his nose and mouth with his hand.

"How was it?" Rhaenyra asked, crouching beside the pit, her voice laced with nervous anticipation.

"Good," Rhaegar panted, a grin spreading across his face. "Six eggs in total, and two have already cracked."

Chapter 622: The Dragons of Dragonstone Island.

"Gather your clothes and tell the Dragonkeepers to calm Syrax, who laid its eggs not long ago."

"Let's go too," Rhaegar said, taking Rhaenyra's hand. He was in excellent spirits. The House had gained two young dragons and several eggs. It was perfect timing for the House to flourish, as he had been worried there wouldn't be enough dragons for his descendants. But as it turned out, he could always count on the Goddess of Abundance, Syrax.

"Your Grace, someone is here to see you," Erryk said, guarding the entrance to the Dragonpit, reporting at the first opportunity.

"Who?" Rhaegar asked, curious.

Erryk's face was solemn as he leaned closer. "It's best if you see for yourself."

Puzzled, Rhaegar looked down the steps. A carriage bearing banners of a "Leaping Trout" and "Crows Surrounding a Weirwood" was pulling up, and inside were two short, unshaven boys.

"Your Grace, Benjicot Blackwood, Lord of Raventree Hall, sends his regards," the boy with black hair cautiously stepped forward, his voice trembling with fear.

The other, a redhead who appeared slightly older, bowed forcefully. "Oscar Tully of Riverrun. May the light of the old and new gods shine upon you, Your Grace."

The two boys were dusty and travel-worn, without a single servant or knight accompanying them. At first glance, they seemed miserable and out of place, evoking sympathy from those who saw them. However, Rhaegar caught the key detail in the boy's words and looked at the Blackwood boy in surprise.

"You say you're the Lord of Raventree Hall?" Rhaegar asked, bewildered. Everyone knows Samwell Blackwood is the Lord of Raventree Hall

"My father is dead," Benjicot said quietly, his eyes vacant, before straightening his posture. "He died protecting the heir prince. His throat was cut by the Ironborn during the chaos."

Rhaegar's face went cold, his mind unwilling to accept what he'd just heard.

The two boys then recounted the grim events. Baelon had been traveling through the Riverlands with the Hand of the King, Lyonel Strong, along with the Lords of Riverrun and Raventree.

They were attacked in the dead of night by an unknown force, no fewer than 500 men, including Ironborn, Riverlands locals, and Sellswords.

The new Lord of Riverrun, Elmo Tully, was struck by a stray arrow and killed instantly. Lord Samwell Blackwood died heroically defending the rear of the "boys."

"And Ser Harwin Strong," Benjicot added, his head hanging like a guilty child. "Lord Harwin led the charge and fell under the Sellswords' blades. He was a brave Lord, but he had never seen true battle before. He rushed in recklessly and lost his life in the first wave."

"He was Commander of the City Watch," Rhaegar muttered, still in shock, unable to fully process the tragic news.

"Your Grace, there's also this," Benjicot nudged Oscar.

Without a word, Oscar reached into a bag and pulled out a small box, handing it over to the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

"Your Grace." Erryk opened the box and held it up for the King to see.

Rhaegar leaned in, his gaze locking onto the contents—a bloodied Hand of the King brooch. His pupils contracted sharply.

"Your Grace, Lord Lyonel is still alive," Oscar blurted, his voice trembling. "The Hand of the King was captured. The Ironborn cut off his hand, trying to force him to reveal our whereabouts."

Rhaegar's stomach twisted with both relief and uncertainty. "Why didn't Lyonel return to see me?" he asked, unsure if he should feel grateful or devastated.

Oscar sniffled, sympathy creeping into his voice. "Lord Lyonel instructed us to offer his resignation as Hand of the King. He also said that without a Hand of the King, no one can assist the King... and you must not be called the Handless King."

"Seven hells!" Rhaegar cursed, closing his eyes as his hand balled into a fist behind his back. He had anticipated resistance to his attempts to centralize power and suppress the aristocracy, but he hadn't expected the first blow to come so swiftly.

"Haha, is this meant to intimidate me?" Rhaegar's eyes flashed with cold determination. "Where is Baelon? What is his condition?"

Having sacrificed so many skilled advisers and generals, he could not afford to lose his last valuable asset.

"The Prince is fine," Oscar said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "He led us in quelling the rebellion and used my father's funeral to solidify the Riverlands."

Rhaegar's expression remained stern as he pondered. "Riverrun is now inherited by your brother Kermit Tully?"

Oscar nodded, managing a faint smile. "Yes, Your Grace."

Though momentarily satisfied, Rhaegar's concern for Baelon lingered. "Where is Baelon? Why hasn't he come to see me?" he asked again, worried that the battle had drained his son's courage.

"The Prince is not with me. He's returned to Dragonstone," Benjicot answered, his breathing quickening. "He is the Prince of Dragonstone, and he will lead our revenge."

Oscar quickly added, "There are dragons on Dragonstone, and the Prince set sail from Rook's Rest three days ago."

A damned attack had taken their fathers, and now the heir prince had sworn to ride a dragon and bring justice.

Rhaegar fell silent, feeling a glimmer of comfort. At least Baelon was taking action. There was some hope left in the tragedy.

Seeing that the King had no more questions, Erryk motioned for the boys to head to the inn and rest. A calamity had struck the Riverlands—the heir prince had narrowly escaped death, and the Hand of the King had lost his hand. Someone would surely pay.

As the boys descended the steps, they glanced back repeatedly. After a moment, Benjicot gathered his courage and called out, "Your Grace, the Prince asks that you don't go to war recklessly on his behalf. He vows to repay blood with fire himself."

Rhaegar froze, contemplating the words. The thought of using the Iron Islands as an example vanished from his mind.

The boys departed, and Rhaegar and Rhaenyra walked together, exchanging a meaningful glance. Rhaenyra's eyes shimmered with worry, unable to fathom the horrors her son had endured.

"Don't worry," Rhaegar said, his voice calm as he stroked her fair cheek. "Everything is turning for the better. Sending the two young dragons to Dragonstone might help."

"Mmm," Rhaenyra murmured, leaning into him in silent agreement.

...

Midday.

The waters of Blackwater Bay were calm, a deceptive tranquility before the storm.

An imposing armada cut through the sea, a dozen large ships sailing abreast, each surging toward King's Landing with the weight of a thousand tons of momentum.

"Roar!"

A silver-gray dragon soared through the sky, its mist-colored wings cutting through the clouds as it ascended, leaving the waves behind. The Great Council of the Targaryens had been called, summoning back bloodlines long scattered.

"Roar..."

A royal ship, flying the banner of three red dragons, sliced through the gaps in the mighty fleet, heading straight for the capital.

Below deck, the cabin was dimly lit by a flickering campfire.

"Roar..."

From the shadows, two newly hatched dragons strained against their cages. Their ferocious instincts were already evident as they slammed into the bars, eyes wide with wild fury, sparks flickering in their gaze.

The campfire swayed with each violent thud, casting long shadows that danced with the increasing noise.

One young dragon, covered in gray-green scales, had scarlet wing membranes and jagged dorsal fins, its mouth brimming with sharp teeth.

The other was black and purple, its scales marked by deep purple stripes, while two sharp, pale horns jutted from its forehead, completing its menacing appearance.

...

Outside, the majestic fleet sailed past, its grandeur commanding the sea.

Trailing discreetly behind was an inconspicuous three-masted ship, clinging closely to the fleet's shadow.

On its deck stood rows of slave soldiers, their faces branded with the unmistakable mark of Slaver's Bay. The sails, flapping in the wind, revealed a striking image—a pair of green dragons entwined, forming a unique totem of two dragons standing side by side.

At the bow of the ship stood a silver-haired figure, her face partially obscured by a silk scarf. She watched the royal ship pass, her gaze unwavering and intense.

Her delicate white ears twitched slightly, as though she had just heard a sound that filled her with ecstasy.

A slow, satisfied smile crossed her face as she narrowed her eyes in happiness.

...

Across the sea, at Dragonstone.

A ship flying the banner of Rook's Rest docked at the island, and a group of people disembarked, making their way ashore.

"This is Dragonstone?" a tall, black-haired woman with a bow slung across her back murmured, her voice filled with awe as she took in the surroundings.

"This is my territory; no need for formality," Baelon said, walking ahead, unconcerned.

Clad in a black robe, the teen Prince had changed noticeably since a month ago.

His eyes now carried a depth and sharpness beyond his years, and his entire demeanor exuded newfound maturity. The most visible mark of this transformation was the horizontal scar on his left cheek, a finger's width long. It had marred his once-childish face, replacing innocence with an air of determination and resolve.

The black-haired woman glanced at him briefly before following in silence. Her name was Alysanne Blackwood, younger sister of the late Lord of Raventree and now aunt to the current Lord, Benjicot.

During the chaos of the War of the High Heart, she had shot and killed several Ironborn in the skirmish that claimed her brother Samwell's life.

Her thick, dark curls had earned her the nickname "Black Aly." Though not beautiful—her skin neither fair nor soft, her face long and horse-like with prominent cheekbones—Alysanne was a skilled archer and had since become the personal bodyguard of the heir prince.

"Let's go, Aly," Baelon said quietly, each step he took on the sandy beach heavy.

...

The group, led by the Dragonkeepers, bypassed the Drum Tower and headed straight for the jagged, towering peak of Dragonmont.

At the foot of the mountain, the elderly Dragonkeeper looked troubled and kept asking for confirmation. "Prince, are you truly planning to live here?"

"Yes," Baelon replied firmly, his gaze fixed on the smoky cave above. "It doesn't matter how long it takes—I'll wait forever if I must."

The elderly Dragonkeeper hunched over, trying to reason with him. "Vhagar is old and ugly, Your Grace. A young Prince like you should choose a more fitting dragon."

"Sorry, I'm not much for advice," Baelon said, shaking his head, his pride unmistakable. "I want it—the founding dragon that fought alongside the Conqueror."

Seeing no way to convince him, the Dragonkeeper sighed in resignation and retreated. After giving orders for the Dragonkeepers to patrol the area, Baelon unsheathed his sword and began chopping down a tree trunk, intent on building a cabin.

"Tasks like these should be left to the servants," said Alysanne, setting down her bow and offering to help with the firewood.

"If I'm going to live here, I need to be self-sufficient," Baelon replied, swinging his sword with practiced precision. He glanced back at her, adding, "Keep your bow ready. We're not safe here."

"Who would dare attack the crown prince of a kingdom on Dragonstone?" Alysanne asked, crossing her arms as though the notion were absurd.

"You'll see," Baelon muttered, unwilling to elaborate.

For years, he had avoided setting foot on Dragonstone, not out of fear of the island itself, but because of a lurking threat—a relentless foe driven by vengeance, haunting him across the island.

Meanwhile, high above, at the summit of Dragonmont...

"Roar!"

A young dragon with dark, glistening scales and scarlet dorsal fins lay on the rocky ledge, its menacing eyes locked on the silver-haired boy below. Even from a distance, the malice in its gaze was unmistakable.

Chapter 623: Two Wisps of Smoke on the Sea

King's Landing, the forecourt of the Red Keep.

Rhaegar strode briskly, his tone light. "I hear the docks in Volantis are full of ships?"

"The Mud Gate is still a bit small," Daeron joked solemnly, following close behind.

His nephew Maekar had returned to King's Landing, unloading a dozen large ships filled with the specialities of Essos at the docks.

Suddenly, Daeron, young and bold, asked, "I heard about what happened to Lord Lyonel."

A loyal Hand of the King who had done his duty, yet had not been protected.

Rhaegar was silent for a moment, nodding slightly. "Lord Lyonel's efforts will not go unrewarded."

His eldest son had been attacked, and several lords loyal to the throne had been killed.

Even if his son intended to seek revenge himself, some form of retribution needed to be taken in advance. The only question was who was behind it. The Iron Islands, the Braavosi, or the remnants of the Triarchy?

Seeing his brother's smile fade, Daeron realized he had said the wrong thing and quickly changed the subject. "Lord Lyonel's retirement is not necessarily a bad thing. Although both of his sons are dead, Ser Harwin has left him three adorable grandchildren."

"Oh, that's good," Rhaegar replied, a little taken aback. He was puzzled. "When did Harwin get married?"

Even if he was the commander of the City Watch he had never heard anything about Harwin's marriage.

"It was an alliance with the daughter of a minor noble family in the Westerlands. The wedding was hastily held at Stone Hedge," Daeron explained, grinning. "I also heard

Lord Lyonel named one of his blond-haired, blue-eyed grandsons Larys, in memory of his youngest son with the bent foot.”

Rhaegar was pleased for a moment, but then his smile faded. “Blond-haired and blue-eyed?”

The Strong family was known for their brown hair, lion-like noses, and their sturdy, robust appearance.

“Yes, all three grandchildren are blond and blue-eyed, and their high noses give them a very heroic appearance,” Daeron continued, oblivious.

As they continued to walk, Rhaegar could no longer bear the silence. He asked in a low voice, “Where did Aemond run off to?”

Whoever is behind this, we’ll start with the Ironborn in the Iron Islands. We can’t let loyal advisors die without consequences.

“As soon as Aemond left the battlefield, he ran to Storm’s End,” Daeron said, flushing.

Seeing Daeron’s discomfort, Rhaegar’s eyes narrowed. “Why would he go to Storm’s End when his marriage to Cassandra has already been annulled? The Stormlands won’t welcome him.”

Daeron stammered, “Well, Lady Elenda...”

He hesitated, unable to say more.

“He, they...” Daeron blushed again, then grit his teeth. “Aemond has abandoned Lady Celine and is now entangled with Lady Elenda.”

“Huh?” Rhaegar’s eyes darkened with disbelief.

“Brother, don’t be angry,” Daeron said seriously. “Aemond hasn’t caused any real trouble; it’s just his private life that’s... not proper.”

“And what kind of example is this setting for her children?” Rhaegar muttered, rolling his eyes. He shrugged and marched on ahead, his frustration palpable. “Send a raven to Storm’s End. Tell Aemond to take his dragon and attack the Iron Islands. Teach the Ironborn a lesson.”

He has to be of use after all. He’s left me with such a mess and wants to act like Aegon? No way!

...

The next day, the Small Council was convened.

Rhaegar sat in the main seat, flanked by his father, Viserys, and his uncle, Daemon. The rest of the Small Council members were arranged around them. Across the table, Aemon and Maekar sat side by side, facing their father, who exuded a majestic presence.

Knock, knock!

“My lords, we have won the battle of Qohor. What should we do next?”

Rhaegar tapped the black and green stone ball on the table, surveying the room.

“Of course, we fight on!” Aemon, eager and brimming with excitement, was the first to raise his hand.

Maekar’s face tightened as he secretly tugged his brother’s sleeve, signaling him to be quiet. Rhaegar glanced at his two sons, choosing to ignore their excitement for the moment. “Who would like to speak?” he asked calmly.

Though his eldest son wasn’t in King’s Landing, both his second and third sons would one day be key figures in the realm. It was important they become familiar with power, even if they held no real authority yet. The scene grew quiet and somewhat awkward, until Daemon leaned back in his chair and spoke casually, “I agree with my grandnephew’s suggestion. Foreigners will never be honest unless they’re beaten.”

“That’s right,” Aemon chimed in again, beaming with energy.

“Quiet!” Rhaegar snapped, cutting off his son’s over-eager nonsense. Of all his children, Aemon, with his restless spirit, was the most troublesome. Chastened, Aemon wilted, his enthusiasm draining like a blade of grass under the sun’s heat.

Turning back to his uncle, Rhaegar’s tone was sharper now. “Tell me your thoughts. The Four City Alliance has yet to be truly crippled.”

It was the height of the long summer, and the prophecy of the conqueror loomed ever closer. Two critical tasks lay before the kingdom. First, they needed to centralize power and raise a large enough army to repel any invasion before disaster struck. Second, they had to quell external threats, starting with the Four City Alliance, the Iron Islands, and the Basilisk Isles. Only once these were accomplished could they hope to face the greater trials ahead.

Daemon, though unfamiliar with the prophecies of A Song of Ice and Fire, had his own strategy. “Qohor is our foothold in Essos,” he began, his voice steady with confidence. He paused, then pulled a map of the two continents onto the table, pointing to the location of Norvos. “The Four

City Alliance has the advantage of geography, army, and wealth, but their inability to unite weakens them significantly.”

He traced the path across the Norvos Mountains. “As long as we can break through Norvos' defenses, the rest of the Alliance will falter. They won't be able to cross the mountains or penetrate our strongholds at Qohor.”

Rhaegar frowned thoughtfully, following his uncle's logic. The mountains in northern Essos were a natural barrier, especially the Norvos range that split the region. With their dragons, if they could secure Norvos, the other Free Cities would be unable to join forces, and Qohor would remain untouchable.

“That's a solid plan,” Rhaegar acknowledged.

Viserys, however, was more cautious. He stroked his chin and spoke slowly, “But after this battle, the treasury has suffered a great loss. Continuing the war will strain our resources, especially if trade across the Narrow Sea is disrupted.”

The kingdom's income depended heavily on the three Free Cities. Prolonging the conflict could cripple maritime trade, plunging the kingdom into financial turmoil.

“Father, we don't have much time,” Rhaegar whispered, his voice low but urgent. “We must find a solution soon.” His concern wasn't just with Essos. Recent news from the North weighed heavily on him. Just days ago, more reports had arrived from the Wall. The wildlings beyond the Wall were gathering in force, moving southward with an army rumored to include giants and mammoths.

It sounded extraordinary—almost unbelievable—but in times like these, even the absurd was beginning to feel all too real.

...

Viserys sighed. “You know, war requires money.”

“Yes, the royal treasury cannot sustain such heavy spending,” Lyman said slowly, his eyes dimming. “The income from the three Free Cities has already been invested in fortifying the Stepstones, and funds were recently allocated to the Greenblood River as well. The expenses have been considerable.”

As the Master of Coin and guardian of the royal treasury, Lyman took his role seriously. Even the king couldn't spend a single golden dragon recklessly. Failing to balance the kingdom's finances could lead to its ruin.

Before Rhaegar could respond, Daemon interjected. “Lord Lyman, do you have any idea how fierce the war across the sea is? It's a lot more than just sitting here, counting money.”

His tone was mocking, and the meaning behind his words was clear. Lyman, already elderly, glared back angrily. “Prince, no one is forcing you to go to war. My sons and grandsons have also sacrificed their lives for this kingdom.”

“Haha, a loyal family for generations,” Daemon scoffed, taking a sip of wine. A faint smile played on his lips. How could an adviser who had never faced battle understand the brutal reality of blood and fire?

Seeing the tension rise, Tyland, more lighthearted and cautious, tried to defuse the situation. “Your Grace, I agree we need to fight, but perhaps it would be wiser to focus on Slaver's Bay instead.”

His brother was still imprisoned in the dungeons of Slaver's Bay.

“You be quiet for now, Lord Tyland,” Rhaegar said, his tone cross, clearly unimpressed. Tyland grinned sheepishly and retreated into silence.

The other council members, the Grand Maester and the Master of Whisperers, remained quiet. Jasper, the Master of Laws, hesitated before speaking up in a low voice. “Your Grace, whether or not we wage war, King's Landing needs a capable Hand of the King.”

“This is the most constructive suggestion I've heard!” Viserys's eyes lit up as he patted the table in approval. Lyonel's resignation had been weighing heavily on him.

Rhaegar looked around. His council wasn't keen on the war, but they were certainly eager to debate the next Hand of the King.

Sigh...

He sighed deeply and waved his hand dismissively. “Given all your enthusiasm, who do you suggest as a suitable candidate?”

He knew his advisers, including his father, all too well. They were experts at infighting but amateurs at handling external threats. When it came to pressing matters, they would feign ignorance or dodge responsibility, yet they'd argue endlessly over trivial details. They wouldn't even entertain a battle plan until the question of the Hand was settled.

After speaking, Rhaegar rested his hand on his forehead and looked down, frustration building.

Daemon, observing his nephew's weariness, smirked wryly and raised his glass in a silent toast. He, too, had once been fed up with the endless debates in the Small Council and had spent much of his time among the City Watch and flea market dwellers instead.

Rhaegar gave him a discreet wink, signaling they would continue the real conversation in private.

“Mm-hm,” Daemon grunted, gulping down his drink and resting his hand on the hilt of Dark Sister at his waist. As a Prince of House Targaryen, his duty was clear.

...

Three days later.

Shipbreaker Bay.

"Roar!"

A grotesque dragon, caked in mud, soared across the bay. Its massive, dirty wings flapped heavily, casting a shadow over the churning sea. Though enormous and fearsome, it was undeniably ugly—a monstrous blend of size, power, and raw ferocity.

“Faster, Sheepstealer!” Amond urged, gripping the reins tightly. His black shirt clung to his body, his silver hair streaming wildly in the wind. His single eye scanned the lands of Dorne below, filled with simmering hatred.

The dragon surged forward, and in a flash, man and beast vanished into the clouds above.

...

Time passed, unmeasured.

"Roar!"

An urgent roar split the heavy clouds as a pale silver dragon shot forth—Seasmoke. Beneath it, several pirate ships from the Triarchy rampaged near the Stepstones, preying on a lone cargo ship from Oldtown.

Boom!

Seasmoke dived, unleashing torrents of flame that devoured the sails and deck of the pirate vessels. The ships were soon engulfed in dragonfire, their wooden frames crackling and collapsing under the inferno.

The dragon soared triumphantly back into the sky, nimble and proud, its movements swift. Yet, as it dodged a scorpion bolt fired from one of the pirate ships, Seasmoke's turn was slightly stiff—its wing membrane bore a large tear, an injury from a previous battle.

With a final splash, the pirate ship sank beneath the waves.

Boom...

A pale shadow streaked across the sky, climbing back into the clouds. Upon closer inspection, a bloody gash could be seen on the dragon's gray, battered wing. Its long, skeletal tail swung lazily from side to side, the tip—resembling a bee's sting—dripped with dried blood.

Two smoky dragon silhouettes flashed through the clouds, and the sea grew calm once more.

“There's a ship here! Look!”

Out of the mist, a pirate ship from the Triarchy appeared, drifting aimlessly toward the wreckage. The dozen pirates aboard sniffed the lingering sulfur from the dragonfire, hesitant but greedy. They began looting the half-empty ships abandoned by Oldtown's merchants.

“Someone's here!”

A bearded pirate kicked open the cabin door, allowing sunlight to pour into the dark interior. Huddled inside, pale-faced slaves flinched from the sudden brightness.

Amid the group, two silver-haired men embraced. Their violet eyes, filled with exhaustion and desperation, now glimmered with hope as they looked toward the light.

“We are saved.”

Chapter 624: Bloodbath in the Iron Islands

It was night.

King's Landing, the Red Keep.

"Uncle, if we want to take Norvos, we need to act swiftly."

"We don't have enough troops."

"But we have dragons!"

In the dimly lit room, Rhaegar stood by the fireplace, bathed in the flickering light. His expression was serious. Daemon sat at the table, methodically preserving his sword, Dark Sister, by rubbing it with salt. The two, uncle and nephew, shared a rare moment of peace, talking in hushed tones. They were forced to seek counsel in private, as the Small Council was filled with incompetent, wine-sipping advisors who had grown too comfortable in peacetime, unable to navigate the thorny path of conquest.

Rhaegar's gaze lingered over the map on the table, ambition gleaming in his eyes. "The Forest of Qohor is vast, and Volantis controls the southern gulf. But if we conquer Norvos in the northern mountains, the Golden Fields—the most fertile land on the entire eastern continent of Essos—will be within our reach."

The firelight flickered, casting shadows on the map as Rhaegar pointed to the key areas. Daemon regarded it calmly. The northern mountains and dense forests enclosed a broad, fertile plain. Essos, far larger than Westeros, was home to three great plains: the barren expanse near Pentos, the war-torn Disputed Lands, and the Golden Fields beyond the Andalos Mountains.

The Golden Fields were the richest of them all, brimming with prosperity and fertile lands, rivaling even the Riverlands and The Reach. In terms of grain production and population, they far surpassed the other two plains.

Rhaegar continued, "The Disputed Lands are expansive, but the usable territory is limited to the river basin. That's not enough to generate the wealth we need."

The dozen small noble families in the region struggled with low taxes, barely supporting themselves. Waiting a dozen years to collect sufficient revenue was not an option. The realm's coffers needed quicker, more substantial income.

Daemon, still polishing Dark Sister, replied evenly, "The Golden Fields are rich, yes, but the towns and markets there are no less powerful than the great Free Cities. And don't forget, the Iron Islands and the Triarchy lurk in the shadows—uncontrollable factors in a prolonged war."

Wars, especially those fought across seas and mountains, were never easy. That was why the Small Council avoided discussions about Qohor and instead focused on electing a new Hand of the King. It wasn't that the war itself was unpopular, but that it threatened the interests of various noble houses.

Take Honeyholt, for example, where the Master of Coin, Lyman, was based. If the Summer Sea or the Narrow Sea were blocked, Honeyholt's trade through Oldtown's port would grind to a halt. The food and troops provided by the house would be requisitioned by the Iron Throne, and if they were unlucky enough to face a raid by the Ironborn, even their castle could be set ablaze. Under such risks, who would act recklessly?

“Every major decision the royal family makes impacts the interests of countless nobles and knights,” Rhaegar murmured, fully aware of the burden of leadership. His expression grew cold. “But I only care about House Targaryen.”

He was done with the empty rhetoric of kingdom, honor, and sacrifice. The dark forces stirring in the North would soon threaten all of Westeros. When that time came, returning to Essos—beyond the Narrow Sea—would be House Targaryen’s only option.

Controlling the Stepstones, the Disputed Lands, and adding the Free Cities of Volantis, Qohor, and Norvos would funnel half of Essos’s wealth into the Targaryen coffers. By then, the Free Cities of Braavos, Pentos, and Lorath would be nothing more than insignificant ports.

Even if Rhaegar couldn’t achieve this in his lifetime, his descendants could. They would ride their dragons and sweep across the lands. After all, House Targaryen had been the remnants of Valyria, surviving and migrating to Westeros. Three hundred years was a short span—certainly not enough to root them irrevocably in one place. Returning to their ancestral lands and securing their future through dragons and wealth was a consideration every leader of their bloodline should make.

“You’re right. Securing the Golden Fields is key,” Daemon said, his voice steady as he finally set aside his sword. A faint smile appeared on his lips. “Compared to the goats of Westeros, Caraxes prefers the fat pigs of Qohor.”

“It’s settled, then,” Rhaegar replied, tapping Daemon’s chest lightly. “If we are to carry out this plan, we must be united, fearless of losses or death.”

Daemon’s eyes hardened with resolve. “Let’s move quickly. We’ll strike Norvos and burn it to the ground if we must.”

The Free Cities themselves weren’t the real prize—it was their strategic location that mattered.

Rhaegar smiled slightly, his determination clear. “Let’s do it then.”

...

That same night,

Pyke, the Iron Islands.

“Ahhh!”

“Dragons! Jump into the sea!”

Cries of mortal terror echoed across the cold, damp island, reverberating through the towering, ancient fortress of Pyke. The island, dark and strange, was now lit by a flickering, ominous light.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer’s brown flames tore through the night sky, casting an eerie glow over the vast sea.

Aemond, his single eye shadowed with menace, gazed coldly down at the chaos below. “Burn it all. Leave nothing behind,” he commanded, his voice as icy as the northern winds.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer circled Pyke, unleashing waves of Dragonfire at every window, every shadowed crevice. The flames licked across the stones, consuming anything that dared move, including the ironborn who scurried like insects across the doomed island.

“Have mercy! Don’t kill me!”

“Run! The dragon is coming!”

Naked rock and salt wives, fleeing their homes in panic, were caught in the torrent of fire. The Dragonfire rained down like molten mud, incinerating everything in its path. The island was consumed in flames, the air filled with pitiful screams and desperate pleas for mercy. Pyke had become an inferno.

“Hahahaha! These lowly ironborn,” Aemond laughed, his voice full of cruel delight. He sounded like the villain in a tavern song, but in the Iron Islands, where strength ruled all, there was no sense of irony. Only power.

As the night wore on, the screams began to fade. In their place, the crackling of roasting flesh filled the air, mingling with the sound of waves crashing against the scorched rocks.

“Find them! Where are they hiding?” Aemond snarled, his satisfaction fleeting. His face, already cold as ice, grew even harder as he scoured the island from atop his dragon. The Greyjoys were nowhere to be found. Neither was the infamous Red Kraken. Even the Ironborn fleet, usually patrolling the seas, had vanished.

“Damn it! Have they all gone to raid that worthless piece of land?” Aemond’s single eye burned with frustration. In one night, he had laid waste to Pyke, Lordsport, and Old Wyk, killing more people than he had in the first half of his life. And yet, it wasn’t enough.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer let out a dissatisfied growl, its belly shrinking with hunger, as if the flames it had spewed had drained its strength.

“Stop whining, you idiot,” Aemond snapped, though his mind was already racing with new plans. Then an idea struck him. “Come on, we’re heading to the Basilisk Isles. We’ll find a real feast there.”

The group that had attacked his nephew had included Ironborn and sellswords. If the Red Kraken couldn’t be caught, the Triarchy’s mercenaries would make a suitable offering.

"Roar!"

Sheepstealer’s eyes glimmered with excitement at the prospect of a full meal. With a powerful flap of its wings, the dragon soared into the night sky, heading toward the Summer Sea.

Man and dragon disappeared into the distance, leaving behind nothing but scorched earth and the smoldering ruins of Pyke, still glowing from the devastation wrought by Dragonfire.

...

The next day at dawn,

Over Blackwater Bay.

"Roar..."

Two dragons appeared from the mist, emerging out of nowhere as they soared across the calm waters of the bay. They climbed higher into the clouds, drawn by the distant roars. The larger of the two, a black dragon the size of a mountain, spread its massive wings like a curtain draped from the heavens. The wind from its flight was so fierce that the early morning fishermen in their small boats were nearly capsized. Once they regained their balance, cold sweat ran down their faces.

"Roar..."

A second dragon followed close behind. Blood-red and sleek like a serpent, it glided just above the water, its wide wings lightly tapping the surface and creating ripples in its wake.

...

Meanwhile, in King's Landing...

A large flock of ravens flew out of the Red Keep, bearing urgent messages to noble castles across the continent.

"Roar!"

"Roar..."

A pale blue dragon and a golden one launched from their lairs at the same time, each heading to separate destinations—Summerhall and the Stepstones. This morning's royal decree had been issued: blockade the sea routes of the Narrow Sea and the Summer Sea. The armies near Dorne were to be placed under full martial law, with constant vigilance against the pirates of the Basilisk Isles. As long as the war raged on, Sothoryos would be trapped.

In the open-air corridor of the Red Keep...

Tap, tap, tap...

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed, black boots striking the stone floor. Rhaenyra stood alone on the balcony, her gaze following the ravens as they disappeared into the horizon. The footsteps stopped, and she turned to see who had arrived.

To her surprise, it was Baela Targaryen, her foster daughter, who stood there with a fierce look of determination.

"Daemon has gone," Baela said, her voice brimming with frustration.

Rhaenyra's heart softened at the sight of her. She could see the anger and hurt in Baela's eyes. "He is my father, but he has not fulfilled his responsibilities in the slightest!" Baela's complaints were laced with bitterness. She had waited three long years, hoping for a chance to see her father at the Targaryen Meeting, but he had left without a word.

Rhaenyra gently stroked her daughter's cheek. "He's already gone," she said, her voice tinged with helplessness. Daemon had never been a man of words; he expressed himself through action.

Rhaenyra knew well that father and daughter were alike in spirit—both stubborn, both driven—making them nearly incompatible.

“I’m going to find him,” Baela declared with fierce resolve. She was determined to prove her worth to Daemon, to show him she was just as strong and capable as any of the Targaryens before her. Just because Gaemon and Aenar were boys didn’t mean they could always outshine her.

“Baela, they’re heading to war,” Rhaenyra said urgently, trying to dissuade her from the dangerous path she was considering. She could not bear the thought of her adopted daughter risking her life on the battlefield.

Baela’s frustration only deepened. “I can’t let him look down on me, the way he looked down on Rhaena,” she replied sharply. She had a healthy dragon, yet Daemon had always been distant. Her younger sister Rhaena, with her small, stunted dragon, received even less attention from their father. The cold distance between them stung deeply.

“You do need to prove yourself,” Rhaenyra admitted, softening her tone. “But you don’t need to go to war to do that.” She paused, then offered a new plan. “Go to Lys and Tyrosh. Defend the family’s territory, just like your grandmother did when she patrolled the Gullet.”

Baela hesitated, clearly caught off guard by the suggestion. She bit her lower lip, torn between her desire to fight and her foster mother’s counsel.

Seeing her daughter’s internal struggle, Rhaenyra knew she had gotten through to her. She lovingly wrapped an arm around Baela’s shoulders, pulling her close. There were still other pressing matters to attend to, and Rhaenyra could not afford to spend more energy on this.

It seemed Maekar had returned from Slaver’s Bay with an intriguing guest—someone who claimed to be of the true bloodline of the former Dragonlords.

The claim was ridiculous, of course, but Rhaenyra had learned never to dismiss such things too lightly. Before meeting them herself, she had arranged for Aemon and the Dragonkeeper to take them to the Dragonpit. Let them see what a “true dragon” really was.

...

In the morning, the sun shone brightly.

A magnificent fleet, flying banners emblazoned with three red dragons, cut through the waters of Blackwater Bay, en route to Dragonstone.

"Roar!"

A silver-grey dragon streaked across the sky, heading straight for The Gullet with fierce determination, its wings cutting through the morning mist. On the deck of one of the ships, Tyland stood in silent prayer, hoping this mission would save his brother.

...

Meanwhile, on Dragonstone...

"Roar!"

A young black dragon with scarlet dorsal fins and crimson wing membranes hovered near the towering peak of Dragonmont, its sharp, vertical pupils scanning the terrain below.

Boom!

A torrent of Dragonfire as dark as night erupted from its maw, striking the steep mountainside and sending billows of black smoke into the sky.

At the base of Dragonmont, hidden within a cold, shadowy cave...

"Hoo... hoo... hoo..."

Baelon gasped for breath, wiping cold sweat from his brow. His black robe was tattered, singed with holes, and his body was covered in dirt and soot. He looked like a beggar from Flea Bottom.

"By the Old Gods... you were right, a dragon really did attack," Black Aly muttered, slumped against the cave wall. Her chest rose and fell shakily, the near-death encounter still fresh in her mind.

Baelon grinned foolishly, despite the danger. "Told you."

Boom!

Before they could continue, the black dragon vanished into the sky, and the air around them grew unnervingly still. Baelon's instincts flared—something was wrong. He crept cautiously toward the cave's entrance.

"Roar..."

A deep, resonant rumble echoed through the sky, like distant thunder—ancient and mournful, filled with the weight of centuries.

Baelon held his breath, gazing upward. The white clouds drifted lazily across the blue sky, the peak of Dragonmont loomed large and unmoving, and smoke curled from its crater.

Boom!

A massive, dark green dragon, its body covered in thick folds of leathery skin, emerged from the clouds. It soared through the sky with a powerful grace, its breath sending clouds swirling in its wake.

"Vhagar," Baelon whispered, his voice filled with awe.

Chapter 625: The Prophecy of the Bearded Priests of Norvos

After half a month.

The hills of Norvos, a high mountain fortress.

The sky was perpetually dark, cloaked in thick, impenetrable clouds. The cold, damp air clung to everything, and the jagged mountains below were surrounded by towering peaks and dense forests of pine and cypress. Of all the Free Cities, Norvos was known for its harshest environment.

"Keep your spirits up! Don't let the dragon catch you unaware!"

From the battlements, red-robed priests with long, scraggly beards shouted at the soldiers standing watch. The men, armed with heavy battleaxes, bore green axe tattoos branded onto their faces—a sacred tradition of Norvos, symbolizing their eternal bond with their weapons. They were bound to their axes for life, a marriage of iron and duty. The priests' scolding was sharp, and the soldiers obeyed in fearful silence, too afraid to show any sign of defiance.

"Never underestimate the Dragonlords of Valyria! They are cunning beyond belief!"

The priests spoke with thick Valyrian accents, their sallow faces filled with grim seriousness. Just ten days ago, the Sellswords of Qohor had mobilized and taken positions throughout the hills surrounding Norvos. Three days ago, an army had gathered at the foot of the high mountain fortress. There was a palpable tension, the unmistakable sense that something terrible was about to unfold.

And then it happened...

"Roar..."

A massive black dragon appeared over the mountains, its enormous wings blocking out what little light pierced the clouds, casting the fortress in shadow. The creature's presence was overwhelming, like a dark storm descending upon the world.

Rhaegar, riding high on its back, smiled wickedly. "Dracarys!"

Boom!

The Cannibal, the ancient and terrifying black dragon, unleashed a torrent of greenish Dragonfire, a sickly flame that resembled ash, pouring it across the fortress like a lethal mist. The sky above turned a sickly green as the fire spread with eerie ease.

"No! No!"

The garrison soldiers' eyes widened in horror, and chaos erupted on the battlements. The Dragonfire, dark green and relentless, clung to everything like a curse. The stone walls melted under its heat, and the flames seemed alive, spreading faster than anything they had ever seen.

Zilla zilla...

The fire consumed all in its path, burning with unnatural ferocity. Soldiers screamed, their bodies alight as if they had been touched by the Black Death itself. Their wails echoed across the fortress as they flailed in agony, rolling on the ground only to be reduced to skeletons by the relentless flames.

"Protect me! Someone, protect me!"

The bearded priests, their faces drained of color, grabbed soldiers in a panic, using them as human shields. But it was in vain. The Dragonfire descended like a fishing net, trapping everyone within its burning embrace.

A single wisp of the green flame caught on a priest's hairband, and within seconds, it erupted into a blaze.

"Ahhhh!"

Screams of agony filled the air, the heat of the fire dispelling the biting cold of the Lonely Hills. Even the snow that had once blanketed the ground began to melt under the intensity of the flames.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal, its menacing green eyes glowing, turned back slowly toward the snow-covered pine forests. With its wings trailing fire, it soared away from the destruction it had wrought.

"Well done, old friend," Rhaegar murmured with satisfaction, tightening his grip on the reins as the dragon swooped down. The chill wind whipped against his face, but his smile remained as cold as the air around him.

How long could Norvos withstand this, when every three or five days Dragonfire would rain down again, each time leaving less and less behind?

...

At noon, sunlight filtered through the dense forest.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal lay sprawled in a clearing filled with thorn bushes, its growl low and lethargic, almost half-dead in sound. The ground within a kilometer of the dragon was scorched black, the air thick with the acrid stench of ash.

"Winter really isn't kind to dragons," Rhaegar muttered with a grin as he strode toward the tent. The Cannibal wasn't injured—just sluggish from the cold, perhaps throwing a tantrum. It had been lazy lately, showing little interest in much of anything.

As Rhaegar entered the tent, several figures were gathered around a map, discussing their next move. Daemon glanced up briefly before continuing. "The rivers of Lorath and Norvos are connected, and Sellswords from Pentos are already on their way. We need to quicken the pace of this war."

"How fast can we go?" Otto replied, his brow furrowed in frustration. "It's only been ten days! Half of our soldiers are still wearing their underclothes, barely ready for battle."

"Who cares if they die? As long as they can hold a weapon, that's enough," Daemon said coldly, his tone sharp and calculated. He wasn't one for sentiment when it came to battle. Delaying would only give their enemies more time to gather reinforcements, making things far worse.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed as he considered Daemon's point. "Norvos' defenses are weak. A full-scale assault now has a high chance of success."

“Your Grace,” Otto interjected seriously, “the army isn’t following orders properly. There’s a real risk of mutiny if we push them too hard.”

“So what?” Daemon snapped, glaring at him. “You’re a Southerner. If you can’t handle the cold, you’re free to retreat to Qohor.” His tone was biting, with no room for sympathy. As long as they moved quickly, the army wouldn’t have time to fall apart.

“Daemon!” Otto's face flushed with anger, his hand twitching as if he were ready to slam the table in protest. He had been Daemon’s rival for over twenty years, and the bitterness between them was well-known.

Daemon’s gaze hardened, daring him to push further.

“Enough!” Rhaegar’s voice rang out, silencing them both. “We attack tonight. Order the army to start cooking and slaughter the goats for soup. It will warm the soldiers before battle.”

Otto, still seething, nodded stiffly. “Yes, Your Grace,” he replied in a low, defeated tone. There were limited supplies; the faster they finished the war, the better.

Daemon’s expression lightened, satisfied with the decision. “We’ve burned all the fortresses surrounding the high mountain stronghold. We can strike Norvos directly along the main road.”

“No prisoners,” Rhaegar added, his eyes cold as he spoke of the coming bloodshed. War demanded brutality, and there would be no mercy for the defenders of Norvos.

...

Midnight, Norvos.

Dong! Dong! Dong!

The deep tolling of three ancient bells echoed across the city, their solemn tones drowning out the wails and cries beneath the flames. The once-majestic Free City, nestled beneath the mountains and along the rivers, was now engulfed in fire and the clash of steel.

"Roar..."

A massive black dragon, its wings spanning the night sky, soared above the burning city. As the Sellswords stormed through the shattered gates, cutting down any who dared resist, countless citizens of Norvos fell to their knees, weeping and praying for deliverance.

On a towering hill, the three ancient bells swayed ominously, their ringing slowing. An old priest, his beard white with age, fell to his knees, tears streaming from his weathered eyes. With a choked voice, he muttered, “Great Other... it is not yet our time.” He clung to the teachings of his god—when danger looms, it is not time to meet death.

“There's another one! Catch him!”

Bloodied and ruthless, the Sellswords spotted him. They seized the frail priest, roughly pinning him to the ground and binding him in thick ropes.

As the priest was dragged away, the three ancient bells, once proud symbols of Norvos, ceased their swaying. Their mournful toll was silenced, like the city itself, consumed by fire and death.

...

The next morning.

Hills of Norvos, Palace.

Heads were mounted on spears, neatly lined up in a grisly display.

“Soothe the civilians, and don't touch the three ancient bells,” Rhaegar commanded, pacing briskly as he gave orders to his men, ensuring the aftermath of the siege was managed efficiently.

“Your Grace, I have an urgent matter,” Otto intercepted him, dark circles under his eyes from a sleepless night. No one had rested easily.

“What is it?” Rhaegar asked, continuing to walk, his mind still occupied with directing Sellswords to extinguish the palace fires. The siege had gone smoothly, but now they faced the tedious task of repairing the damage, including replacing every shattered roof tile.

Otto kept pace, his expression grave. “Daemon captured the bearded priests' temple. Inside, he found a strange mural. You should take a look.”

Rhaegar paused, his curiosity piqued. Of the nine Free Cities, many held ancient secrets, particularly those like Qohor and Norvos, which had existed for thousands of years. These old fortresses often concealed mysteries beneath their stone walls.

Take the red-roofed temple in Qohor, for instance. The Faceless Men had nearly assassinated Aemond there. The incense used in the temple had strange hallucinogenic properties, though Rhaegar had yet to fully unravel its secrets.

“Interesting,” Rhaegar murmured, setting aside his duties for the moment. “Let's go see this mural.”

...

They wound their way through the temple, a foreboding structure of black granite. Inside, Daemon stood before a stone wall embedded deep within the ground, his fingers tracing the faded, indistinct murals.

Rhaegar glanced at the wall, his brow furrowing. The mural was an ancient composition, depicting a dragon, a wight, winter, and the Wall, all etched in deep, heavy lines. It felt primordial, carved long before their time. The scene showed an army of the dead bringing winter, standing beneath the towering Wall. Snow whirled and howled, concealing the dark forest behind them. A dragon, spewing flames, was pierced through the neck by a spear and fell to the ground, where the dead consumed it.

Further along, the mural depicted two dragons locked in battle in the sky, each breathing fire. One spewed black fire, while the other unleashed an eerie, ice-blue flame. The flames themselves were outlined with a distinct pigment, suggesting a particular reverence for fire.

At the end of the mural, a grotesque face stared out—a twisted, unnatural visage. It resembled a human, yet more closely resembled a corpse, its turquoise eyes filled with ambition and disdain for the world.

"Is that the Others?" Daemon asked suddenly, his expression grim as he turned to Rhaegar.

Rhaegar's gaze lingered on the hideous face. "Yes," he replied in a low voice. "The darkness of the North." But what did it signify? The mural hinted that the Others could slay dragons and perhaps even ride them. How could that be possible?

Daemon seemed lost in thought, his voice barely a whisper. "Could my brother have been right?" Since becoming king, Viserys had occasionally spoken to him in private, warning of White Shadows, the darkness to the North, and the conqueror's prophecy.

Daemon had always dismissed it as nonsense, an excuse for Viserys' perceived weakness. But now, standing before this ancient mural, he found his worldview shaken. This was far more unsettling than anything he had seen, even in the Smoking Sea.

"And here," Otto interrupted quietly, pointing to another section of the mural near the cave's entrance. This part depicted a shepherd encountering a dragon for the first time, followed by scenes of the rise of the Valyrian Freehold, the fall of the Old Empire of Ghis, and the enslavement of thousands to mine the depths of the earth.

Another scene showed a fleet of ships sailing toward Westeros, and beyond that, the continuous eruption of the Fourteen Flames, destroying dragons mid-flight.

"It's all a prophecy," Rhaegar said, his expression darkening as he examined the mural closely. But then, his fingers grazed the surface, and his eyes narrowed. "No... the scratches are from different times."

Rhaegar paused, touching three distinct sections of the mural. Suddenly, he realized each part came from a different era. "The shepherd and the dragon—this part is the oldest, at least a thousand years old. The depiction of the Others is newer, but still ancient, likely three or five hundred years old. The scene of Aenar's exile? That was carved just a century ago."

Daemon looked at him, his mind elsewhere. "So, what's the difference?"

"The difference is enormous," Rhaegar said sharply. "It tells us whether these are prophecies or records. At least Aenar's exile is a record, carved long after the fact."

Otto, thoughtful, added, "Perhaps we should ask someone who knows." He called for the Sellswords, instructing them to bring someone in.

Moments later, an old, bearded priest was dragged into the temple. His spirit seemed broken, and a rag was stuffed into his mouth. The Sellswords forced him to his knees before Rhaegar.

Rhaegar pulled the rag from his mouth, getting straight to the point. "What is the meaning of this mural?"

The priest gasped for air, his clouded eyes flickering with a madness born of fear and fanaticism. "Lose one dragon..." he muttered hoarsely, his voice trembling. "Gain another."

Chapter 626: Baelon's Dragon

A few days after the fall of Norvos.

Golden Fields, Dagger Lake.

"Roar..."

The black dragon dove low over Dagger Lake, its massive body skimming the surface. With a swift dip, it gulped down a mouthful of silver fish that leaped from the water, then rose back into the air.

"Haha, full of energy today," Rhaegar laughed, shielding himself as cold water splashed into waves below. The campsite beside the lake was modest, with only two or three tents clustered together.

"Dragon loves the heat and despises the cold," Daemon remarked, striking flint to light a campfire. "The warm climate of the Golden Fields suits it just fine."

A few days had passed since the end of the war, but it felt as though uncle and nephew had made a hasty retreat. The dragons had been sluggish in the cold of Norvos, appearing ready to hibernate at any moment.

Roar...

Caraxes flew overhead, its serpentine body twisting as it exhaled a stream of crimson Dragonfire. Moments later, several large, one-meter-long fish rained down from the sky, splattering onto the ground with a sickening thud.

Rhaegar's face soured. "This is inedible."

Daemon snorted, rinsing one of the fish in the flowing river, and replied half-jokingly, "Not as good as those frozen Norvos pies?" He glanced around the landscape, then added thoughtfully, "Dagger Lake is bigger than the Gods Eye. Why not consider building a castle here?"

Rhaegar grinned broadly. "That's exactly what I'm thinking."

Daemon's expression grew more serious. "Are you sure?"

Norvos had already been captured and was being fortified under Otto Hightower and Kingsguard Cole. Before leaving, Rhaegar had used Dragonstone magic to reinforce the high mountain fortress and the nearby defenses, making them nearly impregnable, rivaling the Bloody Gate at The Eyrie. But the Golden Fields had yet to be fully secured, and Dagger Lake, running north to south, was a vital transportation route.

“I’ve already sent word to Volantis,” Rhaegar replied confidently, “to transport supplies up the Rhoyme and begin construction of a Dragonstone fortress on the shores of Dagger Lake.”

Daemon, more cautious, frowned. “Why not choose one of the ruins of the Rhoynar Free Cities?” He thought of the abandoned cities nestled between the Andalos Mountains and the Forest of Qohor—places like Ghoyan Drohe, Ny Sar, and Ar Noy.

Once key strategic locations, these cities were destroyed by Dragonfire during the Valyrian conquest of the Rhoynar. Despite the devastation, their lands had been fertile enough to attract the ancient Valyrians.

Rhaegar pondered for a moment. “Dagger Lake’s position between the Disputed Lands and cities like Volantis makes it ideal as a trading hub. We can establish a foothold here for the House. Once we’ve stabilized trade, we can look at rebuilding and resettling the old Rhoynar ruins.”

Daemon’s brow furrowed slightly, but he nodded. “That’s a solid plan.”

“We’ll only turn to the ruins if there’s no other choice,” Rhaegar added, shaking his head. His attachment to Westeros still lingered. The decision weighed on him—should they focus on ruling an entire continent or invest in a rich but slowly developing land with vast, untapped potential? The darkness stirring in the North still loomed, and Rhaegar wasn’t ready to abandon the fight just yet. But if the danger of annihilation became too great, his eldest son and others could relocate to Essos.

With the ports of the Disputed Lands and Volantis, and control of the Golden Fields surrounded by Norvos and Qohor, they could recreate a Freehold Empire—a balance of imperial dragons, native nobles, and maritime lords.

“By the way,” Daemon interjected, “the mercenaries from Pentos have mobilized.”

“Then let them come,” Rhaegar said calmly. “A flat battlefield is a gift for a dragon.” His only concern was the Iron Bank, brimming with gold.

...

As the sun set and dusk deepened, the sky over Dagger Lake slowly grew dark. The fading sunlight cast a soft glow across the water, blending hues of red and green into a mesmerizing scene.

Rhaegar mused.

“I should give him some guidance,” he muttered to himself, then began writing a letter about the old dragon in Lemonwood.

Uragax, a dragon steeped in ancient history, was known only to a few. If his son was struggling to tame a dragon, Rhaegar thought it might be wise to direct him toward Uragax. It was a long shot, but worth trying.

After relaying instructions, Rhaegar closed the letter by informing his son of their victory at the Battle of Norvos. He also reminded him to stay vigilant, warning his father and Rhaenyra to be on guard for any potential counterattacks from across the Narrow Sea.

Once finished, he sealed the letter and tied it to the leg of a raven, watching as the bird flew off into the dimming sky.

...

Time flew by. Half a month later.

King's Landing, Dragonpit.

"Roar!"

An enraged roar echoed through the vast hall as iron shackles sparked with blazing Dragonfire. At the massive bronze gates, Aemon leaned casually, sucking on an ice lolly, his carefree posture a stark contrast to the chaos inside.

Boom!

The moss-green dragon known as Trickster clambered up the wall, its amber eyes gleaming with mischief. Its long, scorpion-like tail swayed lazily behind it.

"Insolent old woman," Aemon muttered, spitting out the stick of his popsicle and grinning as he watched a silver-haired woman hurriedly retreat.

His mother had tasked him with showing Irina from Slaver's Bay around the Dragonpit, an assignment Aemon found tedious. During the tour, they encountered Trickster, Moondancer, and Syrax. Yet, despite seeing these creatures, Irina wasn't satisfied—she insisted on seeing a "real" adult dragon.

Vermithor and Silverwing, the two ancient dragons of the Dragonpit, were brought out under the guidance of the Dragonkeepers. Vermithor barely acknowledged Irina's presence, treating her like a mere insect. Silverwing, however, wasn't so indifferent. After a brief flare of her nostrils, she unleashed a blast of Dragonfire at the woman, who barely escaped the flames. There was something about Irina's scent that seemed to repulse the dragon.

"It almost roasted you," Aemon laughed, clapping his hands before ordering, "Take Silverwing back to Dragonstone and make sure someone keeps an eye on that old woman at all times."

Silverwing couldn't escape the Dragonpit, so there was little risk of Irina taming it. Still, Aemon's real concern was the dragon eggs—he couldn't allow them to be stolen. And as long as he was here, no one would succeed.

Hiss...

Trickster slunk back into the shadows, casting a dark silhouette across the hall. From those shadows, Silverwing's fierce, crowned head emerged, its vertical pupils gleaming as it snorted heavily, like a predator eyeing its prey.

"Get her down there, now!" Aemon urged the Dragonkeepers, who rushed to obey.

"Obey your commands, Silverwing!" the Dragonkeepers shouted, coaxing the dragon back into her lair with practiced precision.

Aemon stepped out from the gates and pulled a letter from inside his tunic. The seal bore the unmistakable mark of Rhaegar Targaryen I—his father.

"A letter from Father, let's see what this is about." Aemon broke the seal and unfolded the letter. He had recently returned to King's Landing from Tyrosh, assuming his duties as Grand Maester and Master of Whisperers. The letter had come from the Raven's Lair.

As he read, Aemon's eyes widened in shock. "Three hundred years old... such an ancient dragon." His mind raced with the implications.

"No, no, I have to get this to my brother right away." He hurried to a nearby carriage—an elegant white-painted palace on wheels—and called to Arryk, one of the Kingsguard. "Ser, take me to the Red Keep immediately."

"Yes, Prince," Arryk replied, guiding the carriage forward in silence.

Halfway to the Red Keep, a thought struck Aemon, lighting up his face with excitement. "Hey, my brother's trying to tame a dragon. I should help him out!"

"Faster, Ser!" he called out, a grin spreading across his face as he imagined the perfect gift for his brother.

...

The next day at dawn,

Dragonstone, east coast.

"Roar!"

A young dragon with dark scales and scarlet dorsal fins thrashed on the grassy cliffside, kicking up clouds of dust and scattered leaves.

Crack! Crack!

A long black whip, its barbed tips gleaming, lashed out repeatedly, coiling around the dragon's neck like a snake.

Baelon, breathless and drenched in sweat, climbed onto the dragon's back, gripping the whip tightly. "Attack me again, Iragaxys!" he shouted. His face was streaked with dirt, and his clothes were little more than rags after the struggle.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys, eyes glowing a deep scarlet, let out a hoarse cry, glaring at the rider with frustration.

Baelon, sprawled across the dragon's back, raised the whip again, striking it with force. "That's for attacking me! And this is for being impossible!" Each lash came with a grumbled complaint, releasing the tension of the past two weeks. He had narrowly avoided the dragon's sharp tail on several occasions, and more than once, he'd come close to becoming a fiery snack.

"Roar! Roar!"

Iragaxys let out a pained whinny, rolling in frustration as it tried to shake Baelon off, its massive body twisting on the ground.

"Dream on," Baelon muttered, clinging to the dragon's back like a leech. He was too worn to punch the tough dragon scales, though he wished he could. Hidden inside his tattered pants, he clutched a crumpled piece of paper—a letter from his younger brother, Aemon.

Aemon had written about a 300-year-old dragon in Lemonwood and had sent him a piece of their father's dragon-taming whip, the very one Baelon now wielded. Gritting his teeth, Baelon wrapped the whip around Iragaxys's neck, pulling it tight. "Not so tough now, are you?" he taunted, a grin breaking through his exhaustion.

Iragaxys, furious, flared its nostrils. Every time it saw Vhagar, it tormented Baelon, as if taking pleasure in his failed attempts to tame it. But Baelon had had enough.

"Roar!"

With an angry bellow, the young dragon leapt into the sky, its powerful wings stirring the wind and shrouding the waves below.

"Ah! What are you doing?!"

Baelon, caught off guard, tightened his grip on the whip. As the dragon flew higher, Baelon pulled harder. The tighter he pulled, the more agitated Iragaxys became.

"Roar!"

The dragon let out a long, angry howl, shooting up into the clouds before plunging toward the sea. Iragaxys flailed its wings wildly, desperate to shake Baelon off its back and send him crashing into the waves below.

Baelon's heart pounded in his chest, but his stubborn streak only deepened. "Fine! Let's see who gives in first!" he growled. Man and dragon were locked in a fierce struggle, each doing their best to wear the other down.

Meanwhile, on the towering Dragonmont...

"Hmm?"

Vhagar, resting on the rugged mountainside, stirred at the distant sound of Iragaxys's roar. Annoyed that his peaceful sleep had been disturbed, the massive dragon lifted his ancient head. With a low rumble, Vhagar stood, crushing the strange rocks beneath his weight. He stretched his wings, full of ragged holes from centuries of battle, and launched into the sky.

The ancient dragon had no patience for the noisy antics of a youngling and intended to teach Iragaxys a lesson in silence and respect on Dragonstone.

...

On the other side of the island, the man and dragon were still locked in their stubborn struggle, oblivious to what was coming.

"Roar!"

A deep, thunderous roar echoed from afar, like a storm crashing through the sky. A mix of orange light and thick smoke from powerful Dragonfire billowed into view.

Baelon turned, his face paling. "Run, Iragaxys!" he shouted.

Boom!

But it was too late. A wave of Dragonfire surged toward them, and Vhagar's massive form loomed in the distance, eyes filled with cold indifference. The ancient dragon wasn't aiming to kill—just to teach the young one a lesson in proper behavior.

Without thinking, Baelon dropped to the ground, quickly unwrapping the dragon-taming whip from Iragaxys's neck.

In the next moment...

"Roar!"

Amid the thick smoke and scorching flames, the young black dragon thrashed, lifting its head defiantly. It opened its maw and unleashed a stream of pitch-black Dragonfire, striking from a distance. The dark flames, black as night, splattered against Vhagar's thick, wrinkled skin.

"Roar..."

Vhagar bellowed in fury as the Dragonfire singed his neck. His massive wings flapped angrily as he launched into pursuit.

Iragaxys darted through the air, agile and quick, dodging each of Vhagar's attacks and occasionally retaliating with bursts of his own Dragonfire. His flames were potent, carrying a destructive force reminiscent of Balerion's legendary black Dragonfire.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys barely dodged Vhagar's snapping jaws, diving sharply and disappearing into the sea below the cliff.

Baelon's heart pounded as he watched Vhagar's wrath grow. He knew the young dragon had crossed a line. Gritting his teeth, he shouted, "Leave Dragonstone, Iragaxys!"

Vhagar was relentless and wouldn't forgive such defiance easily.

Boom!

Orange Dragonfire rained down, striking the waves below and boiling the water that surged against the rocky cliffs.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys panicked, instinctively ignoring Baelon's orders and seeking any possible escape route.

"Listen to me, Iragaxys!" Baelon commanded, his voice rising with authority. He snapped the dragon-taming whip, forcibly regaining control of the dragon.

In the chaos, the crumpled piece of paper from his pants fluttered to the ground, catching Baelon's eye. A sudden idea flashed through his mind, and a plan began to form.

Chapter 627: Baelon's Dragon II

"Follow me, Iragaxys!"

Baelon's shout echoed across the skies of Dragonstone, filled with an unyielding determination that left no room for defiance.

Boom!

Vhagar let out a low, guttural growl as it circled the skies, its immense body casting a shadow that stretched across the land. Its deep, ancient eyes, cloudy with time, held a mix of sadness, loneliness, and indifference. No one understood the weight it bore, the old dragon whose roars echoed day and night were its only outlet.

But the young dragon's challenge had awakened something in Vhagar—a long-dormant desire for battle, a spark from the days when the dragon was a force of conquest, a founder of kingdoms.

"Roar!"

Suddenly, Iragaxys burst from the east coast, black and red scales glistening in the fading light. It spewed dark Dragonfire aimed directly at Vhagar's eyes before gliding swiftly along the surface of the sea.

Boom!

Vhagar, momentarily caught off guard, jerked its massive head away as the Dragonfire singed its thick, wrinkled skin, sending sparks and black smoke billowing into the air. The old dragon's slow reaction only fueled its anger. Now, the founding beast was teetering on the edge of a full-blown rampage.

"Roar!"

Vhagar's thunderous roar shook the sky as its large, battle-scarred wings, riddled with holes, flared open, trying to envelop the younger dragon.

Seeing the danger, Baelon acted quickly. "Head for The Gullet, Iragaxys, now!" he ordered, urgency creeping into his voice.

The fury of an enraged Vhagar was unstoppable, and Baelon knew it. He needed to outmaneuver the ancient dragon and somehow manage to control both the unpredictable Iragaxys and the relentless Vhagar.

“It’s like pulling a chestnut from the fire,” Baelon muttered, resolved. He was determined to succeed, no matter the risk. He could live without a dragon, lose his claim to the Iron Throne, even sacrifice his fragile life. But to survive—truly survive—he had to prove himself.

An adult dragon, powerful enough to wage war and reclaim honor, was the only way to shed the shame of being dragonless.

“Faster, Iragaxys!” Baelon urged, his grip tightening on the reins. The young dragon soared over Blackwater Bay, streaking past the ships of Driftmark Island, heading toward the natural stronghold of The Gullet.

Boom!

Behind them, Vhagar pursued, crashing through the clouds with its immense bulk, its sagging jowls quivering as it cut through the air. The old dragon’s eyes were grim, and deep within its throat, flames smoldered, ready to unleash their fury.

As Vhagar passed over Driftmark, the sight of the ancient beast filled the fishermen below with awe. For a brief moment, they thought Lady Laena had returned.

...

The two dragons, one leading and the other in relentless pursuit, flew through the stormy skies above Shipbreaker Bay.

Crack!

A flash of lightning split the heavy dark clouds as they churned overhead. Baelon clung tightly to Iragaxys, gripping the scarlet dorsal fin, bracing against the fierce wind and torrential rain.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys lowered its body, gliding just above the churning sea like a seabird skimming the surface.

Boom!

A searing torrent of orange Dragonfire erupted behind them, vaporizing the rain into a cloud of steam. Iragaxys glanced back but didn’t falter, pressing forward, flying southward into the worsening storm. The rain beat down, thick and blinding, making it harder to see.

Baelon wiped the rain from his eyes, encouraging his dragon, “Keep going, we’re almost there. We need to find that ancient dragon.”

He had no hope of defeating Vhagar with a young dragon. His plan was clear—seek out the 300-year-old beast, even older than Vhagar, to tip the scales in his favor.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys's scarlet eyes gleamed with reluctance, but he pushed forward, his wing beats quickening. The young dragon wanted nothing more than to avoid provoking Vhagar, and now he was being forced to flee while carrying this reckless rider.

"Thank you, Iragaxys," Baelon said sincerely, though he swung the dragon-taming whip with a nonchalance that made the dragon's eyes narrow in frustration. Iragaxys grunted, then dove toward the Stepstones, a place it'd never been before.

It felt like an eternity had passed, but also just an instant, when they suddenly burst free from the oppressive storm. The sky cleared, bright and dazzling, as if someone had flipped a switch from night to day.

Baelon squinted, shielding his eyes against the sudden light.

"Roar..."

Iragaxys exhaled with relief, unconsciously slowing its pace. It was a powerful dragon, built for speed and battle, but the long flight had drained it, far beyond what most young dragons could endure.

"Roar..."

Iragaxys panted heavily, lowering his body even further as they flew in eerie silence. There wasn't a single bird in the sky. The man and dragon found themselves in what seemed like a paradise—floating through a tranquil sea of clouds, the soft breeze barely touching them.

It was this unnerving calm that made Baelon feel on edge.

Rumble...

Without warning, the clouds surged like waves, swirling into a bloom of mist. Baelon's heart leapt, and instinct took over. "Get out of the way, Iragaxys!" he shouted.

In his line of sight, an ancient, murderous dragon lunged from the mist with eyes full of malice, jaws wide as if to bite Iragaxys in half.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys obeyed Baelon's command, diving hard to the right just in time.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys barely avoided a direct hit but was knocked by the impact, its body spiraling out of control, tumbling like a broken kite.

“No! No!” Baelon shouted, wrapping the dragon-taming whip around Iragaxys’s neck in a desperate attempt to slow their descent. “Keep your head up, don’t fall!” His shout, laced with High Valyrian, was a desperate binding spell, a last-ditch effort to regain control.

"Roar~~"

Iragaxys’s injured wing twisted painfully as they fell, its eyes opening mid-plummet in confusion. Seeing the sea rising fast beneath them, a chilling fear coursed through it.

...

Meanwhile, on the Stepstones...

Thud, thud, thud...

The wild, thunderous beat of war drums echoed across Bloodstone Island as warships emerged from every direction, darkening the horizon.

"Give me the iron coins! What is dead may never die!"

Aboard a golden squid-shaped ram ship, a wild young man with jet-black hair bellowed, brandishing a curved knife. His lean chest was smeared with dirt, salt, and dried blood, the marks of countless raids. His narrow, ambitious eyes gleamed with the promise of murder and plunder.

Dozens of warships flying the Kraken banner closed in, the ragged ironborn aboard them howling with madness, their voices unified in a single cry: "What is dead may never die!"

"Attack!"

Dalton Greyjoy’s voice cracked with bloodlust, filled with the primal urge for plunder and chaos.

...

Sea of Dorne

An old dragon soared slowly through the skies, its cold, vertical pupils scanning the vast sea below as if searching for something hidden beneath the waves.

Boom!

Its massive wings scattered the clouds, and a stream of Dragonfire scorched the surface of the water. The dragon was using brute force to flush out its target, sending a clear message of intimidation.

Meanwhile, along the coast of Ghost Hill, a young black-and-red dragon dragged itself ashore, shaking off the salty water that clung to its scales.

“Hurry, Iragaxys,” Baelon urged between gasps, still coughing up seawater. They had narrowly avoided plummeting into the sea but had managed to stabilize mid-fall. The old dragon, wary of ambushes, had forced Iragaxys to dive into the water to hide, and they’d surfaced only after reaching Rainwood, flying toward Ghost Hill, bordering Dorne.

"Roar!"

True loyalty shines in hard times, and Iragaxys, despite its arrogance, spared a glance back at Baelon. Instead of dumping the "little liar" into the sea, the dragon beat its scarlet wings and continued its flight toward Sunspear.

"Thanks to you," Baelon chuckled weakly, feeling the hot winds of Dorne brush against his face as he rubbed his hands together.

Iragaxys didn't respond, still too proud to acknowledge the one who had forced it into this mess. Instead, it tilted its head and accelerated. If it weren't for its injured wing, it would have shown Baelon what real speed and power felt like.

"Thank you, Iragaxys," Baelon said quietly, his voice filled with genuine emotion. His head lowered, and his eyes grew misty. "If I weren't the eldest son, I'd choose you." Tears he had suppressed through battles and chases finally welled up, not from fear or anger, but from facing the young dragon he had once rejected.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Baelon muttered, releasing his grip on the dragon-taming whip. He no longer needed to force Iragaxys with brute strength. He needed an adult dragon—not for himself, but to meet the expectations of his father and the honor of House Targaryen.

As the eldest son and future heir to the Iron Throne, he had to secure his advantage over his siblings. Reading history books, mastering mathematics, or excelling in swordsmanship wouldn't be enough. Only by riding an adult dragon could he claim the Iron Throne with authority.

"Fly faster, Iragaxys," Baelon whispered, choking back his emotions. He wanted to freeze this moment—this fleeting sense of freedom—where he could ride whichever dragon he pleased, without worrying about controlling an adult beast or proving himself.

"Roar..."

Iragaxys neighed softly, its scarlet pupils softening as it steadied its flight. The dragon, sensing its rider's sorrow, gently poked him with its thick tail, as if trying to comfort him.

"Stop it," Baelon muttered, swatting away the dragon's tail half-heartedly. Iragaxys wasn't the only dragon he had rejected. Grey Ghost, Silverwing—he had turned them all away. The guilt of deceiving these magnificent creatures weighed heavily on him, and he feared he was becoming an "emotional fraudster" in the eyes of the dragon pack.

"Roar."

Iragaxys rolled its eyes and rose higher into the sky, its body moving almost unconsciously.

Baelon kept his head down, afraid that Iragaxys might take offense and toss him from the sky. “Never ride a dragon recklessly again,” he muttered, frustrated by the powerful bond he could not fully control.

Suddenly, a thunderous roar echoed from the horizon.

"Roar..."

A massive shadow loomed through the layers of clouds and mist—Vhagar. Its pupils were burning with rage, and deep in its throat, flames gathered.

Boom!

Dragonfire rained down from the sky. Iragaxys flinched in panic, narrowly avoiding the deadly flames as it dipped toward the desert, nearly losing its balance.

“Steady, Iragaxys!” Baelon shouted, wiping away the remnants of his tears and snot, regaining his composure. The brief moment of vulnerability between him and the dragon was shattered, replaced by the immediate danger of survival.

...

By the banks of the Greenblood River, deep in the Lemonwood Forest...

Distant flames lit up the night sky, and the echo of a fierce dragon's roar reverberated for miles in every direction.

"Roar...?"

An old dragon, hidden among the thick bushes, opened its vertical pupils, blinking in confusion at the sound. It lifted its head, peering toward the source of the roar.

Moments later, a massive dark green shadow swept across the sky.

Clatter...

The old dragon’s pupils suddenly narrowed, and the dense bushes rustled as its body shifted, revealing scales the color of moss, blending seamlessly with the vibrant emerald forest.

Chapter 628: Baelon’s Dragon III

Outside Sunspear, nestled along the coast, lay the Water Gardens—an exquisite retreat built by the late Prince Qoren as a summer haven for his children. The gardens were filled with elegant buildings, carved beams, and painted rafters. Flowers and streams intertwined, creating a tranquil oasis where warmth lingered year-round, making it feel like eternal spring.

However...

"Roar!"

A young black-and-red dragon crashed awkwardly through the gardens, its chest marked by deep scratches, spilling hot scarlet blood onto the ground. Its wings flapped desperately, its agile body twisting as it soared again, barely skimming the surface of the Water Gardens.

Zilala...

Wherever the dragon's blood touched, the vibrant flowers and flowing streams withered instantly, leaving behind dry ravines and yellowed leaves.

“Hurry! We’re almost there!” Baelon shouted, gripping tightly as the wind rushed past him, his gaze darting nervously over his shoulder.

High in the clouds, a massive shadow loomed, its form swaying as it revealed the dark green, wrinkled skin of its folds.

"Roar!"

Vhagar swooped low, unleashing a torrent of Dragonfire from its maw.

“Move!” Baelon’s heart raced as he tugged on Iragaxys’s scarlet dorsal fin, urging the young dragon to veer sharply to the side.

Iragaxys, quick and instinctive, twisted gracefully, gliding out of the tropical paradise that surrounded the Water Gardens.

Soon, the two dragons—one small and nimble, the other immense and menacing—flew together, their wings spread wide against the sky.

...

Sunspear.

In the bustling city below, the common folk of Dorne gathered in small groups, their eyes drawn skyward as two dragons appeared overhead.

Rumble...

The dragons whipped up a fierce wind, kicking up clouds of sand that billowed in every direction.

As the smaller dragon flew past, the much larger Vhagar rose behind it, casting an ominous shadow. The Dornish citizens looked up in alarm, shielding their faces from the swirling sand and dust.

“Dragons!”

The shout echoed through the city, spreading panic as the citizens scattered in fear.

Clang!

The bell in Sunspear's clock tower rang out, urging the people to take shelter. At the same time, soldiers clad in earth-brown armor poured from the barracks, quickly taking positions along the city walls.

It was clear—the people of Dorne were terrified, and the unexpected arrival of dragons had thrown the city into chaos.

...

"Roar!"

Vhagar's pupils dilated cruelly as it pursued the much smaller dragon, Iragaxys, who was barely one-fifth its size. At nearly 140 meters long, Vhagar had grown into a monstrous force—only the abnormally large Cannibal could rival it.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys, desperate, twisted and turned through the air, trying to escape the gaping maw of the ancient beast behind it. Barely thirty meters long, Iragaxys was still young. Among the dragons of its generation—older ones like Moondancer, Trickster, and Tyraxes—none could match its strength. Even against the dragons of the last four generations, it was more formidable than Sunfyre or Tessarion. But twenty years of life was no match for Vhagar's one hundred and eighty.

The two dragons tore across the desert, their flight bringing them swiftly to the Greenblood River, where the waters rushed beneath them.

Boom!

Vhagar became even more aggressive upon reaching the water. The massive dragon lunged at Iragaxys, seizing the opportunity and opening its enormous jaws.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys, unable to dodge, unleashed a torrent of black Dragonfire in defense. The explosion of black smoke and fire roared across the sky. But Vhagar, undeterred, powered through the blast, breaking through the smoke as it closed in on Iragaxys's exposed throat.

Iragaxys's pupils shrank with fear—there was no escape. Time had run out.

"Iragaxys!!"

Baelon, horrified, lashed out with his dragon-taming whip in a desperate attempt to intervene. But just as Vhagar moved to strike, a powerful gust of wind blew through.

Hiss!

A flash of green Dragonfire descended like a thunderbolt, slamming into Vhagar's head. The great dragon's jaws froze for an instant, allowing Iragaxys to slip free, narrowly avoiding death.

"Go, Iragaxys!" Baelon shouted, but his mind spun with confusion, unable to determine if the intervention was friend or foe.

Terrified, Iragaxys fled, crashing through the forest on the other side of the river, its huge body flattening the trees in its path.

"Roar..."

Vhagar, enraged by the attack, lifted its head high, bellowing furiously into the sky. Baelon glanced upward, his eyes widening as he saw a moss-green dragon shadow looming above.

Boom!

A massive old dragon appeared from the Greenblood River, its body scarred and crowned with great horns that bent backward. The dragon's fierce vertical pupils gleamed with battle-hardened fury as it erupted from the river, duckweed and leaves clinging to its scales. Without hesitation, the ancient beast lunged, sinking its fangs into Vhagar's thick neck.

Vhagar, caught off guard, lost its advantage. Its thick, wrinkled skin was pierced by the intruder's sharp teeth, and foul-smelling dragon blood began to pour from the wound.

"Roar..."

In a desperate move, Vhagar, despite its bulk, performed an unexpected maneuver. It rolled over mid-air, using its hind legs to kick its attacker in the chest with a force like muffled thunder.

Boom! Boom!

The old dragon's chest, already scarred, bore two new deep gashes that cut down to the bone. It released its grip on Vhagar's neck and retaliated with a burst of green Dragonfire.

"Roar!"

The Dragonfire struck Vhagar's head, and the ancient dragon roared in pain, recoiling as it fled into the clouds. A closer look revealed that the jaw hanging from Vhagar's neck had been torn open, exposing bone beneath the flesh. Though injured, it flapped its wings and ascended, preparing for the inevitable clash that would follow.

"Roar..."

The old dragon wasn't unscathed either. The fresh wounds on its chest dripped hot blood, staining its scales. The injuries from its battle with Vhagar had reopened, and its majestic figure was marked by pain.

When adult dragons clashed, the brutality was raw and swift. There was no playful toying, no hesitation. Their battles were quick, vicious, and decisive. Once they met in the air, it was only a matter of moments before one would prevail.

...

Lemonwood

"Huff, huff..."

Iragaxys lay on the ground, panting heavily, its chest heaving with exhaustion from the long flight across the strait. The young dragon's once-vigorous body now trembled with fatigue.

Baelon slid off its back, gently stroking the dragon's drooping wing. "Don't worry," he murmured, reassuring the tired beast. "We're safe for now."

But Baelon's eyes darted upward, catching the green dragon shadow circling above. The dragon's moss-colored scales were mottled with white and pale yellow, like an ancient beast that had emerged from the forest and lake. Its blood-stained chest gleamed with majesty, rivaling even Vermithor's. In terms of sheer size, it slightly surpassed Vermithor.

"So, that's the 300-year-old dragon?" Baelon whispered in awe, his eyes locked onto the creature. "The Uragax you mentioned in your letter, Father?"

Unlike Vhagar, whose age had turned its form decrepit, Uragax looked robust, with broad, powerful wings covered in creamy yellow membranes. The dragon exuded an aura of strength, but beneath it lay the wisdom and weariness of centuries.

Baelon swallowed hard, his throat tight with tension as he stared into Uragax's amber pupils. There was no ferocity in them—only the calm of a dragon who had seen it all.

"Roar!"

Uragax let out a sharp roar, ascending into the sky to confront the intruder that had entered its territory. It would not let Vhagar go unchecked.

Boom!

A torrent of orange Dragonfire, thick with smoke, rained from the sky. Vhagar, swift and brutal, rushed forward with jaws wide open, ready to strike. Uragax countered with its own burst of fire, using the ensuing smoke as cover to disappear from the battlefield.

When it reappeared, Uragax flanked Vhagar, but the battle-hardened Vhagar anticipated the attack. The old dragon dodged and extended its talons, latching onto Uragax's claws.

Boom!

The two colossal dragons collided in the sky, entangling like eagles mid-flight, their wings flapping furiously as they tore at each other. The roars echoed across the sky, and for a time, neither beast had the upper hand.

“Roar!”

Suddenly, Iragaxys, who had been fleeing moments before, turned back, its muzzle burning with flames.

“Dracarys!” Baelon shouted, brandishing the dragon whip in his hand.

Iragaxys rose sharply, spewing jet-black Dragonfire at Vhagar in a furious retaliation.

Boom!

The attack struck Vhagar squarely on the head. Enraged, the ancient dragon redoubled its assault, both titans clashing with a fury that sent chunks of scale and flesh falling like rain. They spiraled together, tangled in the sky, until both dragons tumbled downward like a falling compass.

Baelon dared not approach. Instead, he urged Iragaxys upward, disappearing into the safety of the clouds.

Rumble!

The two dragons crashed down simultaneously, but it was Vhagar's massive body that plummeted into the wide Greenblood River, sending water surging on both banks. The river rose like a beast, roaring skyward with a wave high enough to drown castles.

Roar...

The Greenblood's waters, stained with dragon's blood, boiled, releasing plumes of steam.

Vhagar roared, its battered head breaking the surface as it hauled its thick hind legs onto the riverbank. As its massive body shook free of the water, fish, shrimp, and water plants scattered, crushed into mud beneath its enormous weight.

Vhagar's eyes glinted with hatred as it glanced at Uragax, whose rear leg dangled limply from the sky. With determination burning in its pupils, Vhagar unfurled its wings and ascended once more, preparing to unleash another round of destruction.

The battle of blood and fire had begun again.

...

Halfway up in the air, Baelon watched as the two dragons clashed fiercely once again, a deep sense of despair rising in his chest.

"I can't stop them. Not at all," he thought.

Uragax had indeed intervened, stalling Vhagar's rampage, but the battle had only escalated into a chaotic frenzy. If he didn't act soon, the destruction would be catastrophic.

"Follow me, Iragaxys!" Baelon called out, hastily mounting his dragon and flying after the warring beasts as they soared higher above Sunsphear.

At that moment, the streets of Sunsphear were deserted, the citizens having retreated to the safety of their homes. Through the cracks in barred windows, they peered out, witnessing the savage battle unfolding in the sky.

"Roar..."

"Roar..."

One dragon latched onto the other's wings, while the second tore at its opponent's chest.

"Dracarys, Iragaxys!" Baelon's clear voice echoed across the sky. From the distance, his smaller black dragon responded, diving in with a low-altitude glide before spiraling upward over Sunsphear.

Boom!

A brilliant explosion of Dragonfire burst into the sky as Iragaxys joined the fray, turning the already heated battle into a vicious three-way melee. Orange, green, and pitch-black Dragonfire collided in the sky, splattering like wild strokes of paint across the horizon.

Sparks and dragon blood rained down on the city below, igniting rooftops and sending flames licking through the streets. The garrison attempted to fight the fires and launched arrows skyward, but their efforts were futile—the dragons were too far above.

The battle raged on from noon until dusk, the roars of the dragons shaking the very foundations of Sunsphear.

"Roar..."

Finally, after hours of brutal combat, Vhagar began to tire. Physically exhausted, the giant dragon let out a deep roar and fell from the sky. As Vhagar struggled to maintain balance, one wing outstretched, it crashed into a cluster of residential buildings, destroying them but avoiding further injury.

"Roar..."

Uragax hovered above, victorious. A triumphant roar rumbled deep in its chest. It had been years since it fought such a vicious battle—perhaps not since its legendary encounter with the Dragoneater. But just as Uragax prepared to finish Vhagar off...

"Stop, Uragax!"

Baelon's voice rang out from high above, riding Iragaxys as he called to the ancient dragon. Uragax's fierce amber pupils narrowed in confusion, and its nostrils flared as it caught the scent of the silver-haired rider who had drawn it to this land.

"Roar..."

For a moment, Uragax glanced at Vhagar, who struggled to rise for another fight, but then hesitated. Weakened and wounded, Uragax chose to retreat. Its chest was nearly torn open, one hind leg broken, and its body covered in bite wounds.

"Don't go, Uragax!" Baelon shouted, his heart pounding in his chest, his pale face flushed with determination. Vhagar had fallen, and the chaos was over. But there was still one dragon left to tame.

As Uragax's cold, unblinking eyes met his, Baelon's resolve hardened. Slowly, he climbed off Iragaxys's back, his voice trembling with emotion. "Uragax... you are a lonely wanderer. Today, let me tame you!"

Without hesitation, Baelon swung the dragon-taming whip and leapt from Iragaxys's back, his heart racing as he made his bold move to claim the ancient dragon.

"Roar...?"

Uragax was momentarily stunned, its amber eyes fixed on the silver-haired boy plunging from the sky.

"Face me!" Baelon shouted, eyes shut tight, as he flung the dragon-taming whip. It wrapped around the old dragon's neck with a snap. The man and the dragon drew closer, locked on a collision course.

As Baelon plummeted, the wind lashed against his face, sharp and unrelenting. His arms spread wide, prepared to embrace either the dragon or death. Suddenly, his pounding heart stilled, and his blood ignited, surging like fire through his veins.

Then, as if touched by some divine force, Baelon opened his eyes. A flash of green fire flickered in the depths of his violet gaze.

"Roar..."

Uragax did not evade. Instead, it allowed the silver-haired boy to land on its back.

Baelon hit the dragon's spine with a heavy thud, rolling to absorb the impact. Even so, the force was enough to crush his insides. But then, something extraordinary happened.

Hula—

Green flames began seeping from Baelon's pores, and a shimmering, diamond-shaped dragon scale sprouted from his forehead.

"Fly, Uragax!"

Forgetting the pain, Baelon gripped the whip tightly and gave the command. Uragax's powerful wings flapped, but the dragon did not yet realize that the whip—now glowing with green fire—had connected them more deeply than before.

Baelon's bloodline had awakened. The ancient Valyrian Dragonlord ancestry he inherited from his father surged to life, triggered by the melee of the three dragons and his own desperate will. His body was transforming, becoming something more—something dragonborn.

"Roar..."

Uragax let out a long, low rumble. Something shifted in the ancient dragon's heart. Memories stirred—the image of a coward who had once abandoned it during the Doom of Valyria. But now, the boy on its back was no coward. He was a warrior, forging a bond unlike anything the dragon had felt in centuries.

"Fly! Fly! Fly!" Baelon panted, each breath hot, his voice raw with determination. "Uragax, let you and I change each other's destinies!"

Baelon was too young to fully grasp the changes overtaking him, too weak to sustain the transformation his bloodline demanded. But he knew one thing—he had to tame the 300-year-old dragon before his strength gave out.

"Roar..."

Uragax let out a mighty roar, and its colossal body lifted into the air, soaring above Sunspire and heading straight for the shimmering waves of the Summer Sea. Deep within, the ancient dragon could not deny the emotions rising within its scarred heart. The silver-haired boy had become something more—something worthy.

As they flew, Uragax's amber pupils reflected the determined face of the boy on its back. No matter how ancient a dragon may be, time wears on even the greatest of beasts. A capable rider could share the weight of those years, easing the burden.

As dusk settled and the sun sank below the horizon, the sky burned with the fiery hues of the setting sun. Baelon, his body exhausted from the dragonborn transformation, slumped on Uragax's back, slipping into a dazed state. His heavy eyes fluttered shut, and he reached out to touch the rough, scarred dragon scales beneath him.

They felt cold, yet warm in places—layered, weathered by time.

Drowsiness overtook him, and a soft, dreamy smile curved his lips. "You belong to me, just as I belong to you," he whispered.

He had done it.

From this moment forward, the 300-year-old dragon was his. His companion, his partner. Uragax, the ancient wanderer, was now bound to him in an unbreakable bond.

Chapter 629: Another Dragon Rider

It was not known how long it had been, but the sky grew dark.

"Roar..."

Compared to the grumpy old woman that Vhagar is, Uragax is more like an ageless, elegant lady.

Rumble rumble—

Suddenly, golden flames broke out in the distance, and thick smoke billowed up from a large area. In the distance, the sound of shouting and fighting echoed.

Uragax's pupils were indifferent as it circled in place once, then turned and headed back to the temporary residence at Lemwood. The young dragon and the old one that had trespassed were still in the territory. It had no time to look around. Sunspire once again appears at the edge of the sea.

"Hmm..."

Baelon gradually woke from his daze and opened his eyes, confused. Looking around, he realized he was covered in moss-like dark green scales, and on either side of him were wide wings with milky yellow membranes.

"Uragax, is that you?"

Baelon shook his head and climbed off the flat back of the dragon.

"Roar..."

Uragax rolled its vertical pupils in response to its young master's query. Docile, it answered all his questions in silence.

"Haha, I'm confused," Baelon said with a smile, stroking the rough scales beneath him. The old dragon was a special breed—stunted in its growth despite its age—and it would remain at the peak of its powers until it was 300 years old. Its body was covered in scars, obvious signs of the countless hardships it had endured.

"You don't have a saddle, and no dorsal fins either," Baelon mused, his curiosity piqued as he looked at the old dragon like a precious treasure. The worn saddle had long since disintegrated, making it harder to ride.

Rumble rumble...

Man and dragon were still getting used to each other when a loud rumble came from afar. Fire and smoke filled the dark sky.

"What's going on?" Baelon asked in surprise.

"Roar..."

Uragax didn't want to pay any attention to the disturbance. The huge dragon flew back toward Sunspire, attracting the attention of the other two dragons.

"Roar!"

Iragaxys's scarlet pupils glowed as it darted into the sky like an arrow, circling the old dragon that had once fought beside it.

Baelon smiled happily. "I did it, Iragaxys!" he shouted, waving his arms cheerfully as if calling out to a friend.

Iragaxys turned its head proudly, then disappeared into the red, flaming clouds, hiding its figure.

"Roar!"

Vhagar shook its head several times as the old dragon slowly rose to its feet. The average lifespan of a dragon was 200 years, and at 181, Vhagar's body had begun to age. But this did not mean its

combat effectiveness had diminished. Often, in their twilight years, dragons could unleash astonishing power that they had never known.

"Stop, Vhagar!"

Baelon's face grew solemn as he spoke in High Valyrian: "Don't die in vain."

Vhagar was a dragon of the House, one of the most important founding dragons of the Targaryens. Fearless fighting only increased casualties and couldn't alleviate the pain of internal trauma. As an old dragon that had experienced three riders, Vhagar had an extraordinary wealth of experience. This experience would leave an unshakeable shadow whenever each successive rider died.

Vhagar was very old. It had lost too much.

"Roar!"

Vhagar looked up, and blood from the sagging folds of its jaw dripped to the ground. It was surprisingly quiet. After a fierce battle, the pent-up emotions in its heart had finally dissipated. Now, at last, it could hear the sounds of the outside world again.

As the sun set, the sea became covered in smoke, and the sky darkened. Baelon was transfixed, his confused thoughts suddenly clearing. "Is that... the Stepstones?"

Realizing this, he sat up abruptly. "Come with me, Uragax!"

Baelon looked anxious as he flexed his dragon-taming whip and tapped it against Uragax's thick scales. Without using the fire magic in his blood, the dragon-taming tools wouldn't work. A simple tap would suffice to command the dragon.

"Roar!"

Uragax's pupils remained calm, and it naturally turned in the opposite direction, roaring as it soared toward the raging sea. Since it had reached its prime, no one had dared to bully it—except that dark and treacherous Dragoneater. When the rider gave the command, it would go and take a look.

"Roar!"

A black dragon's head poked out of the clouds, its scarlet pupils full of complexity. It looked down at the battered old dragon below, whose enormous body had long since decayed into a mere shadow of its former self.

...

The Stepstones.

"Attack! Shoot down that golden dragon!"

Dalton Greyjoy, his face full of madness, personally manned a scorpion crossbow, aiming it at the dragon. Dozens of Iron Islands warships attacked Bloodstone, quickly routing the weak patrol fleet and rushing toward the docks where merchant ships came and went, ready to loot.

"Roar!"

A golden dragon darted left and right, dodging the siege of dozens of scorpion crossbows while setting the nearest warships ablaze.

"Attack, Sunfyre!"

Aegon, his face twisted in anger, clad in black steel armor, rode the dragon. His voice was sharp with urgency as he spoke in the common tongue. He was the Prince of the Stepstones and the Warden of the Narrow Sea.

As he looked down at the Ironborn below, burning, killing, and plundering, his heart ached with grief.

"Damn the Ironborn!" Aegon gnashed his teeth in rage. "Always picking on the weak. Why don't they attack King's Landing?"

Whoosh!

Several steel spears whistled through the air, scraping Sunfyre's neck. The dragon deftly avoided them, its long neck moving with grace. A shrill burst of sound erupted from Sunfyre, a mixture of alarm and fury.

"Hurry up, burn them all!"

Aegon, forgetting his High Valyrian in the heat of the moment, slapped the dragon's back to urge it on.

"Roar!"

Sunfyre was clever and responded swiftly. The dragon leaned forward and charged toward the warship bearing the golden squid's sigil, spewing golden Dragonfire to clear a path.

The flying steel spears glowed red-hot as they softened upon impact, harmlessly bouncing off Sunfyre's golden scales.

Boom!

The Dragonfire crashed down on the warship like ink spreading across a basin. Accompanied by countless screams, the entire ship became a sea of flames.

"Is he dead?"

Aegon, greatly heartened, scanned the chaos, searching for the Red Kraken, commander of the Iron Islands fleet.

"Shoot him down!"

Suddenly, a figure with black hair climbed onto another warship and shouted, ordering the scorpion crossbows to fire in unison.

Whoosh!

A dozen steel spears flew fast and furious, aimed straight at the young dragon, now surrounded on all sides. Sunfyre's slender body tilted upwards, dodging most of the projectiles.

Puff!

Just as Sunfyre was about to break free, a steel spear shot from the shadows, piercing the pale pink membrane of one wing. More spears rained down from the sky immediately after. Sunfyre struggled to adjust its body, but he could not avoid them all—its golden hide was covered in blood.

One spear barely missed Sunfyre's massive chest, shattering scales and flesh in a burst of pain.

"Roar!"

Sunfyre screamed. It was too late to regain height, and the dragon began to fall like a kite with a broken string.

"Haha, well done!"

The Red Kraken laughed, seizing another scorpion crossbow, eager to finish off the dragon himself. He had allied with the Alliance of Three Cities, gaining vast amounts of wealth, superior warships, and powerful scorpion crossbows.

If he could capture the Stepstones, even greater fortune awaited him. The Iron Islands were already ruined. With the spoils, he planned to go to Essos and become the infamous King Dalton.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

The enemy laughed at the rout of his army, relishing their rampant victory. Scenes flashed before his eyes like a slideshow, the end of his life drawing near.

"Roar!"

A majestic dragon with moss-green scales roared, spitting out green Dragonfire like ink, instantly melting the steel spears in the sky.

Rumble!

The massive dragon shot through the air like a meteor, breaking the sound barrier with a deafening roar. Its vertical pupils gleamed menacingly as it swooped low, its tail sweeping across the enemy fleet, toppling several warships in a single blow.

"Roar! Roar!"

Sunfyre twisted in mid-air, narrowly avoiding a plunge into the sea. With a violent jolt and a desperate flip, it regained the sky.

Aegon's face was blank, stunned by the sudden chaos around him.

Just then, a familiar shout echoed behind him: "Uragax, Iragaxys!"

"Roar..."

Iragaxys, who had been battling across the field, soared at the sound. Dragonfire painted the sea, as though a forest of Lemonwood had sprung from the ocean's surface.

Baelon, his face twisted with anger, leaned over his dragon's back, glaring down at the Ironborn fleet below. He knew the Stepstones were in peril, and it was a damned Ironborn attack—one they'd barely escaped.

Feeling the cold wind bite his skin, Aegon gradually regained his senses. Spotting his great nephew riding Iragaxys, he whispered in relief, "Thank the gods."

Before the words fully left his lips...

"Roar..."

"Roar..."

Two dragons—one green, one black—soared through the smoke, diving into the heart of the Ironborn fleet and spewing furious Dragonfire.

"Follow me!" Baelon shouted, anticipating the call to attack.

Vhagar, ignoring its injuries, swayed in the air like an unshakable mountain. Iragaxys, agile and relentless, weaved through the battlefield behind the older dragons, its Dragonfire explosive and deadly.

Though the three dragons were slightly out of sync, the devastation they unleashed was undeniable.

Aegon was in a daze. Watching his nephew—who once had no dragons—now commanding three of them left him dumbfounded. "Huh?"

He looked down at the wounded and whimpering Sunfyre below him, then at the three dragons wreaking havoc across the battlefield. For a man used to being outmatched, it was an incomparable blow.

"Dracarys, burn them all!"

Baelon's focus was simple—he had saved his foolish uncle. With the dragon-taming whip in hand, he chased after the fleeing enemy. In his dragonborn state, he had the strength to lead the charge, herding the dragons forward.

Yet, the other two dragons followed Baelon without needing much guidance. Vhagar, full of rage, led the assault, venting its fury on the Ironborn fleet. Iragaxys followed closely, attacking with skillful precision.

The bond between the dragons wasn't perfect, but their shared hardships had forged a deep friendship, a silent agreement to help one another. Even the timid grey dragon, once hesitant, had joined the fight.

"Roar..."

Uragax, relatively unscathed, became the dominant force in the naval battle at the Stepstones. One dragon alone had set more than twenty warships ablaze.

As night fell, the sea was lit by dozens of "sea candles"—burning ships, their flames dancing on the dark water. The Ironborn were either dead or gravely injured. A few lucky survivors plunged into the sea, only to face the biting cold and hungry fish.

"Despicable Ironborn. Let's see if you dare rebel again," Baelon muttered, his voice filled with venom.

Pure moonlight bathed the scene as Baelon hovered above the blood-red sea, astride his dark green dragon. His hatred for the Ironborn ran deep, fueled by the attacks on the Riverlands and the Stepstones. Now, he was locked in a bitter conflict with the Ironborn of the Iron Islands.

...

On Bloodstone Island...

"Roar~~"

Sunfyre lay on the ground, panting heavily from exhaustion and injury.

On the other side, Aegon sat in silence, "tears" almost streaming down his face. "How could everything change so quickly?" he whispered.

Not long ago, he had been the dragonless nephew, easy to tease. Now, in the blink of an eye, his nephew had become untouchable—beyond provocation.

Chapter 630: Moondancer Strikes

As night fell, smoke billowed across the sea.

Bang!

Baelon leapt off the back of his dragon and rushed to help his limp Good Uncle to his feet, his expression tense with concern. "How's Sunfyre?"

"You should be asking how I am," Aegon muttered helplessly.

"You seem fine." Baelon glanced back at Sunfyre, who was writhing in pain, and added, stabbing Aegon with his words, "What a beautiful dragon, always getting hurt protecting its rider."

The once pale pink, magnificent wing membrane was now riddled with holes, both large and small. There were burns and punctures from stray arrows.

He threw himself at the dragon's bloody wound, tears streaming down his face.

"Don't be sad, Uncle," Baelon said, stroking the scar on his side. "Once I gather the Riverlands lords, we'll launch a crusade against the Iron Islands."

He had a dragon now. It was time to gather his vassals and fulfill his promise.

...

Stormlands, Stonehelm.

It was a dark night, the waves crashing violently against the towering cliffs. From here, you could just make out the bright fire burning on the Stepstones in the distance.

"Roar!"

An ugly, mud-caked dragon slowly crawled out from the shadows, its sharp muzzle clamped around a goat, chewing on the grisly mixture of blood and mud.

Atop its back, Aemond's single eye gleamed coldly as he stared in the direction of the distant fire.

"Roar..."

Having finished its meal, Sheepstealer shook its scrawny body and raised its wings, preparing to take flight.

"Wait, you idiot," Aemond commanded grimly, halting the Mud Dragon in its tracks.

Sheepstealer froze for a moment, then lazily collapsed onto the ground, letting out a loud burp.

"We'll leave later. Got it?"

It's time to make him fall... and in a way he'll never forget.

...

On the other side, by the banks of the Greenblood River...

Boom!

A pale dragon shadow landed on the empty riverbank, its nostrils flaring as it sniffed the air, searching for scents.

"Roar!"

At last, it found a large piece of flesh, slick with dark green scales, half-buried in the mud. A shrill roar echoed in all directions as it began devouring the meat. The sound of crunching and chewing filled the air, while drops of cooling dragon blood dripped onto the ground.

A gust of wind swept away the dark clouds, revealing the bright moon. Its pale light illuminated the flat river's surface, reflecting the terrifying image of the creature.

Its body was as pale as ash, covered in dull, lifeless scales. Its eyes glowed a menacing scarlet, while long, twisted horns jutted backward like gnarled tree branches. Its mouth was full of sharp, saliva-dripping teeth.

"Roar..."

The pale dragon licked the remaining scraps of dragon meat, a satisfied groan escaping as it raised its head. If anyone had been there, they would have seen its true form more clearly—a pale, monstrous beast with a neck as long and thin as a twisted, dried vine, and a body as sickly and withered as a dying tree.

After licking the last trace of blood from its body, the pale wild dragon shifted its stiff neck, spread its ragged wings full of holes, and soared into the sky. Its withered body swayed as it flew, snakelike, disappearing into the night.

It was gone. Completely.

...

The next day,

Golden Fields, Dagger Lake.

It was still dark, and not a single tent had opened its curtains.

Crash!

The tent's curtain was yanked open, and a figure barged in.

With a startled gasp, Rhaegar shot up from the bed, breathing heavily.

"Hoo... hoo... hoo..." His chest heaved as he muttered, "A green dragon, a green dragon..."

"What green dragon?" Daemon frowned.

"A green dragon... it fell into the water," Rhaegar stammered, pressing his cold palm to his forehead. The memory was slipping away—a confused nightmare of a green dragon flying over the sea. Then, nothing.

"Hiss..." Rhaegar drew in a sharp breath, biting his tongue to shake off the lingering fog of sleep.

Seeing his nephew in such a state, Daemon's eyes narrowed. He interrupted, "We don't have enough supplies."

"Then find some," Rhaegar replied absently, rubbing his temples.

"The ships from Volantis are slow," Daemon continued, his voice lowering. "Someone's discovered our trail. It seems they've mobilized an army to catch us."

He laughed darkly to himself. "An army arresting dragonriders? Maybe they're heading straight for the poorly defended Qohor."

Rhaegar wasn't listening. His thoughts had drifted to something else. "Rhaenyra wrote to me... Baela has snuck out of King's Landing." His tone grew more serious. "She might be crossing the Narrow Sea."

"What?" Daemon's expression tightened.

...

Pentos, the Valyrian roads.

A black Dragonstone road, a relic of the Freehold Empire, stretched ahead—its ancient stones once connecting Norvos to Qohor and a now half-ruined path leading toward Volantis.

Clop, clop, clop...

A band of mercenaries rode along the avenue, their war elephants lumbering forward, heading for Qohor. The army numbered over 2,000 men, with 500 cavalry. Towering war elephants, more than ten in total, marched at the front, their enormous bodies clad in bronze armor.

This was one of the most formidable mercenary groups on the continent of Essos, hired by a trusted adviser to the Prince of Pentos.

The army moved slowly, and soon the sun rose high overhead. By noon, the scorching heat beat down relentlessly, warming the Dragonstone road to the point where it burned beneath the soldiers' feet. Sweat dripped from their bodies, only to evaporate instantly in the sweltering heat.

Hoo... hoo... hoo...

Above, the sound of flapping wings cut through the air.

"Roar!"

A young dragon with dark green scales streaked in gray spread its wings and soared.

"Quiet, Moondancer," Baela commanded from atop the dragon, her voice calm but firm. Clad in black leather armor, she glanced down at the column of sellswords below. The troublemakers were within sight.

"Enemies?" Baela's eyes lit up with fierce determination. Tugging on the saddle rope, she smirked. "Our chance has come, Moondancer!"

"Roar!"

Moondancer snorted, flapping her delicate, butterfly-like wings before diving downward, her narrow vertical pupils gleaming with murderous intent.

Baela and her dragon had left King's Landing in broad daylight. They should have gone to Lys or Tyrosh, leaving the Gullet behind them and heading straight for Pentos across the Narrow Sea.

...

Miles away, along the ancient Valyrian roads...

"Roar!"

A magnificent dragon with cobalt blue scales and copper-colored jaws, belly, and talons soared lazily through the sky. Its serene flight was interrupted by the distant roar of another dragon, causing its casual demeanor to shift.

On the dragon's back, Daeron was pouring water from his flask when he heard the sound. He paused, wiping his lips, and muttered, "Go after it, Tessarion."

"Roar!"

Tessarion snorted, flapping its mighty wings in response.

They were on an escort mission. At the request of Rhaenyra and Rhaena, they had been specially assigned to follow and guard the rebellious Baela.

The wind whipped against Daeron's face, distorting his handsome features, but it couldn't mask the bitterness in his heart.

...

A few days later,

King's Landing, the Red Keep.

"Get in quietly," Aemon muttered to himself as he sneaked into the closed king's chambers. He glanced around, eyes landing on the wall where several Valyrian weapons hung silently above the fireplace.

He carefully unhooked the whip and swung it around the room, grinning. "Baelon will thank me when he returns... if he succeeds in taming the dragon."

Rhaenyra leaned against the frame, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. "Thirsty? Why aren't you drinking?"

"Hmph. Who gave you this idle nature?" Rhaenyra snorted. "Did you think I wouldn't notice the missing Dragon Taming Whip—or that someone sneaked into the king's chambers?"

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Aemon mumbled, his head hanging low. He knew all too well that in the streets of Tyrosh, where he had spent time, admitting fault was better than getting beaten.

Rhaenyra sighed, running a hand through her hair in frustration. “I really can’t teach you anything, Aemon. Go to the Mud Gate and see off Irina from Slaver’s Bay for me.”

She had no choice but to let his father deal with him upon his return. For now, there were more important matters at hand.

“See her off?” Aemon blinked, confused. Irina was from Slaver’s Bay and had introduced herself as a Dragonlord—descended from Daeryon family. After poring over his father’s ancient books, Aemon had discovered that there had once been a Dragonlord family in Valyria by that name. But, given the circumstances, letting her leave King’s Landing seemed unwise.

“Don’t look at me like that. This is your father’s decision,” Rhaenyra said, rolling her eyes. “Irina’s old-fashioned, from another century. But she’s rarely aggressive.”

“So... Father wants to send her back to stabilize Slaver’s Bay?” Aemon finished the thought, a flicker of realization crossing his face.

Rhaenyra nodded. “Exactly. With the Four Cities Alliance and the remnants of the Triarchy in turmoil, declaring war on Slaver’s Bay would be foolish right now. Better to send back a female Dragonlord without a dragon and buy some peace.”

Killing Irina wouldn’t serve anyone. Long-term peace with Slaver’s Bay was worth more than her life.

“I understand,” Aemon said, finally blinking away his confusion. He carefully sidled out of the bedchamber.

Rhaenyra didn’t stop him, only sighing softly to herself as she watched him leave, muttering, “My own son...”

...

King's Landing, Mud Gate.

A large ship flying the Daeryon family flag sailed swiftly out of Blackwater Bay, as though fleeing the city.

"Roar!"

A young dragon, covered in green scales and boasting a powerful, majestic form, stood on the city wall like a towering sculpture. Its long tail curved behind it like a scorpion's sting.

“I said, why didn’t anyone notify me?” Aemon muttered, turning his back on the two figures standing nearby.

Tormund, the Master of Whisperers, shrugged with a sly smile. “The Queen wanted to investigate you, Prince. How could we stop her?”

“Ever since that Lady met Silverwing, the Dragonpit’s been on high alert,” Maynard, the Maester of the Dragonpit, added quietly. “I’ve barely had time for anything, let alone lessons.”

“You’re not being very loyal,” Aemon replied, frowning as he crossed his arms. Friends and teachers alike—they weren’t helping him at all, only making things worse.

“Prince,” Tormund leaned in with a grin, clearly enjoying himself. “I did hear some interesting news. Pentos hired a Dothraki cavalry, but word has it that they clashed with dragons. The Khal took his payment and ran before things got ugly.”

“Haha,” Aemon chuckled dryly, though he didn’t find it funny in the least. A cold feeling crept over him as he gazed out at the vast expanse of Blackwater Bay. His restless heart began to settle.

He couldn’t help but think of Baela. His fiancée had left without a word, sneaking off to Essos and leaving him behind. She had no fear of the dangers that lay ahead.