

G.O Thrones 671

Chapter 671: Aemon and Quaithe

The Dothraki Great Grass Sea

Vaes Dothrak – Mother of Mountains

The Dothraki horde crossed the vast, endless expanse of the Great Grass Sea, returning to the sacred heartland of their horse-lord clans. At the entrance to Vaes Dothrak, two towering bronze horse statues stood guard over the avenue, symbols of the horse gods the Dothraki revered.

Along the wide road, statues of harpies, dragons, griffins, and other creatures lined the path—some charming, others grotesque and terrifying. These relics, trophies of conquest, had been plundered from the Free Cities and distant villages, carried back by the Dothraki as proof of their dominance.

At the foot of the Mother of Mountains, the holy peak sacred to all Dothraki, the clash of metal rang out suddenly.

Clang!

A silver-haired boy in an animal-skin coat, his face flushed with exertion, swung a Dothraki arakh with furious energy. His blows were relentless but uncoordinated.

"Too slow, False Dragon," mocked a scarred Bloodrider, a seasoned warrior of the league, effortlessly parrying each attack. His tone was flat, as if unimpressed by the boy's efforts. Each time Aemon's scimitar came crashing down, the Bloodrider blocked it easily, flicking the blade away with a casual twist of his wrist.

"Ah! I won't believe I can't beat you!" Aemon shouted in frustration, swinging the curved blade—longer than he was tall—in a wide arc.

His once-pale skin had turned a deep wheat color from months under the relentless sun. His tight animal-skin shirt left his chest exposed, giving him an air of wildness that contrasted sharply with his noble origins. In stance, at least, he resembled a warrior.

Bang!

Without warning, the Bloodrider lashed out with his foot, landing a hard kick squarely on Aemon's collarbone, just below the exposed skin of his shirt. Aemon grunted as the force sent him flying backwards. He tumbled across the ground, adding fresh scrapes to his already bruised and scarred arms. His vision swam as he tried to focus.

"Stupidly clever. Truly hopeless," the Bloodrider muttered with disdain, spinning his arakh behind his back before striding off toward the Mother of Mountains. According to Dothraki tradition, no iron weapons could be carried within the sacred grounds of the mountain. Every time he beat the boy senseless, he had to descend the mountain, only to climb it again later. It was tiresome.

"Ahem..." Aemon gasped for air, struggling to his feet as the Bloodrider's figure disappeared into the distance. His chest felt tight, his heart racing from the lack of oxygen. He was close to collapse—classic signs of near-cardiac arrest. He had almost died.

"Damned Dothraki. Damned Bloodrider," he cursed through gritted teeth, pounding the grass in frustration. Training was always an excuse to beat him senseless. Aemon knew they weren't even in

the same league. What use were the Dothraki's legendary skills when their strength was so wildly unmatched?

Clop, clop, clop...

The sound of soft hooves approached from behind. Aemon's violet eyes flashed with caution as he quickly turned.

"I brought you a gift."

Leah smiled as she rode closer, her long legs straddling a white horse with a silky mane. In her hand, she held the reins of a bay stallion, just as tall and strong.

"For me?" Aemon hesitated, glancing at the red horse, which stood tall and proud—far more imposing than he had expected.

"Yes, as a reward for your training," Leah replied. She dismounted gracefully and handed him the reins of the bay horse. Her tone grew serious as she added, "In the Dothraki world, no one is truly Dothraki without a horse. Both men and women must ride, or else they are nothing more than slaves."

And slaves, she reminded him with a solemn look, were unworthy of respect.

"Thank you," Aemon murmured, his emotions conflicted as he gently stroked the bay horse's sleek fur.

"Whoa, whoa..." The horse was restless, its front hooves tapping nervously, ready to lash out.

Aemon remained calm, his fingers lightly scratching the horse's chin. His voice softened, turning soothing and steady. "Easy now, good boy... no need to worry."

The bay horse seemed to sense his calm, gradually settling down, its resistance fading. It stood still in the grass, allowing the strange silver-haired boy to touch it freely.

"You're amazing," Leah said, her voice full of admiration. She knew this horse—it was one of the most headstrong in the stables, a young stallion she had chosen on purpose to test him.

Aemon said nothing, adjusting the saddle and stirrups with practiced hands before swinging onto the horse's back with one smooth motion. The bay horse didn't fight or fidget but moved slowly, obediently carrying its rider.

Aemon's silence deepened as he guided the horse. After spending half a year wandering with the Dothraki, he had learned their ways—herding, drying hides, and, of course, caring for horses. Riding a horse, he mused, was far easier than riding a dragon.

"Shall we go for a ride?" Leah's eyes lit up as she mounted her little white mare, her excitement palpable.

"Sure," Aemon replied, patting the horse's neck. Then, almost under his breath, he muttered, "Let's go... Trickster."

The word slipped out unexpectedly, and a wave of loneliness washed over him, cutting the moment short.

' but not understanding its meaning. Dothraki didn't care much for lies or deception.

"Nothing," Aemon muttered, his fingers tightening around the reins. After a pause, he spoke more quietly. "Let's name the horse."

It felt like a small beginning, something new. A name for a new life. A way to distance himself from the shadows of his past. Yet no new name or life could erase the memories that haunted him—each vivid detail of the accident, etched permanently in his mind. His photographic memory meant he could never forget a single moment of that night.

The terrifying image of the pale dragon's jaws, the dismembered green dragon's body, the suffocating saltwater filling his nose and mouth... those memories dragged him from sleep, haunting him relentlessly.

"What name comes to mind?" Leah's sweet voice broke through his dark thoughts, pulling him back to the present.

Aemon blinked, momentarily frozen, and looked around—the vast green sea of grass stretched endlessly in every direction, the sky above still so familiar. Yet the sight of all that green twisted something inside him. He had once loved the color, but now it only reminded him of what he had lost.

"Let me think," Aemon said, his gaze drifting to the clear blue sky. His heart still ached for the freedom and pride he once had, soaring high above the world as a dragonrider. Now, he had fallen—deep into the mud—reduced to a captive of the Dothraki. That crushing sense of loss always clung to him, binding his fragile spirit.

The sky was cloudless, but faint stars were just visible, twinkling faintly in the daylight. Aemon, having studied astronomy under Grand Maester Munkun, found solace in observing the constellations. His knowledge of the stars, a skill that seemed almost useless here, still provided him with a sense of purpose.

"Look, that's the bear constellation," Aemon said, a flicker of excitement in his voice as he pointed upward.

Leah, squinting at the sky, looked puzzled. "Stars?" she asked, her voice doubtful. "We Dothraki look to the sun and the moon, not to stars. Can a bear really be up there?"

"It looks like a big bear," Aemon explained patiently, rubbing the long ears of his bay horse.

"There's also another group called Ursa Minor. From now on, let's name him Ursa—to represent the stars and strength."

A moment of melancholy passed through Aemon's eyes. The Ursa Major constellation, the great bear, reminded him of home, of a mother figure watching over him. He, like Ursa Minor, felt small, hidden in the daytime, and adrift in a distant world.

Leah, perceptive as ever, narrowed her eyes. "You're homesick again, aren't you?" she said, her voice gentle yet direct. "Otherwise, why name it Ursa and talk about Ursa Minor?"

Aemon glanced at her, his expression tightening with discomfort. How was she so good at reading him? But there was no point in yearning for home—he couldn't go back. Even if he could, the memories that awaited him there were too painful to relive. His dragon was gone, and he had fallen into this miserable situation. In the eyes of the world, he was already considered dead. Returning would only mean living in a prison of grief.

"You can't go back," Leah added softly, her tone slightly disappointed. "Father won't let you." She quickly brightened. "But he'll be back soon, and he'll bring you something from the outside world—something to cheer you up."

Suddenly, a rumble echoed in the distance, like the pounding of drums. The ground trembled beneath them, and Aemon and Leah turned their heads toward the sound.

At the foot of the Mother of Mountains, a massive Dothraki cavalry force—thousands of riders—galloped toward them, kicking up a cloud of dust that darkened the sky.

"Whoa, whoa..."

The front rider, The Khal, reined in his black stallion just in front of the mountain's entrance. The entire Dothraki horde came to a halt behind him, their scimitars and longbows put away as they followed their Khal.

"Move faster, you lowly Lamb Men!"

The crack of whips followed, the sound sharp in the air as the Dothraki lashed at the backs of their slaves. Bound together with thick hemp ropes, the slaves—strong and healthy—moved in terrified silence, their heads bowed.

"The slaves from Slaver's Bay are the best," Khal Orka boasted, clearly proud of his latest haul. "Stronger and more useful than any others."

These were young slaves, taken from villages during raids. The old and weak had been traded away, while the strong and able-bodied were kept—skilled in building, smithing, and sustaining the tribe.

"I'm going to pick a slave girl for myself!" Leah exclaimed excitedly, grabbing Aemon's arm and pulling him toward the line of captives.

Aemon glanced coldly at the scene, his interest nonexistent. The sight of the slaves—broken, fearful—left him indifferent.

Who wasn't a slave here already? he thought darkly, resigned to the truth that they were all prisoners in their own way.

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As night fell, the sky above Vaes Dothrak glittered with stars. The Dothraki campfires flickered across the Mother of Mountains, casting shadows as warriors celebrated, brandishing their weapons and dancing in wild revelry.

In a quiet corner, far from the chaos, Aemon stood in the stable, brushing his bay horse. The animal nudged him affectionately with its long tongue.

“Behave, Ursa,” Aemon muttered, pushing the horse’s head away gently, though his mood remained somber. He felt out of place among the Dothraki, their brutal ways alien to him.

His thoughts drifted back to Volantis, where his Third Brother Maekar ruled. Slaves were plentiful there too, but at least they were fed and treated with a semblance of care. Here, among the Dothraki, slaves were nothing—beaten, broken, and discarded. There was nothing Aemon could do to change that, and worse, he was reliant on the protection of a young girl for survival.

Suddenly, an unsettling feeling washed over him. The hair on Aemon’s arms stood on end. He felt the weight of unseen eyes upon him. Silently, he lowered his head, glancing around with caution.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a skinny female slave tied to a haystack nearby. Her dark skin and cowering posture made her look like someone from the Summer Isles, neck bent in submission.

“No... it’s not her,” Aemon whispered, eyes narrowing. He scanned his surroundings again. His father had always said that Aemon possessed a natural intuition—a heightened spirit that allowed him to sense things others couldn’t. Someone was watching him. He was certain of it.

After a careful sweep of the stable, he saw no one else—no movement except for the flames flickering in the distance. But his gaze returned to the thin girl by the haystack. She was pale-skinned, with a flat, round face.

A sudden realization hit him. “Lamb Men?” he muttered, his eyes widening. The girl wasn’t from the Summer Isles at all. She was one of the Lhazareen, a tribe devastated by the Dothraki. How had he not noticed?

Aemon spun around sharply, his hand instinctively reaching for the dragon pendant—Meraxes—hanging from his neck.

Pop...

A slow clap echoed through the air. Emerging from the shadows was a masked woman, standing by the haystack, her hands softly applauding. She wore a golden bandeau and a short skirt, her shaved head gleaming under the firelight. Her veil, made of fine gold chains, revealed a pair of sharp, intelligent eyes.

“Who are you, and what do you want with me?” Aemon asked, his voice firm as he took a cautious step back, his gaze never leaving her. He could tell immediately—she was a witch, or worse, a sorceress capable of illusions and deceptions. She was dangerous.

“My boy,” the woman purred, her voice smooth and magnetic, as if crafted to lure. “You are as vigilant as your father.” She approached with the poise of a noblewoman, her hands resting confidently on her hips.

Aemon’s eyes flashed with suspicion. “You knew my father?” He stepped back again as she moved closer, wary of the danger she might pose. His father had always despised witches, especially those

who came unbidden. The fact that this one still lived after crossing paths with his father meant she was no ordinary sorceress.

"Don't be so wary," the woman said, her gaze sweeping over his young, familiar face with amusement. "I know what you're thinking," she continued, her voice honeyed with seduction. "And I also know where to find a red dragon."

Aemon's heart skipped a beat. Her words were like a knife, cutting through the air between them. Quaithe—this mysterious woman—knew more than she was letting on, and her mention of a red dragon sent Aemon's mind racing.

Chapter 672: The Deal with the Lord of Light

Upon hearing the words "red dragon," Aemon's pupils contracted sharply. He had never imagined anyone else was after it.

"Don't be surprised. I know everything," Quaithe said calmly, her eyes deep and unreadable, like dark pools that hid ancient secrets.

Aemon instinctively gripped the dragon pendant around his neck, trying to steady his nerves. "Are you the second group, or the third?" he asked, his voice tense. How many were hunting the red dragon in the Great Grass Sea? He didn't know, but his sense of duty wouldn't allow anyone to defile the dragon.

Aemon's heart sank. Her words confirmed his worst fear—there were already two groups who had discovered the red dragon before him. Worse still, it was possible that they had succeeded.

"Do you intend to tame the vicious red dragon?" Quaithe asked, raising a pale hand and giving a gentle wave, as if summoning something unseen.

Aemon stopped retreating, his body tense with suspicion. "Do you have a way for me to tame it?" he asked cautiously.

Quaithe's eyes gleamed with a hint of regret. "Suffering has not erased your innocent heart," she said softly, her voice almost maternal. "But to gain the dragon, you will pay a price. And right now, your freedom is all you have left."

Aemon swallowed, a chill creeping up his spine. "Do you want my body or my soul?" His voice trembled, the words scraping out of his throat like nails on glass. Everything about Quaithe felt dangerous, like she was a demon, ready to take whatever she wanted. In just a few words, she had peeled back the layers of his heart, weighing its worth.

Aemon frowned, his skepticism deepening. "But there's still a price, isn't there?"

"The world is fair," Quaithe said, her tone shifting to one of quiet admiration. "Everything comes at an equal cost." Her gaze sharpened, her words dripping with prophecy. "Lose one dragon, gain another."

Aemon's heart clenched as the weight of her words settled over him. He whispered, almost to himself, "I've already lost a dragon."

The Trickster had died, shielding him.

Quaithe's eyes sparkled, and she stared at him intently, as if reading the depths of his soul. Their gazes locked—his violet eyes meeting hers, like two amethysts reflecting each other from the bottom of an abyss.

Suddenly, Aemon was pulled into a vision.

Roar!

A young, dark green dragon soared through the air, its long, thin, scorpion-like tail flicking as it sliced through the hazy clouds. But beneath it, a blood-red mouth, sharp and pale as marble, snapped up from the sea. The monstrous jaws clamped down with terrifying force, tearing into the young dragon's flesh. Blood sprayed into the sky, and the young dragon screamed in agony, its body writhing in the creature's maw.

Aemon felt the pain as if it were his own. He saw the dragon's vertical pupils—so sad, so full of regret—turn back to him one last time before they closed forever. The dragon fell, its lifeless body plunging into the cold sea.

Plop!

The dragon's head sank below the waves, along with the silver-haired rider, as an eerie red glow enveloped one of them. One perished, the other survived.

"You were meant to die. But the Lord of Light spared you."

Quaithe's magnetic voice snapped Aemon out of the vision, bringing him back to reality. She had stepped closer—too close. Only two feet separated them now.

Startled, Aemon tried to retreat, but—

Snap!

"Look, a rare and precious treasure," Quaithe murmured, studying the runic symbols etched into the pendant with keen interest. She rubbed her hands together slowly.

With a soft hum, the pendant began to glow faintly. In the next instant, a Valyrian steel sword materialized out of thin air, as black as the deepest night. The slender blade shimmered, its dark surface speckled with silver, like stars against a midnight sky. At the end of the hilt was a large, octagonal ruby that gleamed blood-red.

"That's mine," Aemon said, his voice trembling with panic as he stepped forward, instinctively reaching to reclaim the sword.

But before he could even blink, Quaithe vanished.

Aemon's eyes widened in disbelief, his heart pounding in his chest.

"It is a powerful weapon, but it does not belong entirely to you," Quaithe's magnetic voice floated through the air, her figure now reappearing near the stable's water trough. A basilisk briefly shimmered beside her before vanishing just as quickly.

"Let go of the sword. It was given to me by my mother," Aemon said desperately, his hand outstretched toward the sword. He barely finished speaking before she disappeared again.

His heart raced, thoughts swirling with confusion. Was this sorcery? Ghosts? He clenched his fists, knowing he had to steel himself against the golden witch.

"It doesn't fully belong to you," Quaithe's voice cut through the night, her figure now back by the haystack. "Half of it belongs to the Lord of Light."

Aemon's eyes narrowed, his breath unsteady. Had she ever moved at all? Or was everything he had seen an illusion—a trick to manipulate him? The pendant's theft, her sudden reappearances—it was all part of her game.

Her finger was poised to pluck the ruby free.

"Wait!" Aemon blurted, his heart sinking. "How do I trust you?"

"What do you want in return?" Aemon asked gravely, already familiar with the weight of such exchanges.

"Smart," Quaithe replied with a knowing smile. "Let me answer your first question: I can tell you the whereabouts of the red dragon. The real question is—can you earn your own trust?"

Quaithe's smile faded, replaced by her usual cold, witch-like demeanor. Her voice turned low and serious. "The red dragon has been captured by a group of Asshai witches and is being transported to Slaver's Bay by a band of Dothraki."

"You want me to stop the Dragonlord of Slaver's Bay from taming it?" Aemon asked, quickly piecing together the clues. His thoughts went immediately to Irina Daeryon, a disgraced noblewoman who had fled King's Landing. He had once seen her off himself.

"No," Quaithe replied, her eyes unreadable. "The Lord of Light merely wants you to find the red dragon. No one else will reach it before you."

Aemon, sensing a hidden meaning, furrowed his brow. "I can't go to Slaver's Bay," he countered. "And I don't have the coin to hire Dothraki."

"Don't worry," Quaithe said, a faint flicker of mockery in her tone as she peered from behind her golden veil. "You'll have your own reasons to enter Slaver's Bay." Her words held a sinister edge. "You lost one dragon... now you've gained another."

Aemon felt a chill run down his spine. The green dragon's death had led to the birth of something else—a new beginning. He could only guess what price would need to be paid next.

"What does the Lord of Light want me to do?" Aemon pressed, still unsure of the cost. He had little left to offer. What could the Lord of Light demand from him?

Quaithe's expression remained impassive. "You misunderstand. The Lord of Light asks nothing of you. What you seek is a sign in the flames," she said, her voice softening as she took a few slow steps back. "When you find the red dragon, you will know the Light's will."

"Wait," Aemon called out, desperate for clarity.

Poof!

The scene before him vanished, and Quaithe's golden figure began to dissolve into the air, her outline blurring until it disappeared entirely.

"Gone again?" Aemon whispered, rubbing his eyes in disbelief. He looked around—he was alone.

Had it all been an illusion? The sword, the pendant, the golden witch who spoke of the Lord of Light—it all seemed too surreal.

"Father really should've killed her," Aemon muttered, clutching his chest as fear gnawed at him. The witch's voice, her accent—it had the tone of someone from the Westerlands, but her demeanor... that was unmistakably Asshai.

His photographic memory replayed the details—small clues, hints of High Valyrian—but even with all his knowledge, the truth remained elusive.

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Half a month later...

Slaver's Bay, Meereen

"Hyah, hyah!"

A group of Dothraki cavalry thundered into the city, their horses kicking up clouds of dust as they galloped through the narrow streets, still littered with rubble. The common folk and slaves scattered in panic, retreating to their homes and locking their doors, too frightened to venture outside. The only sounds were the relentless pounding of hooves and the crack of whips, shattering the uneasy peace of Meereen.

Creak...

While the riders commanded the city's attention, two massive carriages rolled in through a side gate, unnoticed by most. The carriages moved slowly, side by side, each carrying an enormous semicircular object draped in thick red curtains. The weight of the load was immense, requiring ten strong mules to haul each carriage. Their iron-rimmed wheels left deep grooves in the red brick streets as they passed.

"Careful... don't startle the beast," muttered a bald wizard in a red robe, riding a stout dwarf horse. His eyes flicked nervously to the carriages every few moments, watching them with growing anxiety.

"We'll be safe once we reach the Great Pyramid," replied another bald wizard beside him, his face grim. He reached into his robes, pulling out a special incense stick, which he promptly chewed on.

Puff!

The incense ignited instantly, releasing a thick, pungent smoke. The wizard jammed the burning incense into holders on the side of the carriage, replacing the ones that were nearly spent.

Roar, roar...

Suddenly, a heavy, guttural breathing rumbled from beneath the red curtain, like the ominous awakening of a sleeping giant.

Bang!

The carriages jolted violently. The red curtain fluttered, lifting just enough to reveal the iron cage concealed beneath. The cage itself was monstrous—jagged, resembling interlocking fangs, its interior cramped and suffocating.

From within, a long, thick dragon's tail, dark red and covered in thorn-like dorsal fins, thrashed out from the cage, hanging limply over the back of the carriage. Its scales gleamed with a deep, fiery hue, and the weight of the tail alone made the ground tremble.

The face of the bald wizard paled. He mumbled an incantation under his breath, his fingers twitching in nervous ritual.

The Dothraki accompanying the procession leaped from their horses, their bodies padded with thick animal skins. Working together, they struggled to shove the dragon's tail back into the cage, their muscles straining with effort.

The incense smoke billowed thicker, seeping under the red curtain and filling the confined space. Its effect was immediate. The heavy breathing slowed, then ceased, replaced by an eerie silence.

A tense moment passed before the carriages resumed their slow journey. Eventually, they disappeared into the cellar beneath the Great Pyramid, the final resting place of their volatile cargo.

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Dusk. The sun set slowly.

At the cellar door of the Great Pyramid, a furious roar echoed through the stone halls.

A blast of bright red fire shot into the air, illuminating the entrance in a fiery glow. With a loud rumble, the door swung open, and a silver-haired figure stumbled out, her black suit scorched and smoldering.

"Close the door! Don't provoke it further," Irina commanded, her voice tight with fear as she frantically patted out the flames still clinging to her clothes. Her eyes were wide, heart racing, as the heat from the dragon's fury lingered in the air.

"Yes, my queen," a bald sorcerer replied, his tone calm despite the chaos. With a quick glance, he signaled the nearby guards. They moved swiftly, slamming the heavy door shut, sealing the dragon's enraged roars behind thick stone walls.

Clank... clank...

The sound of heavy chains rattled faintly from the other side, barely audible through the thick stone. The sorcerer's cold eyes narrowed slightly as he listened, picking up a sound that ordinary ears could not—flesh being torn, bones crushed under powerful jaws. The beast was feeding.

Sharp fangs ripped through the meat, crushing hard bones, devouring its meal bit by bit.

"I'll try again later," Irina muttered, still visibly shaken. She hurried away from the cellar, her steps quick and uneven, eager to distance herself from the dragon's wrath.

The bald wizard nodded in silence, trailing behind her with measured steps. His gaze remained cold and calculating as he followed the queen's retreat.

The guards stood in uneasy silence, heads bowed, eyes averted, afraid to meet anyone's gaze. None dared to speak of the red-robed priest who had accompanied the queen into the cellar—he had not come out.

Chapter 673: Blackfyre Slashes Through the White Walker

The Wall loomed ahead, and the Haunted Forest stretched out like a dark, silent sea. A heavy snowfall blanketed the land, covering the forest's floor in thick layers of white.

With a low rumble, a massive beast trudged forward, its heavy footsteps shaking the earth and dislodging snow from the tree canopies. Rhaegar, draped in a black robe, rode atop the mammoth, its long, shaggy fur swaying as they crossed a frozen riverbank. Every so often, a gust of wind swept by, and the snowflakes felt like needles piercing his skin.

"We should ride a dragon," came a soft, hesitant voice.

The Child of the Forest peeked out from its basket, hidden beside the mammoth. Its large green eyes blinked against the cold.

Rhaegar kept his gaze fixed on the road ahead, replying cautiously, "Dragons attract the White Walkers. We need to avoid drawing any attention."

He spoke with measured calm, but his eyes flicked upwards, hidden beneath a black ribbon tied across his face, adding an air of mystery to his stern features. Even the heavy clouds above seemed dull through the dark cloth.

The Child of the Forest whispered urgently, "There are many Heart Trees beyond the Wall, but the true one lies further still."

Its voice trembled with concern, driven by the need to find the heart tree, reunite with its people, and deliver Rhaegar to the Greenseer. There was something deeply troubling about the resurgence of the White Walkers. By the calculations of countless Greenseers, their resurrection was still supposed to be centuries away.

But then, twenty years ago, a red comet had altered the magical tides, awakening the Others from beneath the frozen soil. Cold and darkness spread across the land, yet the prophesied Prince, the one born of ice and fire, had not appeared. In the Child's mind, the only human worth trusting now was the man before it—the King who commanded dragons.

But dragons were blood and fire. 'Will they even help?' it wondered.

Crack, crack!

The mammoth's enormous hooves stomped across the ice-covered river, splintering the frozen surface as it barreled toward the Fist of the First Men.

"Easy, big fella," Rhaegar murmured, his voice soothing as he tightened his grip on the reins.

Suddenly, a rustling sound broke the quiet. The birds in the forest ceased their flight, and an eerie silence descended, thick and heavy like a shroud. Then, a sharp, resounding noise split the air. The

mammoth snorted, taking a few uneasy steps backward. Fear flickered in its eyes, an ancient, primal dread.

Rhaegar's heart raced. He strained to listen, feeling the tension in his chest rise.

"Go!"

The Child of the Forest leaped from the basket, shrieking as it pushed against the mammoth's head. Startled, the beast roared and turned to flee.

Whoosh!

In an instant, a volley of bone arrows whistled through the air, striking the mammoth's thick hide. The arrows pierced deep, embedding themselves in its flesh. With a bellow of agony, the mammoth collapsed to the ground, its body shaking the earth.

Rhaegar quickly rolled off its back, grabbing the Child of the Forest and tumbling into the snow.

"The White Walkers are here!" the Child cried, its voice sharp with fear.

Rhaegar's ears rang from the shout, but he swiftly rose, drawing Blackfyre from his belt. The ancient Valyrian steel gleamed in the dim light.

And then, the forest stirred. The snow crunched beneath unseen feet, and the ground quaked with the tremors of approaching danger.

"Roar..."

Dozens of pale-faced figures burst from the snow, their hoarse cries echoing through the forest as they charged forward. Their bodies were twisted at the joints, skeletal and covered in stretched, frostbitten skin—resembling nothing more than walking corpses frozen in time.

Rhaegar's pupils contracted, and a cold sweat began to gather in his palms. This was his first time facing the dead, and he felt a wave of unease wash over him. For a brief moment, he hesitated.

Before he could fully react, even more of the dead emerged from the shadows of the forest, as if they had stumbled into the heart of their lair.

"Hurry! We can't beat them!" the Child of the Forest cried out, panic clear in its voice. It fumbled frantically in its torn pockets, searching for something.

There was an entire army of the dead before them—how could two beings hope to stand against such a force?

Pop!

Without a word, Rhaegar swung Blackfyre, severing the head of a nearby corpse. The moment the blade struck, something miraculous occurred: the dead man stiffened, its decapitated body collapsing to the ground, unmoving.

It was an eerie sight, and yet, in this strange reality, it seemed almost natural. The lifeless corpse was soon trampled into the snow by the relentless march of the other undead.

"Roar..."

More of the dead lunged toward them, their faces twisted in grotesque grimaces, mouths wide open in silent, eternal screams. Rhaegar, realizing something, moved swiftly. With a powerful sweep of Blackfyre, he sliced through the air in a wide arc, decapitating several of the dead in one stroke.

Pop!

Flames flickered along the edge of Blackfyre, hovering just above Rhaegar's hand as he brought the sword back into position. His eyes flicked to the glowing blade, and the corner of his mouth curled in satisfaction. The Child of the Forest had been right—Blackfyre could kill the dead.

Or was it...?

"It's the Valyrian steel," Rhaegar thought, the realization hitting him like a bolt of lightning. That was the key.

"There are too many of them. We need to find shelter," the Child of the Forest said anxiously, pulling out two small glass bottles from its pockets. With a quick flick of its wrist, it hurled them toward the approaching horde.

Boom!

Boom!

The bottles exploded on impact, erupting into a brilliant blaze of green wildfire. The flames spread rapidly, engulfing the nearby undead in a raging inferno. For a moment, the advancing dead faltered as the wildfire scorched their ranks, reducing them to ash.

"Wait—protect yourself," Rhaegar warned, his expression grim as he slashed through the weaker dead, all while keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

This wasn't just a routine encounter. He had ventured beyond the Wall to witness the White Walkers with his own eyes. And where there was an army of the dead, the White Walkers were never far behind, controlling them from the shadows.

Yet something else gnawed at the back of his mind. Robb and the others still hadn't located the Heart Tree or the Greenseer, as the Child of the Forest had spoken of.

"Roar..."

The dead continued to gather in ever-greater numbers, surrounding them on all sides and cutting off any chance of escape. It was clear now—they were not mindless. Their movements were deliberate, coordinated, as if they were trapping their prey.

"They're no fools, after all," Rhaegar muttered, pressing his back against the mammoth, which had risen shakily to its feet. Before him, three wights brandished rusted swords, their hollow eyes locked on him.

"Whoa, whoa..."

A sudden, hoarse neigh echoed from the dark recesses of the forest. Rhaegar's heart sank, and his gaze snapped toward the sound.

Trot, trot, trot...

From the shadows emerged a decaying warhorse, its skeletal body swaying with each unsteady step. Its neck was half-exposed, the pale bones gleaming against the dirty snow. Atop the beast sat a figure—a pale, ghastly creature with the face of death itself. It held an ice-crystal spear, its blue eyes glowing like cold stars.

The creature turned its head slightly, meeting Rhaegar's gaze with an emotionless stare.

"A White Walker," the Child of the Forest whispered, her small body tensing as she fumbled in her ragged pockets. The glass bottles she pulled out were meager, inferior substitutes for the pumpkin bombs she had lost.

Rhaegar grinned, his eyes glinting with anticipation. "Haha, finally showing yourself." He spun Blackfyre in a casual arc, the blade whistling through the air as he kicked aside a skeleton that lunged at him. His body surged forward, powerful and unyielding.

The true nature of the dragonborn awakened within him, and flames flickered along the edge of Blackfyre. This was the moment he had been waiting for. The White Walker had finally revealed itself.

Thud!

The wight commander's expressionless face twitched as it tugged on the reins. The rotting warhorse leaped high, its hooves crashing down with the force of a drumbeat. The ground trembled beneath it as the undead army roared in response, instinctively parting to make way.

Rhaegar observed this without surprise. The scene before him was eerily similar to the visions he had seen in his dreams—an army of the dead, all controlled by this cold, emotionless creature.

"Hissahhh..."

For the first time, the White Walker made a sound. It was thick and low, a chilling noise that sent shivers down the spine. The dead swayed at the sound, tightening their ranks as they began to encircle the Child of the Forest and the mammoth.

It was a clear message. The White Walker wanted a one-on-one fight, but it also intended to clear the field of any distractions.

Terrified, the Child of the Forest scrambled up the mammoth's back, using its trunk as leverage, her wide green eyes flickering between the encroaching dead and Rhaegar. She kept a fierce watch on the army surrounding them, her heart pounding.

Rhaegar, however, paid no attention to what was happening behind him. His focus was locked on the White Walker. Step by step, he advanced toward it, his grip tightening on Blackfyre.

Boom! Boom!

Glass bottles shattered behind him, the wildfire exploding and consuming swaths of the dead. But the army was relentless, pushing through the green flames without a shred of pain or fear. Their rotting faces twisted into even more grotesque forms as the fire licked at their decayed flesh.

The Child of the Forest's panic grew. Her gaze kept darting toward Rhaegar, uncertainty gnawing at her. Could he defeat the White Walker? She didn't know. What she did know, however, was that the dead would tear her apart if he failed.

Boom!

Suddenly, a powerful gust of wind swept through the clearing, whipping the snow into spirals. Above them, the dark clouds churned and rolled, crashing into one another like storming waves. For a brief moment, a dark shape could be seen, faintly outlined in the weakest part of the cloud cover.

“Roar...”

A dragon’s roar, as deep and thunderous as muffled drums, echoed across the battlefield. The dark clouds in the sky trembled in response, rippling as if alive. The White Walker slowly tilted its head, a flicker of surprise crossing its ice-blue eyes.

Boom!

A jet-black dragon burst through the clouds, its immense, hideous head like a dark iron gate swinging open. Its jaws parted, releasing a pungent wave of ash that filled the air. From its maw spewed an eerie, viscous green dragonfire, glowing unnaturally in the gloom.

Clattering.

The dragonfire rained down in torrents, sweeping across the battlefield like a pillar of molten fury. Wherever it landed, the army of the dead was hammered by a tremendous force, their brittle bodies shattering upon impact.

“Roar...”

The Cannibal, infamous for its viciousness, let out a guttural bellow as it dove from the sky. Dragonfire spewed forth again, dividing the battlefield into flaming sections. The undead army stood no chance—under the dark green flames, they were rendered inert, their broken forms turning to ash, no longer able to rise.

“Your turn, ugly white thing,” Rhaegar taunted softly, pointing Blackfyre at the White Walker.

He had done it—lured the White Walker out of hiding. Now, it was time to fight.

Bang!

Provoked by Rhaegar’s words, the White Walker leapt gracefully from its decaying horse. Towering and menacing, it exuded a cold, oppressive aura.

“Hissah!”

The White Walker snarled in fury, its ice spear gleaming as it charged forward, its movements fueled by indignation at being toyed with by a mere human. It struck first, swinging the spear with deadly precision toward Rhaegar’s head.

Clang!

Rhaegar parried the blow with Blackfyre, the clash of Valyrian steel against enchanted ice ringing through the air. The force of the impact buckled Rhaegar’s knees, nearly knocking him off balance. He gritted his teeth as sweat beaded on his brow.

'The strength of the dead... it's immense,' he thought, eyes narrowing in surprise.

With a swift motion, Rhaegar countered, swinging Blackfyre in a wide arc aimed at the wight's torso. The White Walker dodged with inhuman agility, deflecting the strike with its ice spear, sending shards of ice scattering through the air.

Both combatants paused, evaluating each other. Rhaegar twisted his wrist, wincing at the red, swelling bruise. His opponent's raw power was staggering, comparable to a giant, towering seven or eight meters tall.

The White Walker, its icy features expressionless, ran a pale hand along the length of its spear. Its eyes, glowing like frozen stars, narrowed in concentration. The spear in its hand was a gift from the cold gods, crafted to shatter ordinary weapons with ease. Yet Blackfyre had withstood the assault, unscathed by the ice's touch.

The wight's sluggish mind slowly pieced together the truth: Rhaegar's weapon was enchanted.

Swish!

A blur of black steel sliced through the air, aimed straight at the White Walker's head. Rhaegar's grin was merciless, his attack swift and deadly.

Clang!

The White Walker barely managed to block the strike, retreating swiftly with long, nimble strides. The force of the blow reverberated through its arms, and for the first time, a sliver of emotion crossed its cold eyes—shock.

Rhaegar pressed forward, relentless. His eyes gleamed with a predatory focus, the subtle smile still lingering on his lips. In just two exchanges, he had discerned his opponent's strengths. The White Walker possessed terrifying power and supernatural reflexes—qualities that could overwhelm most elite knights. But strength alone was not enough.

Beneath that formidable, pale exterior, the White Walker's combat skills were crude, almost clumsy.

The wight swung its spear again, its ice-blue eyes betraying its growing frustration. Each strike was fast, but predictable. Rhaegar moved effortlessly, dodging and countering with precision.

Clang!

With a graceful twist of his wrist, Rhaegar brought Blackfyre down with precision. The Valyrian steel sliced through the ice-crystal spear, leaving a jagged dent along its length.

The White Walker staggered back, eyes wide with shock. Every blow Rhaegar delivered carried immense power, cutting through the cold wind and sending tremors up the wight's arm.

But Rhaegar did not falter. His every movement was calculated, and he had already learned his opponent's weakness: brute strength was useless without the skill to wield it effectively.

The White Walker retreated, struggling to regain control. It watched Rhaegar with newfound wariness, its ice-blue eyes now filled with something unexpected—fear.

“You've lost, ugly thing,” Rhaegar sneered, stepping closer.

Blackfyre clanged against the ice-crystal spear, the Valyrian steel sliding down its frosted shaft before cutting into the pale, dead hand of the wight. The creature had no time to react—its sluggish mind too slow to dodge. With a hollow clatter, the spear dropped from its grip.

Instinctively, the wight retaliated, thrusting its large foot forward in a desperate attempt to strike. But Rhaegar didn't flinch or parry. Instead, he angled Blackfyre down, its tip ready to meet the attack.

The White Walker froze. In a moment of panic, it jerked its foot back, stumbling awkwardly and losing balance. In just a few seconds, its fatal weakness was exposed.

"You're afraid of Valyrian steel, aren't you?" Rhaegar's eyes gleamed with the realization. He hadn't expected such a discovery.

Swish!

Blackfyre arced through the air, aiming directly for the wight's neck, its pale skin folded and taut. The wight's ice-blue eyes widened in fear as it lifted its hand in a futile attempt to block the blow. Puff.

The blade sliced cleanly through the wight's hand, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. The creature's mouth opened wide, but no sound escaped. It crumbled silently, its body disintegrating like foam, turning to pale dust that scattered in the cold wind.

Rhaegar stood frozen, watching the remnants of the White Walker drift away. It took him a moment to grasp the enormity of what had just happened.

Clattering...

At the same time, the army of the dead faltered. Thousands of skeletal soldiers collapsed, their bodies turning to powder and dispersing into the air, carried away by the wind like ash.

"Roar..."

Above, the Cannibal circled, its eerie green eyes flashing with suspicion. The dragon tentatively landed, its hind legs scratching at the ghostly green dragonfire still smoldering on the snow. The dead, once wrapped in flame, had long since crumbled, leaving behind nothing but the acrid stench of burning.

"We've won!" The Child of the Forest's voice rang out, filled with joy. It hurried over to Rhaegar, eyes wide with excitement. "The White Walkers can be killed! When they die, their army of the dead dies with them!"

"No wonder Valyrian steel is worth its weight in gold," he muttered, patting Blackfyre at his waist. His gaze shifted to the Cannibal, now sniffing around cautiously. House Targaryen still had several Valyrian steel swords in its possession. And with the dragonglass weapons forged from the mines beneath Dragonstone, the threat of the White Walkers seemed less daunting.

"Not as powerful as I thought... more like a curse," Rhaegar mused.

“Where are we going now?” the Child of the Forest asked, stumbling to keep up with him, its voice enthusiastic. “We should go to the Greenseer and ask how to fight the White Walkers.”

Its race, after all, lived near the Heart Tree, and relocating the entire group might be necessary.

“No rush. There’s someone else we need to find first,” Rhaegar replied, ignoring the question as he deftly mounted the dragon’s back. The sight of the White Walker’s weakness had filled him with renewed confidence in the war between the living and the dead.

The Child of the Forest’s words, along with the cryptic messages of the witch Quaithe, had left Rhaegar with more questions than answers. If the Greenseer was truly wise, he would come to Rhaegar, not the other way around. Besides, the Shadow Lands of Asshai were full of witches and dark magic. Who knew if any real power there could defeat the White Walkers or even kill the Night King?

“Roar...”

The Cannibal stretched its massive wings, shaking off the remnants of the battlefield. Its head turned toward the towering mountains in the north.

The Fist of the First Men—where Robb and the others might be hiding.

...

“Hurry up, my little crows,” a wildling hissed, urging the captives forward.

At the Fist of the First Men, a ragged line of wildlings climbed steadily, leading a group of prisoners, all bound and clad in armor. Robb, his arms tightly bound with rope, struggled against his restraints, his voice filled with urgency.

“Let us go! The White Walkers are real—they’re here!” he pleaded, anxiety clear in his tone.

A red-nosed wildling with a toothy grin slapped Robb’s side with a filthy hand, the stench of sweat and dirt clinging to him. “Oh, we know the White Walkers exist, crow,” he sneered. “But we’re not letting you go that easily.” The wildling’s grin widened. Capturing a few “crows” wasn’t easy, and they were valuable as hostages.

Robb winced and dodged the wildling’s filthy touch. “Where are you taking us? You should head to the Wall,” he urged. “The king and my father—has convinced the North to let the free folk through. We can fight the White Walkers together!”

“No chance,” came the cold, gravelly voice of the leader—a giant of a man with a face like stone. He looked down at Robb with disdain. “The free folk don’t trust anyone.”

His eyes gleamed with a hard, unshakable confidence. “Once we find the Horn of Winter and awaken the sleeping giants beneath the earth, that Wall won’t be able to stop us.”

"Yeah, yeah..." The wildlings around them echoed the sentiment, their faces alight with hope at the mention of the Horn of Winter. To them, it was more than a myth—it was the key to taking back the North, to finally reclaiming everything their ancestors had lost. Once the horn was blown, the Wall would crumble, and the free folk would rule the North.

Robb frowned in confusion. The Horn of Winter? Sleeping giants beneath the ground? He knew nothing of these legends, but the wildlings believed in them with fervor. His companions had already been separated from him, absorbed into the wildling tribe, their fates uncertain.

And now, they were all being dragged to the Fist of the First Men, in search of this legendary horn.

Chapter 674: The Real Horn!

The wildlings continued their climb up the mountain, turning their backs on the captive "crow". Robb buried his head, his fingers secretly slipping into his cloak to pull out a few dragonglass arrows. He would throw one away after every stretch of the journey—a quiet ritual of psychological comfort.

...

The Wall, Castle Black.

Cregan Stark gathered his advisers in the silent hall. The air was thick with tension. The big man from House Umber, unable to bear the silence, muttered, "The king has been gone for half a month. Shouldn't we be preparing?"

His words were immediately hushed. The cold beyond the Wall was unbearable now, and the threats of rebellious wildlings and the unpredictable White Walkers loomed. The king had taken a grave risk by venturing beyond.

"I was right. We can't just sit here and do nothing," the Umber man continued, raising his voice, his tone brimming with Northern grit. "What's the point of huddling in this drafty hall? We might as well kill the wildlings already inside the Wall and rally every man of the North to defend it."

Knock, knock.

A dull thudding sound silenced the growing murmur. All eyes turned to Cregan, who leaned forward with a serious expression. "The King has a dragon by his side," he reminded them, his voice low but commanding. "That's why we must focus on the task at hand even more."

"My lord, saving those savages is not a task," the Umber man was quick to object, his face contorted with anger.

"Yes, the savages should never have crossed the Wall."

"The King let those savages in—who will manage those sons of bitches?"

The room erupted as a dozen nobles stood, their objections ringing out in unison. Among them, Cregan noted the men bearing the sigils of House Bolton—the "Upside-Down Flayed Man"—and House Manderly of White Harbor, marked by the "Male Merman Holding a Trident."

As one of the most powerful and ancient houses of the North, House Stark held sway over many ancient vassals, but the Bolton and Manderly lords had influence over much of the population and controlled the only major northern port.

Bang!

The table shook violently as Roderick Dustin slammed his fist down, causing the wine jugs to rattle. He sprang to his feet, shouting, "Sit down and listen to the Lord!"

The old man was tall and fierce, his fury palpable. Silence fell swiftly over the hall. The lords who had opposed allowing the wildlings past the Wall exchanged frustrated glances but sat back down reluctantly. Roderick's reputation and the ferocity of the Army of the Winter Wolves kept them in check, despite their simmering anger.

The other northern nobles watched with varying expressions. The representatives of House Karstark, House Mormont of Bear Island, and other senior houses—those loyal to House Stark—fixed their eyes on the young Lord. As the purest descendants of the First Men, they had centuries of blood feud with the wildlings. They wouldn't dare directly oppose the King's command, but Cregan knew they expected an explanation.

After all, House Stark did not have a dragon.

"My lords, I have only one question: Who is your Lord?"

Cregan Stark slowly rose to his feet, unsheathing the massive sword strapped to his back. He placed it heavily on the table with a cold finality. Silence fell over the room.

Looking down at his advisers, his expression hardened. "The North belongs to the people of the North. If even we doubt the defense of our homeland, who will protect our families, our women, and our children?"

His voice dropped as he invoked the words of his house. "Winter is coming." He paused, letting the weight of the words sink in. "The White Walkers are here, and the entire North is in peril. The wildlings are an essential part of the fight against the Others—they cannot be abandoned."

BANG!

Roderick Dustin slammed his fist on the table, his voice booming with fervor. "My Lord, I, an old man, stand with you. I'll crush the testicles of anyone who dares oppose you!" He glared fiercely at the room, his eyes daring anyone to challenge him.

"Who else objects to the wildlings entering the Wall?" Cregan asked calmly, scanning the faces of those gathered.

No one spoke.

"Good," Cregan continued, his tone measured but firm. "I will send a raven to the royal court, requesting more aid before the King returns."

Then, with sudden intensity, he slammed his hand on the table and declared, "Winter is coming, and no one can retreat!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The advisers of the North pounded their fists in unison, their frostbitten faces alight with determination.

"Winter is coming!" they shouted, the passionate chorus echoing through the hall.

...

Winterfell.

"Quack..."

A raven, black as night, fluttered through the open window. The elderly Maester gently removed the letter tied to its leg, his expression serious.

"What news?" Baela asked eagerly, her eyes alight with excitement. She had been cooped up in Winterfell far too long, the stillness rusting her spirit.

The Maester frowned as he unfolded the message and slowly handed it to the Queen. "Your Grace, a letter of assistance from the Lord."

Rhaenyra sat at the head of the hall, sipping hot wine as she tallied the endless accounts. Day after day, she faced growing demands: aiding nobles whose castles had collapsed under the heavy snow, sending men to clear roads and farms, rescuing orphaned children... the list seemed never-ending, and no matter how hard she worked, she struggled to keep up.

When the Maester passed her the letter, Rhaenyra wiped her lips and opened it with a flicker of anticipation. It had been too long since she had last heard from Rhaegar, and any news from beyond the Wall was rare. The siblings exchanged letters whenever ravens could make the treacherous journey, though messages came few and far between.

As she read the letter, Rhaenyra's joy faded. The problems piled up quickly: a shortage of supplies, equipment requests, wildlings entering the Wall and in need of land. And worst of all—Rhaegar had left the Wall.

The White Walkers had yet to strike, but there was plenty of trouble brewing within the North itself.

"Your Grace, let me see that," Baela said, her hand on her hip as she leaned over to read the letter with her.

Rhaenyra passed the letter, brushing her long silver-blond hair aside. Her deep violet eyes flashed with helplessness. "Lord Cregan's given me a difficult task this time. The Last Hearth, closest to Castle Black, was granted to the Night's Watch during the reign of the Old King. The people of the North won't allow free folk to settle that close to their lands."

Baela frowned. "And now Rhaegar's left the Wall too. What's he thinking?"

"Your Grace, don't trouble yourself with these matters," Baela urged.

But Rhaenyra's mind was already racing. "The free folk want land. We could start by offering promises—grand ones—to calm both them and the northern lords."

Baela raised an eyebrow. "Promises? We don't have any land to give, Rhaenyra."

Rhaenyra smiled, stroking Baela's silky hair, thankful for her adopted daughter's boldness. "No, but we do."

Baela's confusion turned to curiosity as Rhaenyra reached for her quill. "Daeron has reclaimed vast tracts of fertile land in the Golden Fields. If the free folk truly seek land, they can cross the sea to the east and settle there."

That's why the crown could support the North so confidently—because they had thousands of acres of fertile land to fall back on. The royal family had more resources than anyone had realized.

Baela, however, was less concerned with politics. "So... when do we go to the Wall?" she asked, her voice filled with impatience. Adventure, not strategy, burned in her veins.

Rhaenyra's violet eyes sparkled with the same desire. "Let me think on that," she said, her thoughts drifting northward.

The Wall still called to her.

...

The Foot of the Fist of the First Men.

Snow had long since buried the footprints of the ancestors, leaving the ground a vast, unbroken stretch of white. Black boots crunched into the snow, sinking deep into the frozen pits. Rhaegar braced himself against the biting wind and bent down to pick up a dark arrow.

"Dragonglass," he muttered.

The Dragonglass weapons gifted by the Children of the Forest had been reserved for the most critical missions, and they were now scattered ahead of him.

"They're just up ahead," he said, gripping the arrow tightly.

His expression turned solemn as he began to climb the ancient hill. Heat radiated from his body, melting the snow and turning the wind away as if it couldn't touch him. Every few steps, he found another indentation in the snow—a footprint not yet covered by the storm, and next to it, another dark arrow.

The Child of the Forest walking beside him scanned their surroundings, her gaze growing darker as they approached the summit. The Fist of the First Men looked eerily familiar to her.

...

The Summit of the Fist of the First Men.

Robb and a handful of Unsullied worked in haste, freeing themselves from the ropes binding their supplies, swinging their picks to break through the frozen earth and stone.

“Hurry! We’re almost there,” urged the red-nosed wildling, kneeling on the ground and shoving aside the packed snow and dirt with frantic hands.

In no time, they had dug three feet into the frozen ground at the mountain’s peak.

“Stop!” the wildling shouted, his voice trembling with excitement. He reached into the hole, his hands shaking as he pulled out a rag-covered object. The cloth was old and blackened, rough to the touch.

Robb bent over to inspect it. It was unmistakable—Night’s Watch cloaks, tattered and ancient.

“Ha! At last!” the wildling cried, rubbing his hands together feverishly as he unwrapped the bundle.

The first thing to catch his eye was the gleam of dark Dragonglass—daggers, spearheads, arrowheads, all glinting under the dim light of the storm.

“What is this junk?” the wildling scowled, tossing the Dragonglass aside in frustration. Beneath it, still wrapped in the black cloth, lay a horn—pale and engraved with tiny runes. The horn was three feet long, its surface smooth like polished bone.

“The Horn of Winter!” the wildling gasped, his eyes widening as he lifted the artifact above his head, trembling with awe.

“Be careful, idiot!” growled a tall wildling, slapping him on the back of the head. He snatched the horn from the trembling man’s hands and inspected it closely. It appeared undamaged, its ivory surface unblemished. He was about to raise it to his lips and blow when he noticed something odd—a faint flaw at the mouthpiece.

His stomach knotted with dread. He shook the horn near his ear.

Clang, clang...

The hollow interior echoed with the unsettling sound of something rattling inside.

“What the hell is that?”

The other wildlings gathered quickly, surrounding him with anxious looks.

“The horn’s broken!” the tall wildling growled, his fury rising. He made a move to hurl it into the snow.

“Let me try!” the red-nosed wildling protested, snatching it back. He raised the horn to his lips and blew.

A high-pitched, squeaky sound emerged—a far cry from the deep, ancient tone of legend. It was no more than a child’s toy whistle.

“It’s broken... It’s really broken...” the red-nosed wildling groaned, collapsing into the snow, his face a mask of despair.

Legend held that the Horn of Winter was a sacred artifact coveted by both the Children of the Forest and the giants. During the invasion of the First Men, the Children used it to awaken giants from the

earth, sending a wave that shattered the Arm of Dorne. Later, during the Andal invasion, the Horn of the East was said to have summoned the sea to flood The Neck, attempting to divide the North from Westeros.

But something had gone wrong, and instead of breaking the land, it only drowned a large part of the forest, creating the swampy mire known today as The Neck.

“We’re finished!” the red-nosed wildling cried out in despair, grabbing a fistful of snow and throwing it to the ground. “Without the Horn of Winter, we’ll never breach the Wall. We’re doomed to become corpses—slaves to the Others!”

He buried his face in his hands, as the wind howled and the snow fell harder.

Chapter 675: Integrating the North and the Free Folk

“Who said that?”

As the words hung in the air, a cold voice cut through the stillness, picking up the conversation. The wildlings froze, startled by the unfamiliar tone. It was a voice none of them had heard before.

“Where are the wargs?” the voice demanded.

The red-nosed wildling’s eyes widened, scanning the ranks for the wargs. As a scout, how could he have allowed an enemy to get so close? Turning his head, he spotted the male Skinchanger—a thin, dry-haired figure—his face expressionless, eyes rolled back in his head.

“Huh!”

Above them, a grey hawk shrieked in alarm, circling the sky frantically. From the blind side of the mountain, two figures emerged—one tall, one short—walking toward them with deliberate steps.

Rhaegar, his Blackfyre sword in hand, approached without haste, his face indifferent. “A team with Skinchangers is rare, even among the free folk.”

His gaze drifted, landing on Robb, whose chapped lips and bound hands betrayed the hardships he’d faced.

“Your Grace,” Robb exclaimed, excitement bubbling up as he tried to move forward, only to be held back by his captors.

Rhaegar nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes narrowing. “Where are the giants?”

“The giants... they’re being held at the free folk camp, Your Grace,” Robb answered quickly, his shoulders shaking. Even with the king here, they had still dared to bind him.

“How did you slip past the Skinchangers?” The red-nosed wildling stepped forward, drawing his axe and standing defensively before the immobilized Skinchanger.

“Hide?” Rhaegar blinked, his tone almost casual. “I didn’t.”

Suddenly, the Child of the Forest darted out, her green eyes fixed on the grey hawk above. With a sharp cry—"Kee!"—the hawk let out a mournful screech and tumbled from the sky. The Child of the Forest caught it gracefully, cradling the bird in her slender arms.

The wildlings gasped in shock.

"A Child of the Forest!" the red-nosed wildling stammered, stepping back in disbelief. "Who... who are you?"

The Children of the Forest had vanished from the world thousands of years ago, their presence reduced to myth. Even the natives of The Neck rarely saw one. Yet here stood one, following a young man.

Rhaegar strode forward, planting Blackfyre into the snow with a calm authority. "Didn't you hear what your prisoner just called me?"

The Valyrian steel sword glimmered, its black surface reflecting the faint ripples of water across the pristine snow.

The red-nosed wildling sucked in a sharp breath, his voice quivering. "You're the King in the Wall?"

"Let me go, you fool!" Robb's voice rang out, powerful and clear, as he kicked at the wildlings who held him. Breaking free, he straightened, his voice loud with pride.

"Before you stands Rhaegar I of House Targaryen, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, the only King on both sides of the Narrow Sea, and Lord of Slaver's Bay and Old Valyria!"

A cascade of titles spilled from his lips, but there were still many more that went unspoken. The wildlings exchanged stunned looks, unsure of how to respond.

Leaning casually on his sword, Rhaegar offered a faint smile. "And who are you?"

The wildling with the red nose opened his mouth, then hesitated, glancing at the towering figure standing beside him. "Er... he's Balon."

The tall wildling puffed out his chest, sending a quick glance to his second-in-command.

Understanding instantly, the red-nosed wildling corrected himself. "Balon, King-Beyond-the-Wall."

"The king of the wildlings," Robb scoffed, freeing his companions from their bindings.

"I am the King-Beyond-the-Wall," Balon said, his voice calm but firm. "Chosen by the free folk."

He was an imposing figure—at least seven feet tall, with muscles rippling beneath his furs, exuding raw power.

Rhaegar tilted his head, eyeing Balon with a chuckle. "King-Beyond-the-Wall... where's your crown?"

Balon adjusted the bearskin hat on his head, stretching his neck as he replied, "The free folk don't need crowns. They're just shackles, a yoke of oppression on their people."

Rhaegar's smile faded, his tone growing more serious. "Without a crown, how do you distinguish a king from a commoner?"

Drawing the gleaming Blackfyre, Rhaegar's voice hardened. "A crown isn't about being superior to others. It's about standing taller when the sky falls."

He spoke with the weight of command, like a king who leads by example. In the face of danger, when the dead rise and the night grows long, it is the king who must stand firm. And as long as he didn't retreat from the North, neither would his vassals.

Rhaegar met his gaze, stepping closer. "Take me to the remaining free folk and lead them through the Wall with me."

Balon's face twisted in anger. "Who'd believe your lies?" he shouted, swinging his axe in a wide arc.

Clang!

In a flash of black steel, the axe flew from his hands, spinning through the air. Balon froze, staring in disbelief at the broken handle in his grasp. The cold edge of Blackfyre pressed lightly against his neck, sending a chill straight to his core.

Rhaegar didn't flinch, his voice calm. "Lead the way, great King-Beyond-the-Wall."

Balon's bravado crumbled. He stood speechless, his defiance draining away.

Robb, eyebrows raised in triumph, stepped forward, grabbing a rope. "Shall I bind them?" he asked, ready to tie up the wildlings.

"No need," Rhaegar waved him off. "They're on our side now."

The wildlings shared a common enemy with them—the White Walkers—and there was no sense in wasting strength on needless fighting.

Robb nodded, but couldn't resist one final act of payback. He grabbed the red-nosed wildling by the collar and delivered a hard punch to his eye socket.

"Ugh!" the wildling grunted, stumbling back.

"For every punch you gave me," Robb growled through clenched teeth, "I'll return one."

The red-nosed wildling kept silent, not daring to provoke him further.

Rhaegar surveyed the ground, picking up the scattered Dragonglass weapons. His gaze shifted to the Child of the Forest, who sat nearby, cradling the damaged Horn of Winter in her delicate hands.

"What is this?" Rhaegar asked, sensing a faint, unfamiliar magic in the air.

It wasn't the blood and fire of his Targaryen lineage, nor the icy cold of the Others. It felt closer to the elemental magic of the Rhoynar's Water Wizards, but richer—like the vibrant, natural aura of the Children of the Forest. The scent of earth and fresh morning mist seemed to fill his senses, as if he were standing in a spring forest.

"A damaged sacred object," the Child of the Forest whispered, her voice trembling with sorrow. Her green eyes were full of regret. "Thousands of years ago, after we signed the peace with the First Men, many of our ancient treasures were lost. The Horn of Winter was one such relic, once shared between us and the giants. It was thought lost forever, until now."

"And what does it do?" Rhaegar crouched beside him, comparing the horn to the Dragon Horn he carried. The Dragon Horn, made of Valyrian steel and towering over two meters long, was a giant among horns. Only those with the blood of dragons could sound it; anyone else would be consumed by fire.

The Child of the Forest gently caressed the Horn of Winter, its ancient surface worn but still powerful. "It can summon the sleeping giants beneath the earth. It's nature's greatest weapon."

Her brown-green cheek pressed against the horn, but her eyes were filled with sadness. The horn, though once mighty, was now damaged. Its true power could no longer be unleashed.

"More powerful than the Dragon Horn?" Rhaegar asked skeptically, taking the Horn of Winter from her. He bent down, scooped up a handful of snow, and wiped the mouthpiece with disdain. Then, without a second thought, he brought it to his lips.

Wo—

The pale horn vibrated gently in his hands, releasing a deep, resonant sound that echoed across the snowy expanse. The melody stirred the air, causing the falling snow to lift and swirl, forming a graceful arc in the sky.

...

King's Landing, the Red Keep.

In the council chamber, Daemon Targaryen lounged lazily in the main seat, his legs draped over the armrest, holding a letter in his hand. His expression darkened as he read its contents. Across from him, advisors Lyman and Orwyle exchanged uneasy glances but dared not reprimand him for his casual disrespect.

"The King has gone beyond the Wall, and the people of the North are asking for more aid," Daemon announced, frowning deeply. He wasn't just displeased with his nephew's reckless decision to venture into the frozen wilderness, but he also held little respect for the people of the North.

In Daemon's mind, if the people of the Vale were little more than "bronze-armored peasants," then the North was filled with even worse—a rabble of lowborn savages fit to rot in the frozen wasteland beyond the Neck. They were no different from the wild lords of Crackclaw Point, bastards of the cold and wilderness. In his view, north or south of the Wall made little difference—they were all savages.

"Your Grace may be far away, but the Wall still has Princes Aegon and Aemond," Lyman spoke up, his voice trembling as his slow mind processed the situation.

"Both uncles are here, but their dragons may refuse to cross it," Baelon, seated at the lower end of the table, chimed in while supporting the elderly Lyman.

“That’s troubling,” Lyman murmured, his brow furrowing.

Daemon’s eyes flicked toward Orwyle, who had been watching the exchange quietly. “Grand Maester, why can’t the dragons cross the Wall?”

Orwyle hesitated, then finally spoke, choosing his words carefully. “According to historical records, your grandmother, Queen Alysanne, faced the same issue. Her dragon, Silverwing, refused to leap the Wall as well. It seems related to the dragons’ innate nature.”

“Silverwing couldn’t do it, but Vermithor did, didn’t he?” Daemon’s eyes flashed with impatience. “I don’t want old tales. I want facts.”

He waved away the explanation, clearly uninterested. “My nephew has rallied the wildlings beyond the Wall, and the Wall needs royal reinforcements now.”

Baelon leaned forward, his hand brushing the dragon-taming whip at his waist. “Do you want me to go?”

“No,” Daemon snapped, sitting upright. “I’ll go myself and see these so-called White Walkers.”

He had heard enough of the prophecies—A Song of Ice and Fire spoke of ancient threats rising in the North, and Daemon didn’t take such things lightly. Rhaegar might be strong, but the companions he had gathered were another matter. Daemon would need to see for himself.

“Prince, you are the regent,” Tormund, the Master of Whisperers, reminded him gently, choosing his words with care. “The merchants of Hightower and Qarth are officially at war, and the kingdom requires someone reliable to keep peace in the realm.”

Daemon waved him off dismissively. “What about Helaena? Send her to her mother’s family—she can fly around on her dragon if she’s bored.”

Tormund hesitated. “Princess Helaena received a raven this morning. She’s already left for the Wall.”

Daemon laughed, though his thoughts were still on the White Walkers. “She’s eager to leave the royal court behind, it seems.”

He looked at Baelon, who sat beside him, a young man with fire in his veins but uncertainty in his eyes. “I’ll go to the North. You, Baelon, will stay and manage King’s Landing.”

“Me?” Baelon blinked, pointing at himself in disbelief.

“Yes, you,” Daemon replied, giving him a once-over. “Can you handle it?”

Baelon's eyes widened at the sight of the dragons awakening, but then a steely resolve filled him. He took a deep breath, the confidence building within him. "No problem. I'll take care of King's Landing."

Daemon nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Good. You've got a bit of your father's courage."

He cast his gaze across the room, thinking of the broader realm. For the moment, Westeros was quiet—no major conflicts, save for a few skirmishes in Oldtown. The army in the Westerlands hadn't yet crossed Bitterbridge, and it was important to spur them northward.

His mind was made up. Daemon would lead the army to the Wall. There was no time to waste. He couldn't be chained to King's Landing when there was a war to be fought beyond the Wall. The North needed fire and blood.

Chapter 676: The Night King Awakes

Fist of the First Men.

A towering peak of ancient stone jutted into the sky, its summit bare and windswept, defiant against the elements. Below, the snow-covered slopes glistened, stretching far down the mountain's side. Midway up, a sudden shift sent a foot of snow cascading downward, roaring as it swept across the land. In an instant, the avalanche consumed the foothills, burying the quickest path from the Fist of the First Men to the Haunted Forest beneath tons of ice and debris.

Who had triggered it?

Someone—or something—had set off the avalanche.

...

Hardhome.

The only outlet to the sea Beyond the Wall, and the largest gathering place for the free folk. Towering cliffs shielded the settlement from the biting sea winds, while the vast, flat beach below could accommodate the largest of ships. Hundreds of thousands of wildlings were spread across the area, chopping trees to build makeshift shelters, their campfires burning fiercely against the cold.

"This is our base camp," Baron grumbled as he led Rhaegar through the sprawling encampment, his scowl deepening.

"There are at least 300,000 people here," Rhaegar observed, scanning the crowd of free folk wrapped in thick animal furs. "What are you all eating?"

Everywhere, small clusters of fires consumed wood at an alarming rate, though they brought warmth and drove away beasts from the edges of the settlement.

Baron shot him a defiant look. "The free folk admire freedom. We take what the land gives us—whether from the mountains or the sea."

In other words, they survived by catching whatever they could.

"You're back, King Baron," came a voice from nearby.

A tall, heavily tattooed man grinned as he approached, his teeth filed to sharp points. He was bare-chested despite the cold, his eyes gleaming with a feral intensity that made Rhaegar narrow his gaze. The man's stench hit him before the words did—a rank odor of sweat and rot.

“Yo, did you catch a flock of crows?” the man sneered, gripping his axe tightly as he leaned closer, his eyes hungry, as though he might devour Rhaegar and his companions on the spot.

Senli's face twisted in frustration, but out of respect for the King-Beyond-the-Wall, he slowly backed off, raising his hands in mock surrender. Before he left, he shot Rhaegar a venomous glare, his sharp teeth bared like an animal's.

Baron gave a casual shrug. “That's Senli, leader of the Thenn. Got a strong sense of taste, that one.” He leaned in closer and whispered, “Careful with him—those teeth can chew through bone.”

Rhaegar shot him a cold look, pushing Baron's hand off his shoulder. “Do you think dragon teeth bite harder?”

Baron's face twitched with irritation, and he pulled his hand back, muttering under his breath.

“Take me to the leaders of all the free tribes,” Rhaegar ordered. His voice turned icy. “They're all coming with me.”

Nunu, the giant, was casually stripping the hide off a reindeer, his wide grin showing as he called out, “You actually came.”

The half-skinned reindeer was tossed aside, and Nunu moved in for a hug, his bloodstained hands reaching out toward Rhaegar and Robb.

“No, no! Hold on, brother!” Robb quickly ducked to avoid the giant's embrace, raising his hands in defense to dodge the bloody grip.

Rhaegar took a moment to survey the scene. Giants of all ages were gathered together—an impressive sight within the free folk camp. With the giants' support, it would be far easier to rally the wildlings into a cohesive force. The giants commanded respect, and their raw strength would make them invaluable allies in the coming fight.

A group of Thenns lingered near the giant camp, their faces painted in vivid colors, watching the giants with a mix of suspicion and malice.

"Hmph," Rhaegar scoffed, shaking his head with a faint smile. "Frogs at the bottom of a well."

...

A fortnight later.

The Wall, Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.

The blue-and-green seahorse banner of House Velaryon fluttered atop the Wall, alongside the black banners of the Night's Watch. Sailors clad in silver-gray armor mingled with the black-cloaked brothers, adding a splash of color to the otherwise bleak scene.

"Roar!"

A massive scarlet dragon circled high above, its furious roar echoing through the cold, northern air.

"Meleys still refuses to accept the cold," Corlys Velaryon muttered from his perch on the watchtower, his sharp gaze following the dragon's restless flight. For weeks now, the dragon had been in this uneasy state, flapping and diving with clear agitation.

Rhaenys, dressed in soft black-and-red armor, exhaled a frosty breath. "Meleys has been in a foul mood lately. Even the goats it's fed aren't being eaten. It's barely touching the food."

Among the many dragons of House Targaryen, Meleys was known for its temperament—fierce and proud, yet lazy.

Though the fastest dragon alive, Meleys was now over seventy years old, wise and cunning like an experienced warrior past its prime. Yet ever since nearing the Wall, there hadn't been a single day of peace.

"Dragons are wild, and we can't control them entirely," Corlys remarked, putting a comforting arm around his wife's shoulders. "At least the king's dragon can cross the Wall."

"Don't try to soothe me," Rhaenys chuckled, shaking her head. "I'm not nearly as anxious as others might be." She smiled, feeling content. With both her husband and son here, what more could she ask for?

Corlys was about to respond when a distant rumbling cut him off, the sound growing louder with each passing second.

Rumble—

The ground trembled, like the warning of an approaching earthquake, the noise emanating from deep within the Haunted Forest.

Whooo!

The horn of the Night's Watch blew three times—wildlings were attacking.

“Take care of yourself,” Rhaenys said quickly, breaking free from Corlys’s embrace. “I’ll ride Meleys and scout the area.” Without waiting for a response, she rushed toward the winch ladder, her steps swift and determined.

Corlys’s face grew grim as he peered down from the wall’s edge. The wildling horde stretched far into the distance, a sea of bodies so dense they turned the snow-blackened ground into a dark mass.

"More than 100,000 at least," Corlys muttered, clenching his fists as he calculated the numbers. On a battlefield, anything over 10,000 was already too many to count. But this... this was a moving storm of bodies, a dark cloud blotting out the land.

“Roar...”

A deafening roar suddenly shook the sky, like distant thunder rolling across the frozen sea. The sound reverberated over the battlefield, rattling bones and shaking souls.

And then it appeared.

Out of the thick clouds above, a monstrous black dragon descended, its wings so vast they blanketed the entire landscape and even cast a shadow over the Wall itself. The beast was terrifying—an enormous, two-hundred-meter titan whose sheer size dwarfed everything around it. Its massive, mournful green eyes, like the ghostly fires of purgatory, seemed to pierce through the very souls of those who looked into them.

Corlys’s breath hitched. His eyes widened as he stared in disbelief at the dragon before him. Bigger than Vhagar—the largest dragon alive—and even larger than Balerion the Black Dread in his prime. The scale of this creature was beyond comprehension.

“Land, Cannibal,” came a calm voice from atop the beast.

Rhaegar Targaryen sat upon the dragon’s back, looking down at the scene below with an air of command. His piercing gaze caught sight of a familiar scarlet figure—Meleys—soaring toward the Night’s Watch castle.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal's piercing green eyes swept over the hundreds of thousands of gathered Free Folk below, radiating menace. As it soared over the Wall, its colossal wings beat the air with force.

“Rhaegar, you’ve returned!” Rhaenys exclaimed in surprise, rushing up to meet Meleys.

“It’s me, Aunt,” Rhaegar replied with a small smile, teasing, “and I’ve brought along some big ones who’ve finally learned to behave.”

Rhaenys gently patted the black-scaled Cannibal, and the massive dragon lowered its head obediently, its usual ferocity tempered in his presence. Rhaegar slid smoothly down its sleek scales, landing with a solid thud in the snow.

"You convinced all the wildlings beyond the Wall?" Rhaenys asked, rushing over to embrace him.

"Almost," Rhaegar said, his voice steady as he hugged his long-lost aunt. "There are still some stubborn holdouts."

The Thenn, for example, had been especially resistant—but the fires of his dragon had quickly dealt with them. As for the scattered wildlings who remained hidden or refused to migrate, they were now little more than a small, disorganized threat.

"Excellent," Rhaenys said, smiling broadly. "With the Free Folk on our side, the White Walkers will never breach the Wall."

Her use of the term "Free Folk" rather than "wildlings" did not go unnoticed. It was a subtle acknowledgment of the new alliance.

"And where's Laenor?" Rhaegar asked, releasing her and scanning the skies for Seasmoke. Ever since he'd witnessed the true horror of the White Walkers, an unshakable sense of unease had settled over him. He felt a growing discomfort with the idea of dragons traveling alone—something about it felt wrong.

Rhaenys paused for a moment, then chuckled. "Laenor has gone to Castle Black. He's inspecting the Watchtowers along the Wall as well."

Eighteen Watcher's Castles stood guard along the length of the Wall, each a crucial defense against the icy threat to the North.

"Tell him to station himself at Castle Black and stop riding the dragon around aimlessly," Rhaegar said firmly, his tone sharpening with concern. "The Free Folk will begin entering the Wall in groups. We'll escort them to Castle Black. No one should be caught alone—not even on dragonback."

Rhaenys nodded, her expression serious now. "Understood. I'll send a raven to Laenor immediately."

She admired her nephew's foresight and calm control. Rhaegar had been gone for a month, rallying hundreds of thousands of Free Folk, facing dangers that others couldn't imagine.

...

The Land of Always Winter.

Snow howled through the barren expanse, where ice stretched unbroken for a thousand leagues. This desolate wasteland lay far north of Westeros, beyond the Fist of the First Men, past the storm-lashed polar glaciers where winter raged eternal. No warmth, no life stirred here—only endless cold and silence.

Sa, sa, sa...

Footsteps crunched in the deep snow, leaving a trail in the frozen wilderness. A pale figure, draped in cold, moved steadily forward. The ice-blue eyes of the figure locked on the valley ahead, where jagged ice crystals jutted from the ground like teeth.

In the center of the valley stood an altar of ice, its surface smooth and flat, gleaming under the pale light.

“Wow~~”

A soft cry broke the stillness. Two tiny arms poked out from the figure’s chest, revealing a bundled baby squirming within the figure’s embrace. The pale figure lowered its head, gazing down at the infant with eyes as cold as the land around them. The baby’s face, flushed red against the freezing air, wriggled in its swaddling, occasionally letting out a soft gurgle.

The figure’s lips twitched slightly, then it gently placed the swaddled baby onto the altar. The child did not resist, its wide, innocent eyes staring up at the sky.

Hummm...

Suddenly, a chilling aura swept through the valley, lowering the temperature even further. The altar trembled, as though something ancient and malevolent stirred beneath it. A pale light flickered, and a shape emerged from the ice—a humanoid figure, its skin as white as snow, clad in ice-forged armor. Horns jutted from its bald head, and its ice-blue eyes opened with a cold, indifferent gaze.

The baby, unaware of the being beneath it, continued to flail about, its tiny limbs trying to turn over.

In an instant, the figure moved. One moment it was beneath the altar; the next, it appeared at its edge, silent and swift. Its back was straight, its posture regal, but slightly hunched as it extended a long, pale finger, its nails as sharp as claws.

Tap.

The finger touched the baby’s forehead, and the child instantly stilled. The humanoid figure’s lips curled into a faint smile, almost paternal in its gentleness. Slowly, the brown in the baby’s eyes faded, replaced by a frosty blue sheen. Its once-lively gaze dulled, and its movements ceased.

The figure tilted its head, observing the transformation with quiet satisfaction. Straightening, it glanced around the altar.

Four White Walkers knelt in the snow, their heads bowed in reverence. They were awaiting the return of their king, their icy lord who had awakened from the long winter. The figure’s cold gaze lingered on them briefly before turning away.

Whoosh...

High atop nearby ice crystals, three more White Walkers stood, mounted on decayed, skeletal horses. Each held an ice spear, standing like sentinels, their forms blending into the frozen landscape.

The pale figure nodded slightly and began walking toward the mouth of the valley.

Step by step, it moved with unhurried purpose, stopping at the valley’s edge. Without a word, it gazed into the distance, its ice-blue eyes growing vacant. It seemed to peer across vast distances, as though seeing far beyond the horizon.

Suddenly, its vision shifted.

A towering peak, surrounded by snow-covered slopes. Avalanches had buried much of the land below. The Fist of the First Men loomed in the vision, stark and silent.

The vision flickered again.

Now, a frozen bay came into view, stretching endlessly beneath a blanket of ice. Countless Free Folk moved across it, migrating south with all their belongings strapped to their backs. The wildlings were fleeing, their destination uncertain, but their path clear.

The scene shifted once more.

The Wall appeared—great, towering, and impenetrable.

Roar!

A silver dragon soared through the sky, its pale scales shimmering against the snow-covered land. It flew over the Wall, its wings casting long shadows on the ice below.

“Seasmoke, we need to hurry to Castle Black,” a distant human voice echoed from the vision, though it was faint, barely a whisper in the icy wind.

Roar!

Seasmoke let out another growl, uneasy, as if sensing an evil presence watching it from afar. The dragon's agitation increased, its body trembling as it twisted in flight.

The vision ended abruptly.

The pale figure stood still, its face expressionless as it broke off a shard of ice from a nearby wall. With deliberate slowness, it began walking out of the frozen valley, leaving behind only silence and the stillness of the Land of Always Winter.

Chapter 677: The Lannisters Court Death

Golden Tooth, the Westerlands.

As a fortress guarding the gateway to the Riverlands from the Westerlands, the walls of Golden Tooth have been repaired countless times. The blue sun banner of House Lefford flies proudly from its towers.

Knock, knock!

The gates of Golden Tooth swung open as a 10,000-strong army rode out, accompanied by 100 wagons filled with supplies and provisions. At the head of the force, 3,000 cavalymen bore the roaring lion banner of House Lannister.

"My lord, are you sure about this?" Lord Lefford of Golden Tooth asked from the battlements, his expression betraying embarrassment.

"Of course," Jason Lannister snorted, looking down his nose at the man. "I'm doing it."

"By doing this, you are making enemies of the crown," Lord Lefford reasoned, his voice edged with concern.

Jason, however, waved off the warning. A month earlier, an army had begun to gather in the Westerlands. Now, it had swelled to 10,000, prepared to march. Yet, a mere 2,000 had dragged their feet to The Twins, taking far longer than expected. Just days ago, Jason had unexpectedly changed his orders, commanding 5,000 troops that were to march north to instead remain at the Green Fork of the Trident.

This was a clear defiance of royal commands. By halting the troops at the Green Fork, Jason had effectively blocked the only passage for reinforcements to aid the royal family.

Today, Westeros was gripped by an unprecedented winter, the snow piled over three feet deep. The Vale was completely isolated, and the only way north for the southern armies was through House Frey's stronghold at The Twins. Blocking the Green Fork would sever the North from the rest of the realm.

Jason's advisers were troubled, but he looked down on them with contempt. "I have no intention of disobeying the King's orders," he claimed defiantly. "The heavy snowfall has simply blocked the roads, making it impossible for our army to advance."

Lord Lefford, sensing the futility of further argument, sighed. "You make your own decisions," he muttered before turning away. His eyes darted nervously as he left.

Jason crossed his arms, the rubies in his gauntlets clinking against the golden lion emblazoned on his breastplate. "Damn Daemon, damn Tyland," he cursed under his breath. "They should all freeze to death along with the men of the North."

It wasn't just personal revenge driving Jason. A merchant from Qarth had recently landed in Lannisport, and two of The Thirteen had struck a secret deal with him. Delaying the royal war against the North would earn Jason fifty ships loaded with Qarthese spices and jewels.

If he could further stall the Reach's nobles from joining the war by creating chaos in Oldtown, he stood to profit even more through increased taxes to Lannisport. The alliance between Oldtown and House Lannister had already crumbled, with Oldtown now a firm supporter of the crown. Allying with Qarth, therefore, was a perfect opportunity for revenge—one that would also weaken the Hightowers of Oldtown.

...

The actions of the army in the Westerlands soon had far-reaching repercussions. A few hundred soldiers from several noble families of the Riverlands were blocked at the Green Fork of the Trident by 2,000 Lannister troops. After fruitless negotiations, they were forced to turn back towards the Red Fork.

Riverrun, the Great Hall...

"My lord, the bastards of House Lannister are blocking our way and preventing us from reinforcing the King!" one of the lords exclaimed.

"Yes, Lord Jason's actions are tantamount to treason," another replied bitterly.

...

Dozens of Riverlands nobles had gathered, shouting angry insults. These were all lords who had been intent on marching north to support the King, but had been stopped in their tracks by the Lannister blockade. The Riverlands, traditionally weak in military strength, had no large standing armies; even its wealthiest houses maintained only a few hundred men each. Together, two or three families would form a small force. Against the 2,000 Lannister soldiers, they were powerless and had come to Riverrun in disgrace to air their grievances.

On the second floor of the hall...

Young Lord Kermit Tully sat on the lord's chair, his head throbbing as the angry voices of his bannermen echoed below. The nobles of the Riverlands were notoriously stubborn and old-fashioned, and they dared to stand against injustice—but they argued endlessly.

'This can't go on,' Kermit thought, rubbing his temples.

"Brother, this is no way to handle things," Oscar Tully said quietly beside him, frowning. "The supply troops from the Crownlands march north every month, and the Westerlands are looking for trouble. Anyone who dares to block the royal forces, especially the northern allies, is asking for war."

Oscar's eyes flashed with impatience. "House Lannister is clearly trying to sabotage the royal effort to defend the Wall. Once the crown learns of this, the flames of war will reignite."

"I know," Kermit replied, his expression darkening as he gritted his teeth. "Jason Lannister has already been reprimanded by Prince Daemon for delaying the troop deployment. This is his petty retaliation."

"Instead of sitting here and waiting to die, why don't we attack?" Benjicot Blackwood, with his youthful, innocent face, spoke up from the second floor. His eyes gleamed with excitement. "The Riverlands are our territory. We could strike the Westerlands forces with a pincer movement, from inside and outside."

The suggestion caused a stir. Benjicot, along with Kermit and Oscar, was one of "The Lads"—a term for the group of young leaders known for their loyalty to the heir to the Iron Throne. Their boldness and strategic insight had earned them a reputation throughout the Seven Kingdoms.

"I think it's feasible," Oscar said, already plotting routes in his mind. His voice was low, laced with murderous intent. "Lady Sabitha of Twins is still there. If we send a raven to her, we can surround their forces on both sides."

Though they were young, "The Lads" had already demonstrated a shrewdness far surpassing the older generation of lords below, most of whom had been born in times of peace and knew little about true warfare.

Kermit stroked the short beard growing on his chin, clearly intrigued by his brother's and friend's plan. The Lannisters were asking for trouble, and someone needed to seize the opportunity for glory. Since the conflict was unfolding in the Riverlands, the Riverlands ought to claim the credit.

Bang!

Kermit rose from his seat and addressed his brothers and the assembled lords in a commanding voice. "I will send a raven to the heir to the throne in King's Landing. He will personally decide the fate of the Westerlands forces. Everyone must gather their troops and prepare for war!"

Though eager, Kermit knew that acting without royal approval could lead to disaster. They needed the crown's blessing to ensure legitimacy. Once that order arrived, they would march to the Green Fork of the Trident.

"Yes, my lord!" came the resounding reply from the Riverlands lords, ready to rally their men.

...

King's Landing...

Snow blanketed the streets, and the bitter cold caused water to drip from the trees like frozen icicles. Scavengers worked from dawn, dragging snow and frozen corpses out of the city.

Knock, knock, knock!

Gold-cloaked men moved in groups, knocking on doors as they went from house to house.

"The king is giving out firewood and rations, open up quickly!" one of them called out.

A wooden door, crudely covered with rough linen, creaked open. A frail, dirty old woman appeared in the doorway, her face pale, her dry hair matted from days without washing. Like everyone else in King's Landing, she had no access to hot water, let alone extra warmth during the unforgiving winter.

"Take this and wait three days for the next distribution," the gold-cloaked man grunted, tossing a bundle of firewood and a sack of rice into the door without care.

The woman didn't complain. Instead, she murmured her gratitude, her voice filled with relief.

"Thank you... thank our king."

"Don't go out unless you have to, and seal your doors and windows at night," the man advised in a tired, routine tone. He pushed his cart and moved on to the next street, his breath fogging in the cold air.

The heavy snow had fallen unexpectedly, and the entire continent had been caught off guard. In response, the king—currently leading forces in the North—had commanded the Free Cities across the Narrow Sea to send daily shipments of food to King's Landing. This steady influx of supplies kept the capital from starving.

The young heir prince, moved by the plight of the people, had ordered the Kingswood outside the city to be felled for firewood, ensuring those suffering in the cold had fuel to burn. Without this aid, far more would have perished in the freezing streets.

"Thank the gods," one of the gold-robed men muttered with relief as they finished their rounds.

Smack!

The leader of the squad slapped him across the head, his face cold and disdainful. "Thank the royal family, you fool. The gods are enjoying themselves in their temples."

Since the rise of Protestantism, the Faith of the Seven had been losing its authority, its power diminished. If the old and new gods were truly watching over them, the common folk wouldn't have to suffer like this, running through snow-filled streets just to survive.

...

Red Keep, Council Hall...

Prince Baelon sat behind his desk, a pile of thick letters and memorials stacked before him. He casually dropped one petition, which detailed the bodies of the people who had been found frozen outside the city gates that morning. Despite the firewood being distributed, it was nowhere near enough to keep everyone warm throughout the day. For those whose homes were drafty, freezing to death was almost inevitable.

In times of crisis, Baelon couldn't help but feel inferior to his father. His father had foreseen the severity of this winter, moving his own family members—Baelon's grandfather and younger siblings—into more secure quarters in advance. He had also ensured a steady flow of food from the Free Cities across the Narrow Sea, keeping the people of King's Landing fed and preventing riots. But no amount of foresight could conjure more heating supplies, and that left Baelon deeply troubled.

Knock, knock, knock!

The door opened, and two advisers entered the room. Otto Hightower, with Lyman Beesbury close behind, approached cautiously.

"Prince," Otto began, his tone measured, "the fighting in Oldtown has worsened. And there are reports of stone men infected with greyscale in Whispering Sound."

Baelon's eyes darkened at the news. He had suspected the merchants of Qarth might be responsible, spreading the stone men and the plague to sow chaos.

"Has support from the Westerlands not arrived?" Baelon asked, surprised.

The armies of The Reach had already set out for the North, and the royal family had secretly ordered House Lannister to reinforce Oldtown's Hightower to counterbalance Qarth's influence.

"This brings me to the second matter," Otto said, drawing a deep breath. His voice grew solemn. "Lord Kermit of Riverrun has written. The Western army is stationed at the Green Fork, blocking the coalition army's route north."

"Prince, this is nothing short of treason," Lyman added, his tone slow and deliberate. "Lord Kermit begs for your guidance. If necessary, the Riverlands lords are prepared to declare war in your name."

"You must act swiftly," Otto urged, his face stern. "The Westerlands no longer respect the authority of the royal family."

With a slight bow, Otto turned and left the hall, his expression hard. The troubles in Oldtown weighed heavily on him, as it was his family's fiefdom.

Baelon remained seated, resting one hand on his forehead as the enormity of the situation sank in. After a moment, he pulled out a scroll and handed it to Lyman.

"Lord Lyman," he sighed, "organize the impoverished people of King's Landing. Have them gather in churches and other shelters where they can receive food and warmth."

Distributing rations and firewood randomly won't help. If they bring them together, they may still be able to save some lives.

"Yes, Prince." Lyman took the scroll, but hesitated for a moment, as if on the verge of urging Baelon to take military action.

Honeyholt, being so close to Oldtown, was already feeling the pressure, and the Bysperry family, vassals to House Hightower, shared in that distress. His own house was affected, and he harbored a deep resentment toward the Westerlands for breaking their word.

"You may go," Baelon interrupted, waving his hand dismissively.

The letter reported a new rebellion from the orphans along the Greenblood River, with rumors of support from Sellswords and Pentoshi mercenaries. The news had arrived half a month ago, right around the time his Aunt Helaena left Summerhall.

His sister Daenerys and brother Maekar were both far away, and there was no one he could rely on in the capital. A wave of loneliness washed over him as his thoughts drifted to his absent brother, Aemon. Aemon had always been the sharpest, the one with the brilliant, if reckless, ideas.

Closing his eyes in a moment of quiet reflection, Baelon's hand moved instinctively to the dragon-taming whip at his waist. He gripped it tightly, a small but tangible comfort.

Chapter 678: A Dragonlord's Death

The Great Grass Sea of the Dothraki stretched endlessly under a clear sky, with white clouds lazily drifting by. The tall grasses swayed gently in the breeze, rippling like waves across the land. Despite the calm, the acrid smell of burning wood began to creep into the air.

A village of the Lamb Men stood in flames.

"Kill them all! Take the women as slaves!"

"Hahaha!"

The shouts of the Dothraki cavalry mixed with the crackling of fire as houses burned. The air was thick with cries of pain and anguish, punctuated by the laughter of marauders. The slaughter had begun.

Near an open-air sheep pen, the animals had been driven off, and dozens of pale-skinned Lamb Men women were locked inside the filthy, stinking enclosure. They were at the mercy of the Dothraki.

"No, let me go!"

The women struggled desperately, their screams and tears only inviting more brutal violence.

"Baa..."

The sheep bleated fearfully from a distance, their panic echoing the chaos of the village.

Aemon stood watching, unable to bear the sight any longer. "Does it have to be this way?"

"These are the rules. The tribe needs supplies for the migration," the scarred Bloodrider beside him replied coldly as they rode together. His eyes casually swept over the scene of destruction.

Aemon stood amidst the flock, his silver-gold hair tousled and dusty from the milling sheep. In the eyes of the Dothraki, both he and the women were nothing more than lambs awaiting slaughter.

"They're innocent," Aemon said, his voice tight. "Isn't it enough that you've killed all the men? The tribe has taken the sheep, the gold... there's no need for this."

He had witnessed the horrors of the Dothraki raids before, but still, the senseless cruelty turned his stomach. The wanton slaughter was unlike anything he'd seen in Westeros, or even the Free Cities across the Narrow Sea. There, at least, the brutality was tempered by some semblance of restraint.

Crack!

A whip snapped through the air, grazing a sheep's back and narrowly missing Aemon's face. Startled, he stumbled, almost trampled by the panicked flock.

The Bloodrider scowled, his voice low and harsh. "If we don't take them, someone else will. Killing the men and sparing the women won't save them." His gaze was cold, unyielding.

There's no mercy on the Great Grass Sea. Only the law of the strong.

Aemon clenched his fists but said nothing more. Here, mercy was as fleeting as the wind over the endless grasslands.

"Every village you destroy is one less supply point in the future," Aemon said, shifting the conversation to focus on the long-term cost of their brutality.

"Hahaha!" The scarred Bloodrider burst into laughter as if he'd just heard an absurd joke. "There are too many people in this world. We all know that."

"Yes, we all know that,"

"Hahaha..." The Bloodrider's laughter mingled with the sound of a group of Dothraki riders passing by, sacks of loot slung over their shoulders. They whistled and jeered as they rode, a display of casual dominance. The Lamb Men were the easiest prey, multiplying like sheep—soft and defenseless.

Aemon gritted his teeth, the mockery cutting deep. He felt the sharp divide between their understanding of good and evil.

"Now, drive the sheep away." The Bloodrider's voice turned hard as he pointed his riding crop at Aemon, sneering. "A Dragonlord without a dragon is as soft as a lamb. You'll have to learn to live like us, boy."

He didn't want to raise a coward.

Aemon lowered his head, standing silently. Just meters away, the cries from the sheep pen grew more desperate. Dothraki men had put down their sacks and entered the pen, dragging the Lamb Men women out like livestock. Resistance was met with fists, kicks, and worse.

The sound of tearing cloth filled the air. Linen dresses were ripped to shreds, exposing pale, milky skin—the mark of the Lamb Men. The Dothraki showed no mercy, lashing their new slaves with whips if they faltered.

Aemon's hand instinctively moved to his back, tracing the rough scars hidden beneath his animal skin coat. The old wounds, from his own initial flogging, prickled painfully as the screams and the crack of whips echoed through the camp.

"This shouldn't be like this," he thought, his heart tightening.

"What did you say?" The Bloodrider squinted, having barely caught Aemon's muttered words.

Aemon lifted his head, eyes burning with defiance. His father had always taught him to revere life, to protect it. The Dothraki were breaking every rule of humanity he held sacred.

"I will not do this," Aemon said, his voice clear as he met the Bloodrider's gaze.

The Bloodrider's expression darkened, realizing the boy was rebelling. "If you disobey an order, you'll walk in the mud with the slaves."

Among the Dothraki, those who rode horses were revered. To walk, to be without a mount, was to be lower than dirt.

Aemon shrugged, his tone calm. "As you wish. I have never longed for a horse."

He removed his animal skin coat, revealing the network of scars crisscrossing his back, and without another word, he walked through the flock of sheep toward another pen. His decision was final. He was done with the Dothraki, with their savage ways.

He couldn't return home. He had no place there anymore. Nor could he make his way to Slaver's Bay, as the Witch had once prophesied.

The endless killing, the mindless plundering—he was tired of it all.

"Stop, or you're a traitor!" the scarred Bloodrider yelled as he dismounted his horse, drawing his curved blade with a menacing hiss.

"I said, do as you like," Aemon replied coolly, not bothering to look back. His focus was elsewhere. He stepped behind a Dothraki man who was assaulting a woman and, without hesitation, kicked the man hard in the shin.

With a thud, the Dothraki toppled from his horse, crashing to the ground in a twisted heap.

"Get up and go over there," Aemon said gently as he helped the half-dressed woman to her feet. He positioned himself protectively between her and the fallen Dothraki. The woman, older and frightened, stared at him with wide eyes.

"I'm not one of them," Aemon shook his head, trying to reassure her. He bent down and picked up a burning stick from the ground.

In an instant, the commotion caught the attention of the surrounding Dothraki. Some paused their vile acts, while others, still laughing, swayed their hips mockingly.

"The shepherd boy thinks he's a warrior now, daring to challenge us for a woman!" one of them jeered, pointing at the youth who had been kicked off his horse. The sight of a Dothraki being bested by a boy not even tall enough to reach a horse's saddle was a source of ridicule.

The onlookers grinned in anticipation, hoping to witness bloodshed sparked by a woman.

Aemon remained unnervingly calm. Torch in one hand, he drew his sword, Truefyre, with the other. The Valyrian steel blade, dark as night and gleaming with a dangerous edge, appeared like a shadow from his hand. The moment it was revealed, greedy eyes among the Dothraki lingered on the sword, its legend well known.

"You know Blood Sorcery, you damned bastard!" the Dothraki youth spat, his face twisting with both fear and anger. He hurriedly hoisted up his trousers and lunged forward, his curved blade slicing through the air, aiming to cut Aemon down and claim the sword as his trophy.

Clang!

Aemon parried the attack with ease, Truefyre deflecting the blow. The two swords clashed violently, but Aemon stood firm, his movements deliberate, precise. The Dothraki youth pressed on, relentless in his attacks, determined to bring down the silver-haired boy and seize the prize.

Aemon's face tightened with focus, his sword slicing back and forth as he blocked each strike. But as he took a step back, his foot slipped into a puddle left by the sheep's trampling, causing him to falter.

"Die, bastard!" the Dothraki youth roared, seeing his opportunity. His scimitar came crashing down in a final, deadly slash.

Pop!

Aemon had stepped wide at the last second, leaning forward and driving Truefyre deep into the youth's stomach. The black Valyrian steel vanished into his flesh, and the Dothraki staggered back, clutching his side in disbelief before collapsing to the ground.

Sizzling!

Aemon's face went pale as he yanked Truefyre free from the Dothraki youth's body. The dying man coughed up blood, stumbling forward before collapsing face-first into the mud. His stomach, disemboweled by the Valyrian steel blade, spilled its contents in a grotesque mess. Death claimed him swiftly.

The surrounding Dothraki, who had been watching with amusement, were stunned into silence. None had expected this outcome. The scene shifted from mockery to a tense quiet, as they quickly ceased their taunts and leers.

The woman who had been pinned beneath the dead youth seized the moment, sobbing as she crawled desperately toward the sheepfold. Aemon stood firm, his eyes scanning the approaching

Dothraki. There were a dozen or so, slowly closing in, their trousers now pulled up, menace gleaming in their eyes.

"Let them go," Aemon said, his voice steady despite the tension. "You don't need this loot. I can offer you something far more valuable—jewels, worth more than all of this."

His mind raced, knowing that if he could just get back to Westeros or one of the Free Cities, he could keep that promise. But the Dothraki offered no reply, their silence colder than their expressions, which now bore a dangerous, calculating glint.

Aemon sighed, understanding that words were useless. "Then there's nothing left to discuss."

Without warning, he hurled the torch he was holding. It landed squarely on a nearby haystack, which immediately ignited, the scattered hay catching fire in the wind.

He took a few steps back as the ruby at the end of Truefyre's hilt began to glow, reflecting the flames that surged to life around him, spitting and hissing like angry fire serpents.

Whoosh!

A sudden gust toppled the haystack, scattering burning hay across the ground and toward the sheepfold. The flames leaped higher, surrounding the area in a fiery ring.

"What's going on?" one of the Dothraki cried out, backing away from the blazing inferno.

Others stared at Aemon in shock, their eyes wide with fear. "He's a blood mage!" someone shouted. The earlier conjuring of a Valyrian steel sword from nowhere, now followed by this blaze—superstition took hold.

The fire, which he had lit out of desperation, had grown far beyond his control. The wind fanned the flames into an unstoppable force, and now both the Dothraki and the fire surrounded him. Behind him, the Lamb Men women huddled together, their tear-filled eyes fixed on him with a mix of hope and fear.

In this moment, Aemon felt small, but he knew he stood taller than he ever had before.

Aemon sighed deeply and said quietly, "It's over."

It was finally over. He could now meet the Trickster, and if his soul remained intact, perhaps he could cross the sea and see his parents and Baela once more.

Crackling!

The fire consumed the hay, growing fiercer as it reached the wooden fence of the sheep pen, flames climbing higher with every passing moment. Aemon stood still amidst the inferno, his eyes closing slowly. He had made his choice—he would never serve the enemy, nor live as a mere shepherd. A dragon had its own way of dying, and this moment felt right.

"Put out the fire! Don't let the boy die like this!"

Suddenly, voices rose from outside the flames, accompanied by the sound of frantic footsteps. The urgency in their cries broke through the roaring blaze.

So many slave girls and bastard boys were trapped in the fire. The Khal would punish them severely if they perished in the flames.

Aemon's eyes snapped open in shock. The fire had only just licked at his feet—it wasn't over after all.

Whoosh!

Cold arrows rained down from the sky, followed by the unmistakable sound of hooves pounding the earth.

"Kill them all!"

The sudden battle cries shattered the night, sweeping over the village like a storm. Aemon's heart raced, the chaos outside hidden from his view by the wall of flames. He couldn't understand—there were 50,000 Dothraki in the horde, and thousands had been sent to loot this village. Why an attack now?

His instincts were right. A larger, more powerful Dothraki group had stormed the village, ambushing the looters and cutting them down in cold blood. The village, already a living hell, descended even further into madness.

Aemon's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Boy, come with me!" A large, rough hand clamped over his mouth from behind, the callused fingers painfully pressing against his skin.

Aemon struggled, shaking his head violently in an attempt to break free. Through the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the Lamb Men woman he had saved earlier. She was no longer the figure of defiance he had seen before. Her chestnut curls were disheveled, her body thickened with age and wear. Her tear-streaked face, lined with deep crow's feet, was bruised and battered.

Without a word, the middle-aged woman wrapped Aemon in her torn linen skirt and dragged him back toward the sheep pen. Inside, a group of women stood in tense silence, instinctively pushing her and Aemon into the corner.

"What are you doing?!" Aemon hissed, breaking free from the hand that covered his mouth. He couldn't stand the thought of sitting idly by.

"Shh," the woman hushed him urgently, placing a finger to her lips. "They won't kill a slave girl who's useful."

She moved swiftly, plucking a dress from the body of a woman whose head had been crushed and pulling it over Aemon's frame. His silver-blond hair, pale skin, and slender form could pass as a young woman's. The middle-aged woman smeared dung across his face and arms, disguising him further, before pulling him close to her chest, cradling him like a child.

Aemon was too stunned to resist, letting her work without protest. By the time he came to his senses, he found himself lying in the woman's ample bosom, hidden among the group of terrified women.

The fire had started to die down, and the chaotic sounds of battle began to fade.

Bang!

The pen's fence was kicked open, and a group of blood-splattered Dothraki stormed inside.

"Take all the slaves," a hoarse voice commanded in Dothraki. "The slave traders in Slaver's Bay are waiting."

The Dothraki moved swiftly, binding the women and taking them away. The dead were left behind, their lifeless bodies scattered across the village.

...

In the blink of an eye, half a month had passed.

Slaver's Bay, Meereen.

Creak, creak!

The wagon wheels groaned as they rolled over the potholed road, each turn a jarring reminder of the journey's harshness. At the front of the procession, the slave owner rode on horseback, occasionally glancing back at the long line of captives trailing behind.

Strong men, old men, and even children were bound in lines with rough hemp ropes, forced to carry loads alongside the wagons. The female slaves were confined in iron prison carts, their hands tied, huddled together in groups. Dothraki riders flanked the procession on both sides, their presence imposing as they waited to exchange "greetings" in the Free Cities. Trading, though despised by the Dothraki, was customarily referred to as "gifts" when dealing with Slaver's Bay, a twisted reflection of their disdain for the act.

Inside one of the prison carts, the middle-aged woman discreetly pulled out a water bag and whispered, "Drink, boy."

Aemon, curled up in her arms, stared vacantly ahead, his eyes dull and lifeless. His necklace had been lost, and Truefyre, the proud Valyrian steel sword of his house, was now a trophy in the hands of a Dothraki Khal. His former tribe had scattered to the winds. Khal Orka had been slain in single combat, and the once-thriving tribe of tens of thousands was absorbed into the horde of a new Khal, Khal Osk.

'I don't even know if Leah is dead or alive,' he thought bleakly, his spirit hollowed out. He didn't drink from the offered water. He had longed to die with the pride of a dragonlord, not to be tossed from one cage to another.

"We're nearly at Slaver's Bay," the woman said softly. Aemon slowly lifted his stiff neck, catching a glimpse of the distant bronze Harpy statue that marked the city of Meereen.

"Drink a little," she urged, her voice gentler this time. "Once we reach the city, we'll have to part ways." She took a sip herself and, seeing his refusal, forced a mouthful of water into his dry throat.

The half-month journey had been grueling, but her once-tattered linen skirt had been patched up, and she now seemed to find some measure of comfort crouching in the corner of the cart. Aemon coughed as the water went down the wrong way, his body weak from starvation and exhaustion.

As he glanced at the woman, a flicker of life reignited in his desolate heart. Despite her ragged appearance, she carried herself with a quiet dignity. Her movements were graceful, deliberate,

betraying none of the roughness of someone used to hard labor. She had once been someone respected, someone with status. The other Lamb Men women in the cart referred to her as the village priestess.

"Don't look at me like that," she sighed, catching his gaze. "You saved me, so I'll save you." Her tone was resigned, but from his position, Aemon could see the flicker of something darker in her eyes—a hatred that ran deep and unyielding.

The Dothraki had ravaged her village and herself, desecrated her altar, and smashed the sacred statues. She had endured unspeakable violence at their hands. Her calm façade couldn't hide the fury burning inside. How could she not hate them?

As time passed, the slave caravan finally entered Meereen.

Boom!

The procession came to a halt in front of the Great Coliseum. The Dothraki herders swiftly drove the slaves out of the wagons, forcing them into a crowded mass. The slaver, surveying the scene with indifference, barked orders: "The men will be locked up in the coliseum. The women will be taken to the square for trading."

At his command, the slave handlers moved quickly, sorting the captives like livestock. Men and boys were separated from the women, the scene a chaotic tangle of shouts and jostling bodies.

In the middle of the crowd, Aemon could barely breathe, pressed in on all sides. The middle-aged woman who had been his protector pulled him close, hiding him in her arms. Her voice dropped to a whisper, "Stay quiet. Don't let them notice you."

With swift, practiced movements, she produced a dull knife and began cutting his long silver hair, strands falling to the ground. Not stopping there, she shaved his head completely, erasing any sign of his noble lineage. She then ripped her ill-fitting linen skirt, fashioning it into a makeshift, ragged jacket for him.

Aemon's eyes widened in confusion, but before he could protest, the woman looked at him seriously. "Female slaves have no good fate here," she said firmly. "You'll be sent to the arena. That's the only place a boy might survive. It's dangerous, but there, at least, you might have a chance to grow."

Without another word, she shoved him into the line of male slaves. Aemon stumbled, his heart pounding as the realization set in. She was right—his silver hair, the Dothraki's reaction to him, the Valyrian steel sword, and the whispered accusations of blood sorcery marked him as someone dangerous and valuable. Here in Slaver's Bay, even someone with noble blood could be devoured by the evil that ruled this place.

Aemon tried to catch one last glimpse of the woman, but the crowd surged, pushing him further away. He opened his mouth to call out, but it was too late—she had disappeared into the sea of captives, lost to the chaos.

The slavers worked quickly, sorting the slaves with brutal efficiency. By the time the sun began to set, the captives had been divided, assigned to different fates.

...

Night had fallen, and thick clouds smothered the moon, leaving the world below in darkness.

Beneath the Colosseum, in a damp, cold underground cell, Aemon sat huddled against the rough stone wall, hugging his knees. The cramped prison was packed with newly purchased male slaves, all crammed together like cattle, their bodies pressed against one another in the suffocating space.

Tick, tock!

Water dripped from the ceiling, seeping through the walls and falling into Aemon's calloused hands. He lowered his head, licking his dry, cracked lips, his throat parched from days of neglect.

His gaze drifted upward toward the only opening in the cell—a small window, no bigger than a palm, offering a glimpse of the night sky beyond. Barely any light penetrated the gloom, but he couldn't help staring, his thoughts wandering far from the stench of sweat, urine, and despair that filled the cell.

The air was thick with the smell of suffering. He felt the restless bodies around him, the shifting of limbs, the quiet groans of the broken, the scent of filth invading his senses. It was suffocating. In this moment, the prophecy of the Witch came back to him with cruel clarity.

He was truly in Slaver's Bay.

The Trickster had died, saving him from the fall into the sea. Now, Aemon Targaryen had also died in this filthy slave prison. All that remained was Aemon, the slave.

Chapter 679: A Moment of Tenderness

The North.

The Wall.

A horde of wildlings moved through the Wall, migrating in great numbers.

Castle Black.

In the wide courtyard, the new recruits of the Night's Watch trained intensively.

"Roar!"

A yellow-eyed dragon lay prostrate outside the castle, shaking its head and roaring in protest.

"Quiet, Syrax," the Dragonkeeper shouted, bundled in thick clothing and gripping a bamboo staff.

A few charred goats lay scattered in the snow, still emitting black smoke from the dragon's flames.

"Roar!"

Syrax narrowed its displeased pupils, turning its head like a stubborn child, then curled up into a ball on the scorched earth left by its own fire.

It was November, and the climate in the North had grown increasingly harsh. Snow fell day and night, threatening to bury the courtyard walls.

During the day, the temperature was bearable, but by night, the well water would freeze, and even the bacon hanging from the rafters would crack from the cold. Anyone bold enough to urinate outside would need a stick to break the ice afterward.

"Eat, Syrax," the Dragonkeeper called again, his face grave.

But the dragon remained unresponsive. Syrax pulled its wings over its head, large, leathery membranes folding around its body, making it resemble a great mound of yellow jade.

...

Inside Castle Black, the Night's Watch was busy. The damaged buildings needed repairs, and the frozen well required heating.

Supplies were dwindling. Meat had become scarce, leaving only turnips and cabbage as the primary food source. Even that wasn't enough.

The Night's Watch, the Army of the Winter Wolves, the Unsullied, and the combined forces of the Seven Kingdoms... Thousands of soldiers had gathered, and their numbers continued to grow. The North could no longer sustain them with its own produce.

"Your Grace, the supplies for this month have not arrived yet," Cregan reported respectfully, bowing his head in embarrassment.

Rhaenyra sat in the Hall of the Night's Watch, slowly rubbing her hands together. "Wait a little longer. I have already asked Maester Tru to send a raven to inquire," she said solemnly.

"Yes, Your Grace," Cregan bowed even lower, catching a glimpse of the Queen from the corner of his eye. Her face, pretty but reddened from the cold, was framed by long eyelashes now dusted with frost from the breath she exhaled.

Even with the royal family's support, Castle Black—a key fortress—could not guarantee warmth for everyone. Most of the wood went to the brothers of the Night's Watch stationed on the Wall, so they wouldn't freeze in the bitter winds. If things were this harsh at Castle Black, it was hard to imagine the conditions for the common folk across the North.

As they spoke, a cold wind started to howl outside.

Boom.

The wind, carrying curved snowflakes, battered the wooden window panes of the hall. The frames rattled, revealing cracks where thin beams of sunlight slipped through. The dim hall briefly brightened, but the gusts sent chills through those inside.

Strangely, the faint smell of ash lingered in the air.

Plop!

Rhaenyra suddenly looked up and rose from her chair.

"Your Grace?" Cregan asked, puzzled.

Rhaenyra smiled broadly, paying no mind to the heavy hem of her skirt dragging along the floor as she hurried out of the hall.

She could feel it.

...

Meanwhile, beyond the Wall, heavy, dark clouds stretched endlessly, hanging over the Wall like an enormous weight. A thick, coal-black dragon's tail descended from the sky, swirling the clouds and gathering them tightly.

The Night's Watch huddled beneath the Wall's parapets, tending to the fire in the brazier. The flames flickered wildly in the gusts, the wind producing eerie, hollow sounds.

"Roar!"

The sound was as loud as rolling thunder, echoing for miles and shaking their eardrums. When one of the men looked up, he saw it—tragic green eyes emerging from the chaotic dark clouds above.

"Land, Cannibal," came a familiar command the next second.

The massive beast, as large as a mountain, plunged headlong through the clouds, its enormous wings casting shadows both inside and outside the Wall. The wind was so fierce that the Night's Watchmen couldn't lift their heads.

With a rumble, the Cannibal landed, its three pairs of pale, curved horns bowed low as its wings folded back, shrouding its body.

"Get some rest, mate," Rhaegar said with a slight smile, climbing down the rope ladder from the thick neck of the dragon.

"Your Grace! Your Grace!" Several Dragonkeepers stationed just outside Castle Black hurriedly stepped back, bowing in salute.

The black dragon's landing had triggered a massive avalanche, nearly burying them in snow.

"Prepare enough livestock for my dragon. It's been through a lot lately," Rhaegar said as he shook his head, landing on the snow. He ran a hand through his messy silver hair before heading toward Castle Black.

The journey had lasted over a month—moving from the Fist of the First Men to Hardhome, from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and back to Castle Black, following the wildling migration. The Cannibal was exhausted, having braved snow and wind to protect him throughout.

Rhaegar shook the snow from his shoulders and noticed that his once-pristine black cloak now had several large holes. Were it not for his noble demeanor, he might have looked like a ranger of the Night's Watch returning from beyond the Wall.

He was walking with his head down when the sound of approaching footsteps made him stop.

"Rhaegar!"

The voice was filled with excitement and joy, barely contained. Rhaegar froze, his eyes widening in surprise as he looked up.

Rhaenyra stood at the entrance to the courtyard, beaming at him.

"Rhaenyra, why are you here?" Rhaegar asked, both surprised and delighted. He unconsciously quickened his pace.

Rhaenyra broke into a trot, stepping through the muddy snow, and rushed toward him with open arms.

Rhaegar smiled broadly, meeting her halfway. As they drew closer, the two silver-haired figures, both dressed in black, embraced tightly.

Rhaenyra was overwhelmed with happiness, her voice trembling slightly. "Let me see—are you hurt?"

Still clinging to each other, they began to feel the outlines of the other's body beneath their cloaks, both afraid he might be injured.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Rhaegar chuckled softly, burying his head in the crook of her fur-lined hood, holding her tightly.

At sixteen, Rhaegar had already stood six feet tall; now, at six-foot-two (188 cm), he towered over her petite frame. In his arms, she barely reached his chest. He had to bend slightly to hold her properly, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

"It's so dangerous out there. I'm just glad you're back," Rhaenyra whispered, her eyes filling with tears as she stared at him tenderly. She cupped his cold, handsome face in her hands, unable to contain her emotions. On her tiptoes, she leaned up and quickly kissed him on the cheek.

After the accident with her youngest son, Aemon, the concept of family had taken deeper root in Rhaegar's heart. Her children were growing fast, but Rhaegar's feelings for her had never changed.

"No, we'll face the difficulties together," Rhaegar said gently, pulling her back into his warm embrace. It was as soft and comforting as ever, and Rhaenyra couldn't resist burying her face into it.

"Come on, I'll get you something to eat," she said, blushing slightly. Rolling her eyes playfully, she linked arms with him, and they walked back together.

...

"Roar!"

Syrax, the golden dragon, poked its head out from between its wings, watching its rider walk away. It let out a puzzled sound, then turned back to the scorched goat in front of it. With a quick motion, the goat disappeared.

Hiccup!

The Cannibal's miserable green pupils glanced sideways at Syrax, and it stuck out its scarlet tongue to lick its maw, saliva dripping onto the snow. The snow instantly melted, leaving a scorched, withered patch.

"Roar!"

Terrified, Syrax quickly buried its head beneath its wings, like an ostrich hiding from danger.

...

The siblings returned to Castle Black and entered the hall, hand in hand.

"Your Grace."

Baela approached them, surprise evident in her expression as she glanced at the two of them.

Rhaenyra smiled warmly and said, "Baela, go to the kitchen and ask the maid to prepare a meal to properly welcome him home."

"Yes, I'll go right away," Baela replied with a smile and set off without hesitation.

Though there wasn't much meat in the kitchen—most of it reserved for the dragons—the king was here, and that meant there would be something to eat.

Once Baela had left the room, Rhaegar wondered aloud, "Rhaena didn't come with her?" He was used to the sisters being inseparable.

Rhaenyra guided him to sit down, her eyes never leaving his face. She spoke softly, "Rhaena has great administrative talent. She felt it was best to stay in Winterfell."

Winterfell couldn't be left unguarded, not with the North so unpredictable. Rhaena, quiet and gentle, was best suited for overseeing things behind the scenes.

Rhaegar nodded in agreement. The North's harsh climate made even the Wall colder than the rest of the region. An adult dragon like Syrax could manage, but the younger, weaker Morning might not fare as well in these conditions.

Knock, knock, knock!

The sound of knocking from the porch around the corner caught Rhaegar's attention. He looked up to see a familiar figure standing in the doorway, her silver hair gleaming in the dim light.

"Helaena, you're here too?" Rhaegar said, surprised, rising from his seat.

"She's been here for a while," Rhaenyra replied with a knowing smile, raising an eyebrow as she gently released his arm.

"Brother..." Helaena's eyes sparkled as she stepped closer, her pace slow but eager.

Upon hearing that Rhaegar had gone to the Wall, she had come at once, without pause. Along the way, she had a dream.

In it, a pale figure stood at the foot of the Wall, commanding an endless army of the dead to assault the stronghold. Dragons roared in the sky, their fiery breath raining down, and from some unseen vantage point, she saw the ground splashed with boiling Dragonblood.

Rhaegar walked toward her, not allowing thoughts of Summerhall to distract him. In his eyes, the Seven Kingdoms were insignificant compared to an embrace like this.

Helaena was even more direct, flinging herself into his arms like a swallow returning to its nest. She clung to him, unwilling to let go, and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck before pressing her lips to his.

Rhaegar smiled and accepted the kiss, though he couldn't help but chuckle softly. After a moment, he gently freed himself from her koala-like embrace.

He sat back down, now flanked by his sisters on either side. The warmth between them was undeniable.

As they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder, and the emotions they shared now were far stronger than ever before.

"Daemon is here too," Rhaenyra said suddenly, updating him on the latest developments. "Aegon and Aemond are patrolling the various strongholds along the Wall, and Daemon is training the combined forces of the kingdom."

Apart from the heavy snow in the Vale, which had blocked the mountain passes, and Dorne, which was far away in the desert, only the army from the Westerlands had not yet arrived.

The armies of the Crownlands, the Riverlands, The Reach, and Stormlands numbered 30,000 strong—far more than the combined forces of the Night's Watch, the Army of the Winter Wolves, and the Unsullied.

"Daemon will command the army. His leadership will help reduce friction between the different groups," Rhaenyra added.

Rhaegar frowned slightly but then shared his own news. "Sea Snake is leading a 3,000-strong Valyrian army and staying at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea with Aunt Rhaenys."

Each of the 18 strongholds along the Wall needed to be garrisoned. Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, located near the water, was especially vulnerable, with free folk often sneaking in by boat. If the White Walkers could cross the sea, Eastwatch would have to be defended by the strongest forces.

"House Velaryon is very reliable," Rhaenyra agreed.

"But there are too many fortresses along the Wall. We've been discussing abandoning some of them," she added, referring to an ongoing debate.

Helaena, her chin resting on her hands, spoke dreamily, "Castle Black is the main target of the Others' attack. The dead cannot cross the Wall." That's what the prophecy had shown.

Rhaegar looked thoughtful. "Abandoning some of the fortresses is the right choice. We can halve them, let the others freeze completely, and concentrate our forces on the key strongholds."

The exits of unnecessary Night's Watch fortresses would be sealed with ice, and the combined forces could focus their efforts. One objective was to fight the White Walkers; the other was to keep the free folk in check.

Creak!

Just as they were deep in conversation, the hall door opened. Baela entered carrying a tray of steaming food, pushing the door wide as she barged in. Behind her, Daemon followed, a smile on his lips.

As soon as he stepped inside, he saw his nephew caught mid-conversation. More figures squeezed into the hall behind them: the rotund Maester Tru, Grey Worm in his black armor, and—unexpectedly—a Child of the Forest.

"A Child of the Forest?" Daemon glanced at the figure, frowning instinctively.

He remembered that these strange, ancient beings were not always friendly.

Sniffing the air, the Child of the Forest leaned in close to Daemon, wrinkling her nose before stepping back with wary eyes. "You also know blood magic... and you smell like a dragon."

This dragon scent was different from the other dragonborn at Castle Black. It resembled Rhaegar's, who had been searching for ways to fight the White Walkers. It was a purer, more pungent smell, carrying a greater threat.

"Stay away from me. I don't want to step in a brown-green turd," Daemon sneered, placing a hand on the hilt of Dark Sister as he arrogantly circled around her. His fingers itched to draw the blade, but he restrained himself.

Meanwhile, Rhaegar was being served by the two sisters, not even needing to lift a knife or fork to eat.

Helaena ladled soup, blowing on it before gently pushing the spoon to his lips. Rhaenyra cut slices of roast lamb, feeding him bite by bite.

The way they doted on him made the children, watching from a distance, want to weep.

The Child of the Forest observed the scene for a moment, then suddenly leaped onto the table, her excitement jangling through the air.

Rhaegar glanced at her, his expression stern.

"We have to find the Heart Tree and the Greenseer!" she exclaimed anxiously. "I can feel it—the cold of the Others is nearing. We can't delay any longer."

Through the Weirwoods beyond the Wall and the power of Greensight, she could see the endless army of the dead spreading across the land. The White Walkers were advancing, and if they didn't locate the Greenseer soon, it would be too late.

Rhaegar, chewing on his mutton, swallowed a mouthful of soup without haste. He didn't want to take the Child of the Forest's warning seriously.

Valyrian steel could kill White Walkers, and Dragonfire could decimate the army of the dead. As long as the Wall held—protected by its ancient magic—there was no real reason to panic. He believed they could withstand the invasion from within.

The Heart Tree and the Greenseer? It all seemed like mystical nonsense to him, no more believable than the cryptic prophecies of the shadowy witch Quaithe. If he were to go on an adventure, he'd be more inclined to travel to Asshai to seek knowledge than venture beyond the Wall again. A place steeped in magic and shadow was more likely to hold answers for fighting the Others than some ancient tree.

"The White Walkers are growing in number," the Child of the Forest continued, her voice tinged with urgency and mystery. "This proves that the Night King may have awakened from the Land of Always Winter. The Greenseer knows secrets the world has forgotten. We need him."

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed. He had wondered the same thing for a long time. "Who is the Greenseer?" he asked warily. "Is it a person? A Child of the Forest? Or perhaps... a Weirwood?"

"The Greenseer is dead," the Child said, catching Rhaegar by surprise. Then she continued, "But whoever finds the Heart Tree will become the new Greenseer—and lead mankind in the fight against the Others."

Chapter 680: The White Walkers Invasion

Rhaegar's face twitched slightly as he looked up, locking eyes with Daemon. The uncle and nephew exchanged a glance, both sharing the same skepticism about what the Child of the Forest had just said.

Rhaegar broke the silence, his voice measured. "The Greenseer is dead. Will there be a new one from your tribe?"

"Not for now," the Child of the Forest replied regretfully, shaking its head. "We have not been recognized by the Heart Tree."

Daemon's eyes narrowed, his voice sharp. "Then what makes you think that if we find the Heart Tree, we'll become Greenseers?"

"By who?" Rhaegar and Daemon asked in unison, their voices firm.

The Child of the Forest jumped down from the table, agitated, scratching its head and pacing in small circles. Its green eyes darted nervously as it muttered, "Who could it be?"

Watching the creature's uncertainty, Rhaegar raised his hand, gesturing to the others in the room.

One by one, they left, leaving the Child of the Forest alone, still murmuring to itself—doubting her own words.

...

It was night.

On the second floor of Castle Black's greenhouse, the cold wind howled outside, and snowflakes pattered softly against the windowpanes. Inside, Rhaegar lay on a hard bed, wrapped in a goose-down quilt.

"Do you think what Billbo said about the Greenseer is true?" Rhaenyra asked, her back to him as she prepared fruit wine at the small table.

The room felt still and intimate. Helaena had gone to rest early in the adjoining chamber, leaving just the two of them. Though Rhaegar and Rhaenyra shared a close bond, they still took turns with him for the night.

"Maybe," Rhaegar mumbled, half-asleep, his eyes already closed.

The Child of the Forest—Billbo, as they had begun calling it—was no mere creature. She had come entrusted with the remnants of a dying race, speaking of ancient magic that was difficult to grasp. The Heart Tree and the Greenseer felt distant and intangible.

Rhaegar wasn't entirely skeptical. He had once touched the twin Weirwoods in Highgarden and had felt a faint jolt of their magic. But with the Others threatening their very existence, now was not the time to venture beyond the Wall in search of fabled powers. His mind was set on a more cautious strategy—holding the Wall, testing the White Walkers' strength bit by bit.

Knock, knock.

The quiet knock broke the stillness, followed by the sound of footsteps stopping just outside the door.

Startled, Rhaenyra threw a thick cloak over her shoulders and went to answer. As she opened the door, Daemon stood leaning against the frame, his eyes downcast, flickering with uncertainty.

"Daemon, what is it?" Rhaenyra asked, stepping aside as she glanced back at Rhaegar, who was now awake, sensing the weight of his uncle's visit.

Rhaegar opened his eyes at the mention of his name, already guessing what had brought Daemon here at this late hour.

Daemon didn't enter the room. He remained in the doorway, silent for a long moment before finally looking up. His voice was quiet but determined.

"To defeat the White Walkers, we need the power of that prophecy."

Having seen the prophetic murals of Norvos, Daemon had slowly come to believe in magic, more than he once had. The Greenseer... was worth seeking.

"You're convinced?" Rhaegar hesitated, his gaze steady on Daemon.

Daemon shook his head slightly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Caraxes can fly over the Wall. Before the White Walkers invade, I'll gather more knowledge."

He didn't trust the Child of the Forest, but he believed that the solution to the White Walkers lay somewhere in the North. Caraxes was his best chance to cover ground quickly, and in a short time, he could accomplish much.

Rhaegar's eyes flickered with contemplation. Daemon was undeniably a valuable ally, far more reliable than Aegon or Aemond in the fight against the White Walkers. The mystery of the Greenseer was tempting, and if anyone could find it, Daemon might be the one to succeed.

"Take this with you, Uncle," Rhaegar said, rolling out of bed and reaching for a pale horn. He tossed it to Daemon with a solemn expression.

Bang!

Daemon caught the horn effortlessly, holding it up to inspect it. "What is this, another oddity like the Dragon's Horn?" he asked with a smirk. His good nephew always had a knack for strange artifacts.

"The Free Folk call it the Horn of Winter. It's a broken magical relic," Rhaegar explained seriously. "They say it can summon the sleeping giants beneath the earth. Better to have it with you."

Rhaegar had blown into it once, and while its power remained a legend, he couldn't dismiss its potential. The "sleeping giants" might refer to earthquakes of great magnitude. The ancient Children of the Forest had once shattered the Arm of Dorne with magic, possibly using something like the Horn of Winter.

Daemon raised an eyebrow, surprised at the significance of the horn. It might actually be more useful than he'd first thought. He flipped it in his hand, then fastened it to his belt with a grin. "I'll take the Child of the Forest with me. It won't take more than three days to make the journey."

"Be careful on the road," Rhaegar cautioned, offering his farewell.

Daemon, always one to act swiftly, gave a curt nod and turned, leaving the room without a second glance. His nephew had already explained the weaknesses of the White Walkers. Armed with Caraxes and Dark Sister, Daemon felt prepared to face whatever lay beyond the Wall, be it the White Walkers or the army of the dead.

Once Daemon was gone, silence settled over the room.

Rhaenyra hesitated, then asked, "Are you sure?" Her voice carried a note of concern—it was a dangerous mission, after all.

"It's fine. He's Daemon," Rhaegar said, reclining back on the bed. His thoughts drifted to Asshai, wondering if that mysterious land held the true key to defeating the Others.

...

At dawn the next day, Castle Black lay buried under a thick layer of snow. The Night's Watch trudged through snow-filled potholes, their footsteps crunching against the frozen ground.

"Over here, bring the wood over here!" Rhaegar shouted, raising his hand to direct two giants hauling massive logs.

Nearby, veterans of the Winter Wolf Army, bare-armed despite the cold, swung their axes at the trees with sharp, rhythmic strikes, the sound of metal against bark ringing out as they worked to build a new structure.

Dozens of miles away, countless free folk poured into the forest, felling trees to carry back to Castle Black. The news of the closure of several fortresses along the Wall had spread, and hundreds of thousands of free folk had gathered near the castle, desperate to survive the biting cold. With no choice but to build settlements, they cut down the surrounding forest.

Boom! Boom!

The heavy footsteps of the giants reverberated as they worked alongside tamed mammoths, quickly piling logs in towering heaps. They moved with the efficiency of a well-organized construction team.

Rhaegar oversaw the effort, his movements precise and focused. From behind, he heard hurried footsteps approaching through the snow.

Baela appeared, her face flushed red from the cold wind. "Daemon has left," she announced breathlessly.

She had gone to feed the dragons early that morning, only to discover that Caraxes was gone. Knocking on Daemon's door, she had found no answer.

"He's busy, but he'll be back soon," Rhaegar said, offering her a reassuring smile.

But Baela bit her lower lip in frustration. "He didn't even say goodbye to me." Her voice wavered with hurt. It was as if he had left without a second thought, forgetting that she was his daughter.

Rhaegar sighed softly and placed a comforting hand on her head. Daemon's inarticulate nature had always left a gap between them.

Before he could say more, Cregan approached, his expression grim. "Your Grace, there's something you need to see."

Sensing the urgency, Rhaegar gestured for Baela to head back to Castle Black. "Go find Rhaenyra. Don't dwell on it alone."

Baela hesitated, then took a deep breath and turned to leave, her steps heavy in the snow.

Rhaegar followed Cregan toward the winch ladder, climbing up to the Wall. When they reached the top, a group of weary Night's Watchmen awaited them, their faces pale and tense.

On the frost-covered tiles lay several frozen corpses, their bodies stiff and unmoving. Judging by their clothing, they were rangers of the Night's Watch. The bodies were still intact, but their wide, frozen eyes were filled with terror.

"They were found just outside the Wall this morning," said Old Benjicot, the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, his face grim. "I suspect the White Walkers are sending a message."

The three rangers were part of a group that had gone missing several months ago. No one could explain how their bodies had suddenly appeared near the Wall.

Rhaegar crouched down to inspect the corpses, his mind racing.

"What did you find?" Cregan asked, curiosity flickering in his voice.

"I'm not sure yet," Rhaegar replied, his eyes darkening slightly as he rose to his feet and unsheathed Blackfyre. "Let me try."

Puff!

With three swift, precise strikes, Rhaegar drove the blade through the hearts of each corpse. The sound was sharp and hollow, like piercing frozen meat.

The three corpses jolted upright, their fangs bared as their dark pupils flashed an unnatural ice-blue. They let out a guttural roar filled with rage and resistance, then collapsed back to the ground, stiff and lifeless.

Their ice-blue eyes faded to gray, leaving them truly dead this time.

Rhaegar calmly sheathed Blackfyre, his voice steady. "It was the White Walkers. Take the bodies away and burn them."

The gathered men were frozen in shock. For most of them, it was the first time they had seen the dead return to life—only to die again.

Old Benjicot, the Lord Commander, swallowed hard before giving the order. "Take the bodies away," he instructed the Night's Watch, his voice heavy. "The fact that the White Walkers could bring these bodies here means their army is close to the Wall."

Rhaegar's expression grew more serious as he addressed the men. "Prepare thoroughly. The underground passageways need to be frozen and sealed off completely."

He paused, then added firmly, "Increase the night patrols. Don't skimp on the charcoal fires."

"Yes, Your Grace."

The White Walkers' approach was inevitable. Rhaegar had long expected it.

...

Fist of the First Men

The avalanche had buried the main road under heaps of snow, leaving only a few towering boulders exposed amidst the icy drifts.

A faint sound...

The dull, rhythmic thud of hooves on snow broke through the howling wind. Slowly, a frozen, rotting warhorse staggered forward, its decaying form nearly blending into the swirling snowstorm.

On its back sat a pale figure, clad in ancient, frost-covered armor, gazing coldly into the distance.

"Whoa, whoa..."

Two more rotting warhorses appeared, each carrying a white-haired wight. The undead riders halted behind the leading horse, their lifeless eyes fixed on the figure before them—the Night King.

Expressionless, the Night King looked upon the snow that blocked the path ahead and slowly raised a hand.

Hula—

With a sudden rush, the snow exploded into the air, clearing the way. The Night King, still mounted on his decaying steed, waited motionlessly, holding the reins.

After a brief pause, his sharp-nailed hand swung downward.

"Roar! Roar!"

From the foggy snowstorm, guttural, hoarse roars echoed. An uncountable army of the dead staggered forward, heads hanging like marionettes pulled by invisible strings.

Without a flicker of emotion, the Night King calmly led the army onward, clearing the path through sheer numbers. The dead shuffled past, their movements stirring up snow and wind, blurring everything in sight.

Then, the Night King lifted his head.

A strange glint flashed in his ice-blue eyes, which quickly turned a milky white. Visions swirled before him, like scenes projected onto a screen.

"Roar..."

In the vision, Daemon's brow furrowed as he tugged on his saddle grip. Caraxes, undeterred, surged forward, its serpentine body folding into the flames of Dragonfire.

Poof!

The vision abruptly ended. The Night King's eyes reverted to their chilling ice-blue, his expression unchanged. He turned his gaze northward, sensing something in the distance.

Trot, trot...

A White Walker approached, its skeletal hand resting on its chest as it rode up to him. The Night King glanced at it, then raised a single finger, pointing north.

Understanding the silent command, it tugged on the reins, turning its horse and galloping toward the distant north, cutting through the tide of the dead like a ghostly rider.

The Night King twisted his neck, his cold gaze once again fixed ahead. Without pause, he continued to lead his army of the dead forward.

Their destination: The Wall.

...

Two days later.

The Wall.

Five kilometers from Castle Black, the edge of the Haunted Forest had receded, leaving the ground littered with felled trees.

Rumble, rumble.

Dark clouds, black as coal, rolled slowly across the sky, shrouding the Wall in a heavy gloom. The earth trembled beneath the advancing storm, and wind and snow began to swirl, gradually enveloping the land.

Whoosh!

A horn sounded from atop the Wall, followed by three urgent bell tolls.

The Night's Watch sprang into action, lighting the smoke signal at the top of the Wall. Old Benjicot, wrapped tightly in a bearskin coat, quickly descended the winding ladder to the winch and hurried to the watchtower.

Peering out over the vast landscape, his heart sank as he saw countless figures emerging from the Haunted Forest, closing in on the base of the Wall.

Roar...

The advancing figures had grotesque, frozen faces, their bodies stiff, dressed in the tattered remains of once-living men. They shuffled forward like an army of the dead.

"It's the corpse army!" Old Benjicot Ko's face went pale. He grabbed the bell ringer's mallet and struck it hard, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Prepare for battle! The dead are upon us!"

His shout echoed across Castle Black, igniting a frenzy of activity.

The Army of the Winter Wolves, the Unsullied, and the Kingdom's coalition rushed to the battlements, forming orderly lines behind the parapets, bows drawn, arrows notched, and stones ready to be hurled.

Down below, the Night's Watchmen moved quickly through the tunnels, carrying sealed kegs. Some were filled with fire oil, while others held the deadly wildfire, buried in beds of fine sand.

Rumbling and booming,

The army of the dead continued to close the distance, entering the one-kilometer range of the Wall.

Suddenly, everything stilled.

On the Wall, the allied forces held their breath, the weight of impending battle heavy in the air.

Clop, clop, clop...

A single rotting warhorse pushed through the ranks of the dead, stopping on a high ridge. The Night King sat upon it, his cold, ice-blue eyes fixed on the Wall. He raised a single hand.

With that simple motion, the dead surged forward once more.

Tens of thousands of wights accelerated, charging toward the Wall in a suicidal rush.

"Counterattack! Don't let them get close!" Old Benjicot barked the order, his voice sharp.

Flaming arrows shot down from the battlements, followed by a rain of fire from the allied forces. The night sky lit up like fireworks as rockets streaked through the darkness, showering the army of the dead in flames.

Pop! Pop!

Each rocket struck true, killing a wight on impact. But the horde behind pressed on, trampling over the fallen without hesitation, driven by a mindless rage.

Despite the first wave of fire, more than half of the wights surged forward, breaking through the initial line of defense. They roared savagely, their jagged claws tearing at the frozen surface of the Great Wall, scraping away the fine frost with a sickening screech.

As they clawed at the ice, dense rolling rocks rained down from above, smashing the wights into bloody pulp. Flesh and shattered bones splattered across the ground, painting the snow in grotesque colors. Some of the undead found the entrance to the underground passages and pounded furiously on the frozen door, but it held firm, reinforced by layers of Dragonstone walls encased in ice, harder than steel.

Watching from afar, the Night King remained unmoved. With a slow, deliberate motion, he raised his hand once more.

From behind him, a White Walker stepped forward, gripping an ice-crystal spear. Leading the second wave, it charged ahead, and the undead army followed in unison.

The Walkers moved swiftly, extinguishing the remaining flames left by the first volley of arrows. The allied forces fought back, unleashing a relentless barrage of arrows and rolling stones. Fire oil was poured down, igniting the battlefield, and the stench of burning flesh filled the air as scores of wights were cut down.

Plop!

The lead White Walker pushed aside the brainless undead in its path and advanced with purpose. The ice-crystal spear swung through the air, smashing anything in its way, reducing rolling rocks to powder.

Clang!

The spear struck the ice wall of the Great Wall with brutal force. The White Walker's ice-blue eyes gleamed with arrogance as it began climbing, using its hands and feet to scale the icy surface.

Each time it ascended a few feet, it pulled the spear free and smashed another gap in the ice, making the climb easier for the undead swarming behind it.

"Don't let them get up here! Release the scythes!" Old Benjicot shouted, his voice tight with urgency as he drew his sword.

Boom!

Suddenly, a black dragon as dark as night soared over the Wall, its wings blocking out the sky and scattering the storm clouds.

"Dracarys!"

Rhaegar's eyes burned with intensity as he commanded from atop the great beast, gazing down at the swarming dead below.

Roar...

The Cannibal's emerald-green pupils glinted menacingly as it dove, its massive throat rumbling with the heat of Dragonfire.

In the next instant, a torrent of dark green Dragonfire poured from the sky, drenching the climbing wight in flames.

The White Walker looked up just in time, its eyes wide with fury as the searing Dragonfire engulfed its body. It let out a final, agonized scream before melting into a pool of steaming ice water.

The murky green fire cascaded like a waterfall, incinerating the army of the dead at the base of the Wall. In mere minutes, tens of thousands of wights were reduced to ash, their bodies collapsing into smoldering heaps.

The Cannibal snorted heavily, its wings spread wide as it glided low over the battlefield, clearing a path of destruction.

Rhaegar remained firmly seated on the dragon's back, his body tilting slightly with its movements, his eyes fixed on a pale figure on the distant slope. Clad in armor and crowned with a horned helm, the figure radiated a cold, commanding presence.

"Is that you?" Rhaegar muttered, his heart surging with murderous intent as he yanked on the reins, urging the Cannibal forward.

Across the field, the Night King tilted his chin, studying the massive black dragon with icy detachment. The scent of ash, more repulsive and dangerous than fire itself, filled the air.

Without breaking his cold gaze, the Night King reached behind him and pulled the ice-crystal spear from his back. But instead of throwing it, he raised it high, pointing toward the sky.

In response, half of the undead army split off, surging toward the towering Great Wall like an unstoppable tide.