

G.O Thrones 251

Chapter 251: Cold Treatment

Gulp Gulp~

Leaving the Dragonpit in a carriage, Rhaegar passed through the crowded Silk Street on his way to the Red Keep. As they traveled, he lifted a corner of the curtain to observe the changes on the street.

"What are you looking at?" Rhaenyra asked, sitting opposite him, her legs crossed beneath her black skirt.

Rhaegar glanced back at her, catching a glimpse of her fair skin under the skirt. "King's Landing has really changed. It used to be full of rats crawling through filth. Now, it's much cleaner."

He continued to gaze out the window at the transformed city.

"It's all because of you," Rhaenyra said with a proud smile. "A year ago, I couldn't step outside without worrying about dirtying my boots."

Repairing public toilets, hiring sanitation workers, fixing houses—all of these were Rhaegar's initiatives. Rhaenyra was well aware of his contributions.

Rhaegar shook his head modestly, though he couldn't help but smile. "Lord Otto deserves praise. He made the biggest sacrifices to fund these improvements."

"Hmph, it's because you're full of cunning plans," Rhaenyra laughed, recalling the abuse and attacks Otto had endured over the past two years. Civilians had splashed filth on his courtyard gates and filled his grounds with dead rats and sparrows as threats. This had been Otto's dull and humiliating daily life.

Helaena, who had been dozing, roused herself and asked blankly, "What's wrong about Grandfather?"

"Nothing, we'll be back at the Red Keep soon. Don't fall asleep," Rhaenyra said, patting her cheeks to stay awake.

She couldn't hide her joy. Otto had endured two years of humiliation, and despite the success of his efforts over the past year, Rhaegar had claimed most of the credit. By gathering women and children and using them to shape public opinion, he had overshadowed Otto's achievements.

Otto, hoping to finally receive recognition, had gone to the Small Council to apply for acknowledgment of his contributions. However, since the proposals had originally been Rhaegar's ideas, Otto's efforts went largely unrecognized, leaving him as the ultimate laborer without the desired acclaim.

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Red Keep

The guards saw them approaching and promptly opened the gates.

Rhaenyra took Rhaegar's hand and said softly, "We're home."

Rhaegar nodded, quietly feeling the bumps of the carriage as it rolled forward.

As they entered the front garden of the Red Keep, the coachman tightened the reins.

Ser Steffon, a member of the Kingsguard, stood by and announced in a loud voice, "Welcome Rhaegar of House Targaryen, Breaker of Shackles, Ruin Maker, Prince of Harrenhal, and heir to the Iron Throne. And his two sisters, Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen and Princess Helaena Targaryen."

As the proclamation ended, the carriage door opened from the inside.

Rhaegar shifted his position and looked around the courtyard of the Red Keep.

The courtyard was cold and empty; the nobles who used to gather to compete and watch were nowhere to be seen. The carriage was facing the gate of the Red Keep, which was tightly closed.

Seeing the situation, Rhaegar commented, "Oh, it's really quiet!"

After half a year away, revisiting the place where he grew up revealed a different kind of scenery - one that was noticeably colder.

As they disembarked from the carriage, the Kingsguards dispersed into the front yard, waiting solemnly. Rhaenyra and Helaena poked their heads out and looked around curiously.

Helaena, still very innocent, asked softly, "Where did those lords go?"

In her memory, the forecourt was always crowded with people wandering around every day.

"Hush, be quiet," Rhaenyra said, pressing down on her small head. She knew someone in the Red Keep didn't like her brother.

Rhaegar opened his arms and smiled, "Get out of the carriage first, ladies."

"Well, brother, hold me," Helaena said, happily jumping into Rhaegar's arms. He caught her steadily, took half a step back, and placed her on the ground.

Turning around, he clapped his hands at Rhaenyra. She looked uneasy and whispered, "I'll help you ask father for justice."

"Don't worry about it," Rhaegar said with a reassuring smile. He took her hand, hooked his other arm around her legs, and lifted her out of the carriage.

He didn't concern himself with the details. The answers would come when he saw his father.

Creak.

The front door of the Red Keep opened, and a thin, bald man in a black tuxedo stepped out.

Rhaegar looked over at the sound of the door, his expression unchanged.

When the man saw the handsome and upright Rhaegar, his eyes lit up. He quickly walked down the steps to Rhaegar, extending his hand but then hesitating, afraid of being too forward. After a pause, he solemnly nodded and said in a deep voice, "Welcome back, Prince."

Rhaegar lifted his hand to shake it, looking the man up and down with a smile, "Lord Caswell."

"Please, the King is waiting for you in the Throne Hall," Caswell said, a bit agitated, his voice rising slightly.

Rhaegar leaned in and whispered, "Thank you, my lord."

In Caswell's delighted eyes, Rhaegar led Rhaenyra and Helaena into the main door.

"Lord Caswell is warm-hearted and meticulous, a good man," Rhaenyra commented as they walked some distance away.

Rhaegar thought for a moment and agreed, "The House Caswell of Bitterbridge, one of the oldest noble families of the Riverlands, would be a loyal partner."

Lord Caswell had shown him favor long ago. His family had close ties with Oldtown and House Hightower, and Rhaegar hadn't paid much attention to them before. Seeing him today refreshed his previous impression.

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He passed through the empty banquet hall and walked along the corridor adorned with the crest of the three red dragons.

"Your Grace, with the prince's name day approaching, it's only fitting to notify the entire realm," said one voice.

"The prince has been living in Harrenhal and is busy with business..." another voice added.

"If the princess invites him personally, the prince might find time to attend..." suggested a third.

The throne room was just ahead, and familiar voices of discussion echoed through the corridor.

Rhaegar walked slowly forward until the solid wooden doors of the hall appeared in front of him. At the entrance, Kingsguard Arryk Cargyll stood watch. He immediately spotted the prince.

"Arryk, long time no see," Rhaegar called out, his eyes alight.

Unable to conceal his emotions, Arryk's face lit up with joy. "Prince, you're back."

"Open the door. I can hear them discussing me inside," Rhaegar said, lifting his chin and placing his hands behind his back.

"Yes, Prince," Arryk replied, gripping the handle and pulling the door open.

The door opened with a creak, startling those inside.

Viserys sat upright and expressionless on the Iron Throne, where blades were densely packed. Below him, Lyonel and Otto occupied important positions to the left and right. Other royal advisers were present, including Rhaenys Targaryen, the Master of Dragons; Jasper, the Master of Laws; and Grand Maester Mellos.

Rhaegar stood at the doorway, scanning the room with a slight smile.

The hall fell silent as the advisers exchanged glances, no one daring to speak first.

"My lords, it has been a long time," Rhaegar greeted calmly, then strode into the hall.

He passed by a few advisers, nodding in turn. Rhaenys held her head high and gave him a knowing look.

Reaching the Iron Throne, Rhaegar looked up at his father, the King of the Seven Kingdoms.

Viserys gazed at his eldest son with a solemn expression, exuding the majesty of a king.

After a moment of silence, Rhaegar spoke, "Father, I am back."

Viserys looked furious and said in a deep voice, "Rhaegar, I thought you were going to be a brat for the rest of your life."

"A lifetime is too long. I'm more generous," Rhaegar joked, then added despondently, "If I don't come back, I'm afraid the doors of the Red Keep will not open for me next time."

Viserys' face hardened. "No next time. Otherwise, don't even come near the Red Keep."

Rhaegar sighed, noting the changes in everyone's expressions—Lyonel's joy, Rhaenys's relief, Otto's calmness, and Jasper and Mellos's silence. He quickly assessed the situation.

Viserys and Lyonel exchanged a look and nodded slightly.

Lyonel, with a shy belly laugh, announced, "Prince, his majesty has prepared a dinner for you, to welcome you back."

"Excellent," Rhaegar agreed casually.

"Hmph!" Viserys snorted coldly. "Retire, get some rest, and dress sharply for the dinner."

"Yes, father," Rhaegar replied with a smile, nodding to the royal advisers before exiting the hall.

With that, the father-son relationship was restored, and it was time to move on.

Rhaenyra and Helaena were still waiting outside.

As soon as Rhaegar left, the discussion in the hall resumed, shifting from doubts about the prince's return to planning the celebration details—whether it should be a banquet or a tournament.

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It was late.

In a remote attic of the Red Keep, a creaking sound echoed as the door was pushed open. Alicent, dressed in a green robe, stepped out with a grim expression.

"The banquet is about to begin. I must get things under control," she said coldly, and quickly disappeared around the corner of the stairs.

In the attic, a chair faced the wooden door. Larys smiled and wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. News of the prince's return to King's Landing had spread like a storm through the Red Keep.

Her Grace the Queen, unable to contain herself, had sought a way to reconcile.

With that in mind, Larys leaned back in his chair and muttered, "If you want something, you have to fight for it. Looking ahead and looking back is not a good idea..."

He shivered and closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

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In the prince's bedroom, the familiar layout and the warm fire burning in the fireplace created a cozy atmosphere. Rhaegar sat in front of the dressing table, small, delicate hands behind him combing his long hair.

"Rhaenyra, a simple tie is fine. There's no need to tie it any other way," Rhaegar suggested softly, wincing as his hair roots ached from the tugging.

"Oh, I'm sorry if I hurt you," Rhaenyra replied, easing the force on her hands. She pulled his long hair over her hand, tying it into a low ponytail with a thin rope.

"Suit yourself. The feast is about to begin," Rhaegar sighed, giving up the struggle. He scooted back on the stool, resting the back of his head against a warm, soft patch.

The temperature was just right, warmer than the fireplace. Rhaegar liked it so much that he turned his face sideways and rubbed it repeatedly.

"Rhaegar, be honest," Rhaenyra scolded, reaching for his ear. How are you going to meet people if you keep rubbing on me?

Chapter 252: Aegon's Encounter with Daemon

Just as Rhaenyra was about to change into her dress, a gale blew through King's Landing.

"Roar..."

A low, thunderous dragon roar echoed across the city. A massive figure blocked the curved moon, casting a wide shadow over the land.

A huge dragon with dark green scales flew from the direction of Blackwater Bay, soaring above King's Landing. Two figures were perched on its back, one seated in front of the other.

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In the banquet hall of the Red Keep, a grand dining table was set, and maids bustled about, serving various dishes and fruits.

Viserys was the first to arrive. He signaled the maids to continue their work and took a seat alone at the table, waiting. Shortly after, Alicent arrived, accompanied by several young Targaryens. As the hour grew late, more guests filtered into the hall.

Viserys was delighted with this long-awaited family feast.

Half an hour later...

Tap...

Footsteps echoed on the stairs leading to the hall.

Rhaegar, dressed in luxurious black attire with his long hair neatly combed, revealing his handsome face, descended the stairs. Rhaenyra held his arm, her long silver hair braided into pigtails, cascading down her waist.

Before reaching the bottom, Rhaenyra puffed out her cheeks and complained in a small voice, "It's all your fault. I changed into another dress and now we're late, right?"

"We're not late. The banquet hasn't started yet," Rhaegar reassured her, adding, "Rhaenyra, you know I lost my mother when I was young. I always miss her a little."

Rhaenyra's cheeks turned scarlet, and she glared at him with a mix of annoyance and embarrassment. Not satisfied, she stomped on his boots.

"Ouch!" Rhaegar grunted in pain and said, "Don't be angry. I was being sincere."

Rhaenyra raised her eyebrows, grabbed his head with both hands, and playfully bit his cheek.

Rhaegar winced and protested, "Don't bite! I'll bite you back!"

With a row of reddish teeth marks on his cheek, Rhaenyra looked furious.

This was a habit she couldn't break since childhood. Whenever she had the chance, she would chew on something, not treating it as food.

Rhaegar pulled away, rubbing his sore cheek. "You're a bit of a menace," he muttered, half-amused and half-pained.

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As the two descended the stairs, the hall below was already filled with people gathered around the tables.

"Look, here comes the hero of the evening!" Viserys announced with a smile, waving his children to their seats.

"Princess..." Two silver-haired, dark-skinned little girls seated at the table greeted Rhaenyra warmly.

Rhaenyra, her earlier irritation now dissipated, smiled back, "Baela, Rhaena."

The two little girls, Laena's daughters and Rhaenyra's adopted nieces, were only three years old but already obedient and sensible, endearing themselves to everyone.

They also greeted Rhaegar politely, and he responded kindly, though his face soon darkened as he took in the scene.

The table was rectangular, surrounded by members of House Targaryen and their close kin. When Rhaegar and Rhaenyra arrived, everyone took their seats.

Viserys sat at the head of one side of the long table, with Alicent and Otto to his right. On his left was a seat reserved for the newly arrived siblings. To Otto's right sat Laenor and a young, unfamiliar silver-haired girl.

Across from them, from right to left, were Aegon, Helaena, Aemond, Daeron, and the twin sisters.

On one of the broad sides of the table sat the regal Rhaenys. Opposite her were Laena and Daemon, who had just arrived from Driftmark.

"Rhaegar, take your seat," Rhaenyra said, noticing his discomfort and tugging at his coat, whispering a reminder.

Rhaegar touched his cheek, imitating her earlier tone, "Rhaenyra, you're embarrassing me."

"Okay, blame me then," Rhaenyra replied with a helpless smile, pulling him into a seat. Showing up with a visible bite mark did draw some curious glances, especially from Helaena and the other children.

Seated, Rhaegar looked around the room and smiled without a word.

Viserys raised his glass and was the first to speak, "My lords, you are all of dragon blood. Welcome to this family feast."

As he spoke, he patted Rhaegar's shoulder. Rhaegar raised his glass in response, and the others followed suit.

Viserys made a few complimentary remarks, clearly pleased, and repeatedly mentioned his eldest son's upcoming age coming.

"Gentlemen, what do you think would be a suitable celebration for a great name day?" he asked, looking around expectantly.

"Rhaegar has yet to be knighted, so perhaps a tournament could be organized," Rhaenys suggested. This idea had been discussed at the Small Council.

Since the War for the Stepstones, King's Landing had hosted numerous banquets and royal hunts, but it had been a long time since they had held a tournament.

"Not a bad idea, cousin," Viserys said approvingly, though his eyes lingered on Daemon, who was sipping his wine. "Daemon, what do you think?"

The banquet was intended to ease the strained relations between Daemon and his nephews. Given the opportunity, Daemon hesitated before speaking.

"Uh..." Daemon's eyes flashed slightly, his finger tapping his chin as he mused, "Cousin's words are very insightful. I agree!"

"Hmph, I agree too," Aegon added from the corner of the table, his tone mocking.

Daemon glanced at him with indifference. This foolish nephew was even more irritating than his great-nephew.

"Huh," Rhaegar chuckled softly, propping his chin up with both hands. His eyes gleamed with amusement as he watched the scene unfold.

Daemon had spent two years in the dungeon, only to be released last year. Viserys had justified Daemon's release as an opportunity for him to make amends.

Rhaegar didn't concern himself with Daemon's supposed "faults"—he doubted his uncle could ever truly challenge him. What he cared about were Daemon's merits and potential influence.

Three years ago, during one of their quarrels, Viserys had suggested making Daemon the commander of the Narrow Sea to maintain order in the Stepstones.

Rhaegar had vehemently opposed this idea. In his view, the Stepstones, a strategic and wealth-gathering region constantly at war, should be firmly under royal control, not given to Daemon. He had countered his father's suggestion, only to be blindsided by an even more shocking proposal from Viserys.

Viserys proposed granting Aegon the title of Prince of the Stepstones and incorporating the region into the territory of the Targaryen dynasty, with Daemon's duties in the Narrow Sea under his supervision.

This proposal was met with near-unanimous opposition from the Red Keep, with Rhaegar leading the dissent.

Aside from Aegon's questionable character, abilities, and personal desires, Rhaegar saw the division of the Stepstones as an attack on his own ambitions.

Traditionally, only the Targaryen heir was given a significant title such as Prince of Dragonstone. Granting such titles to other family members would not only dilute his own power but also cause internal strife.

The Targaryens were proud and often rebellious, rarely willing to be subordinate. Every generation since Jaehaerys I had seen battles for the throne.

Granting Aegon his own dominion would be akin to releasing a tiger back into the wild, allowing his ambitions to grow unchecked.

If Aegon were given a title, would Aemond and Daeron demand the same? And what about their unpredictable uncle Daemon? Should he, too, be granted lands? Where would these lands come from, and how would they affect the stability of the realm?

Rhaegar mulled over these questions. As king and father, Viserys should have considered these implications too. Yet, despite the evident risks, Viserys seemed determined to divide the kingdom without any clear countermeasures in place.

"Rhaegar, what do you think of the tournament?" Viserys asked, a smile on his face, determined to ignore the underlying tension between his sons and brother.

Viserys knew his eldest son harbored resentment. He had made his adjustments accordingly. Daemon's two years in prison had been a harsh lesson. Granted, it relied on the premise that neither uncle nor nephew held grudges over their dragon-related skirmishes.

Aegon hadn't been granted control of the entire Stepstones, only a piece of Bloodstone. He remained a prince without the elevated title. Moreover, the fortress on Bloodstone was still under construction, hardly resembling a castle.

For the past three years, Aegon had served as a laborer in the defense of the Stepstones. When he occasionally returned to King's Landing, he often sought refuge in brothels, needing to be dragged out each time.

For Viserys, he kept potential trouble to a minimum. He did not want to hinder his eldest son's future. His efforts, though not absolute, left Rhaegar seething but reluctantly accepting the current situation. Rhaegar planned to set strict rules to prevent future problems when the opportunity arose.

Rhaegar's thoughts returned and he agreed, "No problem. I was just thinking about the knighthood." He could earn a good reputation without having to flaunt his power.

"Good, the matter is settled. Let's discuss the venue for the tournament later," Viserys said, considering the newly renovated Harrenhal Castle. He hadn't visited Harrenhal since his falling out

with Rhaegar. Hosting the tournament there would provide an opportunity to reconcile and escape King's Landing for a while.

With the decision made, the dinner party began. Rhaenyra and Alicent sat to the left and right of Viserys, serving him food. Viserys beamed, enjoying the attention from his wife and daughter.

Rhaegar, meanwhile, focused on his plate, occasionally glancing at Aegon and Daemon. Daemon, titled the Lord of the Narrow Sea, technically managed the entire region but realistically only controlled the Stepstones. He had to fend off pirates and the Triarchy's reprisals, bearing significant responsibility but little power.

Aegon's fiefdom on Bloodstone Island received limited treasury funding, leaving the castle unfinished. He remained under Daemon's command, tasked with various duties. Over time, Daemon's arrogance clashed with Aegon's laziness, souring their relationship. Daemon had once disciplined Aegon, deeply offending his nephew.

Aegon feared Rhaegar but not his uncle, who had been beaten by his elder brother. Aegon continually caused minor troubles, a constant irritation. Despite Daemon's authority, he couldn't fully control Aegon.

Realizing Viserys primarily wanted the Stepstones' safety maintained, Daemon eventually relinquished his broader responsibilities as Lord of the Narrow Sea. He returned to Driftmark, where Laena awaited him. After two years without touching a woman, Daemon and Laena were fervently reunited.

Chapter 253: The Pregnancy Comes

Rhaenyra sat on a chair, chatting with Laena and the silver-haired girl beside Laenor. She looked gentle, her voice soft, and every move exuded the calm demeanor of a young lady. Her intellectual beauty was fully emphasized, reflecting a mature woman's grace.

"Celine, you and Laenor are newlyweds. Traveling is a good choice," Laena suggested with a hopeful smile. "I have quite a few friends in Pentos. You could go there for some fun."

Celine, the silver-haired girl who appeared at the Targaryen family banquet, was the only daughter of Lord Bartimos Celtigar of Claw Isle. She had married Laenor late last year, in 120 AC, to strengthen the bond between the Celtigar and Velaryon Houses.

Petite with a beautiful face and a few freckles adding to her charm, Celine smiled, albeit forcedly. "I'll discuss it with Laenor," she said, her knuckles whitening as she gripped her knife and fork.

Turning to her husband, she asked in a low voice, "What do you think, Laenor?"

Laenor, not listening to the women, was engrossed in drinking with Aegon. Only when Celine tugged at his sleeve did he turn with a self-assured smile. "Fine, whatever you say," he replied, then continued his drinking.

For Laenor, paying outward respect to Celine was sufficient for his duties as a husband. Drinking with a brother was far more important. Celine pursed her lips, released her grip on his sleeve, and forced a slightly embarrassed smile at Laena and Rhaenyra.

Laena's face went cold for a moment before she composed herself and sat down next to Celine. She hugged her gently and comforted her, "All men are like that. Everything will be fine."

Laena understood her brother's behavior very well. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate Celine, but he lacked the concept of a wife. Rhaenyra, understanding, withdrew her smile. Laenor's preferences were no secret - he preferred the company of men to women.

Celine leaned into Laena's embrace, her voice barely a whisper, "I'm still a virgin."

Laena stroked her head, speaking candidly, "Don't worry, men are fickle. You're only sixteen. There's plenty of time. Rhaenyra and I were both past twenty before we lost our virginity."

"Laena!" Rhaenyra's voice rose slightly, her eyes widening.

Talking about such matters in private was one thing, but it was unseemly at a banquet. Laena turned and said frankly, "Am I wrong?"

Rhaenyra was speechless and moved back to her seat, deciding not to interact further. She wasn't married and felt she couldn't compare to Laena, who was a wife and mother.

Laena, unfazed, continued to comfort Celine with her personal insights. She and Daemon had been married for years, and she had seen it all. This was just a small scene.

"Huh," Daemon chuckled from the side, unable to hold back his laughter. He appreciated Laena's broad-mindedness, unrestrained by trivial conventions. She truly was the perfect match for him.

Hearing his laughter, Rhaenyra rolled her eyes and returned to her seat next to Rhaegar. Since Daemon's return to Driftmark, she had visited Laena only once.

That visit had ended awkwardly when she stumbled upon Daemon and Laena in an intimate moment on the balcony, with Aunt Rhaenys witnessing the scene alongside her. Since then, any communication with Laena was done through ravens and invitations.

Rhaegar teased her, "Why are you back and not talking again?"

His keen senses had picked up the women's conversation. Rhaenyra, feeling annoyed, threatened him through gritted teeth, "Don't push it, Rhaegar."

Feigning surrender, Rhaegar raised his hands and said, "Fine, you're the queen, you're the boss."

Rhaenyra hummed proudly and began helping him with his food. Suddenly, Rhaegar leaned closer and hooked his finger under her chin, directing her gaze across the table. "Look, Rhaenyra."

She reluctantly turned her head, wondering what he was pointing out. There, in front of her, Aegon and Laenor were drinking happily. Rhaenyra scanned the scene, puzzled. "What am I supposed to see?"

"Look below their waists," Rhaegar hinted mysteriously.

Rhaenyra lowered her gaze, following the line of their shoulders, chest, abdomen, waist, and then—

She grabbed Rhaegar's arm, her mouth agape in surprise. Aegon and Laenor, leaning close with their shoulders touching, were groping each other under the table, smiles plastered on their faces.

Rhaenyra quickly looked away, flustered. "They..."

She wanted to ask how long this had been going on, but was too embarrassed to speak openly.

Rhaegar's mouth curled into a sly smile, and he whispered, "Three years."

He explained that after Vaemond's funeral, during an inspection visit to the Stepstones, he had landed his dragon on Bloodstone Island and unexpectedly found Aegon and Laenor in a compromising position on the grass.

Cannibal's wings had created a gust of wind that scattered their clothes, leaving the two naked and exposed.

Rhaenyra's eyes widened in shock. "I can't believe it's been this long."

"They were stationed on the Stepstones for years, without any women around. It was only natural they turned to each other," Rhaegar said, sharing his secret with ease.

Aegon, ever the wanderer, was unbothered by boundaries and Laenor had simply capitalized on their isolation. Rhaenyra covered her mouth, stifling a giggle. Among the nobility, such affairs were not unheard of, and she found humor in the situation rather than scandal.

Rhaenyra laughed quietly, feeling like a young girl sharing a mischievous secret.

When the twins turned one, they left Driftmark and moved to King's Landing or Dragonstone with Rhaenyra. Despite not having a deep bond with their birth mother, Laena, they still missed her.

Baela, bold and outgoing, hugged Laena's thigh, tilting her face up. "Mother, did you have another baby?" she asked loudly enough for everyone to hear.

The room fell silent, and all eyes turned to Laena. She paused, stroking Baela's silver hair, unsure how to respond.

Rhaena, hugging Laena's other thigh, pressed her face against her mother's skirt. "Mother, father said you're going to give us a little brother," she said in a sticky, affectionate voice.

Laena shot an annoyed glance at her innocent-looking husband. They had agreed to keep it a secret to avoid upsetting their daughters and Celine.

Daemon shrugged casually. "The kids have a right to know," he said.

Laena, frustrated but composed, took a deep breath and placed her hands on her daughters' heads. Addressing everyone, she announced, "I'm pregnant. The maester says it's been almost two months."

A smile crept across her face, radiating a maternal glow.

"Congratulations, Laena," Rhaenyra exclaimed, rising from her chair to embrace her friend. The others followed suit, offering their congratulations, especially Viserys, who clapped enthusiastically.

"Good! The Targaryens will have another newborn," he beamed. Every new heir for House Targaryen was precious.

"Thank you, brother," Daemon said with a chuckle, standing up despite Laena's irritated look. He lifted his wine glass in a toast. "Gentlemen, I am to have another child, a Targaryen heir!"

"Well, congratulations, Prince Daemon," Otto Hightower responded first, clapping his hands. He knew how to keep the atmosphere lively, especially with his daughter and grandchildren present.

Viserys was overjoyed, raising his glass and drinking hurriedly, spilling wine down his front. Rhaegar also applauded, scanning the room.

While his father and Rhaenyra's smiles were genuine, Otto, Alicent, and a few younger brothers were more perfunctory. Helena was in her own world, playing with grapes. Laenor and his wife's smiles were stiff, not heartfelt, and Aunt Rhaenys was silent, her expression stern.

Rhaegar frowned slightly, sensing the tension.

Out of the blue, Aegon asked, "Cousin, when will you and your sister-in-law have a child?"

"Aegon!" Laenor's face darkened, and he nudged him.

Aegon continued teasing, "You'll have to work harder. Lord Corlys has been waiting for a grandson to inherit Driftmark."

Daemon chimed in playfully, "Yes, to have a pure Velaryon with salt in his blood."

Laenor blushed and put down his glass. "I've only been married less than a year. There will be plenty of opportunities," he said quietly.

"Very well, a nice declaration," Aegon retorted, sarcasm

Despite their casual relationship, Aegon and Laenor had little to do with each other. Aegon had never been fond of House Velaryon.

Daemon leaned back in his chair, a smirk playing on his lips as he observed the unfolding drama.

Laenor's chest heaved with anger, ready to retort.

"Laenor, sit down and keep your wife company," Laena interjected, her voice commanding attention and diffusing the tension.

Celine sat with her head bowed, fingers nervously twisting together, her eyes rimmed with redness. It wasn't that she didn't want children; her husband simply never gave her the chance.

Chapter 254: Inheritance

Celine was filled with regret. She should have insisted on annulling the marriage; at least then, she might have found happiness.

Since marrying Laenor, she spent most of her time alone or witnessing him flirt with his personal knight. The very thought made her stomach churn.

Laenor and Laena were close, often listening to their sister. Reluctantly, Laenor sat back down beside Celine, forcing a smile. "Don't worry, we'll have a baby."

Celine's eyes were numb with disappointment. "Can you?"

Laenor's forced smile faltered as he took a long gulp of wine. The words stung. A man couldn't admit he couldn't perform, but... he truly couldn't. Despite his efforts, he couldn't muster the desire to be with his wife. This filled him with guilt and made him avoid her even more. People tend to run from their flaws.

The room fell into an awkward silence until Viserys broke it by introducing a new topic. "Daemon, you should cherish your wife. She's a treasure."

Daemon's slight conflicts with Laena hadn't gone unnoticed by Viserys. "As it should be," Daemon replied lightly.

Rhaenyra, stroking Laena's flat belly, smiled. "When the baby is born, what will you name it?"

"Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" Laena asked, her eyes sparkling.

"You've already thought of a name?" Rhaenyra was surprised.

"Of course, I think about it all the time," Laena said, pressing Rhaenyra's hand. "If it's a girl, we'll name her after you."

"What about a boy?" Rhaenyra asked, intrigued.

Laena turned to Rhaegar, who was eating his melon. "A boy will be named Rhaegar. It's a good, strong name."

Rhaegar, feeling the attention on him, humbly said, "My name is quite common, not as noble as you say."

Viserys's face darkened. "Rhaegar, your mother chose that name before she died. Don't belittle it."

"Sorry, father," Rhaegar apologized immediately.

Viserys, still annoyed, said to Laena, "Use the name Rhaegar. I hope your child will be just as remarkable."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Laena said gratefully.

Viserys waved it off, his affection for the name Rhaegar evident. It was the name his wife had called out on her deathbed. For her, he had foregone naming his eldest son after his father, Baelon Targaryen.

The mood of the feast brightened after this exchange. Rhaenyra and Laena chatted a bit more before Rhaenyra returned to her seat, her eyes burning with a different intensity as she looked at Rhaegar.

"What's the matter?" Rhaegar asked, feeling a shiver run down his spine.

Rhaenyra shook her head and folded her hands on her belly.

Rhaegar understood immediately and shook his head. Rhaenyra and he aren't even married yet. They cannot follow Laena's example.

"Rhaegar, be careful," Rhaenyra warned. "I don't want to stain my dress or drink tea again."

Rhaegar, hesitantly, said, "I have a small fortune. I can afford dozens of dresses."

The maester had advised against drinking too much moon tea, so it's usually just a matter of changing clothes or taking a shower.

"I don't care. I'm not accommodating you anymore," Rhaenyra said sternly.

Rhaegar smiled helplessly. The feeling of impending trouble was not pleasant. Often, he couldn't do as he wished. Rhaenyra held the initiative.

...

Three days later, it was midday at the Dragonpit. Rhaenyra and Rhaegar entered under the escort of the Dragonkeepers. Rhaegar's name day had already passed, and the recent family feasts had doubled as his celebration. Now, Rhaegar was preparing to return to Harrenhal for the upcoming tournament.

King Viserys had announced the tournament across the Seven Kingdoms, inviting nobles from all corners to attend. Due to some nobles residing in remote areas, the event was scheduled for mid-summer, half a year away, to ensure everyone had ample time to travel.

Inside the Dragonpit, Rhaegar immediately heard a sharp dragon roar, followed by Daemon's low voice. "You are Caraxes, a mighty dragon."

Rhaegar continued walking, observing the dim interior of the Dragonpit. Caraxes, the Blood Wurm, was prostrate on the ground, his snake-like neck stretching and his slender body twisting. One of his wings flapped normally while the other drooped, shackled and secured by a steel collar.

During the last dragon battle on Driftmark Island, Caraxes had suffered severe damage to one of his wings.

After two years of recuperation on the rocks of Driftmark, his wing was repaired, but it was so distorted that it couldn't keep balance. Recently released from captivity, Daemon had been the first to visit his dragon, and was disappointed by Caraxes' condition.

Daemon had taken drastic measures, binding Caraxes with chains and amputating the deformed part with an axe, then bandaging the wound. The dragon's roar during this procedure was said to be heard throughout Driftmark, nearly provoking the sleeping Vhagar.

Daemon's methods, though extreme, were somewhat effective. Dragons are resilient and can heal over time. Caraxes was silent for another year, but its wounds were mostly healed and its bone grafts were in good shape. In another year and a half, it would be able to fly again.

As Rhaegar approached, he saw Daemon rubbing the scarlet scales of Caraxes. Daemon wasn't alone; his two daughters were with him. The introverted Rhaena clung to Daemon's coat, looking at Caraxes with a mix of fear and envy. Baela, bolder, circled around Caraxes's neck, observing intently.

After a while, Baela asked, "Father, when will my sister and I's dragon eggs hatch?"

She had a green egg, while her sister had a red egg with black spots. Neither showed signs of hatching.

Daemon replied, "Don't be anxious. The dragon egg will choose its owner and the time of its birth."

"When is that?" Baela looked puzzled.

"I don't know," Daemon said flatly.

"No?" Baela exclaimed, surprised that her seemingly omnipotent father didn't have an answer.

Daemon remained calm, murmuring, "Be patient. You are my daughters, and it is your destiny to become dragon riders."

The probability of a dragon egg hatching is not high, especially when placed in a baby's cradle. This tradition, dating back to when Rhaenys placed eggs for her brother Jaehaerys, had little success.

Over the years, only Jaehaerys and Rhaenyra had successfully hatched eggs in their cradles. Daemon himself, his brother Viserys, their cousin Rhaenys, and many nieces and nephews, including Rhaegar, had failed.

The dragon egg in the cradle tradition had become more of a symbolic blessing for future generations.

Baela nodded earnestly. "Alright, I'll go back and take good care of the dragon eggs."

"Me too," Rhaena agreed, raising her hand.

Rhaegar approached, deliberately deepening his footsteps to announce his arrival.

Daemon turned his head at the sound, seeing his nephew and niece coming together. He glanced at them briefly before turning away, uninterested. Except for his brother Viserys, no one in House Targaryen paid him much heed, and he reciprocated the sentiment.

Rhaenyra and Rhaegar exchanged a look, curiosity evident in their eyes. The tension between Daemon and Laena and Laenor had been palpable at the recent family banquet.

Rhaenyra took the lead, asking, "Uncle, why aren't you with Laena?"

Daemon frowned. "Pregnant women are moodier than dragons."

Baela and Rhaena hurriedly greeted him, explaining, "Grandmother is with Mother. They have something to discuss."

After the Battle of the Stepstones, the kingdom was at peace. When the Sea Snake stepped down as Commander of the Navy, Viserys had invited him to become the Master of Ships.

Sea Snake had declined, citing the need to recuperate, and stayed on Driftmark. Rhaenys, as the Master of Dragons, traveled between King's Landing and Driftmark, occasionally acting as godmother to several of her cousins. It was a demanding role, but she managed it to keep the Targaryens and Valyrians united.

Picking up on the subtext, Rhaenyra's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Uncle, did you and Laena argue about the baby?"

Daemon shook his head impatiently. "You're supposed to be heading back to the Riverlands. Hurry up and go."

Rhaenyra tugged at Rhaegar's sleeve, winking. Daemon seemed anxious.

Rhaegar's thoughts aligned quickly. He asked bluntly, "Laena wants to name the baby as Laenor's heir?"

Daemon's hand, which was stroking Caraxes, paused. He turned his head, eyes cold.

Rhaegar spread his hands, smiling. "Looks like I guessed right."

Laenor couldn't have children, and the Velaryon House needed an heir. Laena's child was the perfect candidate, possessing both Velaryon and Targaryen blood.

"You guessed wrong, but you're close," Daemon admitted, annoyed. He took his daughters' hands and said, "Corlys wants me to name one of my daughters, or Laena's unborn fourth child, as the heir to House Velaryon."

"That doesn't seem harsh. Your child would legally inherit Driftmark," Rhaegar reasoned.

Daemon's eyes narrowed. "Would you let your child give up their family name for a piece of territory?"

Chapter 255: Highgarden Rose

The Targaryen and Velaryon Houses, both noble houses of ancient Valyria, have shared a deep bond throughout history. Together, they survived the Doom of Valyria, but notable differences set them apart.

The Targaryens possess dragons, the rightful rulers of the skies, with the power to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. The Velaryons, who claim salt in their blood, are revered as the Lords of the Tides.

For centuries, these two houses have been intricately linked. Today, Sea Snake Corlys Velaryon is married to Princess Rhaenys, and their children have taken command of dragons. However, the perceived weakness of King Viserys has led the Velaryons to look down on the royal family.

The emergence of Rhaegar Targaryen has shifted this dynamic. By establishing the Dragon Laws, he disqualified the next generation of Velaryons from controlling dragons. Without dragons, the Velaryons are diminished, no longer holding the unique power they once did.

Daemon's children, pure Targaryens, are born with the bloodline and qualifications to command dragons. For them to adopt the Velaryon name would mean renouncing their royal heritage and the right to rule dragons. Daemon, a solitary figure, even refused to father an heir with his former wife, Lady Rhea, to inherit Runestone. How could he allow his child to forgo the Targaryen name for Driftmark?

Rhaegar, understanding Daemon's perspective, shook his head. "I am not a father yet, but my child is my child, and that cannot be changed." The Targaryen identity was far more significant than being a Velaryon, and Daemon's pride in the Targaryen name meant he would never let his children give it up.

If Daemon had not valued this pride, he wouldn't have risked his life by returning to Driftmark with Laena to fight for his daughters' rights. Finding some agreement in Rhaegar's words, Daemon's irritation eased slightly.

Laena had been pressing him about the inheritance. Corlys's offer wasn't unreasonable, but Daemon couldn't bring himself to agree. To him, it felt dishonorable for his children to change their name.

With a sneer, Daemon expressed his contempt for Laenor. "I pray that Laenor, that failure, can father a child so the Sea Snake can have a grandchild to inherit his legacy." If Laenor were capable, none of this would be an issue.

Rhaegar laughed and shook his head. "Laenor can't be with women. It's nearly impossible."

If Laenor could fulfill this role, there wouldn't be so much trouble.

Daemon's eyes flashed with disdain. "Gender is just an illusion. It's the outer skin that matters. A real man should sleep with whomever he wants."

Rhaegar was momentarily speechless, taken aback by Daemon's blunt philosophy. These words disrupted his understanding, and he quickly crushed the unsettling thoughts forming in his mind. Glancing at Rhaenyra, he hurriedly dispelled any improper notions.

Daemon smirked and spoke in a patronizing tone, "You should try different women more often. It's the only way to grow."

He then glanced at Rhaenyra and added, "No matter how good the main course is, any flavor can get boring."

Rhaegar stepped in front of Rhaenyra, understanding the implication. He replied calmly, "Uncle, everyone has different tastes and habits."

"You might be right," he continued. "I used to dislike wine, but now I enjoy my own sweet fruit wine. However, I still long for the sweets I've loved since childhood."

Rhaegar's voice was firm and sincere. The Targaryens were known for their deep desires, but that didn't mean there was no loyalty. He wasn't like his father and uncle, who frequented brothels.

With that, he took Rhaenyra's hand and squeezed it gently. Rhaenyra lifted her chin and gave Daemon a cold look. She despised those who encouraged Rhaegar to stray.

"Whatever," Daemon scoffed. "Enjoying the most abundant rights in the world while suppressing your nature is ridiculous."

Rhaegar frowned at the accusation. Rhaenyra tugged his hand and said dismissively, "Ignore him. Laena is pregnant and won't let him on the ship, so he's holding his fire."

She knew Daemon's persuasive nature all too well. She had once been tempted by his mantra of "sleep with whoever you want." In hindsight, it was an irresponsible notion. How can one be responsible for their family and loved ones if consumed by desire?

Rhaegar nodded, deciding not to argue. Everyone has different tastes and habits. Daemon was Daemon, and he was himself. They were different people and didn't need to conform to each other's ways.

The siblings walked hand in hand towards the Dragonpit in search of their dragons. Daemon watched them go, his eyes glinting with stubbornness. He whispered, "This is your nature, and this is what a Targaryen is."

...

Harrenhal

A desolate ruin on the northern shore of Lake God's Eye, had seen better days. Now, its crumbling walls and steep hillside were the backdrop for a peculiar gathering. Hundreds of rough-hewn laborers clustered around several massive, thick iron cauldrons.

The task was both strange and arduous. They removed stones and mud from the damaged walls and threw them into the cauldrons, mixing in dark, sticky dragon dung.

"Roar..."

A dragon's roar pierced the air as several large orange and white fireballs descended into the cauldrons.

With a sizzle and a hiss, the materials within the cauldrons began to melt into a liquid form. Standing tall and imposing, the priest Tru recited incantations, urging the formation of black dragonstone.

Moments later, the cauldrons contained a boiling, bubbling solution of blackstone. The workers hurriedly placed half-high stone jars beneath the cauldrons. Supported by two brackets, the cauldrons tilted, pouring the molten solution into the stone jars.

Workers inserted flat loads into the arm-thick holes at either end of the jars, then carried them away to pour the solution onto the foundation of the demolished wall. Hundreds of workers worked in unison, and in less than half an hour a towering section of wall over ten meters long had taken shape.

The workers dispersed, not out of laziness, but because of the demanding nature of their material supplier. Nearby, a light-gray dragon lay at the base of the wall, its head drooping lazily, its tail flicking occasionally.

A team of black-armored guards arrived, leading several fat, strong goats. The goats walked slowly in front of the dragon, known as Gray Ghost, who lifted his eyelids, looked at them, and then opened his mouth to release a dragonfire.

"Baa~~"

The goats screamed as they were incinerated, transforming into charred roasted meat. Gray Ghost stretched his neck, devoured them slowly, and burped, releasing a sulfuric scent into the air.

Once Gray Ghost finished its meal, Tru ordered the laborers to prepare for the next round of dragonstone smelting. In the past, the powerful Cannibal dragon had been used to melt dragonstone, but its fire was too intense, often injuring workers and destroying containers.

Now, Gray Ghost was the primary dragon for this task, with Syrax and Dreamfire occasionally rotating in.

"Roar..."

A fierce wind stirred as a black dragon's shadow crossed the vast Lake of God's Eye, soaring above Harrenhal. A golden dragon followed closely, both landing in the courtyard of the Kingspyre and Widow's Towers.

...

The Kingspyre Tower

Rhaegar entered his castle, Kingspyre Tower, with a relaxed air. Despite its grandeur, the castle lacked the solidity he desired. Still, he found the picturesque scenery, pleasant surroundings, and mild climate of Harrenhal far more comfortable than the foul-smelling gutters of King's Landing.

As he entered the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, Tormund and Grey Worm approached, each carrying a white falcon on their shoulders.

"Prince Rhaegar," they greeted him respectfully.

Rhaegar nodded. "What is it?"

Tormund, his chief of intelligence, and Grey Worm, commander of the Harrenhal garrison, were his trusted confidants. Their presence signaled something important.

Tormund gently coughed and produced two letters from his pocket, speaking softly, "A letter from Highgarden and one from Riverrun."

Rhaegar took the letters and began to read. Moments later, Rhaenyra, wearing a red strapless dress, approached with a curious look.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"See for yourself," Rhaegar replied, handing her one of the letters.

Rhaenyra took the letter and read it carefully. The elegant handwriting was unmistakably feminine, and the letter was filled with elaborate expressions of admiration for Rhaegar.

"It's from the daughter of the Lord of Highgarden, Margaery Tyrell," Rhaegar explained.

"Hmph, what a rotten Highgarden rose," Rhaenyra scoffed, slapping the letter playfully against Rhaegar's chest. "Someone wrote you a love letter. Why don't you hurry up and answer it?"

Rhaegar took her hand and laughed softly. "Roses have thorns. I wouldn't dare pluck them indiscriminately."

The content of the letter was bold and explicit, undeniably a love letter. It included an invitation for Rhaegar to visit Highgarden, which piqued his interest. Old Tyrell had recently lost his heir, making Highgarden a political powder keg. Margaery's letter at such a tumultuous time made Rhaegar suspicious of her intentions.

Rhaenyra crossed her arms, skeptical. She remembered how innocent Rhaegar had been with Jeyne at first, even refusing her invitations. But when she wasn't looking, their relationship had blossomed. Rhaenyra was wary of history repeating itself.

Seeing her doubt, Rhaegar handed her the other note.

Rhaenyra took it reluctantly, her eyes never leaving Rhaegar's face. She read the message from Riverrun and gasped, "Old Lord Tully is bedridden?"

The letter explained that Grover Tully was incapacitated, leaving Riverrun leaderless and in chaos. His two sons were vying for power, each gathering petty nobles and landless knights, resulting in daily martial duels.

Chapter 256: Ridiculous Demands

Rhaegar sighed. "Things have escalated. Elmo is under house arrest by his two uncles and managed to send me a letter."

Rhaenyra's expression became serious. "You must go to Riverrun. We can't have chaos there."

Old Tully's illness had left a power vacuum, and the antics of his sons threatened the stability of the Riverlands.

Rhaegar nodded. "It is necessary to intervene."

Despite Old Tully's mediocrity and stubbornness, he had remained loyal to the Crown. Rhaegar could not ignore the unrest in Riverrun.

He turned to Grey Worm. "Prepare to leave tonight. Take some men and go to Riverrun."

"How many shall I bring?" Grey Worm asked, tightening his grip on his spear.

"Fifty Unsullied and fifty Fearless should suffice," Rhaegar replied.

The Fearless, infantry soldiers trained by Grey Worm, were formidable, even if not quite at the level of the Unsullied. Harrenhal's defense relied mainly on Fearless patrols.

Grey Worm's eyes flashed with determination. "Yes, Prince."

In Riverrun, where the garrison usually didn't exceed a thousand, a hundred men would ensure Rhaegar's safety.

Rhaegar glanced at Tormund and Grey Worm. "Anything else to report?"

If not, he could finally rest.

Grey Worm hesitated, then spoke. "Prince, Maester Tru wishes to return to the Citadel to regain his status as Maester. He has been helping with the repairs at Harrenhal."

Tru, a renamed Maester, preferred not to be called one, but was still respected at Harrenhal, where he taught the children to read and write.

Rhaegar thought for a moment, then smiled. "Tell him not to worry. I'll arrange for him to be sent to Oldtown soon."

Grey Worm sighed in relief and nodded respectfully before withdrawing. He had taken his language lessons with Tru seriously.

Rhaegar then turned to Tormund, who hadn't left. "What is it?"

Tormund smiled helplessly. "The Faith of the Seven is sending two priests to the sanctuary inside the castle."

Rhaegar frowned. "It's not a big deal. Just don't let them roam around. Think of them as extra hands for the sanctuary."

He did not like the Faith of the Seven. The upper ranks did little more than collect money from the nobles, while the lower ranks were often poor and hoped for miracles from the Seven Gods. Although some sincere believers did good work, they were often naive and made unreasonable demands.

As expected, the priests not only settled in the sanctuary but also started making requests.

Tormund's expression was troubled. "Prince, they want you to fund a 30-foot bronze statue of the Mother for the sanctuary."

Rhaegar chuckled at the absurdity. "Do they have any idea how much bronze that would take?"

Copper was highly prized in Westeros, along with gold and silver. The request for a massive bronze statue was absurd.

Tormund patted the restless white hawk on his shoulder and spoke softly, "According to the priests, this request is negotiable."

"They claim that the loss of the Old Gods' faith in Harrenhal and your restoration of the sanctuary is a sign that the Seven Gods want their faith to spread in the Riverlands. As the Targaryen prince, they believe you should set an example by promoting the faith of the Seven Gods in this region."

The Riverlands were ancient lands with many noble families still loyal to the Old Gods, their sacred weirwood trees standing as a testament to their beliefs. The Faith of the Seven had long sought to convert these families.

Rhaegar smirked, recognizing the priests' ploy. After a brief pause, he said, "Tell them that the Mother is indeed compassionate and holy. I will commission a ten-foot wooden statue for worship. They should not ask for more."

His resources were tied up in maintaining his army, forging armor, and weapons. There was no surplus to indulge the priests' grandiose plans.

Tormund's eyes twinkled with understanding. "I'll convey your message appropriately, Prince."

The Faith of the Seven was a unique presence on the continent. They couldn't be fought or ignored, and their audacity in asking for funds was unmatched. To refuse would be to disrespect the Seven Gods and invite judgment.

...

Two days later.

Riverrun.

"Roar..."

Cannibal hovered over the city, surveying the tiny figures scurrying below.

The soldiers on the walls quickly lowered the drawbridge, and the gates creaked open.

Cannibal descended slowly, and Rhaegar dismounted from the dragon's back.

He patted Cannibal's scales and said, "Rest close by."

"Roar..." Cannibal responded with a low growl, its green eyes sweeping over the people on the walls before it turned and took off.

"Prince, you're here," Grey Worm greeted, leading a team out of the city.

"Let's go in," Rhaegar commanded.

"Yes, Prince," Grey Worm replied, positioning himself just behind Rhaegar and leading the soldiers in two lines as they entered the city.

As they crossed the drawbridge, Rhaegar surveyed the garrison of Riverrun. The soldiers, heads bowed, guarded the walls. It was evident that Lord Tully's illness had severely affected the household.

"Take me to see Lord Grover first," Rhaegar instructed.

His primary concern was the old lord's health. Grover Tully needed to be alive to ensure a smooth transition of power. His premature death could complicate matters.

Grey Worm led the way, pushing aside guards as they made their way to the main tower, seeking the Lord's quarters. The absence of Grover's sons and Elmo was noticeable, and the usually lively city was eerily quiet.

The main tower and walls of Riverrun were constructed from white stone. The Lord's residence was in the lower level of the tower's attic. Rhaegar and his escort quickly arrived there.

In front of an aged wooden door, two knights stood guard. Upon seeing Rhaegar, they quickly saluted, "Greetings, Prince."

These were Grover Tully's loyal knights.

Rhaegar raised a hand and said, "At ease. I have come to visit Lord Grover."

One knight spoke softly, "Prince, the maesters are treating Lord Tully inside. Please keep the noise down to avoid disturbing his recovery."

"Don't worry, I will just take a quick look," Rhaegar assured him, respecting the knight's concern.

The knight saluted gratefully, and the other opened the door, stepping back silently.

Leaving Grey Worm at the door, Rhaegar entered the room alone.

As soon as he entered the room, the strong smell of medicine hit his nose.

Rhaegar instinctively covered his nose and mouth, then walked in with measured steps, his eyes taking in the surroundings.

Riverrun was not a large city, and the lord's residence reflected that modesty. The stone walls were decorated with various swords, stag heads, and candlesticks, giving the room a rustic charm. A round table of solid wood occupied the center, and a cozy goose feather cushion lay near the fireplace.

A fire crackled in the hearth, the pine crackling as it burned.

A middle-aged maester sat on the edge of the cushion, diligently recording the lord's condition with a goose quill. "Low-grade fever, unconsciousness, regular bloodletting in half a bowl..."

Rhaegar approached quietly, his gaze fixed on Lord Grover Tully as he lay unconscious on the soft cushions. The old lord's face was pale, his eyes closed. A damp towel rested on his forehead and a thick blanket covered his frail body.

Rhaegar's presence startled the maester, who looked up in surprise. "Prince, when did you enter?"

Rhaegar put a finger to his lips. "Hush! Don't disturb the patient."

The maester, looking somewhat embarrassed, replied, "Of course, Prince. The Lord has been in a coma for several days now, and there is still no sign of improvement."

"Have you finished your examination?" Rhaegar asked.

"Yes, Prince."

"Then leave us."

The maester bowed and left the room. Alone with the unconscious lord, Rhaegar sat down on the cushion beside him. He removed the damp towel from Grover's forehead, feeling its coldness. It was no longer suitable for use.

Throwing it aside, Rhaegar spoke softly, "Old man, I advised you long ago to decide on a successor, but you hesitated."

Grover Tully's heir was his grandson, Elmo Tully, but the old lord had stubbornly clung to the traditional succession laws of Westeros. According to Andal Succession Laws, if an heir's eldest son died, the line of succession would pass to the second son, bypassing the grandson.

Elmo, as the eldest grandson, found himself third in line. Grover's two sons were seen as inept, yet the old lord couldn't bring himself to bypass them, causing endless strife and delay in naming Elmo as his successor.

As if in response to Rhaegar's words, Grover's lips moved slightly, and he gasped a few times.

Rhaegar leaned closer, hopeful for a moment, but the old lord soon fell silent again.

Disappointed, Rhaegar rolled his eyes. "If scolding could wake you up, I'd have tried that ages ago."

He soaked the towel in warm water and placed it back on Grover's forehead. The smell of medicine in the room was overpowering, prompting Rhaegar to stand and leave.

As he moved, he stepped on something soft with a crunch. Looking down, he saw a few pieces of melon rind. Crouching, he picked up a piece and glanced under the cushions.

It was clean but dark beneath, and there was no dust. Rhaegar discarded the melon rind, shaking his head with a wry smile.

Chapter 257: The Champion of the Tournament

Leaving the lord's chamber, Rhaegar ordered the two knights to stand guard and made his way directly to the main tower.

"Where are Lord Tully's two sons?" he asked, walking briskly.

Gray Worm responded, "In the Godswood. They have been sending people to duel every day."

"Lead the way. I want to see this for myself," Rhaegar commanded.

Gray Worm nodded and called for a few Unsullied to follow, then led Rhaegar toward the Godswood.

The Godswood of Riverrun was situated in a secluded corner of the city. It was a serene and verdant garden, filled with weirwoods, flowers, streams, and birds nesting in the trees.

Rhaegar and his escort crossed a small bridge over the river that encircled the main tower, entering the peaceful area of the Godswood.

As they approached, the sound of clashing steel rang out. The small clearing within the Godswood was crowded with spectators.

Two groups of people stood at opposite ends, one from the south and one from the north.

"Prince!" A black-haired boy at the edge of the crowd shouted in surprise upon seeing Rhaegar.

Rhaegar looked up. "Elmo, you're out."

Elmo, the grandson of Lord Grover Tully, had mentioned in his letter two days earlier that he was under house arrest by his uncles.

Elmo quickly approached, looking relieved. "Thanks to your guards, Prince, I was able to leave my room."

Rhaegar glanced back at Gray Worm, who nodded in acknowledgment.

Gray Worm had discreetly helped Elmo out of his confinement. The boy's house arrest was not strictly enforced, and when Gray Worm's men arrived in Riverrun, they were able to contact Elmo and facilitate his release.

Rhaegar examined Elmo's attire, noting it was still that of a nobleman, unchanged from before.

He frowned slightly and asked bluntly, "Your uncles placed you under house arrest, and you let them get away with it?"

Elmo lowered his head in shame. "They acted too quickly. I didn't have time to react."

Rhaegar's voice grew colder. "If you had a way to send a message, why didn't you contact the knights loyal to your father and rally them to your cause?"

The old Tully's deceased eldest son might have been mediocre, but he had been the heir for over twenty years. Elmo, as his only son, could certainly garner support if he made an effort.

Caught off guard by Rhaegar's questions, Elmo stammered, "My grandfather is only sick. It hasn't come to that yet."

"Fool!" Rhaegar snapped, pointing an accusing finger at Elmo's nose. "If it hasn't reached that point, why did you write to me, asking me to come to Riverrun to watch this farce?"

Rhaegar, a prince and heir to the kingdom, had respected Lord Grover Tully. But Elmo's failure to handle his own affairs and his plea for outside help tested that respect.

Elmo, frightened, tried to explain, "Prince, I—"

"Get out of my sight. I don't have time for your excuses," Rhaegar interrupted, pushing past him toward the depths of the Godswood.

Elmo, desperate to apologize, tried to follow.

"Stand down, Elmo," Gray Worm commanded, his spear barring the way.

Elmo reluctantly complied, backing away.

Rhaegar, hearing the commotion behind him, clenched his teeth in frustration. "Pathetic!"

If the Tully House produced more heirs like Elmo, the royal family might need to reconsider their role as the guardians of the Riverlands. Not only were they failing to manage their own lands, but they also couldn't handle internal family disputes.

Keeping such a weak lineage as protectors of the Riverlands was becoming increasingly untenable.

...

Deep within the Godswood, Lord Tully's two sons were locked in a heated confrontation.

The second son, Milov Tully, stood as thin as a reed, flanked by a dozen horsemen in mismatched armor. Most conspicuous were two priests in robes embroidered with the seven-pointed star, signifying their allegiance to the Faith of the Seven. These priests were similar to the ones Rhaegar had encountered at Harrenhal.

Standing opposite Milov was his red-haired, burly brother, Edmure Tully. Rhaegar cast a disdainful glance at Edmure, repulsed.

The name Edmure Tully carried considerable weight in their family history, much like the prestige of Aegon Targaryen within House Targaryen. To bestow such a venerable name on this rotund, incompetent figure seemed a disservice to their ancestors.

Edmure's side also boasted a large retinue of mostly unruly knights. However, one individual stood out to Rhaegar—a middle-aged man with striking gray-blue eyes.

He wore silver-gray armor of obvious quality, with a broadsword at his side. A silver eagle crest adorned one corner of his armor, the symbol of House Mallister of Seagard.

Seagard, on the coast of the Riverlands, was one of the few cities with a maritime border. The Mallisters, with their noble and proud bearing, had once ruled the Trident as kings.

Rhaegar took note but did not pause, his footsteps drawing the attention of both factions who turned to look.

"Prince... Prince..." they stammered, saluting as he approached.

Rhaegar, who had known Lord Tully before he moved to Harrenhal, was a familiar and respected figure in Riverrun. After the fall of House Bracken, he had risen to become the de facto ruler of the Riverlands, a name known throughout the region.

With little patience for pleasantries, Rhaegar waved them aside. The disheveled knights, in the midst of their duel, quickly retreated, unwilling to offend him.

Rhaegar walked straight up to the middle-aged man of House Mallister and asked, "Lord Mallister, what brings you here?"

Lord Mallister, the head of his house, was no ordinary family member. Rhaegar had met him on several occasions. Despite his loyalty to the realm, Mallister had never sworn personal allegiance to Rhaegar, maintaining that his allegiance was to the king alone — a man of great honor and integrity.

Rhaegar's most vivid memory of Lord Mallister was his victory in the annual tournament in 105 AC. It was the year Rhaegar was born, the same year his mother died in childbirth. The tournament had been a great event, drawing competitors from all seven kingdoms.

The star of the tournament had been Criston Cole, the former Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Cole had shattered Harwin Strong's collarbone, earning Harwin the ironic nickname of "Brokenbones".

He had also defeated the Cargyll brothers, Erryk and Arryk, both members of the Kingsguard. In the final round, Cole had even disarmed Daemon Targaryen, Rhaegar's uncle, sending his Dark Sister's sword flying.

However, Cole's run had ended in the final match against Lord Mallister. With a swift and powerful stroke, Mallister's heavy sword had cut through Cole's morningstar, securing victory.

As a child, Rhaenyra had often lamented to Rhaegar that Mallister's extraordinary skill had thwarted Cole's ambitions. As a result, Rhaegar held a deep respect for Lord Mallister.

With a helmet trimmed with wings tucked under his arm, Lord Lymond Mallister offered a slight bow, his voice deep and resonant. "Reporting back to the prince, I came here at an invitation."

He glanced at Edmure Tully, making it clear who had extended the invitation.

Rhaegar was confused. "What did he promise you?"

Lord Lymond's face darkened and he gritted his teeth. "Old Tully had the audacity to suggest a marriage between one of my daughters and his youngest son."

Rhaegar understood immediately. "Edmure?"

Lord Lymond's expression grew even grimmer and he nodded. "Indeed. A few years ago, Old Tully pushed for the betrothal as if he would not live another day, desperate to secure the alliance."

Rhaegar sympathized with Lord Lymond's frustration. The Tully House motto, "Family, Duty, Honor," clearly placed family above all else. Even a failure like Edmure was used to cement noble bonds.

"Lord Lymond," Rhaegar asked cautiously, "how did you come to...?"

He couldn't bring himself to say Edmure's name for fear of adding to Lord Lymond's embarrassment.

Lord Lymond's face grew so dark that it seemed ready to erupt. His teeth were clenched. "That fool once had some redeeming qualities and Old Tully blinded me with his urgency."

Considering Old Tully's haste to secure the marriage, it seemed he had feared Lord Lymond would see through Edmure's facade.

"Damn Grover," Lord Lymond muttered, his fists clenched as if ready to storm the Keep and put an end to old Tully's deception.

Rhaegar, seeing Lord Lymond's rage, quietly withdrew, feeling a pang of sympathy for the man. Old Tully had indeed been underhanded.

After a brief exchange, Rhaegar turned his attention back to Tully's sons. "I came here as a guest. Continue your duels; don't mind me."

Milov and Edmure exchanged uneasy glances, clearly taken aback. They knew of Rhaegar's arrival; the sight of a black dragon circling Riverrun Castle was impossible to miss. But fear had kept them hidden in the Godswood.

Seeing their hesitation, Rhaegar's eyes hardened. "Fight. Do you need me to teach you?"

Startled, the two brothers quickly moved, signaling their knights to take positions. They understood well the danger of incurring Rhaegar's wrath.

Two and a half years earlier, a minor noble from the Riverlands had disrespected Rhaegar and denied him entry.

That night, the noble's warehouse had mysteriously burned down, along with dozens of warhorses and a granary, resulting in a loss exceeding a thousand gold dragons. This financial blow had left the once-wealthy family deeply indebted.

No one ever discovered who set the fire, but the message was clear to all the Riverlands nobles: when a prince visits, you open your gates and welcome him. This was no longer the era when local nobles could mock and refuse the royal family's requests with impunity.

Chapter 258: Changes in Riverrun City

The two Tully brothers ordered their knights to resume the duel, their eyes never leaving Rhaegar's cold, unflinching expression.

Moments later, one of the knights swung his longsword and pointed it at his opponent's throat, securing victory. The priests standing beside Milov immediately clasped their hands in silent prayer.

Rhaegar frowned, contemplating the involvement of the Faith of the Seven in this succession dispute.

"Prince, those priests are Milov's allies," Elmo whispered, approaching with trepidation.

Rhaegar was skeptical. "The contest for heirship should be based on individual merit. What use does Milov have for the Faith of the Seven?"

Elmo clenched his teeth, his voice filled with anger. "The priests have declared their support for Milov's claim. They've even sent a raven to the main church in Oldtown. They're waiting for my grandfather to die so they can back Milov's ascension."

He tightened his fists, muttering bitterly, "Those meddling priests."

Succession was an internal matter of the Tully family; the Faith of the Seven had no right to interfere. It was likely that Milov had promised the priests a large donation once he inherited Riverrun, to persuade them to support his claim.

As the conversation continued, the two contestants chose new opponents for the next duel. Milov selected a tall knight armed with a longsword and shield. Edmure, his face grim, brought forth his father-in-law, Lord Lymond.

Rhaegar watched in confusion. "What is the purpose of these duels?"

The duels seemed disorganized, with knights just slashing at each other without clear rules or goals.

Elmo sighed, "They measure strength by the number of knight victories. Whoever wins more duels is considered superior."

"That's it?" Rhaegar was incredulous.

"That's it," Elmo confirmed, his tone filled with helplessness. The two uncles, instead of using their power effectively, were staging meaningless duels to assert their dominance.

"What a pair of hopeless fools!" Rhaegar muttered. Had he had their resources, he would have eliminated his rival and taken Riverrun after old Tully's death. Instead, they engaged in this pointless show of force.

The duel began. Lord Lymond attacked first, swinging his heavy sword with both hands and forcing his opponent to retreat. Seizing an opportunity, he found a gap in his opponent's armor and struck decisively.

Poof!

The tall knight's arm was severed at the shoulder, blood gushing from the wound.

"Next!"

Lord Lymond's eyes were cold and unfeeling, his sword resting against the ground.

Milov stared, wide-eyed, unable to believe that an old lord, nearing fifty, could be so formidable.

Lord Lymond was past his prime, with gray hair and sideburns, and a face lined with wrinkles. Yet he fought with the vigor of a much younger man.

Soon the next opponent stepped forward. Lord Lymond responded with ease, swinging his heavy sword with such force that his opponent struggled to counter.

Finally, Lord Lymond sliced through his opponent's breastplate. The man fell and died in a pool of his own blood.

In Westeros, armor varies greatly in quality. The most expensive suits are thick and sturdy, leaving little room for weak points. Cheaper armor, however, often more ornate and impressive looking, has numerous weaknesses.

Lord Lymond's armor was an ancestral treasure, marked with countless slashes, but well maintained. In contrast, many of the second sons of nobles and lesser knights recruited by Milov and Edmure could only afford substandard armor and weapons.

To Lord Lymond's experienced eye, their equipment was riddled with flaws.

The duel continued. Lord Lymond cut down four knights in a row before his breathing became labored. Satisfied with his performance, he stepped back, leaving the lesser men to continue their bickering.

Rhaegar, uninterested in the proceedings, beckoned Elmo to join him at the entrance to the Godswood.

"Prince, what are your orders?" Elmo asked cautiously.

Rhaegar's irritation flared. Thinking of the two worse Tullys in the Godswood, he could only grit his teeth and accept the situation.

"Come here!" Rhaegar grabbed Elmo by the neck, his eyes boring into him, his voice icy. "Old Tully is gravely ill, and your two uncles are busy vying for power. These are your family's affairs, and I will not interfere."

"Prince..." Elmo was shocked by the news and his expression changed.

"Shut up!" Rhaegar's face hardened, his words slow and deliberate. "Go back to the Godswood, see your two uncles, and use your rusty brain to think about what you want to do, what you should do!"

He released Elmo, who stood stunned. Leaving Grey Worm with him, Rhaegar returned to the main tower with a few Unsullied.

Elmo remained frozen, staring blankly at Rhaegar's retreating back and muttering, "My... thoughts?"

He looked down at his hands, calloused from practicing with sword and bow. After a moment, he raised his head and met Grey Worm's impassive eyes.

At that moment, determination filled Elmo's eyes. Remembering his grandfather's advice before he fell ill, Elmo rubbed his face, his breathing accelerating.

Grey Worm stood motionless, like an emotionless wooden figure.

...

The duel in the Godswood continued into the afternoon.

Two of Tully's knights suffered grievous wounds, and their bodies were carried out of the forest one by one. In the end, Edmure triumphed over Milov with a decisive victory. Milov's face darkened, his eyes burning with rage.

The death of his older brother should have made him the heir. With the old man now seriously ill, his chance had finally come.

...

Nightfall.

Edmure, basking in his victory, hosted a banquet and drank heavily with his knights. Unbeknownst to him, changes were afoot in Riverrun under the cover of darkness.

With old Tully incapacitated, the castle's affairs had been divided between his two sons. Milov controlled the vaults and warehouses, while Edmure oversaw the arsenal and the garrison. Though they avoided direct confrontation, the tension between them escalated.

Dark clouds shrouded the sky, obscuring the crescent moon. The cold winds of early spring blew through Riverrun, stirring the waters of the river.

"Move faster, don't get caught."

"Be ruthless, don't waste time..."

In the dim night, a group of black-robed men emerged from the main tower, heading toward the weapons storehouse and garrison. Others made their way to the secondary fortress where Edmure was hosting his feast.

Meanwhile, in one of Riverrun's basements, several garrison soldiers entered, their flickering torches casting eerie shadows.

"My lords, I have a matter to discuss," a figure in black robes said, stepping forward and removing his hood to reveal short black hair.

...

Main Tower, Lord's Room.

Rhaegar entered with a tray of fruit, flanked by several Unsullied.

"Prince!"

Two Knights stood guard.

"Don't mind me, I'm here to see Lord Grover," Rhaegar said, not giving the knights a chance to refuse as he pushed the door open.

The knights hesitated for a moment, but finally allowed him to enter.

...

The entrance to the armory.

Thud-

Black-robed men lunged forward, slitting the throats of the two patrolling soldiers. A similar scene unfolded near the warehouse. As soon as the guards changed shifts, the men in black approached under the cover of night and dispatched them with swift, deadly blows.

"Done, let's move!"

The leader of the black-robed men wiped the blood from his dagger and motioned for his companions to leave.

Whoosh...

Before the words fully left his mouth, a volley of arrows flew from the shadows. The black-robed men fell, struck down with screams of agony.

A military commander emerged from the darkness, flanked by dozens of soldiers.

"Dispose of the bodies and clean up the bloodstains," he ordered coldly.

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers swiftly removed the corpses and began scrubbing the ground with buckets and mops.

...

Main Tower, a bedroom on the third floor.

Milov lay sprawled on a large bed, two heavily made-up prostitutes in his arms. Half-asleep, he dreamt of old Tully's death, his fat brother being hacked to pieces, and his nephew imprisoned. He envisioned himself as the new Lord Tully, Lord Paramount of the Trident and Lord of Riverrun.

Bang!

The door burst open, sending the two prostitutes screaming in terror. Milov jerked awake and scrambled to his feet.

"Who dares intrude in my room!" he bellowed.

"Uncle, your dreams are premature," Elmo said, stepping inside in a black robe, his eyes cold.

Behind him, a group of armored soldiers rushed into the room, pushing the prostitutes aside and binding the naked Milov.

"What are you doing, Elmo? I'm your uncle!" Milov shouted, stunned.

"I don't need to be reminded," Elmo replied coldly. "Gag him and lock him in the dungeon."

"Yes, my lord."

A soldier punched Milov in the stomach, grabbed a prostitute's stocking and stuffed it into his mouth before dragging him out like a dead dog.

...

On the other side, in a secondary fortress.

The black-robed men infiltrated the fortress gates, blending in with the night watchmen. Despite their best efforts, they were outnumbered and outgunned.

As the battle ended, the sound of footsteps echoed from outside.

"Assassins! Leave no one alive!"

Dozens of well-equipped soldiers stormed the gates, quickly dispatching the black-robed men.

In the midst of the soldiers, Grey Worm, now in standard leather armor, led a contingent up the stairs.

At that moment, Edmure lay asleep in his room, unaware of the danger.

Grey Worm paused at the door. Lord Lymond, heavily armed, stood guard, glaring at the group ascending the stairs.

...

The Next Day

The Great Hall of Riverrun.

Elmo sat in a chair, his face slightly haggard. He had taken the prince's hint and gathered his father's old knights to strike first. In one night, both of his uncles were imprisoned in the dungeon. The plan had gone surprisingly well, much to his disbelief.

Now, with his uncles under his control, he faced a new dilemma. What should his next move be? Should he eliminate them completely and bear the stain of kinslaying? And what about his grandfather, who was gravely ill? If the old man recovered and discovered that his uncles had been killed, how would he react?

These thoughts swirled in Elmo's mind, making him fidget and rise from his seat in agitation. He decided that he had to see his grandfather; otherwise, he wouldn't know what to do next.

With this resolve, he strode toward the Lord's room on the top floor.

It wasn't long before he reached the dimly lit corridor leading to the room. He saw two knights and several Unsullied guarding the door. None of them acknowledged him as he approached; they were entirely indifferent.

Elmo's unease grew as he reached the door. Through the closed door, he could faintly hear a familiar voice.

Chapter 259: A War Without Blood

Creak...

Elmo pushed open the door and froze at the sight.

Inside, the fireplace blazed brightly, dispersing the early spring chill. Rhaegar sat on a low stool, roasting two sausages over the flames.

On a cushioned seat, Old Lord Grover Tully, once seemingly unconscious, sat up, full of energy, gnawing on a pear. Lord Lymond, missing since the previous night, was beside him, the two men exchanging contemptuous glances and muttered insults.

"Grandfather, you're awake?" Elmo's voice trembled, unsure how to interpret the scene.

Without looking up, Rhaegar turned the sausages around and said flatly, "Not exactly. Your grandfather didn't sleep a wink last night." He hadn't slept much either and was hungry now.

Elmo's eyes flickered, his mind was racing.

"Come here, Elmo," Old Tully beckoned, his voice low and hoarse, still betraying his illness. Elmo, knowing he couldn't avoid the confrontation, walked over.

"You did well," Old Tully praised quietly, tossing the pear core aside.

Elmo's head snapped up, his eyes shining with hope.

Old Tully grinned. "You were quick on your feet, taking out your two uncles in one fell swoop. You have a bit of your grandfather's style."

"Grandfather, did you pretend to be sick on purpose?" Elmo asked apprehensively.

"I had a terrible headache a few days ago, but after some bloodletting I felt better," old Tully explained.

Elmo looked at Lord Lymond and whispered, "Did you invite Lord Lymond?"

As far as he could remember, this Lord always looked down on his uncles. Since Lord Lymond was staying with his grandfather, it was clear that there had to be an arrangement between the two.

Lord Lymond, polishing his heavy sword, sneered. "In times of war, these young fools are not enough to invite me to support their cause."

He sheathed his sword. "The Ironborn have been raiding the coastal villages. I came to Riverrun for supplies."

All his life he had considered honor as his life. How could he come to Riverrun as a fighter for a stupid son-in-law?

However, Old Tully repeatedly begged him to protect his heirs and not let them kill each other in public.

Only then, at Old Tully's urging, did he agree to a few duels.

Elmo looked to his grandfather for confirmation, trusting him for the moment. Old Tully nodded, a dark expression clouding his face. With two sons and a grandson, he had his hands full. He had feigned a coma to see which of them might prove worthy, but none had met his expectations.

Elmo had acted only after Rhaegar's prodding and had merely imprisoned his uncles, rather than eliminating them. It was a disappointment to the old man, who had hoped for more decisive action.

The sausages sizzled in the oil, sending bursts of flame and heat into the air. Rhaegar, unfazed by the heat, picked up a roasted sausage and took a bite. The meat was juicy and rich with spices, a comforting taste amidst his contemplation.

He pulled out a letter with a roaring lion seal from his pocket, ignoring the Tully grandfather and grandson nearby. The letter was from Tyland Lannister, overseeing the construction of the Prince's Palace.

Firstly, Tyland reported that the palace construction was about a third complete. Rhaegar had deliberately withheld the method of creating Black Dragonstone, viewing it as a crucial strategic asset too dangerous to risk in a populated area.

The letter then shifted to Dorne. The arid, drought-prone desert was seeing a rise in vagrants near the Vulture's Roost, threatening the Prince's Pass. Tyland warned that these vagabonds might attack, aiming to raid the Riverlands.

Rhaegar frowned and took a heavy bite of sausage, remembering the never-ending conflict with the Triarchy.

Even after their last significant attack, the city-states held a deep grudge against the Targaryens. Small-scale raids continued, pirates attacked supply ships in the Narrow Sea, and trade was stifled by alliances between the free cities.

Prices soared, and Westerosi merchants faced increasing taxes that cut into their profits. Rumor had it that Prince Qoren of Dorne had recently married the widowed daughter of the Sea King of Braavos, forging a new alliance. Clearly, Qoren Martell was planning something more significant.

"Triarchy... Free Cities..." Rhaegar muttered, staring at the letter. He remembered his promise to Rhaenyra and his father's obsession with expanding the realm. Perhaps the answer lay in Essos, a land once held by the Targaryens.

But it wasn't the right time. Targaryen strength wasn't at its peak. Daemon's dragon, Caraxes, was still injured, and Rhaenyra's Syrax was unfit for battle. Only Rhaegar and Aegon were full-fledged dragon riders, and Aegon's Sunfyre, not yet grown, was not yet fully formidable.

Rhaegar needed more time for his younger brothers to mature and master their dragons. Aemond, at ten, had yet to tame a dragon, and Daeron, at seven, had tamed Tesseract, but his dragon was no bigger than a horse. It would be at least a decade before they could be counted on.

There was also the matter of Alicent and Otto Hightower. While Rhaegar was away from King's Landing, they were busy rallying lesser nobles who felt marginalized. Their intentions were unclear-whether they sought the throne or held a grudge against the current power dynamic was yet to be determined.

"The dark currents are swirling, and none of them give me any peace of mind," Rhaegar mused.

Taking the last bite of his sausage, Rhaegar flipped open the letter and read the final paragraph.

"Boremund of Storm's End. Lord Baratheon is gravely ill and dying; the maester's prognosis is grim..."

Rhaegar's spirits lifted, his expression becoming grave. Lord Boremund was not a mediocre figure like Old Tully. He was a renowned man from the time of Rhaegar's great-grandfather, Jaehaerys I, and had made his mark in battles, leading the Stormlands army to a significant contribution.

Boremund was a wise and generous man. Although he supported his niece, Princess Rhaenys, he never defied the orders of the royal family. His respectability was unquestionable.

If Boremund died, his only heir would be his eldest son, Borros Baratheon - a man with a strong ego, but a fool nonetheless. Unlike his father, Borros had a low opinion of the crown.

During the War of the Stepstones, he had indulged in drinking and mischief, distancing himself from both the royal family and Rhaenys, creating a great deal of uncertainty.

After reading the letter, Rhaegar crumpled the paper, his face darkening. The Stormlands was a crucial region for the Targaryen Dynasty, controlling the southern approach to Dorne and defending against attacks from the Narrow Sea.

If the king was in trouble, the Stormlands could provide immediate support via the Kingsroad. Boremund's passing would be a major blow to the royal family.

After a few moments of silence, Rhaegar stood up and approached the quiet lord, dissatisfied. "Old Tully, Elmo has defeated his two uncles. It's time to decide on the heir."

Had he not discovered Old Tully's fake illness, Rhaegar might still be in the dark, contributing to the old man's plans. But he was no longer interested in playing along. He told Elmo directly to fight for his claim and resolve the matter quickly.

Hearing this, Elmo looked at his grandfather with expectant eyes. Old Tully, his eyes flickering, replied, "Not yet. Elmo has done well, but not to my satisfaction."

In his mind, when his uncles were in trouble, Elmo should have seized the opportunity to eliminate the threat once and for all. But Elmo had hesitated, had waited passively. If Rhaegar had not intervened, the uncles could have caused more chaos, which was not the behavior of a true leader.

"Grandfather, what terms would meet your requirements?" Elmo asked boldly, emboldened by the night's events.

Old Tully thought for a moment. "The prince mentioned a tournament of strength. You and your two uncles will participate, and whoever ranks highest will be the heir."

"A contest of strength?" Elmo was taken aback.

"No! You can choose knight representatives to fight. I will only see the results," Old Tully clarified.

The three heirs lacked heart, determination, and remarkable skills. If Elmo had eliminated his uncles the night before, there would be no more tests. However, the two Tullys were also his children, so a final test of leadership was in order. It would measure their ability to rally support and secure the position of Lord of Riverrun.

Without hesitation, Elmo agreed, "Yes, I will participate."

After the previous night, his prestige in Riverrun had already surpassed that of his uncles, making victory seem within reach.

Knock, knock...

A knock at the door interrupted them and an Oath Knight announced, "My lord, two priests from the Faith of the Seven wish to see Young Master Elmo."

Old Tully frowned and said, "The priests are insignificant. Why should my grandson see them in person?"

He knew the behavior of these priests all too well - cannibalizing for money and power, even forcing one son to murder the other. In the name of the Seven Gods, they committed acts uglier than those of common villains.

Chapter 260: Harbinger of a Storm

The Great Hall of Riverrun

Two priests, clad in robes and clutching their bibles, waited in silence. Their calm faces exuded the aura of devout believers.

Footsteps echoed through the hall.

The priests looked up towards the smaller hall on the second floor. Elmo emerged, catching their attention. They tightened their grips on their bibles, aware of the previous night's events.

Elmo approached the Lord's high seat but did not sit. Instead, he stood by, waiting.

Under the disbelieving gazes of the priests, Old Lord Tully, supported by two young maids, hobbled into the hall.

"The Seven bless you, Lord Grover, for recovering from your illness," one priest said, clasping his hands in surprise at Tully's presence.

"Hmph! A minor ailment won't be the end of me," Lord Tully scoffed, dismissing the so-called blessing of the Seven.

If the Seven truly blessed the Tully House, they would have provided him with a worthy heir.

The priests exchanged glances, contemplating whether to mention Milov. The tempting promises made by Milov weighed heavily on their minds.

One priest decided to speak. "Lord Grover, there was an incident in Riverrun last night involving your second son, Milov..."

"Silence, you damned fools!" Old Tully roared, pointing an accusatory finger at the priests. "Look at the chaos you've caused, pitting my children against each other for power. You dare claim to be followers of the Seven!"

As his voice echoed through the hall, a group of soldiers stormed in.

"Seize them! Search for evidence of their crimes. I will escort these scoundrels to the Oldtown Church for judgment," Tully commanded with disdain.

During their time in Riverrun, the priests had taken bribes and indulged in debauchery. Prostitutes could testify against them. Tully had no patience for hypocrisy and wanted to root out the corruption head on.

"Yes, my lord!" The soldiers, their faces grim, overpowered the priests, breaking their arms and legs on the spot.

"Ah! We are believers of the Seven! You cannot do this to us!"

"The Father will not forgive you!"

The priests' screams echoed as they were dragged away, their bibles abandoned on the floor.

Old Tully turned to Elmo. "This is how you deal with scoundrels who deceive and manipulate."

The Faith of the Seven might be revered, but it had no place in the noble succession. The priests had crossed a line, and House Tully must respond decisively.

Rhaegar and Lord Lymond emerged from the side hall, clapping in satisfaction. For the non-believing nobles, seeing the Seven Divine Churches dealt with so decisively was a rare and gratifying sight.

Old Tully turned to Lord Lymond with a sneer. "Why are you still here? Haven't I given you enough money and provisions?"

Lymond replied with a solemn expression, "The money and supplies are appreciated. I'll be leaving soon, but I must warn you: a powerful new house has emerged among the Ironborn, and they're causing trouble."

"I know," scoffed Old Tully, dismissing the concern with a wave of his hand. "No matter how powerful, they're still just pirates."

Rhaegar stepped forward, his face cold. "Old Tully, there's trouble brewing in King's Landing. I must leave as well."

The news of Boremund's impending death demanded his immediate return to make preparations. Old Tully, though surprised, didn't argue. "Thank you for your help, Prince. I'll have Elmo prepare a gift for your journey to Harrenhal."

Rhaegar waved off the offer. "As you wish, but no need to trouble yourself." With that, he bid farewell to Lord Lymond and headed towards the stairs.

"Prince, wait!" Old Tully shouted as Rhaegar began to descend.

Rhaegar turned back, confused. Old Tully's face was conflicted, his grip on his walking stick tightening and loosening. "Do you remember the woman I spoke of? Alys Rivers?"

Rhaegar's brow furrowed as he remembered. "Lord Lyonel's bastard daughter?"

He remembered the green-eyed woman with ample breasts. Old Tully had once mentioned something peculiar about her, hinting at ulterior motives toward Lord Lyonel.

The only impression he had of Alys Rivers was when she secretly invaded his bed before he moved to Harrenhal.

That day, he almost accidentally killed her, thinking she was an assassin but at the time, Rhaegar was preoccupied with repairing Harrenhal and paid little attention to it.

Old Tully leaned forward, his voice low. "She is not Lord Lyonel's daughter. She was his nursemaid."

"What?!" Rhaegar was stunned, thinking he had heard wrong. Alys Rivers appeared to be in her early thirties, with flawless skin and a youthful face. How could she have been Lord Lyonel's nursemaid?

Lord Lyonel was in his forties, which meant that his nursemaid would be at least sixty. If Alys Rivers was indeed his nursemaid, she would date back to the time of Rhaegar's great-grandfather, Jaehaerys I. Could she be some kind of old woman?

Old Tully's expression was grave. "I learned from the old servants of the House of Strong that she nursed not only Lord Lyonel but also his two heirs."

"Her appearance has remained unnaturally youthful, seemingly around thirty years old, which is rumored to be the result of bathing in the blood of young girls. She is most likely an evil forest witch."

Rhaegar sucked in a breath in horror. If this was true, he had almost been seduced by a woman as old as his grandmother.

"Seven hells! Thank the gods I remained faithful," he muttered, feeling a wave of nausea as he remembered the woman's shameless sweet talk.

Old Tully's face darkened, his voice heavy with concern. "This woman is dangerous, and I suspect she had ill intentions toward Lord Lyonel."

Rhaegar's eyes widened. "She disappeared six months ago?"

Old Tully nodded. "Her whereabouts are unknown, but according to the servants of the Strong House, Alys Rivers was close to Larys Strong."

Rhaegar's grip tightened on the Dragon Claw hilt at his waist. Larys Strong had long served as the Lord Confessor in the Red Keep. If Ally Haven had indeed joined forces with Larys, she might be hiding in the Red Keep itself.

"Prince, whether or not Alys Rivers is a forest witch, she should not be allowed near the royal family," Old Tully warned.

He is a traditional and stubborn person.

In his eyes, magic is always a dangerous thing.

A witch who is rumored to use the blood of young girls to maintain her beauty is even more dangerous for in his eyes.

If he hadn't discovered that Alys Rivers was disloyal to Lord Lyonel Strong, he wouldn't have paid attention to investigate.

Rhaegar nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "Thank you, Old Tully. Your information is invaluable."

"You should remain vigilant, Prince," Old Tully advised.

"I will," Rhaegar assured him and turned to leave.

As he walked away, Rhaegar's mind raced. "Alys Rivers... Forest Witch..."

He remembered the last time he had heard of Forest Witches, during an incident with Shadowbinders at Crackclaw Point when he was six years old.

The Forest Witch's notebook had detailed various dark magics: sensing the minds of trees and plants, shapeshifting, and, most terrifying of all, necromancy-the power to raise the dead.

...

The sun shone brightly at noon.

"Roar..."

A black dragon shadow broke through the thin clouds and hovered over God's Eye Lake.

Below, directly opposite the Isle of Faces, stood the towering dragon's nest.

Over the past three years, the Isle of Faces had grown in size due to the constant movement of the earth's crust. The Dragon's Nest was built on the northern shore of the island, resembling a dark mountain with a cavernous opening.

On the southern shore, a pier was built for ships to dock. In the center of the island, where several weirwood trees once stood, the lush greenery had been cleared away to make way for a white stone palace.

Inside the palace, a hot spring bubbled, the heat rising in steamy wisps. A few weirwoods were rooted to the bottom of the spring; their red leaves had ceased to grow, and the maesters considered them dead. The water, full of sulfur and other minerals, was too hot for even the hardy weirwoods to survive.

Rhaegar, naked, soaked himself in the bubbling hot spring. He had rested well the night before and sought the warmth of the spring to relax.

With his eyes closed and his chest gently rising and falling, Rhaegar seemed to be asleep.

Without realizing it, he drifted into a dream.

In broad daylight, over a vast, calm sea, seabirds flew in flocks, the salty sea breeze carrying a faint scent of blood.

"Roar..."

An angry dragon's roar echoed across half the sea.

From a unique vantage point, Rhaegar saw a huge dragon soar into the sky. On its back was a small, silver-haired child whose face was indistinct.

"ROAR!"

Another dragon roared, the clouds swelling as a green-scaled dragon's tail flashed by.

Boom...

Golden and crimson dragonfire collided, sending thick clouds of searing, rolling sparks into the air.

"Roar..."

Suddenly, another slightly smaller dragon flew in from the distance and joined the dragon battle in the clouds.

This dragon had dark red scales, slender horns, and crowns, with dark-colored pupils gleaming fiercely.

Rhaegar clenched his fists, staring intently at the new dragon.

Its size was similar to the Red Queen Meleys and the Bloodwyrn Caraxes, but Rhaegar was certain it was neither.

This was a dragon he had never seen before.