

G.O Thrones 651

Chapter 651: Who Will Be the Hand of the King?

King's Landing.

It was July, and the heat was oppressive. The waves of Blackwater Bay lapped lazily against the shore, powerless to ease the stifling summer air.

Red Keep, Godswood.

The towering Weirwood stood majestically, its crimson leaves spreading like a vast canopy, casting deep shadows over the exposed roots on the raised ground below. Rhaegar stood beneath it, his palms pressed against the pale, rough bark. His expression was calm, betraying no hint of discomfort.

"Your Grace, you wanted to see me?"

Daeron entered through the back door, his eyes clear and expectant.

"I don't expect you to call me 'Your Grace' in private," Rhaegar said with a light laugh, turning to face his brother.

Daeron paused briefly, then smiled. "Brother."

Among the siblings, Daeron was known for his gentle and humble nature. He had few ambitions of his own and often followed in his brothers' footsteps.

Rhaegar found a thick tree root to sit on and gestured to the ground beside him. "I want to talk to you about who should govern the Basilisk Isles."

Daeron sat down, his brow furrowed in thought. "That's no easy place to rule," he said thoughtfully.

"Precisely," Rhaegar agreed, his expression turning serious. "Which is why it needs careful management. I want to appoint you as governor of the Summer Sea and adviser to the Basilisk Isles."

The pirates of the Triarchy had been all but annihilated, and the remnants of their forces no longer posed a threat. However, tens of thousands of women, children, and slaves remained on the Basilisk Isles. Three fledgling Free Cities had already been established. Leaving them unchecked could sow the seeds of future chaos.

Someone wise and patient needed to oversee the region—a task that demanded trust and skill.

Daeron hesitated. "Brother, Sothoryos is desolate."

"I'm not asking you to live there," Rhaegar replied firmly. "Just keep an eye on things. Choose one of the islands where the Free Cities are taking root. The slaves there will become the new settlers, reclaiming the land."

It was impractical to move the slaves elsewhere, as they were a valuable, though low-status, population. Having them continue to build on the foundations laid by the Triarchy was the best course of action.

Seeing his brother's determination, Daeron gave a reluctant nod. "I'll try."

Rhaegar grinned and ruffled his brother's hair. "Show a little spirit. The Basilisk Isles aren't so bad. They have maritime trade routes and plenty of resources. Give it time, and it'll thrive."

With the Triarchy's downfall, the hard work of establishing order in the isles had already been done. Rhaegar had saved years of effort. If not for Rhaena losing her claim to Driftmark, Daeron wouldn't even need to move. Rhaegar had initially thought of entrusting the isles to Tyland and bringing them under Volantis's jurisdiction, but now Daeron was the right fit.

Daeron, still tousled from Rhaegar's playful gesture, chuckled. "Then you'll need to give me some funds from the treasury."

Rhaegar waved dismissively. "No problem. Just dip into Lyman's coffers."

"You're the king!"

"..."

The brothers burst into laughter, the sound of their playful banter filling the Godswood as they pulled pranks and teased each other beneath the great Weirwood tree.

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It was midday, just after lunch, when the Small Council was summoned. Rhaegar entered the council hall, feeling somewhat listless. The room was already filled with ministers, their faces unusually grave.

"Your Grace!" they greeted in unison, standing to show respect.

Rhaegar glanced around, noticing his father, Viserys, and his uncle, Daemon. Viserys was deeply involved in politics, while Daemon held the prestigious title of Prince of the Targaryens.

"What's happened?" Rhaegar asked, his gaze moving between them.

Grand Maester Orwyle stepped forward, his expression troubled. "Your Grace, there's been an issue with the reconstruction of Storm's End. Rumors are circulating about ghosts crying out from the ruins. It's not only stalled progress but has scared off many of the craftsmen."

Rhaegar, halfway to his seat, paused and let out a soft laugh. "Ghosts causing trouble? Really?"

"That's what I've been told, Your Grace," Orr said cautiously.

Rhaegar waved dismissively. "Sit down. If the craftsmen have left, recruit a new batch. I'll send Aemond to take a dragon and circle the ruins. That should quiet any ghosts."

He didn't believe in such superstitions. People's hearts could be treacherous, but ghosts? That was a step too far. The dead had already faced fire—what more could they want?

"Your Grace, there may be more to it than superstition," Jasper, the Master of Laws, interjected quietly.

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow. "What exactly is wrong, Lord Jasper?"

Jasper hesitated, then spoke cautiously. "The House of Baratheon has ruled the Stormlands for over a century. Many branches of the family remain with Baratheon blood. Rebuilding a Prince's Palace

at Storm's End... may provoke them. Some nobles in the Stormlands don't wish to be absorbed into the Crownlands."

Rhaegar leaned back in his chair, feigning sudden realization. "Ah, so it's a difficult situation?"

Jasper smiled, taking Rhaegar's response as a sign of agreement. "Your Grace is wise."

But Rhaegar's expression shifted, turning hard. "If it's difficult, then send someone capable to oversee it until the Prince's Palace is finished."

"If anyone resists," Rhaegar added coldly, "they will be dealt with."

Jasper's face tightened, and he fell silent, offering only a forced smile in response.

"Your Grace," Lyman chimed in, his dim old eyes narrowing with thought, "you spoke of capable people, and it brings to mind another matter. Since Lord Lyonel's retirement, the position of Hand of the King has remained vacant. A wise man is needed to fill the role."

The Hand of the King was a critical position, often acting as the buffer between the king and the realm's nobility. Whoever held that office could shift the balance of power, depending on their loyalties. Historically, the Hand was always a trusted confidant of the king, such as Orys Baratheon for the Conqueror or Septon Barth for King Jaehaerys.

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed slightly, and he glanced at his father, Viserys, who sat calmly, observing the conversation.

"You should choose a wise man from the Small Council, or someone you trust." Viserys spoke slowly, his voice tinged with drowsiness as he tried to offer subtle guidance.

When wielded effectively, the Hand of the King was a powerful weapon—a blade that could shape kingdoms. Viserys had personally appointed two Hands during his reign: Otto Hightower and Lyonel Strong. The former was highly capable but idealistic and self-serving, while the latter was pragmatic, steady, and respected for his impartiality. Both had served their purposes at crucial moments, and Viserys had chosen them carefully.

Otto Hightower had been one of the two remaining senior statesmen at the end of King Jaehaerys's reign, representing Oldtown and the conservative aristocracy. At the time, the Targaryens were vulnerable. Corlys Velaryon harbored resentment toward the crown, while Daemon coveted the position of heir. Viserys had kept Otto in power to counterbalance those external and internal threats.

In the early days, their partnership had flourished. Together, they had steadily outmaneuvered Corlys and Daemon, forcing them both to withdraw from King's Landing. But over time, Otto became too bold, meddling in royal affairs to further his own ambitions.

When Otto's overreach became intolerable, Viserys had replaced him with Lyonel Strong, a loyal and pragmatic Hand who restored the crown's influence in the Small Council. But Lyonel's cautious approach, though stabilizing, was not suited to guiding a more aggressive or ambitious king.

Now, as Viserys reflected, he realized stepping down had been the right choice—for both himself and the realm.

Rhaegar listened closely, sensing the deeper meaning behind his father's words.

"Your Grace, do you have someone in mind?" Lyman asked, his tone uncertain.

The king was still young, and no one knew who he truly trusted yet. The members of the Small Council exchanged looks, each secretly wondering if they might be chosen. Even Corlys Velaryon, Master of Ships, and Tyland Lannister, recently returned from Volantis, straightened in their seats, watching Rhaegar's expression closely. The position of Hand of the King was an irresistible prize—second only to the crown itself.

For someone like Corlys, it wasn't just about power. The status that came with the title was tempting, even for a man already revered for his legendary voyages and wealth. And with his extensive experience, he was certainly qualified for the role.

Rhaegar glanced around the room, sensing the rising tension. He decided to turn the question back to the council. "Who do you all have in mind?"

The king understood the importance of selecting a strong Hand, but he wasn't sure who would be the best fit. Rather than making a hasty decision, it was wise to hear the thoughts of those around him.

Jasper, the Master of Laws, was the first to step forward, unable to contain his eagerness. "Your Grace, Storm's End presents challenges at the moment. Why not send me to oversee the reconstruction? It could serve as proof of my ability to handle difficult tasks."

The lingering issue of Storm's End had, after all, prompted the need for this discussion. For Jasper, handling it successfully would be a way to prove his worth—not just as a capable lord, but as a potential Hand of the King.

"Lord Jasper has volunteered. Anyone else?"

Rhaegar smiled, not objecting outright but allowing the conversation to flow.

"Your Grace..."

Tyland cleared his throat, standing up with a self-satisfied air. Before he could continue, Rhaegar cut him off.

"Please sit down, Lord Tyland," Rhaegar said, his voice polite but firm. Volantis was already handling enough affairs, and there was no need for Tyland to return to court so soon.

Tyland, visibly embarrassed, sank back into his seat, realizing he had overstepped. A foreign adviser didn't carry the weight needed for the role of Hand of the King, and he knew it.

Lyman observed the exchange with a calm, calculating gaze, waiting for the right moment. Finally, he spoke. "I recommend Lord Corlys. He is the Lord of Driftmark, and his qualifications, reputation, and the strength of his house make him worthy of the honor."

"Thank you, Lord Lyman," Corlys said, nodding solemnly. He was pleased with the nomination. With his son Laenor back in the family fold, the influence of House

Velaryon was stronger than ever. Winning the position of Hand would solidify his legacy as one of the realm's greatest leaders.

Lyman chuckled, the wrinkles around his eyes smoothing out. "If this were ten years ago, I might've run for the office myself."

"I recommend Prince Daemon," Tormund, the usually reserved Master of Whisperers, suddenly said, raising his hand and smiling sheepishly.

Daemon, who had been lost in thought, blinked in surprise at hearing his own name. He hadn't expected to be thrown into the mix.

"Uncle," Rhaegar's eyes lit up with a glint of excitement. He and Daemon worked well together, and the idea of having him as Hand wasn't unappealing.

But Viserys, trying to remain diplomatic, forced a smile. "Daemon is a free spirit, Your Grace. He even struggles to attend Small Council meetings."

"I'm not volunteering either," Daemon drawled, rolling his eyes, his voice dry and dismissive. He was never one for formal titles or positions.

The conversation continued, with the council members offering their thoughts one by one. Only Grand Maester Orwyle remained silent, his face thoughtful.

Rhaegar, noticing his silence, dropped the pound and turned to him. "What do you think, Grand Maester?"

Orwyle hesitated, his eyes drifting toward the old king. "If it's experience you seek, no one here can match that of Your Grace, Viserys."

The suggestion took Rhaegar by surprise, as it did the rest of the council.

"No, no, no," Viserys quickly waved his hand, rejecting the idea outright. "I've already retired. I can't act as my son's Hand—it would undermine my own honor."

He couldn't imagine how history would record him if he stepped back into such a position.

Orwyle offered a quiet, awkward chuckle and quickly withdrew from the conversation. He had simply floated an impossible option to deflect attention from himself.

Rhaegar saw through the ploy, smiled, and stood. "Everyone has made their recommendations, and I'll need time to think carefully before making a decision."

With that, he rose and began to leave. As he passed by Jasper, seated diagonally across from him, Rhaegar placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Lord Jasper," Rhaegar said, his voice low but firm, "as you're from the Stormlands, you can rest assured that the reconstruction of Storm's End will be in capable hands—yours."

Jasper's face lit up with pride. "Don't worry, Your Grace! I'll give it my all."

Chapter 652: The North's Empty Harvest

It was a beautiful afternoon as Rhaegar stepped out of the meeting hall, the weight of the day's discussions still lingering in his mind. The warm sunlight felt like a gentle reprieve, and all he wanted now was a good night's sleep.

The decision about the Hand of the King could wait.

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Throne Hall.

Viserys bade farewell to his advisers and settled onto the Iron Throne with great anticipation. The cold, unforgiving metal still bit into his skin, but today, he hardly noticed.

"Grandfather, Your Grace!"

A group of silver-haired children rushed toward him, their faces lit with joy, like young birds flocking back to the nest. The eldest, Rhaena, led the way, while the youngest, Aegor, was being dragged along the floor by his sister, Visenya.

"Yes, yes, let's hear the story of the day," Viserys chuckled, his heart swelling with affection. The pain of the Iron Throne seemed to vanish beneath the warmth of his grandchildren. There were a dozen healthy children surrounding him, either his own grandchildren or those of his brother Daemon. In the past, he would never have dared to dream of such a blessing.

"You should rest, Viserys."

The story had just begun when Alicent entered from the side of the hall, her voice gentle but insistent.

"Let me stay a little longer; there's no rush," Viserys replied, brushing off her concern as he scooped Visenya into one arm and Aegor into the other. After so many years of duty and hardship, he wanted nothing more than to enjoy this moment with his grandchildren.

"You always say that," Alicent sighed, draping a blanket over his lap and gently resting a hand on his leg. As she did, her eyes drifted to his left hand, still wrapped in a bandage from where the Iron Throne had cut him days before. A small patch of dried blood had formed. The wound hadn't festered, but neither had it healed.

Viserys noticed the bandage and smiled softly, saying nothing. It was just a cut, after all.

The two sat together in silence, watching their grandchildren—the mischievous dragon hatchlings—run and play. Alicent, now over forty, had become a grandmother herself. She scooped up Jaehaerys and Jaehaera, who were idly picking at the floor, holding them close. Her eldest son Aegon's children were her pride and joy—pure, innocent, and far more dear to her than the others.

"Aren't you going to the tea party?" Viserys asked, mildly surprised at her lingering presence. He wasn't used to having his story time interrupted.

"I'll stay with you," Alicent replied, her voice quieter than usual, her gaze distant.

Viserys could tell she had something weighing on her mind. He knew all too well what it was. "What's troubling you, my love?" he asked gently.

Alicent hesitated, then whispered, "The court is buzzing about the election of the Hand of the King." She glanced up at him, her expression conflicted. "My father..."

"Otto is doing a fine job in Qohor," Viserys cut in, his tone growing firmer. He had heard this before.

Alicent wasn't deterred. "He's old, Viserys, and being so far away is unsettling. We need him here." King's Landing was no longer the secure place it once was, and without Otto, Alicent felt exposed. If her father returned as Hand, she would feel safer, more supported.

"Alicent, it won't work," Viserys sighed, placing his hand over hers. "Otto chose to spend his final years in Qohor. That was his decision."

Otto and Cole were crucial in governing the distant city of Qohor and the Golden Fields. Rhaegar wouldn't agree to his recall, not when so much was at stake in Essos.

Alicent fell silent, her eyes downcast. She couldn't hide her disappointment, her face shadowed by a quiet sadness.

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The Council Chamber.

Knock, knock!

Baelon sat in the hall, leafing through old documents, when the knock interrupted him.

"I'll get it," said Baela, standing by the bookshelves with a feather duster in hand. She moved gracefully toward the door, her slender figure exuding a mature charm.

"And you are?" Baela asked, her brow furrowing. She didn't recognize the visitor.

"My name is Desmond Manderly. The heir prince knows me." Desmond smiled, his triangular eyes glinting with sharp intelligence. He glanced past Baela, immediately spotting Baelon seated within.

Baelon looked up at the sound of the familiar voice. "Lord Desmond? When did you arrive in King's Landing?" he asked in surprise. Desmond Manderly, the Lord of White Harbor, was one of the most prominent nobles in the North. Dressed in finely tailored silk robes and adorned with rings of gold and gemstones, his graying hair neatly combed back, he looked more the part of a wealthy merchant than a northern lord.

"I landed at the Mud Gate this morning, Prince," Desmond replied humbly, offering a deep bow. "The Commander of the Kingsguard informed me that His Grace was resting, so he led me here to see you."

Understanding the situation, Baelon smiled warmly. "Please, have a seat, my lord."

He glanced at Baela, offering an apologetic look. "Would you mind pouring Lord Desmond a glass of wine? We wouldn't want our guest from afar to feel unwelcome."

Baela nodded, gracefully pouring wine from a jug. The brother and sister's coordination didn't go unnoticed by Desmond. Though he had not received the grand reception he likely expected after such a long journey, Baelon's courteous words and attention smoothed over any lingering disappointment.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Prince," Desmond said, flashing a broad smile. He turned to Baela, who handed him the glass, adding, "And thank you, my lady."

As he spoke, Desmond discreetly glanced around the room. His gaze lingered on Baela, the eldest daughter of Prince Daemon, heir to Tyrosh across the Narrow Sea. She remained unmarried after the death of her fiancé, Prince Aemon. There was something calculating in Desmond's eyes as he observed her.

Baela, ever perceptive, caught the subtle appraisal and frowned slightly. "You're welcome, Lord Desmond," she replied, her voice polite but clipped.

Baelon noticed her reaction and then looked at Lord Desmond, whose warm smile remained fixed in place. Anyone who knew Baela well could see she was close to losing her temper. Sensing the tension, Baelon decided to move things along before the situation escalated.

"What brings you here, my lord?" he asked, steering the conversation to business.

Desmond's smile faded as he adopted a more serious tone. "Prince, the kingdom has won the war against the Basilisk Isles. In light of this, I seek to borrow a sum of money from the national treasury on behalf of White Harbor."

Baelon's brow furrowed in confusion. "White Harbor has always been wealthy. Why borrow from the treasury? Wouldn't the Iron Bank of Braavos be more suited for such a request?"

White Harbor and Braavos had strong trade connections, after all.

"You misunderstand, Prince," Desmond replied, his tone now somber. "White Harbor, and the North as a whole, face unique difficulties." He sighed heavily before continuing, "You are a Dragonlord from the South, and you've experienced nothing but the long ten-year summer. You may not have seen the true bite of winter."

Baelon's frown deepened. The hardships of the North were something he hadn't fully grasped, but Desmond's words hinted at challenges he had yet to understand.

Desmond continued, "King's Landing may be basking in summer, but the North is already gripped by winter. Heavy snow has blanketed the crops."

"How can that be?" Baela, still holding the jug of wine, exclaimed in surprise. The North should also be enjoying the long summer.

Desmond, sensing her confusion, responded with a somber tone. "You don't understand. Spring in the North was warm, yes, but the snow fell suddenly and without warning."

He sighed heavily, adding, "Lord Cregan, during his inspection, noted that the entire region will likely face a poor harvest this year."

House Manderly, though not originally from the North, had long since adapted to its harsh climate, becoming one of the region's most influential families over the past thousand years.

Baelon, stunned by this news, quickly searched through the official records from the North over the past six months. To his surprise, there was little to no communication from the noble houses, as if the North had become a world unto itself.

"Prince, I know borrowing from the national treasury is a bold request," Desmond said, his voice tinged with helplessness, "but White Harbor is running out of options. The Iron Bank has refused us, and if we don't act soon, the port will freeze over. I must prepare before the true winter arrives."

Baelon fell silent, considering the situation. He understood why the Iron Bank had turned White Harbor away. Throughout past wars, White Harbor and Gulltown had been pivotal in defending against Braavos.

Now, with the fall of the Basilisk Isles, Braavos had lost a potential ally and had no interest in assisting a weakened White Harbor. Why lend aid to an enemy who could no longer serve their interests?

As Baelon pondered, he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked up to find Baela's eyes meeting his, offering silent encouragement. She didn't interfere with his decision, but her presence grounded him, clearing his thoughts.

"I am truly sorry for what has befallen the North," Baelon began, his tone softening. "The royal family will not turn a blind eye."

Desmond, however, was growing impatient. Polite words meant little to him; he wanted action, repayment for his family's loyalty to the crown.

"Please, Lord Desmond, be patient," Baelon said, leaning back in his chair. "As the saying goes, it's not the lack of resources that causes problems, but the mismanagement of them. The natural disaster has affected all the noble houses of the North."

Desmond narrowed his eyes. "And what do you mean by that?"

"I can't make the final decision on this," Baelon admitted, shifting the responsibility higher up. "But I will speak with my father, and we'll ensure proper reinforcements are sent to the North."

His words were well-calculated, artfully vague, and delivered with a practiced ease. Desmond, a seasoned player in the political game, understood the subtext immediately. The heir prince was buying time.

Desmond's face darkened, and he stood abruptly. "Very well. I shall await the king's decision. In the meantime, I'll take my leave and stay as a guest at the inn."

He nodded cordially to Baela and stormed out, his frustration barely contained.

Baela, now free from the formalities of hosting, poured herself a glass of wine and leaned against the table, her tone more relaxed. “You’ve offended him,” she remarked, taking a sip of the sweet wine.

Baelon snorted in response. “He offended me first,” he retorted. “Borrowing money is a favor, not a right. Throwing a tantrum when denied isn’t going to help his case.”

He frowned, his irritation growing. “White Harbor acts as if they’re indispensable. Even Oldtown pledges its allegiance to the crown without such arrogance—why should White Harbor be any different?”

“Careful,” Baela warned, her voice calm but serious. “White Harbor’s support represents half of the North’s strength.”

She sipped her wine, her expression serene, though her eyes held a wisdom beyond her years.

“Mm-hm,” Baela replied with a casual shrug, her eyes still full of concern.

Baelon sighed, resting his chin in his hand. The chamber fell silent as the weight of the conversation lingered between them.

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It was night.

Rhaegar had just woken from a deep sleep when the sudden news hit him like a hammer blow.

“It’s snowing in the North?” His voice was groggy, and his sleepy eyes struggled to focus, but the gravity of the message jolted him awake.

Baelon, standing by his bedside, nodded rapidly, like a chicken pecking at grain. “I’ve sent a raven to Winterfell, asking Lord Cregan for more details.”

“Good thinking,” Rhaegar muttered, running a hand through his long, tangled silver-and-gold hair. He sighed. “The end of the ten-year summer is near. I wonder how hard this winter will strike.”

“Father, what should we do?” Baelon’s expression was serious, his brow furrowed.

“The North isn’t like the South—it’s a stubborn place, resistant to change.” Rhaegar’s mind raced as he formulated a plan. “To be cautious, we need someone to go and work with Cregan directly, to get the full picture.”

Desmond’s words, though urgent, could not be fully trusted. He was a shrewd businessman, and there was always a mix of truth and exaggeration in his claims. It was better to see things firsthand.

“Who should we send?” Baelon’s eyes gleamed with interest.

“I can go,” Baelon said with a broad smile. The prospect of leaving King’s Landing clearly excited him, especially after spending so much time idle in the capital. His

dragon, Uragax, was also restless, flying circles over Blackwater Bay with nothing to do.

"You won't go alone," Rhaegar said firmly, his eyes narrowing. The fate of his second son weighed heavily on him, and he wasn't about to risk another disaster.

Baelon, catching the hint, grinned and winked. "What if Baela accompanies me?"

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow. His eldest foster daughter was capable—strong-willed, fearless, and skilled. The two of them together would make an impressive pair, a royal delegation that could handle any situation the North threw at them.

The idea had merit.

Chapter 653: Fierce Competition

The night deepened.

The Red Keep, a guest room.

A single candle burned on the table, casting a flickering light that dispelled the daunting darkness.

"Your grandfather was the brave Baelon, one of the most daring knights in the Seven Kingdoms."

"If you trace your ancestry properly, the bloodline is no less thick than Rhaegar's."

Daemon's lazy voice echoed in the room, laced with supreme confidence. His dark eyes were particularly deep as he spoke.

There was a brief silence. Leaning back in his chair, Daemon spoke indifferently, "The boy wants to take you to the North. Have you made a decision?"

His gaze narrowed slightly, revealing a trace of inquiry, as if confirming something.

Across the room, Baela stood by the fireplace, kindling the stacked firewood.

Ka-ka!

The flint struck together, producing a few sparks. As the firewood began to catch, the growing flame gradually dispersed the damp chill lingering in the room.

Daemon glanced at it and remarked nonchalantly, "That's a rare copy from the library of Pentos. Your mother packed it in her luggage. We were truly in tune with each other back then."

At his words, Baela paused, her hands stilling over the book. She closed her eyes slowly.

Bang!

The book slammed into the cabinet, sending a layer of old dust into the air.

Her mother, who had died in childbirth, was a constant, painful thorn in her side. If not for the unbreakable bond between her and Daemon as father and daughter, she might have turned her back on him long ago.

Daemon's expression remained unchanged as he spoke with measured calmness. "Baelon is young and headstrong. He needs a wise and understanding companion by his side."

His hawk-like gaze locked onto his eldest daughter.

"My fiancé has just died!" Baela's voice trembled with incredulity. "Do you think I would forget the past, marry a boy years younger than me, and then compete with my younger sisters?"

Mentioning Aemon, her deceased fiancé, caused her composure to fray.

"I'm sorry," Daemon said after a brief pause, though there was an unmistakable note of relief in his voice.

"I won't go to the North. You can reject cousin," Baela said flatly, her exhaustion evident. She turned away, resuming her task of tidying the room, clearly no longer interested in the conversation.

Daemon poured himself a glass of wine, his expression faintly bored. "It's all about the debts of children. Even the king has to tread carefully."

Baela ignored him, picking up a feather duster and dusting the bookshelf vigorously. Daemon shrugged, unconcerned. He had no doubt that his eldest daughter imagined she was dusting away more than just dirt.

"You shouldn't be in King's Landing," she suddenly blurted out, then, after a moment's thought, added, "You should be in the fields of Essos, riding your dragon, dressed in black and flying recklessly."

Baela was hot-tempered and born to be on a dragon's back. Just look at her now. She was wearing a red dress that didn't match her skin tone, her short silver-blonde hair combed up, dangling earrings swaying as she moved, and she carried a feather duster in her hand.

She looks like a servant girl at the Red Keep.

Daemon was drinking and grumbling, a nagging old man in his fifties. But despite his cold, unruly face, and his thin frame, his body was still full of power. You couldn't guess his real age.

"Don't you think you're being noisy?"

The longer Baela listened, the darker her face became, and she couldn't help but furrow her brow. If it weren't for her filial piety, she might have shoved the feather duster in his mouth.

"Haha, then say something useful." Daemon gave a carefree laugh before suddenly turning serious. "Has that boy asked you to go to the North with him? Have you made a decision?"

Baela's breathing quickened, her fiery temper barely contained. The same question over and over again. Has he gone senile?

"Cut the crap, you should go." Daemon tapped his fingers on the table for emphasis. "There are hidden dangers in the North. You must go there yourself and bring me back the most realistic news."

"You will find out in the future," Daemon resumed his lazy posture, adding, "It's better not to know. It's quite a disaster."

"I can go to the North. What else?" Baela knew she had no right to refuse and sought to satisfy her curiosity.

“Look around, experience the local customs,” Daemon said indifferently, leaning back. “Think of it as a vacation. Don’t let yourself get depressed.”

“You’re concerned about me?” Baela frowned.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Daemon scoffed.

Baela stood by the fireplace in silence, warming herself. To be fair, her mood had been quite unstable lately. She wanted to go across the Narrow Sea to look for Aemon but was afraid of finding only a mangled corpse. But since Uncle Laenor had returned alive, she firmly believed there might still be a chance for Aemon.

After a while, Daemon had dozed off in his chair when he heard the door creak open. He didn’t move, keeping his eyes closed.

Baela pushed the door ajar and glanced back at her father, pretending to be asleep.

“Haha,” she sneered to herself, stepping out of the room. “It’s good to get some fresh air,” she murmured, her magnetic voice barely audible before the door clicked shut.

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The next day...

King’s Landing, Dragonpit.

"Roar!"

A moss-green behemoth soared from the Bronze Gates, its milky-yellow wings flapping as it rose into the sky. The old dragon circled King’s Landing once, then flew off toward the Vale, following the path of the Dragon Gate.

Trailing close behind was a young dragon, pale green, flying low in the sky. It stayed in the shadow of the larger beast, as if it were a part of the old dragon’s immense presence. Together, the two—one large, one small—resembled moss-covered land and towering pine trees.

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The Red Keep, the meeting hall.

Rhaegar leaned against the window ledge, watching as the two dragons disappeared into the distance.

“You got what you wanted,” Daemon remarked, circling the conference table. He stopped at the first chair on the lower left side, the seat meant for the Hand of the King. The chair’s arms were carved with hands clutching keys, symbolizing the Hand’s authority.

“You make it sound like I’m pining for your daughter,” Rhaegar grumbled reluctantly. “If it weren’t for the fact any other family members couldn’t be spared, it wouldn’t be the children leading this mission.”

“Uncle, the House still needs to seize opportunities from the outside.” Rhaegar grew serious, his voice thoughtful. “The Golden Fields must be developed. Its annual grain yield could feed half the continent of Westeros.”

“Who will you send this time?” Daemon asked, finally shifting his attention from the chair, a spark of interest in his eyes.

“I’ll go myself,” Rhaegar replied with certainty, distrust clear in his tone. “Before that, I need to choose a Hand of the King to govern in my absence.”

“Oh?” Daemon’s eyes narrowed slightly, and the corner of his mouth lifted into a sly smile.

...

Mid-July, and the heat showed no sign of relenting.

King’s Landing bustled with activity. Hundreds of large ships were anchored at the Mud Gate, each flying the banners of nobles from all over Westeros. The king’s selection of a new Hand of the King had spread like wildfire, drawing many self-important lords eager to try their luck.

...

Red Keep, the throne room.

“Your Grace, the price of Stormlands stone has suddenly doubled. We may need to increase the funds we’ve set aside,” Jasper reported in his usual slow, methodical tone. No sooner had he opened his mouth than he was talking about draining the treasury.

“Lord Lyman, how much more can the treasury allocate?” Rhaegar asked calmly from the Iron Throne, his face betraying little emotion.

Lyman, however, was far from calm. He frowned, his irritation palpable. “Your Grace, the treasury is not inexhaustible! There’s something very wrong with the price of stone from the Stormlands.” He scowled at Jasper. “The king has already been generous enough to pay the workers building the prince’s palace. And now you dare ask for more?”

Rhaegar’s eyes twinkled, his tone sharpening as he turned to another member of the court. “Lord Iron Rod, do you agree with Lord Lyman?”

Jasper hesitated, then offered his rehearsed excuse. “Your Grace, the situation in the Stormlands is... unique.”

“It’s all the king’s land. What’s the difference?” Lyman shot back aggressively, his question landing like a challenge. His sudden vigor was palpable.

Lyman straightened in his seat, ready for a fight. No way he'd let anyone take more money from his pocket.

Rhaegar watched the exchange with amusement, his gaze resting on Jasper, who squirmed under Lyman's relentless questioning.

Even in his old age, Lyman's miserly dedication remained unshaken, and for that, Rhaegar knew, there was no one better suited to watch over the crown's coffers.

Rhaegar's expression darkened, his brow furrowing as he sneered. "The position of Hand has not yet been decided, Lord Jasper. You're already reaching beyond your station."

As he spoke, Rhaegar glanced across the hall. Aegon, Aemond, and Daeron stood together, each leaning in different poses, poking at one another and chatting casually. On the opposite side, the royal advisers, led by the Sea Snake, stood in a formal line, watching the proceedings intently.

"He's looking at you," Aegon whispered with a mischievous grin, his hands resting on his stomach as he leaned in toward Aemond.

Aemond, not bothering to hide his disgust, pushed Aegon away and stepped forward. "Your Grace, the Hand of the King shapes the future of the realm. It is vital you choose someone you trust." His voice was firm, and his chest puffed out with determination. His single eye gleamed, a clear indication of his ambition.

Rhaegar rested his chin on his hand, his gaze sharpening as he weighed Aemond's words. He seemed to be seriously considering whether the young prince was ready for the responsibility.

"Your Grace, Prince Aemond is still too young!" Jasper blurted out, clearly losing his composure. "We should select a capable man from the Small Council, not someone simply because they're your kin."

"Lord Jasper is right," came another voice before Rhaegar could respond. Corlys Velaryon, the Sea Snake, stepped forward, his tall, commanding presence impossible to ignore.

"What is Lord Corlys' opinion?" Rhaegar asked, his tone neutral, though his eyes flicked between the three men now vying for his attention.

Corlys's gaze was fierce as he spoke, his voice filled with quiet authority. "Compared to the previous two Hands, my qualifications and abilities are no less. I come from the wealthiest house in the Seven Kingdoms, and I ask for the honor." His words were laden with ambition.

"Lord Corlys, please, calm yourself," Daemon interjected with a smile, standing at the side of the hall.

Corlys turned sharply, incredulous. "Daemon, are you vying for the position of Hand as well?"

The two men were old rivals, their enmity well known. Each understood the other's ambitions intimately. Daemon, who attended Small Council meetings thanks to his wife's influence, had long skirted the lines of power despite his own formidable experience.

Chapter 654: He Can Shut Up Forever

"Why not?" Daemon asked, stepping forward slowly, his tone calm but assertive. He was the King's uncle, the younger brother of the Old King, and the son of the fearless Baelon. Becoming Hand of the King should be more than fitting for him.

"Is that really what you think?" Corlys grinned, a mocking edge to his voice. "It suits your impractical nature."

Daemon grunted in response, unfazed. Mockery was nothing new to him. His stubbornness had always shielded him from such barbs.

Daemon chuckled, a teasing glint in his eyes as he brushed off the subtle insult. Aemond's challenge was like a child begging for attention, not a threat to him.

"Brother!" Aemond turned to Rhaegar, his voice firm and intent. "Let me be Hand of the King. You'll have peace of mind."

Aemond had come prepared. "Stonehelm is well-defended against Dorne, Qohor offers the cheapest lace and spices, and I can fight for you on the battlefield."

Rhaegar nodded slightly, considering the words. There was truth to them—Aemond did have his strengths.

"As far as I know, Qohor isn't yours to claim," Corlys interrupted, his voice cutting through Aemond's confidence. "Your only fief is Stonehelm. The lands beyond the Greenblood are guarded by the fleet of House Velaryon, and we are the ones building the second Prince's Palace."

Corlys spoke with undeniable authority. He had dared to pursue the position of Hand because he had the backing—and the confidence—to do so. The royal family could not afford to overlook Velaryon support.

Aemond's face turned cold, his temper rising. "Qohor belongs to me. Whoever conquers it, owns it." His words were sharp, laden with menace. The Free Cities he had worked so hard to cultivate were not to be tampered with.

Rhaegar glanced at his uncle, who had remained calm and observant throughout the debate, and asked with a smile, "Uncle, you didn't say a word while the others were showing off their abilities."

Originally, Rhaegar had leaned toward Corlys Velaryon, the Sea Snake. After all, he had considered a few worthy candidates: Lord Cregan of the North, Kermit Tully of Riverrun, and even his own brothers, Aegon and Aemond. Corlys had seniority, but age had made him proud, perhaps even complacent, and Rhaegar suspected he didn't take the king as seriously as he should.

Cregan Stark, though a strong option, presented another challenge. House Stark, though loyal and steadfast, was rooted in the North, which was growing increasingly unstable.

And the Northmen rarely traveled south, making Cregan's potential influence limited. He was young and skilled in politics, but the North was far too distant to be effective.

Then, of course, there were Rhaegar's brothers. Both Aegon and Aemond had been considered, with Aegon—unkempt as he often was—still proving more trustworthy than many others at court.

"Your Grace, I have nothing to add," Daemon replied with a dismissive wave and a smile. "I offer only the loyalty of a dutiful servant."

"Loyalty?" Corlys muttered, barely containing his disdain. "Do you really deserve to use that word?"

Just thinking of the reckless stunts Daemon had pulled over the years could fill a basket.

"You want to test me?" Daemon's eyes narrowed, his smile barely concealing the challenge in his words. A father-in-law and son-in-law, exchanging veiled threats. To an outsider, they might have looked like sworn enemies.

Corlys wisely chose silence, deciding that biting his tongue was better than feeding the flames.

Rhaegar straightened in his seat, no longer slouching as he gained a clearer sense of the power plays unfolding before him.

"There's still—" he began, but a sudden interruption cut him off, a noisy voice echoing through the hall.

Rhaegar turned toward the source of the commotion and saw the eager Master of Laws, Jasper, rushing to make his case. Desperate to climb the ranks, Jasper began with flattery, "I hail from the Stormlands, Your Grace. I was one of your father's trusted advisers, and I helped build the Prince's Palace."

Jasper's ambition was transparent. House Baratheon, once rulers of the Stormlands, had fallen out of favor. Anyone could see that the Stormlands would soon fall under the direct control of the Crownlands, with the Prince's Palace being established as the administrative center. If Jasper could become Hand of the King, he'd have the power to place his loyal men in key positions at the palace, giving him control over the Stormlands. His ambition was clear—he wanted to rule through influence.

"Lord Jasper, you interrupted me," Rhaegar said coldly, his voice carrying a sharp edge. It was a warning, and the first one he had given.

He had tolerated this man for too long. Rhaegar hadn't replaced his father's old advisers out of respect for their service, but that didn't mean they couldn't be replaced if they overstepped.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," Jasper said, feigning humility as he pressed on with his self-promotion. "The construction of the Prince's Palace is urgent. If I were appointed Hand of the King, I would negotiate reduced material costs and rally the nobles to unite behind the crown."

The question hit like a dagger, cutting straight to the point. Jasper's face flushed with sweat as he scrambled to explain. "With House Baratheon retiring, some might feel... uneasy about the transition."

"Who?" Rhaegar asked bluntly.

Jasper faltered, unable to provide an answer. It was something he dared not discuss in detail.

"Enough," Rhaegar said, his interest waning. He waved Jasper away like a bothersome insect. "Leave."

If this conversation continued, Rhaegar knew his temper would get the better of him. His hand instinctively moved to his waist, where Blackfyre hung. The absence of Truefyre, which Aemon carried, gnawed at him, deepening his irritation.

"Your Grace..." Jasper tried again, desperation creeping into his voice.

Humiliated, Jasper backed away, but couldn't resist one last attempt. "Your Grace, rumors of wailing spirits from Storm's End have begun to spread—"

"I told you to shut up." Rhaegar's veins pulsed visibly on his forehead. The thinly veiled threat in Jasper's words was beginning to test his patience.

"Rumors can be dangerous, Your Grace, so if you—" Jasper pressed on, oblivious to the rising tension.

Swish!

A flash of cold steel interrupted him. His words died mid-sentence as the sharp edge of a sword cut cleanly through his neck. Half of his head slid off like a block of soft cheese, hitting the ground with a dull thud.

"Ahhh!" Aegon jumped, his eyes wide with shock.

"What a nuisance," Daemon remarked calmly, wiping the blood from Dark Sister's blade with a casual shrug. "At least he's quiet now."

Plop.

Jasper's body, now missing half its head, collapsed to the ground in a lifeless heap. The remains of his brain splattered across the floor, with his half-severed tongue grotesquely exposed in the open mouth of his severed jaw.

"How dare you!" Erryk, Commander of the Kingsguard, shouted, his face pale as he drew his sword. "Disarm him!"

Kingsguard Erryk and Ser Steffon advanced from either side, their expressions fierce as they surrounded Daemon. The infamous Rogue Prince had long been a source of disdain among the more loyal knights of the realm, and now their anger boiled over.

“No, no,” Daemon said smoothly as he sheathed his sword, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I was only doing my duty,” he added with a smile, his eyes locking onto his nephew on the Iron Throne.

Rhaegar’s face remained impassive, revealing nothing of the storm brewing beneath his calm exterior. He had expected Daemon to use this moment to eliminate Jasper as a competitor for the position of Hand. But to actually see him strike Jasper down in cold blood? That was another matter entirely.

“Your Grace, Daemon has just attacked and killed a Adviser of the Crown in your presence. This is recklessness beyond measure!” Corlys Velaryon’s voice rang out, his face contorted in fury. Whether the anger was genuine or calculated was difficult to tell, but with one rival dead, the path to power was opening for him.

Around the throne room, the other advisers stood frozen in shock, eyes darting between Jasper’s lifeless body and Rhaegar. Lyman, pale and trembling, covered his mouth to keep from retching as the full weight of the scene sank in.

Rhaegar didn’t respond to Corlys’s outrage immediately. Instead, his gaze lingered on Daemon, who stood below the throne with a faint smirk, seemingly unfazed by the chaos he had caused.

“This matter... ends here!” Rhaegar’s voice cut through the tension, his tone resolute and full of kingly authority. “Daemon Targaryen will serve as Hand of the King, and as Hand of the Queen. There will be no further objections.”

The words hung in the air like a proclamation of fate.

“Thank you, Your Grace!” Daemon grinned as he knelt, accepting his new title with the same air of indifference that had carried him through the entire scene.

The throne room fell into an uneasy silence. Then, breaking it, Corlys, his voice full of disbelief and rage, shouted, “Your Grace, you would rather protect your uncle than accept me as Hand of the King?!”

His frustration was palpable. This wasn’t the first time Corlys had been overlooked. First, King Viserys had refused to marry his daughter Laena to the heir. Then, Rhaegar himself had rejected the match between Baela and his eldest son. And now, instead of appointing Corlys—a man with seniority and wealth—Rhaegar had chosen Daemon, a man notorious for causing chaos. It was the final insult.

Facing Corlys’ objections, Rhaegar attempted to reason with him. “Lord Corlys, you already have significant responsibilities as Master of Ships and Admiral of the Fleet,” he said evenly.

“No! That’s no excuse,” Corlys retorted, his voice sharp with frustration. “My son Laenor can take over as Master of Ships. You are deliberately snubbing me.”

“What a joke,” Corlys sneered, his gaze flicking to Daemon with disdain. “I just want to see what kind of kingdom you two will run.”

With that, Corlys turned on his heel and stormed out of the throne room, his cloak billowing behind him. He could tolerate Daemon being the Hand, but he would not allow House Velaryon to be dishonored by this farce. A prince who spent his days in the brothels of Flea Bottom? Daemon would turn King's Landing into a den of vice.

"Take care," Daemon called after him, arms crossed and a smirk tugging at his lips. If he couldn't be his brother's Hand, he would gladly serve as his nephew's. He had no desire to wait quietly on the sidelines. He'd encouraged Baela to follow her own path; now he would prove himself too, just as he had tried years ago when both his brother and Otto Hightower had sought to sideline him. Now, he had the chance to hold power, to do something that would make the world take notice.

"Kingsguard, take the body away," Rhaegar commanded calmly, his tone unchanged by Corlys' exit. The defection of the Sea Snake wasn't enough to shake him. Where could Corlys go? The Seven Kingdoms were vast, but House Targaryen wasn't about to cower before anyone.

Erryk nodded and signaled for the Kingsguard to remove Jasper's body from the hall.

"Aemond, don't give me that look," Rhaegar added, turning to his one-eyed brother. "You'll take over Lord Jasper position as Master of Laws and help maintain order in King's Landing."

It wasn't the Hand of the King, but it was a prestigious post. Rhaegar would test Aemond here first, giving him a proper role in the governance of the realm.

"Yes, Your Grace," Aemond replied through gritted teeth, his expression sour. He had aimed higher, for the Hand, but the Master of Laws was at least a position of influence, seated at the Small Council.

Rhaegar's gaze then shifted to Daeron, standing quietly at the edge of the room. "As for you," he said, "you will serve as Lord Treasurer. Help ease Lord Lyman's burdens."

"Huh?" Lyman, startled, looked at Rhaegar doubtfully. "Your Grace..."

"You're already advanced in years," Rhaegar said with a dismissive wave. "It's time you took things a little easier."

Lyman hesitated for a moment, but finally relented. "Yes," he muttered, bowing slightly. It was true—age had begun to weigh on him, and he couldn't deny that it was time to pass on some of his responsibilities.

Daeron scratched his head, surprised by the sudden responsibility now placed on him. It felt like he had just been pulled into the very center of royal duties without warning, and the weight of it sank in like a stone.

Lastly, Rhaegar's eyes landed on Aegon. The prince was practically beaming with excitement, his eyes wide with anticipation, filled with almost comical foolishness.

"That's it. The meeting is adjourned," Rhaegar declared, his gaze sweeping over the room. Without another word, he dismissed them all, leaving Aegon's excitement hanging awkwardly in the air. If Aegon wanted to continue pretending to be oblivious, then so be it.

Chapter 655: Winterfell

Driftmark, Spice Town Harbor

Corlys surveyed the anchored fleet with a gloomy expression, his gaze drifting over the damaged ships again and again. The aftermath of battle was evident—sails torn, hulls battered. As always, the shipwrights would have their work cut out for them.

"Corlys, there you are."

Rhaenys approached briskly, a helpless smile tugging at her lips.

"I was supposed to be at your nephew's Small Council meeting," Corlys said flatly, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

"You're still a child, sulking like this. It's unbecoming," Rhaenys said, her eyes soft as she regarded her husband.

"I'm not sulking," Corlys muttered, turning his head away, brow furrowing. Anger was hard to hide.

Rhaenys shook her head and laughed. "Losing to Daemon has shamed you, hasn't it?"

"I didn't lose to just Daemon," Corlys snapped. "I lost to the Targaryen men—a bunch of backstabbers. None of them can be trusted."

"That's because you're being too aggressive," Rhaenys said, crossing her arms and leaning against a nearby cargo hoist. "You need to rein in your temper. No one enjoys having an arrogant, prideful man around."

"You think I have a bad temper?" Corlys turned sharply, eyes filled with surprise. His wife's words struck deeper than he had anticipated.

"What I mean," Rhaenys replied, her voice light as she tactfully shifted the subject, "is that you should focus your energy elsewhere. You're not young anymore. It's time to think about the children."

"So you do think I'm old," Corlys said, a flicker of despondency crossing his face before he put his arm around his wife, drawing her close. His broad chest pressed against her face, and he marveled at her beauty, her nobility.

Rhaenys smiled, a soft laugh escaping her as she patted his chest. She had always loved proud, confident men, which was why she had chosen Corlys, the most arrogant of them all. But arrogance, she thought, was only admirable when backed by the power to wield it.

"What did you mean just now, that I don't value the House above all else?" Corlys asked, his voice calm, though a hint of tension lingered beneath the surface.

Without waiting for her response, he added, almost matter-of-factly, "Laenor has brought back his wretched wife from a commoner family to High Tide. And their mute daughter."

Rhaenys raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't talking about them."

As the wealthiest and most powerful noble in the Seven Kingdoms, Corlys naturally looked down on the common-born girl. She was heavyset, exuding the air of a country bumpkin—qualities that made it impossible for him to see her as anything but an opportunist. In his mind, she was to be treated as a paramour at best. Their daughter was born out of wedlock, and Corlys had planned for Laenor to eventually marry a noblewoman of proper birth, producing legitimate heirs with the appropriate lineage.

But Laenor had fallen deeply in love with his wife and pleaded with Corlys to treat them with respect. As a father who had lost both his son and daughter, Corlys could not refuse when fate returned one of them to him. Reluctantly, he accepted his commoner daughter-in-law into the family.

"Who else are you referring to?" Corlys asked, his tone half-joking, though there was a sharp edge to it. "You don't expect me to arrange an engagement for my mute granddaughter with a Prince, do you?"

He looked away, the weight of the absurdity settling over him. Corlys, even with his influence, knew he didn't have the power or prestige to make such a demand. The young king would certainly not humor an old man half-entrenched in the politics of the sea.

"It's Rhaena," Rhaenys said, her face growing serious. She sighed, meeting his gaze. "You know what I mean. That child has been raised as the heir to Driftmark for years, but now she's hiding in King's Landing, refusing to come back."

"There is only one Driftmark," Corlys replied quietly, his voice steady. His son's inheritance rights would always take precedence over his granddaughter's. Bloodline was law.

"Then compensate her," Rhaenys insisted, her aim clear and direct. "Rhaena is already Laenor's foster daughter, and she deserves her due. She's the next rightful heir to Driftmark."

Corlys frowned, considering her words. "Now Laenor knows how to appreciate women," he muttered darkly. "His wife is so plump, always giving birth to sons."

Though the bloodline had been diluted, Corlys saw the need for a male heir to carry the legacy of Driftmark. The tarnishing of the family's prestige was a price he had come to accept—for the sake of Driftmark's future.

"Forgive me for disagreeing," Rhaenys said coldly, her expression hardening as she pushed her husband away and took a step back.

Corlys was caught off guard. He cursed himself silently, rubbing his temple in frustration. He had stood by her side when her claim to the Iron Throne was rejected because of her gender, her "female status" disqualifying her. Back then, he had been her fiercest advocate, even raising the banner of gender equality championed by his mother-in-law, Queen Alysanne.

But now, things felt different.

“Give me a moment, Rhaenys,” he said, hesitating. His voice faltered as if he were struggling to find the right words. “I need time to adjust.”

When they had no son, his focus had been unwavering—securing the future of Driftmark. But now, with Laenor returned and a living male heir, everything seemed more complicated. The world, once certain, was full of unpredictable turns.

Rhaenys’s eyes sharpened as she spoke. “Now, bring Rhaena back from King’s Landing. Don’t break the child’s heart.”

Corlys remained silent, staring at the ground.

“And then,” she added, her voice steady with purpose, “you must prepare a large ship.”

Corlys glanced up, puzzled.

“The House Velaryon owes its prosperity to your ancestors’ boldness—following Aenar when he exiled himself from Old Valyria. That choice made us who we are.”

At that moment, Rhaenys seemed to glow with wisdom, a force of conviction around her. “Now that Essos has been reshaped by Rhaegar’s conquests, you should be ready to follow the winds of change as well.”

Corlys said nothing, but her words weighed heavily on him. As Rhaenys turned and began to walk away, her figure gradually fading into the distance, Corlys gathered his thoughts. He turned back toward the docks, where the shipbuilders worked tirelessly.

Addam was busy polishing his tools, his focus absolute. Beside him, Alyn, stripped of his usual fine clothes, was helping carry a basket of fish and shrimp.

Corlys’s irritation stirred. It was the unease of a proud man wrestling with guilt, his sense of duty clashing with personal regrets.

“My lord,” Alyn called out, noticing him. He set down the basket, wiping his hands on his shirt.

“Come here for a moment, Alyn,” Corlys beckoned, his voice steady, hiding the storm within.

“What can I do for you, my lord?” Alyn approached, eager yet respectful.

Corlys studied him for a moment before speaking with the weight of authority. “You will take a large ship to bring Rhaena back from King’s Landing. In the meantime, I need you to arrange something for your brother.”

Alyn’s eyes brightened with renewed hope, eager to prove himself. “What is it?”

Corlys looked away, unwilling to meet those eager, violet eyes filled with such youthful energy. “The Golden Fields across the Narrow Sea need development. Tell Addam to go there and reclaim a fertile piece of land.”

Alyn nodded, understanding the task, though he remained disciplined. “Yes, my lord. I’ll tell Addam to do his best.”

He couldn’t help but steal a glance in the direction where Rhaenys had disappeared. Unlike Addam, who remained entirely absorbed in his work, Alyn was keenly aware of the world around him. His eyes tracked movements, reading the mood of the scene, always observant.

Corlys watched him, a mix of admiration and regret stirring within. Alyn was handsome, upright, and full of vitality—qualities that reminded him of his younger self. In contrast, Laenor, raised among nobles, had developed a gentler, more feminine disposition. With a delicate face as striking as his sister Laena’s, Laenor had always seemed more like a noble girl than a lord.

But Alyn and Addam, bastards though they were, possessed a competitive fire that Corlys could not deny.

“Yes, my lord,” Alyn repeated, a small smile curling his lips. Then, with a glance back at the vendor’s path, he quietly resumed his work, though his mind remained sharp and alert, always watching.

...

The North, Winterfell

Snow fell softly over the castle’s towers, blanketing Winterfell in white. In the vast Wolfswood, a single tree stood tall—a red-leaved weirwood towering above a crystal-clear spring.

“Responsibility is sacrifice.”

“Responsibility is everything, even more than blood...”

“The North bears a great responsibility to the Seven Kingdoms, a duty older than any oath.”

Underneath the ancient weirwood, Lord Cregan Stark, clad in a dark leather coat, recited the solemn words of the traditional declaration. His expression was grim, matching the weight of his words. From a sack, he drew out one pound after another—black and white tokens that would seal the fates of those gathered.

A circle of strong young men stood around him, each waiting to take their turn. Some drew white pounds, and their tense faces eased with relief. But others drew black, and their expressions grew even more solemn.

Cregan’s sharp gaze swept over the group. His large, calloused hand landed firmly on the shoulder of a young man who had drawn a black pound. The youth’s black hair, black eyes, and long face marked him unmistakably as a Stark—features passed down through generations.

“Are you all going?” came a quiet voice from the side, tinged with confusion.

Baelon, his brow furrowed, looked around at the men of the North. He struggled to understand the ritual before him.

Cregan, his dark eyes serious, lowered his head slightly. “Since the time of the First Men, we have been the kingdom’s shield against the cold and the darkness,” he explained. “According to ancient

tradition, when winter approaches, one in every ten male children of our family must be chosen to join the Night's Watch."

He paused, his voice gentle but firm. "This is not a punishment, Baelon. It is an honor."

Cregan straightened, his gaze returning to the circle of young men. "Do not stop the drawing," he said gravely, and the ritual continued.

Baelon exhaled slowly, watching in silence.

Suddenly, the shrill cry of a raven pierced the stillness, accompanied by the soft crunch of footsteps on snow. Cregan turned, raising his arm for the black bird to land. It settled, and he removed the letter-carrier from its leg, reading the message quickly.

Baelon tightened his black cloak, eyes widening in surprise as he spotted a familiar figure approaching. "Baela, why aren't you at the castle?"

The silver-haired maiden, dressed in a red gown and a black fur coat, stepped into the Wolfwood. Snowflakes clung to her fur-lined shoulders, and her cheeks were flushed an unnatural red.

"I couldn't stay," Baela replied, her breath misting in the cold air. "So I followed the raven."

She sniffed, her voice strained as she added, "The Maester said being active would help me recover from the chill."

The two of them had been in the North for several days now, long enough to gain a true understanding of its cold.

"Roar..."

A deep, melodic dragon roar echoed suddenly through the Wolfwood, and a gust of cold wind whipped up the snow in a swirling frenzy. From the dense trees emerged an old, rough-scaled dragon, its moss-colored hide speckled with frost. The beast shook its massive body, dislodging the snow that had settled on its back, while its tired, vertical pupils blinked with weariness.

"He's complaining too," Baelon muttered, exhaling a cloud of warm breath as he rubbed his hands together. "Even the dragons don't like the cold."

"Uragax has already done you a favor by showing up," Baela replied, her voice raspy with frustration. "I don't even know where Moondancer's gone to hide." Her young dragon, unable to stand the biting chill, had likely found a warm place to nest.

"Prince," Cregan spoke up suddenly, drawing their attention.

"But which noble castle collapsed from the snowstorm?" Baelon asked carefully, not surprised by the news. It had been a brutal winter, burying the North in ice and snow even in July. Many households were struggling just to survive.

"It's not a castle—it's the wildlings," Cregan said, handing a letter to Baelon, his face grim. "They're gathering beyond the Wall again, planning another assault."

Baelon's eyes narrowed as he read. This would be the third time the Wall had been attacked during this harsh winter. The Night's Watch had already suffered devastating losses.

"For this reason, half of our new recruits are traditionally sent to the Night's Watch," Cregan continued. "The selection of those recruits was just completed in the Wolfswood."

Baelon nodded, understanding the weight of the situation. "But we haven't even finished traveling the entirety of the North."

"The Wall is more important," Cregan said, his tone firm and leaving no room for argument. "The selection is done. We march for the Wall tomorrow."

Chapter 656: The Wall

Dragonstone, at the edge of a cliff.

The Cannibal crawled across the grass, its heavy body crushing the blades beneath it. Its labored breathing was like a searing torrent of heat.

A deep, guttural roar rumbled from its throat.

"Roar~~"

...

A shrill scream echoed from the massive beast, sending grass and dust whirling into the air.

Rhaegar lay on his side beside the black dragon's wing, eyes open as he watched two young dragons sparring. One had gray-green scales, scarlet dorsal fins, and wing membranes, with a sharp head that lacked a horned crown. The other, black with streaks of purple, bore a fierce appearance with a long, curved horn crown.

"Roar!"

The gray-green young dragon bellowed, unleashing a blast of scorching scarlet dragonfire that hit the mottled black dragon square on the head. The force knocked the latter over, leaving it dazed.

"Haha, the two little guys," Rhaegar chuckled, tossing a piece of fresh wyvern meat toward them.

The scent of blood caught the attention of the young dragons, and they lunged at the meat like starved cats. One bit the other, while the other kicked back. They couldn't even eat peacefully.

Another low growl came from the Cannibal, its eyelids fluttering. Its massive mouth opened slightly in an impatient rumble.

The two young dragons froze at the sound, then quickly tore off pieces of wyvern meat before flying away, each clutching their share. They were no bigger than hunting dogs, their wings still weak and unsteady as they wobbled in mid-air, much like young children carrying heavy loads.

"You've scared them," Rhaegar said, shaking his head, though there was a note of amusement in his voice. He flapped his own pitch-black wings. The two dragons,

much like Moondancer and Morning, had hatched from eggs laid by Syrax. Rhaenyra had named the newborns Arrax and Tyvarix.

'Like Lyanna's Vermax,' Rhaegar mused, 'named after the deities of Syrax, the goddess of fertility. They represent the warrior, the spear, and thunder... While Vermax represents wisdom and enlightenment, they are all warden dragons of the Mother Goddess.' He smiled at the thought. 'Very affectionate.'

The Cannibal opened its miserable green vertical eyes, its wings flapping irritably. One of the young dragons hovered tantalizingly close, as if daring it to strike. The Cannibal's pale dragon head twitched—it hadn't yet fully digested its last meal, but the thought of fresh, tender meat tempted it.

"Tsk tsk..."

Rhaegar smirked, climbing onto the saddle along the Cannibal's wing. He had no time to play with his old companion. The dragon seemed to sense this, bracing its wings and gazing across the coast, its monstrous head cocked toward the horizon.

"Let's go. Velaryon's fleet should be setting sail." Rhaegar fastened his black cloak around him, his mind already working over the plans for developing the golden fields. King's Landing was under the care of his father and Rhaenyra, while the Good Uncle and Aemond had joined the Small Council. He felt relieved, bold, and eager for news from his eldest son in the North.

"Roar!"

With a powerful flap of its wings, the Cannibal let out a mighty cry, soaring into the sky. Its thick tail slashed through the cliff face as it launched itself into the air.

"Roar!"

A young dragon, scales shimmering cobalt blue with a copper belly, flew out from the Stone Drum Tower, trailing far behind the Cannibal. Daeron rode on its back, one hand clutching a golden key, the other a map.

"Alas, another long journey," Daeron muttered. 'With great responsibility comes great power, I suppose. Not like Brother Aegon, who has less power and fewer burdens to carry.'

The two dragons flew over Blackwater Bay, one leading, the other trailing. Slowly, they disappeared beyond The Gullet.

Below, a fleet flying the banner of a green seahorse sailed across the sea. A dozen large ships carried cargo and sailors. On the deck of one ship stood a young man with a determined expression, his gaze lifting toward the soaring dragons.

"I wish I were a rider too," he murmured, eyes gleaming. Addam turned and began barking orders to the sailors with renewed vigor.

...

The North.

The Wall, Castle Black.

Creak...

The winch-ladder embedded in the frozen stone wall slowly ascended toward the top of the towering Wall. The bitter wind howled, snowflakes slipping through the iron fence.

Baelon shivered, shaking his head to free the snow from his silver-and-gold shawl.

"You should dress more warmly, Prince," said Cregan, standing straight and tall, a broad greatsword slung diagonally over his left shoulder.

"It's exciting to finally see the Wall up close," Baelon replied, smiling, his eyes drifting past Cregan's greatsword.

"Winter is coming. This is no occasion for excitement." Cregan's brow furrowed deeply, concealing a deeper worry.

"Winter? Do you mean... something beyond the Wall?" Baelon was quick to understand and thought instantly of the prophecy.

"You are right." Cregan's eyes flashed with a fierce light, and he murmured, "This is just a sprinkle of snow at the end of summer. The real winter will be... devastating."

"You brought me here to the Wall. We'll face it together." Baelon stood tall, showing the bearing of a heir prince, his vision not limited by youth.

"You are kind, just like your father," Cregan remarked, allowing a rare smile to break his stern features. Teasing, he added, "At least you didn't threaten me with a dragon like when my ancestor, Torrhen Stark, faced the Black Dread."

Baelon couldn't help but smile. "I thought you wouldn't like to discuss that part of history."

"Torrhen Stark, the King Who Knelt," Cregan said, with an unusual perspective, "isn't remembered in shame. He brought the men of The North home safely."

Just then, Cregan's gaze caught movement in the sky.

Roar...

The massive, mountain-like dragon lay in the snow outside Castle Black, shaking its head in protest as its wide wings swept snow away. It was colder than Winterfell, and the Great Wall loomed behind, emanating an aura of forbidden magic.

"Dragon," Cregan muttered, a fierce light igniting in his eyes.

Clang!

The winch-ladder shuddered violently as it struck the wooden boards at the top of the Wall.

"Watch your step," Cregan said, snapping back to the present. He pushed open the ladder's gate and stepped onto the Great Wall.

As far as the eye could see, battlements rose higher than head height, their frost-covered stones barely concealing the fierce north-south wind. Men of The North, bundled in thick fur coats, waited respectfully near the stairwell, their eyes on the Lord and the young Prince.

Plop—

Baelon leapt onto the hardened layer of ice, while the torches along the Wall swayed in the cold wind, casting flickering shadows across the ancient fortification.

"It's cold," Baelon muttered.

"This is only the tip of the iceberg. You'll have to learn to accept it."

Cregan, like an amiable teacher, took the young prince's hand and walked onward. Despite being only in his twenties, Cregan had already known love and loss. After enduring many trials, he had become remarkably open-minded. The heir, just ten years old, felt almost like his own child to him.

"This way, my lord," said a seasoned Night's Watchman as he approached, leading the pair toward the watchtower.

Cregan nodded. "I'll show you the view beyond the Wall so you can tell your father about it when you return home."

"I'd rather take a leak," Baelon joked, his face reddened by the cold. His voice carried a hint of exasperation as he added, "My cock's shriveled into nothing, and I can't stop thinking about peeing."

When they reached the watchtower, it turned out to be a simple wooden structure jutting from the Wall. Cregan pointed toward the distance with a large hand.

"Over there is the Haunted Forest, wildling territory," he said.

Baelon followed his gaze, noticing the arrows lodged in the walls and the dark bloodstains scattered in the snow below. Some of the arrows were nearly two meters long, as imposing as the steel spears used on scorpion crossbows. Red patches bloomed on the snow, staining the frozen remains.

"Those are the marks the wildlings left behind," Cregan whispered gravely. "They feel winter coming too and are doing everything they can to cross the Wall."

"Why don't we just let them in?" Baelon wondered aloud.

Both knew the true enemy lurked far beyond the Wall. The wildlings were merely unfortunate souls, living on the wrong side when the Wall was built. Like the people of The North, they were descendants of the First Men.

"I can't be certain of their threat," Cregan said calmly, showing no annoyance at the question.

"Besides, the people of The North can barely feed themselves. They can't afford to care for outsiders."

He explained that even the sons of the nobility volunteered for the Night's Watch to spare their families' dwindling rations. The wildlings were unproductive, and letting them pass the Wall would be disastrous.

Whoosh—

Cregan bent down, about to speak again, but the sound of solemn horns echoed from the Haunted Forest, cutting him off.

Sa sa sa...

Dense footsteps crunched through the snow, shaking the forest lightly. Baelon's eyes widened, and an unease crept up his spine. From the trees, a procession of wild men emerged, draped in animal skins, their ranks solemn and indifferent to death.

At the front, a massive beast, towering several stories high and covered in long, matted hair, trudged forward.

"Mammoth," Baelon whispered, eyes widening as they reflected the enormous creature. There were two mammoths, their thick waists bound by ropes, dragging behind them massive tree trunks.

Two giants, seven or eight meters tall, trudged alongside the beasts, their grotesque faces framed by ragged animal skins. Longbows and arrows, identical to those embedded in the Wall, were strapped to their backs.

Roar...

A heavy, thunderous dragon roar reverberated from behind them, temporarily drowning out the echo of the horns. Uragax soared into the air, circling the Wall, its amber eyes filled with alarm.

Baelon and Cregan stood side by side, their backs to the dragon and their faces turned toward the cold wind and gathering snow.

...

The Great Grass Sea of the Dothraki.

An afternoon. A shoddy tent.

"My brother was the smartest man and the dumbest idiot." Aemon's eyes grew distant, filled with memories.

A faint flush returned to his pale cheeks as his voice rasped, as though something blocked his throat.

"What was he like?" Leah sat cross-legged on a worn woolen rug, holding a plate of cooked horse meat.

"Him..." Aemon bowed his head, forcing a smile. "He was better than me. I'm not as good as he was."

"No!" Leah protested, her eyes widening as she held up a small dagger. "You're a Prince, and so was he. You're a real dragon, just like him. How could he be better than you?"

"That's different."

Aemon gently pushed the blade aside, picking up a piece of horse meat. He chewed slowly, wincing as his jaws ached from the effort. The tough meat resisted, refusing to fall apart.

"Are you sad?" Leah leaned closer, peering into Aemon's purple eyes.

"No," Aemon lied.

Leah tilted her head, her expression thoughtful. "You had a dragon. What was it like?"

"It was big... a great big one." Aemon's throat tightened, and a flush crept up his neck.

"It's dead, isn't it?" Leah, sharp as ever, saw through his attempt to hide the truth. If the dragon still lived, it would have found its way back to him by now.

Aemon's face darkened. In frustration, he grabbed the dagger and stabbed at the horse meat, cutting it with unnecessary force.

"Don't be sad," Leah said, her voice bright, as if she were offering a gift. "In a few days, I'll give you a little horse. Then you can ride with me, instead of walking with the slaves."

Aemon:...

I didn't want to talk. My thoughts were consumed by memories of the Trickster—the wild dragon I saw that night. It never returned. I regained the will to live, but without a goal, without direction.

"Woof woof~~"

A playful barking pulled Aemon from his thoughts. Leah was lying beside him, trying to cheer him up with a curtsy that looked more like a game.

Blushing, Aemon leaned back. "What are you doing?"

"Your dragon is gone, isn't it?" Leah's eyes sparkled with hope as she offered, "I'll be your dragon now. I'll take you for rides across the Great Grass Sea."

Aemon couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head. "That's not how dragons sound."

"Then how do they sound?" Leah asked eagerly, sitting down beside him. Her enthusiasm undiminished, her wide eyes flitted between Aemon's fair face, which grew more captivating the longer she stared. His short silver-blond hair and purple eyes shimmered like the moon and stars.

Leah sniffed the air and grinned. The stench of sweat and dirt had faded, replaced by the smell of mutton and grass. "So, how do dragons really sound?" she repeated, her curiosity undeterred.

"A dragon is a dragon. You can't imitate it." Aemon shifted uncomfortably, but Leah followed, sitting even closer.

With no other options, they both turned their attention back to the horse meat. Leah retrieved the small dagger, slicing it into thin strips as they ate in silence.

Outside the tent, the open-air stables buzzed with activity. Cas Khal, the stern-faced leader, stood stroking his warhorse. His expression gave nothing away, but he exchanged a knowing glance with his Bloodrider.

The scarred Bloodrider nodded in understanding. Without a word, he unsheathed his curved knife and made his way toward the tent. His sharp eyes glinted with a dark, complex intent.

Chapter 657: The Thirteen of Qarth

The continent of Essos, the Golden Fields.

The sky stretched in a deep, cloudless blue, while the lakes shimmered in shades of emerald green. Thousands of people had set up makeshift homes, cultivating farmland around the fertile shores of Dagger Lake. The water was calm, disturbed only by the occasional ripple.

On the horizon, the foundations of a massive structure were beginning to take shape, sprawling over a large area. Workers moved steadily, carrying wood and stones to hasten the construction. Everything was carried out in an orderly fashion, and no one voiced a single complaint.

The grass rustled underfoot as it was trampled by the bustling crowd. Across the lake, a massive black dragon lay motionless, its sad green eyes half-open and half-closed. Its sheer presence cast an invisible weight over the camp, a sense of oppression that gripped the hearts of all who dared glance at it.

Whenever someone gazed too long in its direction, the hot breath from the dragon's thick nostrils turned the grass in front of it to scorched earth. The people, sensing the heat even from a distance, worked harder under the silent pressure.

"Old friend, let's go for a walk,"

Rhaegar's voice broke through the hum of labor as he strode out from the fields, a grave expression on his face. The shortage of manpower was glaring. Even though the war with Braavos and Pentos had officially ended, the Dragonlord's House remained marred by its aftermath. The people of the Golden Fields would rather see their homes trampled by Dothraki hooves than submit to the rule of the Dragonlords and build anew.

"I'll come with you,"

Daeron said, trailing behind, his pace slower. His hands were blistered from chopping firewood. There were so few hands to help that even the Prince had to work.

"You stay here. If you leave, they'll all run,"

Rhaegar replied, his voice cold as he swiftly climbed onto the dragon's back. "I'll go to Slaver's Bay to handle matters. You stay and try to gather more displaced people."

The Dothraki had ravaged half of western Essos, with the Golden Fields suffering the brunt of their devastation. Yet Daeron had gained a good reputation by rescuing those plundered by the Dothraki, which made him invaluable in rallying the refugees.

After giving his instructions, Rhaegar patted the dragon's back.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal stirred, rising from the grass, its hind legs stamping the earth with a thunderous boom. It flapped its colossal wings, lifting off into the sky. Over the past two months, the nutrients from the pale dragon it had devoured were fully digested, giving the Cannibal's dark scales a renewed metallic sheen. The once-visible holes in its wings had healed, and its size had grown, nearing 200 meters in length.

Boom!

From the perspective of the common folk, the black dragon appeared like a coal-black mountain, taking flight. Its wings beat heavily, creating gusts of wind that rippled through the fields. Slowly, the massive creature disappeared into the clouds, leaving only the distant echo of its roar.

...

Slaver's Bay.

Meereen, the Great Pyramid.

"Your Grace, Astapor has trained 2,000 Unsullied this year, all fully armored warriors," Racallio announced. Dressed in a garish outfit of red and green, he exuded an odd blend of womanly charm and rugged masculinity, his full beard contrasting with his exaggerated gestures. His frustration was palpable. "But instead of offering them to you, the Good Masters have raised the price."

Irina, seated high on the throne, sighed and pressed a hand to her forehead. "Send your fleet to Astapor and trade them gold for the Unsullied," she replied. Her voice carried the weariness of one who had navigated these negotiations before.

The Unsullied were the finest remnants of the Old Empire of Ghis, and Meereen's defenses relied on the 1,500 already in its ranks, bought in previous years. Astapor, newly revived, funneled most of its looted slaves into training more Unsullied, and this year's crop had finally come of age.

"Don't worry, Your Grace," Racallio said, puffing out his chest in a grand show of confidence. "If the Good Masters refuse to sell, I'll just stuff their heads up my arse and squeeze them!" He twisted his hips theatrically as he strode out of the hall, leaving Irina shaking her head at his eccentricity.

As he departed, two bald sorcerers in red robes entered, their pale faces marked with strange tattoos that radiated an ominous aura. The air seemed to grow colder as they approached.

"Your Grace," one of them said, bowing deeply.

Irina straightened on her throne. "Have you found the red dragon?"

"We have some news," the sorcerer said.

"Speak."

"In the distant Great Grass Sea, the Lamb Men have found traces of a dragon."

The sorcerer's voice was steady, each word slow and deliberate, meant to soothe. "We've already sent men to search in that direction."

It was little more than whispers of dragon dung and charred sheep bones, but Irina knew it was enough to stir hope—or fear. Her face grew colder as the conversation dragged on.

"Just find some more concubines for my brother," she snapped, waving them off impatiently. She had no desire to linger on the sorcerers' cryptic tales.

"Yes, Your Grace," the sorcerer replied, bowing once more. Before retreating, he added, "A merchant ship from Qarth has docked, and a witch has come with it."

Irina frowned, about to demand an explanation, but the man was already gone, his words trailing behind him.

Boom.

The wind howled, slamming into the windows and toppling the ornate decorations inside the hall.

"Dragon!" A soldier's frantic cry echoed from the city below. The commotion outside surged, the sound of hurried footsteps and shouted commands filling the air.

Irina's hand tightened on the armrest of her throne. Her gaze lifted to the open sky beyond the Great Pyramid.

"Roar..."

A massive black dragon circled above, its enormous wings stirring gusts of wind as it flew over the city. Its shadow darkened the streets of Meereen, casting a sense of awe—and terror—across the land.

...

It was midday.

The Colosseum, Meereen.

Thousands of spectators sat in eerie silence, watching a multi-person duel unfold in the arena below. Unlike the usual rowdy crowd, an unsettling mix of anxiety and wildness hung in the air, casting a heavy stillness over the Colosseum. Even the slave warriors battling below seemed drained, their swords clutched limply in trembling hands.

Amid this tension, a grotesque sound filled the air—chewing, loud and awful.

The Cannibal, its massive body towering over the high walls of the Colosseum, feasted on a pile of cows and sheep. The livestock seemed like mere snacks in its enormous maw, their grunts and splashing blood lost in the beast's relentless chewing. Its green, vertical pupils gazed down with a cold, predatory malice, as if it could devour the entire audience just as easily.

"It is an honor to meet you, Your Grace, ruler of the Iron Throne," spoke a man from the high platform overlooking the arena. Seated in a row were a dozen finely dressed figures.

The speaker was a bald, round-faced man, short and stocky, with a constant smile on his face. "Seeing is believing. You truly remind me of the great conqueror, Aegon. Truly imposing."

"Indeed," the twelve men and women seated around him nodded in agreement.

Their clothing was vibrant, adorned with jewelry that glittered in the midday sun. They exuded wealth, luxury, and the heavy scent of perfume.

Rhaegar lifted his eyes and spoke with a measured tone, fingers resting near his nose. "Master Bargins, let's get straight to the point."

The group in front of him was none other than The Thirteen of Qarth. The Golden Fields, Rhaegar's realm, desperately lacked manpower, resources, and—most of all—money. Qarth, a rich and independent coastal city on the eastern edge of Essos, rivaled even the Nine Free Cities in wealth. Rhaegar sought to secure a loan from them.

Bargins, momentarily taken aback by the request, allowed surprise to flicker across his fat face. Then he chuckled. "No problem, Your Grace," he said with a practiced smile, ever the adaptable businessman.

The Thirteen, diverse in hair color and skin tone, were bound by their shared business acumen, a trait that had led them to wealth and influence in Qarth.

"Your Grace of Meereen," Bargins continued, "we are honored to ask for your help as our intermediary."

He produced an elegant wooden box and handed it to Irina, seated across from him. Irina, with her silver hair and purple eyes, wore a split blue skirt that accentuated her noble and aloof demeanor. She opened the box to reveal a chain link with a dragon head pendant, intricately carved.

"Valyrian steel?"

Irina's eyes lit up as she carefully picked up the silver-gray chain. The dragon-head pendant glimmered in the light as it rested against her arm, draping over her chest and complementing her attire. The piece's elegance only enhanced the natural beauty of her Valyrian features—long silver-gold hair, fair skin, and a regal bearing.

"Thank you," Irina beamed as she admired the Valyrian steel chain, its dragon-head pendant gleaming in the light. The material itself spoke of its priceless nature, while the dragon symbol perfectly embodied the heritage of a Dragonlord's house. It was a thoughtful and significant gift.

"Your Grace, we've prepared a gift for you as well," Bargins said with a polite smile, turning to Rhaegar.

He adopted an apologetic tone, adding, "A cargo ship loaded with spices is waiting in the harbor for you. Originally, there were three ships, but they ran into a storm on the way."

Rhaegar nodded, his expression neutral. There was no surprise or excitement—five of the six Free Cities under his control were rich in spices. Compared to Valyrian steel, spices were hardly enticing.

Bargins, momentarily taken aback, hadn't expected Rhaegar to be so unimpressed.

After a brief pause, he regained his composure and smiled again. "In your letter, you mentioned wanting to borrow from the Qarth Bank. How much do you wish to borrow?" He rubbed his hands together, the gesture unmistakably mercenary.

"Three million golden dragons," Rhaegar replied, leaning back in his chair. "Though if it were possible, five million would be even better."

Bargins' smile faltered. "That's no small sum," he said, his tone becoming more serious.

Rhaegar chuckled. "Is that a problem for Qarth? Or do you not have the funds?"

"The Thirteen possess vast wealth," Bargins responded gravely. "However, as I understand it, you still owe the Iron Bank nearly a million. The Seven Kingdoms and several Free Cities have been drained by years of war."

He left the rest unsaid, but the implication was clear. With so much wealth tied up in conflict, how could Rhaegar possibly repay a loan of that size?

"Are you suggesting I can't pay it back?" Rhaegar's eyes narrowed. "Or is it that Qarth doesn't have the funds?"

Roar...

A low, thunderous dragon roar echoed from behind, vibrating through the room like distant, muffled thunder. The Thirteen flinched, their expressions changing instantly. Cold sweat formed on their brows beneath their fine clothing.

"You misunderstand, Your Grace," Bargins quickly corrected, his smirk returning. "To be candid, we also owe the Iron Bank, and our ability to repay is limited."

"So you don't have the money?" Rhaegar cut straight to the point.

"No, no!" Bargins waved his hands frantically, his voice eager to placate. "We do have the funds to lend you for the development of the Golden Fields, but repayment... let's just say it's not as straightforward as you might hope."

It was a bold admission—essentially confessing they might default on the loan without a hint of shame.

"Your Grace, don't underestimate The Thirteen," Bargins said confidently, tilting his head. "The Iron Bank has controlled the world's wealth for centuries. Now that you rule six of the Nine Free Cities, why not replace the Iron Bank with us?"

Rhaegar rested his chin on one hand, considering the proposal. His gaze shifted to Irina.

Irina, still admiring her new chain, glanced up. "Qarth has already established its own bank," she said, a hint of excitement in her voice. "Even Slaver's Bay has borrowed from it."

Rhaegar suddenly understood the larger game at play. The Thirteen had ambitions far beyond simple trade—they sought to topple the Iron Bank itself. They weren't here merely to offer loans or pay tribute to his throne. They wanted to draw the Iron Throne into their plans, to use the power of dragons to safeguard their ambitions.

They had no interest in charity or admiration. They came to align themselves with dragons and ensure their dominance in the world's financial future.

Chapter 658: Should I Go to Asshai?

It was afternoon. The crowd had dispersed from the Great Arena, leaving behind an air of desolation.

Rhaegar sat upright in his chair, a smile curling the corner of his lips.

"Your Grace, you will never regret your decision," Bargins beamed, carefully folding the signed and sealed parchment and slipping it back into his bosom.

"That's right, the Thirteen never lie." A large, dark-skinned man with a round belly patted his ample chest with pride.

The remaining eleven men all smiled, raised their goblets, and toasted each other. Just moments ago, the Iron Throne had signed an agreement with Qarth. The Iron Throne would borrow 3.5 million golden dragons to reclaim the Golden Plains, while Qarth would provide the funds, goods, and fifty large ships for year-round transport.

The agreement allowed Qartheen merchants to establish shops at Iron Throne-controlled ports and reduce taxes.

Additionally, Qarth would borrow from the nobles of the Seven Kingdoms to help overthrow the Iron Bank's monopoly and support the impoverished nobility. The two sides had formed an alliance—if war broke out, they would advance and retreat together.

On the surface, it appeared to be aimed at the Iron Bank, but in truth, it was a scheme that involved the Iron Throne. Rhaegar smiled as he put away another parchment. It was merely an agreement concerning debts and the opening of ports.

'With the Golden Plains successfully cultivated, the House and the Seven Kingdoms will be safe from the White Walkers in the North,' he thought. 'If we don't pay the Iron Bank, we certainly won't pay Qarth. And if the Thirteen dare to conspire with the ports and Free Cities, they'll face a rude awakening by dragons!'

Everyone knew dragons were evil, magical creatures that neither honored their word nor showed mercy.

The Thirteen, satisfied after achieving their goals, began to leave. Irina rose, weary from sitting, and started walking away. Rhaegar remained, the only one still seated in the Colosseum.

He heard soft footsteps approaching. A figure emerged from the shadows, adorned in gold ornaments that jingled as she swayed her hips. Rhaegar's ears twitched, and his gaze shifted. The woman's skin was pale as parchment, her head shaved and marked with strange tattoos. A golden headdress concealed her true face. She was thin, with gold covering only her chest and lower body, her attire revealing more than it concealed.

Rhaegar's eyebrows furrowed slightly as he found himself captivated by her dark, gleaming eyes.

Boom.

An invisible air current swept through the Colosseum, casting a layer of gloom over everything. Her dark eyes were lifeless, like a stagnant pool, brimming with rigidity and numbness as if they sought to devour a person's soul.

"Sssshhhh..."

"Croak..."

Rhaegar stared calmly back at her. Three spiritual creatures materialized on his shoulders, beings that existed between the physical and Spirit Realms: a dark serpent, a drab Dream-Eating Toad, and a Bat Worm with scarlet wings.

The serpent, with its round head and flat body, rolled over on its stomach. The Bat Worm flitted around its master, while the Toad sat atop a silver-blond strand of hair, its dull, green eyes wide open, exuding a steady spiritual resistance.

Rhaegar's purple eyes grew colder as a flicker of black flame danced within them.

Pop!

The spiritual clash came and went in an instant, vanishing as swiftly as it had appeared.

"Your Grace, good technique." The skinny woman's voice was dry as she swayed her hips, stepping forward.

Rhaegar's expression hardened, his voice cold. "Who are you?"

The woman had attacked without warning. If he hadn't been as skilled, he might have succumbed to her strike.

"Quaithe." She stopped three meters away, her hands resting on her small belly as she bowed her head in greeting. "I come from Asshai and now serve the Thirteen."

"I don't believe they'd be foolish enough to send a witch who doesn't know her place to offend me." Rhaegar's eyes narrowed, a dangerous glint revealing the murderous intent simmering beneath his calm exterior.

Rumble—

A dark, clawed hook landed heavily on the seats above, and a hot air current, smelling of ash, descended over them, casting a large shadow across their heads. Quaithe glanced up, her black eyes flashing with surprise.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal's green, vertical pupils glared down menacingly, baring fangs that smoldered with flame as it locked its gaze on the woman like she was prey. Sensing its rider's emotions, the dragon came to protect its master.

"A majestic dragon," Quaithe murmured in admiration. "Even Balerion the Black Dread was no match for this one."

"You've seen it?" Rhaegar silently drew Blackfyre from his waist, his voice sharp.

"It was the largest dragon in history," Quaithe said with a soft laugh. "No dragon has surpassed it to this day." She gestured toward the Cannibal. "This one is still young, but in a few decades, it will surely rewrite that history."

Rhaegar's face darkened, and the murderous intent around him grew palpable. The strange witches of Asshai, with their eccentric Spirit Magic and cryptic knowledge of history, were dangerous. The safest course was to kill her on the spot.

"You've offended me," he said, stepping forward, his gaze carefully scanning their surroundings for any sign of a trap.

"I apologize for my actions." Quaithe bowed again, tilting her gold breastplate in a way that revealed a large expanse of soft skin. "But I have come for you."

Just as Rhaegar's eyes caught the exposed vulnerability, Quaithe shifted the conversation. "I sense winter and darkness rising from the far north. You should listen to me."

"Oh?" Rhaegar's mind raced, but he kept his voice measured. "And you know this how?"

Quaithe's gaze grew solemn. "It's an army of the dead," she said in a deep voice. "The conqueror's prophecy is about to come true. Heavy snow will cover the land, crops will wither beneath it, and both nobles and commoners will huddle by their fires—only to freeze to death."

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed, a flicker of interest flashing across his face. "Go on," he said coldly.

This woman knew much more than she let on. From her words, Rhaegar gleaned two vital pieces of information. The Others were indeed approaching, which was plausible—rumors had spread from across the Narrow Sea. But more troubling was that she knew of the conqueror's prophecy. That made her dangerous.

Quaithe continued to speak eloquently, "If you want to survive this difficult time, I have three tips for you."

"Do I need to say thank you?" Rhaegar wondered as he held the Blackfyre mace.

"No need. I no longer need the worldly goods of grain and money." Quaithe's words carried a hint of otherworldly arrogance, and its dark eyes seemed to encompass all things in the world.

"A dead dragon never rots in the soil."

"A man who cannot be killed cannot be on his knees."

Rhaegar listened quietly, pondering the deeper meaning.

Finally, Quaithe spoke a familiar phrase: "To go north, you must journey south. To reach the west, you must go east. To go forward, you must go back, and to touch the light you must pass beneath the shadow."

'This is not the content of the last words of the dragonless Vaegon,' Rhaegar thought to himself. Paying attention to the words "north" and "east," "shadow," and others, an unfamiliar place name came to mind.

Rhaegar said cautiously, "You want me to go to Asshai, where there is a way to fight the Others?"

East combined with Shadow, and only Asshai in the Shadow Lands fit the description.

"You will get your answer." Quaithe gave a mysterious smile and turned to leave.

Swish—

A flash of black light passed by, beheading the figure.

Rhaegar maintained his sword-swinging posture and snorted, "Playing God."

Plop—

The headless corpse fell to the ground, eerily not spilling a single drop of blood. Rhaegar's pupils narrowed as he noticed this. White smoke billowed. The corpse melted like a candle, turning into a puddle of viscous water that seeped into the ground.

"Your Grace, I wish you well in your trials." Quaithe reappeared in the dark corner, smiling and bowing.

"Roar..."

A jet of dark green dragonfire shot out, enveloping a wide area of the audience. Rhaegar held up a hand in front of him, staring through the flames at the graceful figure. A wisp of white smoke drifted by, and then the figure turned up at the entrance to the Colosseum.

"What a strange technique," Rhaegar murmured, watching as the figure disappeared into the crowd.

Yes, the crowd!

"Roar..."

The Cannibal lowered its dragon head, its green vertical pupils locked on the Colosseum, and there wasn't a single person in the vicinity. Why would anyone stay where the Deathwing appeared if they weren't afraid of death?

Rhaegar used the Serpent to heal his wound and couldn't help but laugh. "It's still spirit power... a bit one-sided." He had been careless, thinking the spirit impact only had one round. Before he knew

it, he had been distracted by the other person. But he had also gained a lot of information from the conversation.

Rhaegar sat down with a frown, thinking, 'Quaithe... the conqueror's prophecy... who on earth...?' Her appearance gave no indication of his ethnicity. But from his exquisite High Valyrian, one could faintly hear an accent from the continent of Westeros.

'The common language of the Westerlands, with its condescending view of the country folk,' Rhaegar grinned, his thoughts gradually becoming clearer. Having spent so much time with the brothers Jason and Tyland, the Westerlands accent was very familiar to him. Quaithe was trying desperately to hide it, imitating High Valyrian as if it were its native tongue. But in the face of Rhaegar's proficiency in High Valyrian, it was like a grain of sand in wheat flour—he could tell at once.

'I hope it's not who I think it is,' Rhaegar gripped the hilt of his sword, a little doubtful. 'Really... living to this age, you can become such a genius. I will kill her next time I see her!'

...

The North, The Wall.

Rustling...

Outside the Wall, tens of thousands of wildlings gathered, axes in hand, cutting down trees.

"Are they building a fire to cook their food or preparing a siege ladder?" Baelon asked, rubbing his cold hands together as he stood on the watchtower.

The wildling army had been there for nearly half a month. The pressure they exerted hung like an indelible gloom, driving the Night's Watch at Castle Black into a state of constant anxiety.

"There's smoke from cooking fires. The free folk need to fill their stomachs too," said Cregan, his eyes sharp and alert. "Tell the Night's Watch to step up night patrols. We can't rule out a night attack."

"Yes, my lord," replied a Night's Watch member, who, at the sound of the order, quickly left the two noble figures behind.

Baelon's small face was covered in frostbite, and he whispered, "With Uragax here, the wildlings won't dare to do anything." He stamped his foot hard in frustration.

"Roar..."

A moss-colored old dragon curled up at the base of the ice wall, its massive body draped over the Wall like a green cloak. Thanks to this old dragon, whenever the wildling army attempted an attack, Uragax would take to the sky, circling overhead. At the sight of the enormous beast, the wildlings would retreat in fear.

The situation had been at a stalemate for half a month.

Cregan's face was grim, but there was dissatisfaction in his tone. "Prince, you should return to King's Landing for reinforcements. We can't continue like this."

"And what would happen to you if I left?" Baelon asked, concern in his voice.

With the new batch of Night's Watch recruits, only 3,000 men were defending the Wall. The entire North was buried in snow, and even Cregan, as a Lord, struggled to rally his advisors and gather fighters in these harsh conditions. If Uragax left, the wildlings would undoubtedly launch a full-scale assault.

"Prince, the North is home only to the people of the North," said Cregan with steely resolve, though there was a touch of helplessness in his tone. "I don't mind telling you, even if your dragon has been losing its appetite for the past fortnight, the pigs and goats at Castle Black are nearly gone. We won't last much longer."

If they waited any longer, they would run out of food.

"Roar! Roar!"

Suddenly, a shrill cry echoed in the distance.

Baelon turned, his breath catching as he looked towards the sound. A young light-green dragon was flying through the snow and wind, letting out a mournful, unwilling cry as it struggled against the storm.

Chapter 659: Dragon Eggs!

Night falls, and all sound ceases.

The Wall.

Snow blankets the top of the city walls, and the cold wind howls, whipping up the campfire and enveloping the Night's Watch in the bitter night air.

He feared the watchmen on duty might succumb to the cold and hunger, drifting off to sleep—never to wake again.

"My lord, our food reserves are running low."

The voice came from a middle-aged man with a straight posture, streaks of white in his black hair. He led the patrol with a commanding presence that set him apart from the others.

Cregan glanced back and reassured him, "Commander Benjicot, just wait a little longer."

The heir prince had already returned south along the same route, and royal reinforcements were on their way.

"My lord, perhaps you should call on your advisers once again for help."

Benjicot Blackwood's face was grave, his tone leaving no room for debate. The wildlings watched the Wall with hungry eyes, and darker, unknown forces lurked beyond it. If the North couldn't stand united, how could the southern lords be expected to give their best?

Cregan fell silent, his mind churning. He hesitated, pondering Benjicot's words.

The current Lord Commander of the Night's Watch had once been the Lord of Raventree Hall. The father of the late Lord Samwell and the grandfather of the current "boy," Benjicot, had seized a rare opportunity during the Bracken rebellion to block the way for Lord Bracken's counterattack. When House Bracken was destroyed, the elder Benjicot confessed his crimes and took the black, choosing to guard the Wall. His wealth of experience and keen abilities eventually led him to the position of Lord Commander. Approaching sixty, he was now known as the "Old Man of Castle Black."

"My lord, prepare as quickly as possible," the elder Benjicot urged. He tugged at the black cloak around his shoulders and sighed, turning to leave.

Whoosh——

A rough horn blast shattered the silence of the night. Flames erupted from the Haunted Forest, a dense wall of fire closing in on the Wall.

Dum dum dum!

The bells of Castle Black rang out in alarm. Scouts shouted, "The wildlings are here, hurry!"

Amidst the chaos of battle, three times the usual number of bonfires were lit along the Wall.

"I'll go down to command Castle Black. The castle keep is yours," Cregan said, his face pale as he hurriedly descended the Great Wall. The only breach in the Wall was the tunnel gate, guarded by Castle Black.

On the other side...

Beyond the Great Wall, firelight spread across the wasteland.

"Roar! I'll go first!"

A towering giant, eight meters tall, pounded his chest and roared, each step carrying him forward several meters.

Withstanding a rain of arrows, he barreled toward the outer steel fence of the tunnel gate.

Clang! Clang!

He smashed his massive shoulders into the iron fence, dislodging chunks of ice and snow, but the gate held firm.

"Bring the mammoths!"

The giant shouted at another equally imposing giant, whose face was so frozen stiff he could make no further expressions. In each of his enormous hands, he gripped a mammoth covered in long, matted fur, dragging thick tree trunks as they charged.

Behind them, the horde of wildlings surged forward, emboldened by the sight of the giants and mammoths leading the assault. They stormed the Wall like a tidal wave.

To survive. To live.

They had to cross the Great Wall and reclaim the fertile lands their ancestors had lost.

...

The next day, at Winterfell.

It was a rare, beautiful, sunny day.

"Roar..."

Uragax lay prostrate by the lake in the Godswood, feebly nibbling on a charred goat. Even with the clear skies, the chill was ever-present—too cold even for a dragon. Snow covered the ground a foot deep, untouched by the sun's feeble warmth.

Inside the castle, in the Great Hall, Baelon rose early and made his way to the dining table. Toast baked over a fire, fried eggs, and pork sausage were laid out before him. He took a sip of warm goat's milk tea whenever he choked on the food, slapping his chest to force it down.

"It's not bad," Baelon remarked, satisfied. It was already much better than the rations at the Wall.

"Roar! Roar!"

A cold wind whistled past the window, accompanied by the restless neighing of the young dragon outside.

Baelon walked over to the wooden-shuttered window and glanced out. There, he saw Moondancer circling Winterfell. Its light green body resembled a butterfly, fluttering through the air, but its flight was chaotic in the sunlight, accompanied by a harsh, discordant cry.

"Moondancer is still not acclimatized to the cold," Baelon muttered, a grave expression crossing his face. He worried about the long winter ahead. If the young dragon couldn't fight when war came, the House would be severely weakened.

Suddenly, hurried footsteps echoed down the hall.

Baela appeared, bundled in heavy furs, her face flushed with excitement. "Baelon, come with me quickly."

"What's happened?" Baelon asked, noting the steam rising from her after her run. Targaryens rarely caught colds, and Baela had already recovered from her earlier illness.

"Don't dawdle. I promise you'll be surprised," she said with a beaming smile, leading the way eagerly.

Baelon followed, confused but curious. They left the castle and made their way to the crypts beneath the adjacent Godswood.

Tick-tock, tick-tock...

The crypts were dark and gloomy, built deep underground, with water dripping down the stone walls.

Click!

Baelon lit a torch, the sudden glow revealing something unexpected. "The crypts are warm," he said, surprised. The temperature here was completely different from the bitter cold outside. It felt like stepping into a conservatory, heated by a blazing hearth in the midst of a snowstorm.

"According to the old woman from Winterfell, there's a hot spring beneath the crypt," Baela said excitedly. "They say there's an active volcano under Winterfell, which is why it's so warm down here."

Baelon chuckled, shaking his head. "Unlikely. The hot spring is real, but it's hardly an active volcano."

Despite his dismissal, the hairs on his arms stood up. He could sense the presence of fire elements in the air. There were likely underground veins of heat, but they were far from volcanic activity.

Baela smiled knowingly, her mind focused on something else entirely. They continued into a larger, open tomb room. The warm air carried with it a strong stench of sulfur.

Baelon wrinkled his nose at the smell, following it until he found the source: a dark heap of dragon dung, shiny and moist, piled in the corner like an oval stone.

Crack!

Baela picked up a stone and struck the outer shell of the dung. With a sharp sound, the casing broke away, revealing something incredible—a jade-colored dragon egg.

"Look, Moondancer has laid eggs," Baela said, her excitement palpable. She waved Baelon over and continued digging through the dung with great enthusiasm. Soon, two more eggs emerged—one a brass color, the other a grayish black.

"A total of three dragon eggs," she said, her face glowing with joy. "The House's wealth has just increased." No wonder Moondancer had been restless, sneaking off to the crypts to lay her eggs.

"We can't keep the eggs here in the North," Baelon said seriously, picking up the jade-colored egg. "When we return to King's Landing, these will become part of the House's legacy."

Lord Cregan wasn't in Winterfell, and the people of the North were known for their rough manners and their hostility toward the South. Coupled with the harsh climate, the odds of the eggs surviving here were slim.

"Very well. I'll pack my things." Baela didn't mind getting her hands dirty as she joyfully scooped up the two remaining dragon eggs. "Moondancer just laid them, but she's strong enough to fly to White Harbor."

...

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

King's Landing, Dragonpit.

"Roar!"

"Roar..."

The dragons roared anxiously, their walls marred by scratches and scorch marks, chains rattling with tension. A low rumble echoed through the Dragonpit as a massive, coal-black creature burrowed its way inside. The roars fell silent.

Rhaegar, who had just returned after a long journey, looked puzzled. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Roar!"

A light gray dragon climbed onto the iron bridge, its slender tail swaying back and forth. With a powerful beat of its wings, it soared towards Blackwater Bay. Flying alongside it was a young dragon, covered in black scales, with scarlet dorsal fins and wing membranes.

Rhaegar didn't try to stop them. He slid down from his dragon's back, still confused by the scene.

Earlier that morning, they had spotted Silverwing, an ownerless dragon, circling over Blackwater Bay before retreating to the smoky caves of Dragonmont.

"Thank the gods, Your Grace, you've returned safely."

Maester Maynard limped over, his pale face even paler than usual. Not only was one of his legs lame, but the other was wrapped tightly in bandages.

"Your Grace," came another voice, as the elderly Dragonkeeper approached, leading several of his wounded colleagues. Each bore fresh scars and bandages that had yet to fully heal.

Rhaegar scanned the scene in surprise. "A riot in the Dragonpit?" he asked. He had only been gone a month—how could things have devolved so badly?

The Dragonkeepers had tended the dragons for years. It was unthinkable for them to be in such a miserable state.

Maynard, looking pitiful, spoke up, "The dragons have been like this lately, attacking anyone who tries to feed them or clean up after them."

Sometimes it was a dragon wing striking out, other times a tail lashing dangerously. The Dragonkeepers were constantly getting injured. "It's really hard on the bones," Maynard muttered under his breath.

Rhaegar frowned and turned to the elderly Dragonkeeper, whose face was full of grief. He had been among the first of the Dragonkeepers, working in the Dragonpit for decades.

"The temperature has dropped suddenly, Your Grace. There's frost at night." The old Dragonkeeper's voice was low, and he murmured in High Valyrian: "The dragons are the last sacred magic of ancient Valyria. They sense danger—they are migrating to habitable places in advance."

Rhaegar fell silent, digesting the words. The three ownerless dragons—Silverwing, Grey Ghost, and Iragaxys—had all returned to live on Dragonstone. It seemed the dragons knew something the men did not.

He hadn't noticed the chill while riding on dragonback, but the air in King's Landing was undoubtedly colder than it should be. It was only August, the time of the scorching sun. Yet the temperature in the Crownlands, which usually bathed in the warmth of Blackwater Bay, had dropped significantly. It felt more like autumn than summer.

"Roar!"

Suddenly, a strange dragon's roar echoed from deep within the Dragonpit, followed by the sound of something massive slapping the ground.

Rhaegar turned just in time to see his brother, Aemond, covered in dirt, climbing out of one of the pits.

"Brother?"

"Aemond?" Rhaegar called, startled.

Aemond's single eye widened in surprise. His already sallow complexion darkened even more as he saw Rhaegar.

"What is that in your hand?" Rhaegar asked, noticing the odd object Aemond was holding.

It was round, squishy, and covered in a brown, leathery shell. Barbs like briars jutted out from its surface, and it looked like a stinking, hardened lump of rotten meat.

"A dragon egg," Rhaegar said, eyes widening in realization. "The Sheepstealer's?"

The egg's unsightly, drab coloration could only belong to the wild and untamed Mud Dragon, known as the Sheepstealer.

"Yes," Aemond grumbled, his face as black as the bottom of a pot. He was clearly reluctant to speak. "I always thought the Sheepstealer was a male dragon. But here we are—she laid a big one."

It had been a surprise. When the Dragonkeepers opened the pit, they found the ugly, brownish dragon egg hidden inside. There was only one, but it bore the unmistakable hue of the Sheepstealer's scales. Small and compact, it was nonetheless a dragon egg.

"Wow..." Rhaegar blinked, tilting his head with amusement. "Looks like you won't need the royal family to produce dragon eggs anymore."

He hadn't expected the Sheepstealer to lay eggs at all. That wild, unruly dragon was having a second spring, it seemed.

"Roar!"

The Sheepstealer slowly crawled out of its pit, its sly, vertical pupils dilating as its thin tail swished back and forth.

'Where's the egg?' its gaze seemed to ask. There was a faint, uneasy scent in the air—perhaps a trace of Dragoneater. Hopefully, it hadn't been eaten.

Chapter 660: The Capital Has Moved into Harrenhal

The North, beyond the Great Wall.

The Fist of the First Men.

The crunch of footsteps in the snow echoed through the desolate foothills. Three Night's Watchmen, cloaked in black, led their scrawny horses, trudging through the biting cold.

"I say, we should find a place to get warm," muttered a skinny young man, his teeth chattering. He had shifty eyes, and the way he hunched his shoulders and crossed his arms made him look even more wretched.

"Shut up and save your strength," the burly Watchman beside him snapped, pulling his weary horse along. This was wildling territory, and at any moment, they could stumble upon a migrating tribe. There was no safe haven for the Night's Watchmen beyond the Wall—here, they were the hated "Crows."

"Quiet," whispered the third man, patting the skinny youth's shoulder. "We need to find shelter before dark." He fished a piece of moldy dried meat from his cloak and handed it over. Supplies were running low, and hunger gnawed at them all. They could only survive by sharing what little they had.

"Thank you," the skinny man whispered, his eyes flickering with gratitude. After a moment's hesitation, he tucked the dried meat back into his cloak, patting his chest as if to remind himself of it. Before joining the Night's Watch, he'd been a thief in the dungeons of the Red Keep, thrown into the cells without trial by the damned Master of Laws.

Clop, clop...

Suddenly, the sound of hooves broke the silence.

All three froze. Without a word, they dropped to the ground, burying themselves in the snow. Their first thought was wildlings. They were Rangers sent to track the migration patterns of the Free Folk, but Rangers seldom lived long beyond the Wall.

The wind howled, and the snow blurred their vision. Dark shapes began to form in the fog.

They gripped their daggers, hands shaking as they stabbed their skinny, half-dead horses in the necks. Blood poured into the snow, and the animals collapsed, their breaths shallow and fading. The horses could not be allowed to betray them.

"Roar..."

The sound of approaching footsteps grew louder, accompanied by hoarse, inhuman groans. Beneath it, the faint clatter of bones.

Clop, clop...

The wind began to die down, and the view cleared. The three men cautiously peeked out from the snow, and what they saw turned their blood cold.

They were surrounded. Thousands of corpses—shambling, frozen, decayed—staggered through the snow. Ragged armor clung to their skeletal forms, bones grinding and rattling with every step. The stench of death and rot filled the air.

The legion of the dead marched aimlessly, their lifeless eyes dull, controlled by some unseen force. They didn't seem to notice the Night's Watchmen. Or if they did, they simply didn't care.

"Woohoo..."

The skinny youth let out a terrified whimper, his jaw hanging open in horror. One of his companions quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, dragging him down into the snow. The three of them huddled beneath a large stone, desperately trying to stay hidden.

Time crawled by as the dead army passed. When it was finally gone, the Watchmen lay there, frozen with fear, hardly daring to breathe.

Clop, clop...

The sound of hooves stopped nearby, sending a fresh wave of dread through them. The air grew unnaturally cold.

The skinny youth, ever alert, turned his head in terror. His eyes widened.

A pale-skinned figure sat atop a decaying horse, long hair whipping in the wind. Its glowing blue eyes locked onto them.

The White Walker stared down at them, its gaze piercing, unfeeling. The creature's hand slowly reached for its back, pulling out an ice-crystal spear.

Whoosh—

The cold wind howled as the Walker prepared to strike.

"Ahhh!"

A bloodcurdling scream pierced the frozen air, echoing across the snow, as if the very earth itself had fallen into purgatory.

...

"Ahhh!"

King's Landing, the Red Keep.

Visenya screamed, her tiny hand trapped in her brother Aegor's mouth.

"Hmph," Aegor grunted, biting down with determination, proving the old adage that even a cornered rabbit will bite. Drool dripped from his face, sour and sticky, as he gnawed on his sister's fingers.

"Aegor, stop biting your sister!"

Rhaenyra rushed over, quickly pulling the two apart. She cradled Visenya, who was crying loudly, her small fingers bleeding from the sharp bite marks.

"Why didn't you do anything?" Rhaenyra demanded, shooting a sharp look at Rhaegar, who was calmly flipping through an account book, seemingly oblivious to the chaos.

Bang!

Rhaegar closed the crude account book with a thud, stretched, and walked over. Without a word, he reached into Aegor's underpants and began pulling out golden dragons and silver stags. Then, not satisfied, he hoisted his youngest son upside down by the legs, shaking him gently.

A cascade of coins clattered to the ground—gold, silver, and even half of a copper star.

"Ooooh..." Aegor didn't cry or fuss, only grunting in mild protest as his secret stash was exposed.

Rhaenyra blinked in surprise, her face flushing red.

"See? Your daughter did this," Rhaegar said, scooping Aegor back into his arms. He rolled his eyes as he explained, "Visenya's been using her brother's underpants as a piggy bank."

Rhaenyra's eyes widened in disbelief, and she turned her gaze to her daughter, who was still sniffling in her arms.

"Visenya!" Rhaenyra's face darkened, her voice filled with stern disbelief.

Visenya's eyes widened in terror as she realized she had been caught. The next moment, her ghostly wails echoed through the halls of the Red Keep.

The attendants passing by kept their heads down, too afraid to comment. They all knew what that sound meant: someone had just been disciplined.

...

The siblings finished with the other pair and made their way to the council hall together.

"Your Grace."

Erryk, commander of the Kingsguard, nodded respectfully and saluted, pushing open one of the large doors with a single hand.

On the opposite side stood another Kingsguard, Hall Reed, a short man with grey hair and green eyes, his youthful face betraying his shy nature. "Your Grace," he mumbled as he pushed open the door from his side.

"You've worked hard," Rhaegar said with a small smile, taking Rhaenyra's hand as they walked into the hall.

The room was already filled with people—royal advisers, members of the House, all gathered around the council table. Once Rhaegar took his seat at the head, the discussions began.

"Rhaegar, you want to move the capital?" Viserys asked, frowning deeply from within the thick blanket wrapped around him. His voice was heavy with concern.

"Moving the capital is no small matter," he added. "It's being debated all across the Seven Kingdoms."

Rhaenys, standing beside her cousin, also expressed her disapproval. "The decision affects more than just us. It affects everyone."

Grand Maester Orwyle, Master of Coin Lyman, and Master of Whisperers Tormund exchanged uneasy glances but said nothing, though their faces clearly showed their apprehension.

Meanwhile, some of the younger members of the family seemed uninterested in the weighty matters at hand. Helaena played absentmindedly with a sapphire, while her children, Viserion and Daenaera, sat by her feet. Aegon, eager for distraction, coaxed his children to go and playfully punch another pair of cousins.

"Quiet, you idiot," Aemond muttered, grabbing Aegon by the collar with evident disgust. "You look like you're sick." Despite his sharp words, the blue eye under his black eye patch was glazed, showing his own weariness.

Rhaegar glanced around the room, sighed softly, and addressed the council. "Winter is coming. Harrenhal is a better location for stockpiling food and soldiers than King's Landing."

He let the words hang in the air for a moment before continuing. "King's Landing is a rat's nest with vulnerabilities on every side. Aside from the port, it's far less defensible than other castles. Harrenhal, however, is in the warmer Riverlands, with fertile farmland and Gods Eye Lake providing fresh water and fish. It's large enough to house the royal family and store the grain we'll need for winter. And," he added, "the underground magma chamber beneath the Isle of Faces has been developed—our dragons can winter there without suffering from the cold as they do in the Dragonpit."

Viserys shook his head, his frown deepening. "King's Landing has been the capital since Aegon the Conqueror founded the realm. The capital cannot be moved lightly. It's more than just a city—it symbolizes the king's authority. If we move to Harrenhal, what will the Seven Kingdoms think?"

"And what of the people in the city?" Viserys pressed. "There are millions in King's Landing. You can't just abandon them. Harrenhal may be vast, but it can't hold an entire city."

Rhaegar remained calm, though his expression was serious. "Father, it's not that simple. We aren't abandoning them. If we don't prepare for the winter, those same people will starve in King's Landing."

Viserys opened his mouth to protest again, but Daemon intervened, his interest piqued. "Brother, let's hear him out." He turned to Rhaegar with a glimmer of curiosity. "My nephew doesn't make decisions rashly. Let's see what he proposes."

Viserys reluctantly fell silent, though his attachment to the city was clear. King's Landing had been his home for decades, filled with memories of joy and sorrow. He wasn't ready to abandon it so easily, especially in his old age.

"Father, winter is coming," Rhaegar said, getting straight to the point. His tone was calm but carried the weight of certainty.

"Winter?" Viserys blinked, momentarily confused by the sudden declaration.

Daemon and Rhaenyra exchanged a knowing glance, the conqueror's prophecy coming to both their minds.

Rhaegar turned to the assembled blood relatives and advisers, his face serious. "Heavy snow has already blanketed the North, and the wildlings are attacking the Wall in large numbers."

He paused, letting the gravity of his next words sink in. "As far as I know, the heavy snow will spread across the entire Seven Kingdoms, bringing a cold not seen in a century."

"Baelon wrote to you?" Viserys asked, a flicker of worry crossing his face as he thought of his eldest grandson.

Rhaegar shook his head. "Not yet. But it's clear the situation is dire. Harrenhal is easier to defend, and the Hall of a Hundred Hearths will be warm enough to ensure the survival of our House during these harsh times."

Rhaegar's words carried an unspoken truth—they couldn't afford to flee to Essos unless absolutely necessary. Harrenhal and Dragonstone were their best options. But Harrenhal, with its fertile lands and strategic location in the Riverlands, was far superior.

"Dragonstone is barren and dependent on maritime trade taxes," Rhaegar continued. "It's not large enough to house the royal family's forces. Harrenhal, however, controls the Riverlands, The Vale, and The Reach, stabilizing our rule over the Seven Kingdoms."

Viserys's expression shifted as he finally recalled the conqueror's prophecy—the heavy snow in the North, the dragons growing restless. It all pointed to the disaster that had long been foretold.

Rhaegar slid a ledger across the table toward Daemon and spoke solemnly. "We can't make a spectacle out of moving the capital. Father and the dragons will go first. You'll remain here as Hand of the King to keep the peace."

King's Landing would remain the capital in name, but the royal family needed to relocate for their survival.

Daemon glanced at the ledger, then chuckled. "No problem," he said, his tone light as he pulled his daughter closer. "Rhaena, you should stay with your foster mother," he instructed. "She'll take care of the dragon hatchling for you."

Rhaena's eyes sparkled, and she instinctively took her brother's hand.

"Rhaena can return to Driftmark," Rhaenys interjected, her voice gentle as she stroked her granddaughter's cheek. "She's Laenor's heir, and that hasn't changed."

Rhaena lowered her gaze, clearly unhappy with the idea. Daemon laughed, noticing her reaction.

"No rush," he said. "First, stay with Rhaenys and learn the court's ways. There's no need to hurry back to Driftmark."

To Daemon, the notion of Rhaena inheriting mere land was beneath her. It was better that she remain a true Targaryen.

"Very well, then. It's decided." Rhaegar brought his hand down on the table with finality. "Rhaenyra and I will move the royal household to Harrenhal. Aemond will stay to assist Daemon, and Helaena will return to Summerhall."

He began listing off names and assignments one by one. Helaena was to return to her fiefdom. Daenerys's, her sister Lyanna and Maekar would be sent to the Vale and Volantis.

Jeyne would remain alone at the Eyrie, braving the winter. Daenerys, with her mastery of Stormcloud, was more than capable of keeping potential threats at bay.

The Golden Fields had secured financial backing from Qarth, allowing Daeron to recruit soldiers and cultivate the land. Maekar, though young, had a talent for business, and his return to Volantis would allow him to oversee Slaver's Bay and support Daeron's mission.

"Helaena is leaving too?" Aemond frowned slightly, clearly displeased by the decision.

Helaena looked up, her large eyes blinking with an innocent confusion.

"Summerhall lies in the Dornish Marches, where the climate is warmer than Harrenhal," Rhaegar explained, his tone even. "With her presence in Summerhall, the Stormlands and Dorne will be more stable."

The Five Southern Kingdoms would remain under control, ensuring that the rest of Westeros—The North and the Westerlands—would not stir trouble during the harsh winter ahead.