

G.O Thrones 71

Chapter 71: Negotiation

As the sun started to set, Rhaegar had a long chat with the siblings, picking up some useful tips.

He found out they were on Crackclaw Point, a sparsely populated area known for its swamps and forests, which borders Dragonstone and Driftmark Islands.

Once they got to the cave, they gathered around a fire that was flickering. Tormund was really keen to know more about Rhaegar's dragon, asking lots of questions about its size and abilities.

"The Cannibal is enormous, I'm like a flea on its back," Rhaegar replied casually, nibbling on a wild fruit.

He understood the power of perception; what he said shaped their beliefs. Even though he didn't know the Cannibal's whereabouts, the mere mention of a dragon nearby ensured his safety.

While Skylar tended to the fire, he casually mentioned the bloodstain in the valley, connecting it to Rhaegar's dragon.

Rhaegar remained calm and collected. "We were attacked by other dragons on the Narrow Sea, so I ended up stranded here."

"Other dragons?" Tormund gasped in surprise.

Rhaegar elaborated, "Dragonstone Island was once home to many dragons. My ancestors used them to conquer Westeros."

Skylar interjected, contradicting him. "Nonsense. Only three dragons were known in the War of Conquest."

Impressed, Rhaegar replied, "You know your history?"

"Hmph. I've read books on the subject. I'm not an idiot," Skylar shot back.

Rhaegar chuckled and decided not to argue. It was good to know that she valued knowledge and understood the importance of a prince.

A piercing eagle cry echoed from outside the valley.

Skylar and Tormund quickly got up and went outside.

"Is it your tribe?" Rhaegar asked, feeling a bit uneasy.

He tried to get the Cannibal's attention through their bond, but there was no response.

Rhaegar figured the dragon was badly injured, so it had probably flown off to recover.

Until the dragon's return, fate depended on his own efforts.

Rhaegar exited the cave and followed the siblings. He saw a crowd of people streaming into the valley with loud shouts. They were tall and burly, clad in leather and armor, and they exuded a primal, savage aura.

Their leader, a middle-aged man with a braided beard and sharp eyes, caught Rhaegar's gaze with a steely stare. Rhaegar felt this and tried to stay composed.

These people were not to be trifled with. He had stumbled into a savage's den.

Skylar reassured him, "Don't worry, Uncle Falcon is honorable and won't harm children."

After finishing his task, Falcon turned to them. "Is he the noble child you mentioned?"

Skylar nodded solemnly. "Yes, he is the child of a king, a Targaryen."

"A prince?" Falcon exclaimed, clearly surprised by Rhaegar's status.

Though not a wildling, a prince's status was still extraordinary.

Rhaegar knew he had to speak up to answer Falcon's question.

"I'm Rhaegar Targaryen, born in the Red Keep in King's Landing. Does that ring a bell?" he stated firmly.

"A place thousands of miles away. Why would I know?" Falcon replied, nonchalant.

"I traveled the continent on a dragon and encountered trouble. If you help me, I'll reward you handsomely," Rhaegar proposed, hoping to strike a deal.

Falcon chuckled. "I can believe that. Your father is a king; a mountain of gold and silver must be at your disposal."

Rhaegar's eyes lit up. "So you'll help me?"

"No promises," Falcon flatly refused.

Surprised, Rhaegar offered gold and protection in return.

But Falcon remained adamant. "The Hawk tribe doesn't trust outsiders. It's always been that way."

Skylar confirmed his words. "That's our way."

Rhaegar pressed on. "What are your conditions for helping me?"

"Join our tribe. I'll protect you," Falcon declared solemnly.

Rhaegar burst into laughter.

Sitting firmly, Rhaegar stared at Falcon and scoffed, "Do you really think a Targaryen prince would join a savage tribe? That's the funniest thing I've heard."

With that, Rhaegar realized that Falcon wasn't going to help him. As a dragon rider, he knew he had power, as evidenced by the bloodstains in the valley. He doubted Falcon would dare touch him.

Falcon, unfazed by Rhaegar's words, smiled. "But didn't you come seeking my help?"

Rhaegar was momentarily speechless. It was true; he had sought assistance, though his dragons were his true strength. He needed to stall the savages and prevent any harm.

Falcon, cutting a piece of hare, offered it to Rhaegar. "I spotted a wounded beast flying off to the Swamp of Despair. I'll offer you protection until your dragon returns. But you must promise your dragon won't harm my tribe and leave as soon as you can."

Falcon wasn't your average savage. He'd dealt with noble lords before, and he knew that the wounded beast in the valley was dangerous.

The dung heap at the valley's mouth told a story. Most of it was the dragon's trail, left before it went to hunt.

This kid had been the top threat from the start. The wild dragon could return at any moment.

It would have been a bad idea to try to negotiate more with this kid while the dragon was around. Falcon could kill him and run away, but tribal tradition forbade harming children.

It was better to leave him be and treat him well. When the dragon returned, the child could ride it to safety. If the child had a conscience, he might even repay the favor.

Falcon's perspective changed Rhaegar's view of the wildlings. Maybe the Maesters were wrong about them being ruthless.

"You're indeed wise, and I promise to keep my dragons in check and leave peacefully," Rhaegar responded, accepting the roast.

"It's not easy being a leader. I've got to look out for everyone," Falcon said, sharing the meat with the siblings.

Chapter 72: Shadow Creature

Negotiations brought relief, easing the wariness between the two sides.

Rhaegar accepted food and water from the savages and watched them dance around the campfire.

Falcon and Skylar's sibling joined him by the fire, telling stories.

Falcon, picking at rabbit bones, remarked, "You don't seem old enough to be the king's youngest son."

"I'm actually the oldest," Rhaegar joked.

"Traditionally, the oldest inherits. You could be the next king?" Falcon was surprised.

"No, it's my sister," Rhaegar replied plainly.

"Why? Is she hiding a dick under her skirt?" a brown savage teased, igniting laughter.

Rhaegar glanced at Falcon, who remained silent but visibly displeased.

Falcon firmly told the teasing savage, "Xander, leave!"

"Yeah, yeah, Xander, scram..." Xander brushed off the warning.

Only when a hawk landed nearby did Xander reluctantly leave, shivering and muttering about the tribe's unrest.

"The tribe has been unsettled lately, many warriors are restless," Falcon said before walking away.

Rhaegar grinned, "He has a foul mouth, I wonder if his breath rivals dragon dung."

Falcon, slightly irritated, paused, "I'll take care of him and warn the others."

He wasn't irritated at Rhaegar's threat, but at the tribe's men for embarrassing him in front of guests.

The night progressed.

When his hunger was satisfied, Rhaegar returned to the cave where he had awakened to rest.

Falcon provided soft animal skins and made sure the siblings accompanied him.

Arranging the skins as bedding, Rhaegar greeted the sleeping siblings and shared the remaining skins.

"Thank you," Tormund murmured gratefully.

"May I ask about the changes in the tribe?" Rhaegar inquired, jumping at the chance for information.

Tormund hesitated, glancing at Skylar.

Skylar nodded and lay down on a straw mat.

"Our home was attacked by monsters," Tormund explained solemnly, "forcing Uncle Falcon to lead us on this journey."

"Monsters? Like alligators or pythons in the swamp?" Rhaegar's curiosity was piqued.

"No, shadow creatures, swift as pythons, lurking unseen," Tormund trembled with fear.

Rhaegar was incredulous. "I've never heard of such creatures. Are they real?" he asked, turning to Skylar for confirmation.

Skylar nodded sadly. "They are. Even our elders are baffled. These monsters came out of nowhere."

Rhaegar frowned, uneasy. The safety of this tribe was more precarious than he'd thought.

After a somber exchange, the cave fell silent.

The three lay in their beds, the cries of the wildlings echoing from the carnival outside the cave.

After a while, Skylar broke the silence. "Why is your sister the heir?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter; we're both my mother's children," Rhaegar replied, uninterested.

"You're fooling yourself. Noble lords prefer a son to inherit their title," Skylar interjected.

"True, but my father chose her, and I support her because we're family," Rhaegar explained.

Skylar scoffed, "She'll marry, have a family of her own, and you, the brother with a higher claim to the throne, will just be in her way."

"What lord are you the illegitimate daughter of? To have so much knowledge of the Targaryen political situation," Rhaegar joked.

Skylar grimaced. "Just a bastard from someone who couldn't keep his pants on," she replied, uncomfortable discussing her heritage.

"I don't need you meddling in my family's affairs, young lady," Rhaegar shot back.

Tormund chuckled, "He called you lady."

Skylar kicked him to stifle his laughter.

The cave fell silent again.

...

It's midnight.

The air is thick with humidity, and the crescent moon is hidden by a thick cloud.

Without it, the darkness deepens.

In the valley, the tired wildlings are sleeping in groups on the ground.

The campfires are almost out, with just embers left.

In the darkness, a shadowy figure emerges from the shadows of a looming tree.

It blends in perfectly with the night, moving like a snake towards a sleeping savage.

It sneaks into the savage's nose, ears, and mouth...

It seems almost like it's made of air as it easily gets into the savage's body.

The savage is startled awake by a soft gagging sound. His eyes flutter open.

To his horror, he finds a twisted creature on top of him, with tendrils extending like vines.

Before he can scream, the tendrils pierce his brain, ending his life.

With a chilling efficiency, the creature moves on, seeking its next victim in the darkness.

...

Rhaegar was fast asleep inside the cave.

Out of nowhere, a mournful scream pierced the night, jolting everyone awake.

Rhaegar blinked and looked around the cave. The siblings were already on their feet, grabbing weapons from nearby.

"Stay inside, it's dangerous out there," they warned as they quickly left.

Numbly, Rhaegar followed, believing is more dangerous to be left alone.

Outside, the savages were in a panic. Some were tending to the bonfire, while others were lighting torches, but the darkness persisted.

Rhaegar stayed close to Skylar, peeking out to assess the situation amid the chaos. Amidst the screams, useful information was scarce.

As the commotion settled, Falcon returned with the tribe warriors, carrying corpses.

Strong savages, bleeding from every orifice, lay among them. One had been fatally shot by an arrow.

In front of the tribe, Falcon incinerated the bodies.

Another savage retrieved the arrow, scowling.

"The other tribes have surrounded us and are watching our movements!" The Falcon's angry roar echoed in the night.

Chapter 73: The Promise

As soon as Falcon opened his mouth, the wildlings started making a lot of noise, rattling and screaming, and asking for revenge.

Rhaegar asked Tormund in a quiet voice, "What happened to the three burned bodies?"

Of the dead, only one had been shot; the others had died in strange ways.

It was a detail too intriguing to escape Rhaegar's notice.

Tormund cast a fearful glance over his shoulder, his voice lowered to a tremble, "Those were the ones claimed by the Shadow Creature. Its presence still haunts our tribe."

Even as he spoke, his body trembled, his face growing even more pale.

Addressing the assembled clansmen, Falcon raised his hands high, his voice commanding, "Silence! The enemy is close. Get your weapons ready right away!"

The arrows killed the night's sentinels.

One of the tribe members had stumbled upon a body while answering nature's call in the dead of night. His screams rallied the tribe.

The other three were found by the tribe when they woke up, and their deaths made the Hawk tribe feel devastated.

Falcon led the able-bodied savages in arming themselves, lighting torches, and venturing into the valley in small groups to scout.

With the night sentinels down, it was clear that there was someone out there, waiting to strike at any moment.

Rhaegar frowned at the grim scene unfolding before him.

This tribe has become the target of an unknown threat, and now that other tribes were uncovering their route, launching an indiscriminate assault would only invite an ambush and annihilation under the cover of the night.

As Rhaegar moved to issue his warning, Skylar grabbed him by the collar and said, "Don't act rashly. You can't expect a bunch of impulsive savages to think things through."

"But it's dangerous!" Rhaegar kept pushing.

"I am aware of that, as is Uncle Falcon. But the survival of the wildlings depends on conquest and subjugation," Skylar replied.

Skylar, holding a bow, led Rhaegar and Tormund with a firm grip, suggesting, "Let's hide with the women and children. Tribes rarely harm them."

"..."

The able-bodied savages followed Falcon out of the valley, leaving Rhaegar among the weak and infirm.

Among them, besides the pregnant women, were the wild children who resembled untamed apes.

Rhaegar observed the surroundings and said, "Your tribe seems to be short on men and children."

"The conquered tribes see their men and elders killed, their women raped, and their children abandoned," Skylar explained. "Many of these children are orphans taken in by Uncle Falcon. He believes they will grow up to be fierce warriors."

"Falcon is a unique savage," Rhaegar said, shaking his head with a wry smile.

For a hunter-gatherer like Falcon, feeding a child seemed like an impossible task. To expect a young savage to grow into greatness seemed like a huge challenge.

...

The early morning air was filled with the sound of flames rising outside the valley, accompanied by screams and the wailing of another group.

Falcon stumbled back to the safety of the valley, covered in blood, followed by a few badly injured and angry figures.

The ominous howls followed them relentlessly as the glow of the fire spread across the open expanse.

"Run! The people of the Soldier Pine Tribe are coming, get out of here!" Falcon brandished his axe, deflecting bone arrows as he urged the tribesmen to flee.

"Quickly, move!"

Without hesitation, Rhaegar dashed toward the narrow exit on the opposite side of the valley.

Glancing back, he saw the others running ahead with even more urgency.

They fled in a frenzy of panicked screams.

Rhaegar was left behind, struggling to keep up with the adults.

He felt fear surge through him as he tried to reach out to Cannibal again, but received no response.

"Don't stand there, go!" Falcon's voice cut through the chaos as he quickly grabbed Rhaegar's clothes off and slung him over his shoulder before sprinting away with all his might.

Rhaegar took a moment to look back. He watched as the invading savages poured into the valley.

Half of them scavenged what remained of the Hawk tribe's belongings. The others kept up their relentless pursuit.

The small group Falcon had rallied proved no match for the invaders, some falling to their onslaught - some hacked to death, others pierced by bone arrows.

Falcon's figure blazed a trail ahead, his stride leaving the pursuing savages far behind.

The sight eased Rhaegar's fears; he had no desire to become entangled in the deadly conflict between the tribes and risk his own demise.

...

At dawn, the Hawk tribe was still on the run. They were heading west through the pine forest. They were broken up and scared.

In the chaos, men were killed by blades while women suffered unspeakable horrors on the forest floor.

Children, desperate to survive, scattered in all directions, some meeting their pursuers, others seeking refuge in the dense foliage.

Falcon, carrying Rhaegar on his shoulders, kept going, with a few loyal wildling guards following behind.

When they finally reached a lonely hill, Falcon dropped Rhaegar to the ground. He was out of breath.

"The tribe is lost," Falcon said, his voice heavy with grief.

Xander, a wildling, looked at him with sad eyes. "We can rebuild it as long as we live. The day will come when we can return."

Falcon tried to stay positive. "The tribe may be fading, but what about this child?"

A fellow wildling looked at the pale Rhaegar with suspicion. "What use is he to us?"

Rhaegar, battered and bruised, crouched behind Falcon, his gaze wary.

"He's got dragons and royal blood in his veins," Falcon said quietly, despite the noise around him.

"He's worth more than gold. He's a beacon of hope for our tribe."

But some people were still not convinced.

"He's just making it up," said one. "If he really had dragons, we would have already died in the fire."

Another spat scornfully. "Perhaps the Soldier Pine tribe was drawn to him, he is the harbinger of our downfall, a curse upon us all."

But Falcon stood firm, a shield against the rising tide of hostility. "Noble or not, he is one of us. We cannot abandon him."

As the tension simmered, the savages cast cautious glances at Rhaegar, their weapons at the ready, uncertainty clouding their judgment.

Rhaegar's words rang out, his heart pounding with urgency. "My dragon is on its way back. I can use its power to avenge the Hawk tribe and bring you riches beyond your imagination."

But even as he spoke, Rhaegar doubted the trustworthiness of this newfound company. They hadn't even lasted a single night before they broke apart.

Falcon, who seemed to embody the steadfastness of a chieftain, took a deep breath and spoke with solemn authority. "If he claims to possess a dragon, let's wait until dawn. The truth will be revealed in time."

One wildling, Xander, dismissed the notion with a derisive snort and turned away, but the others, mindful of Falcon's stature, reluctantly acquiesced and sat on the ground.

As dawn approached, Falcon climbed to a vantage point on the hill with Rhaegar in tow, his eyes scanning the pine forest they had fled.

Rhaegar, still catching his breath, sought reassurance. "I have a dragon."

"I know," came Falcon's short reply.

"What will you do now that your tribe is scattered?" Rhaegar asked, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

Falcon's answer was simple yet firm. "Wait."

"Wait for what?" Rhaegar pressed, confused.

Falcon fixed him with a steady gaze. "Wait for your dragon to find you and rain fire upon the tribe of Soldier Pine."

The unexpected vote of confidence left Rhaegar momentarily stunned. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't," Falcon admitted, his tone cool and detached.

"But my tribe is in trouble, our people have been hurt, and we don't know what's going to happen next. I need your dragon to help us get back what has been taken from us."

Rhaegar's resolve hardened. "Don't worry. Once my dragon finds me, I'll make sure your tribe gets what it deserves."

"Then remember our agreement," Falcon reminded him sternly.

Before their conversation could continue, a dark arrow pierced the air and found its mark in Falcon's eye socket, instantly silencing him.

Shocked, Rhaegar watched as the bone arrow emerged from the back of Falcon's skull.

Chapter 74: Hatred Never Lasts for One Night

It's a pretty intense experience to see someone die, and Rhaegar would probably admit that he wasn't prepared for it.

As blood splattered from Falcon's head, painting half of his once-silver hair crimson, Rhaegar remained calm and collected, without the expected discomfort, fear, or trembling that often accompanies such gruesome scenes.

He wiped the blood from his face with a steady hand, but his expression showed no emotion as he looked at Falcon's body. His lips were pressed firmly together.

His gaze then shifted, following the trajectory of the bone arrow to its origin—a towering pine tree shrouded in thick needles, where Xander, the fleeing wildling, stood poised with his bow drawn.

"Is he dead?" Rhaegar's voice was barely above a whisper as he nudged Falcon's body with a boot. There was a note of disbelief in his voice.

Despite the circumstances, Rhaegar couldn't help but acknowledge Falcon's intelligence and pragmatism, even in death.

He had shown a rare quality among the savage tribes, one that Rhaegar had hoped to rely on to escape.

But now that Falcon was dead, Rhaegar realized that he needed to find another way.

"Get up," he told himself, addressing the fallen chieftain. "Falcon is dead. I need to find another way to escape."

Meanwhile, Xander, feeling pretty confident after killing Falcon, went up the hill and got the other wildlings to rally.

They hadn't really grasped the situation yet. It was only after Xander asked them to look that they finally turned their gaze towards Falcon's lifeless form, sprawled in a pool of crimson.

One particularly tall wildling was seething with rage, eager to avenge Falcon's death by exacting justice upon Xander.

The others, however, didn't say anything. They just looked at Xander with a mixture of scrutiny and apprehension.

Xander silenced the dissenting wildling with a bone arrow, ending his life in an instant.

He then addressed the remaining survivors. "The Hawk tribe is no more. Do you want to wander aimlessly in these pine woods?"

He gave them a choice. "Follow me," he commanded. "We're going to find refuge with the Soldier Pine Tribe—a stronger, untainted tribe."

With a little persuasion, Xander got the others to switch sides, and their survival instincts won out over any lingering doubts.

Xander pointed to the frozen figure of Rhaegar and said, "His family is royalty, and he has lots of money. If we give him to the Soldier Pine Tribe, they'll accept us."

Some people agreed with him, and he got more supporters. Finally, Xander tied Rhaegar up and put him on his shoulders, showing that he was in charge of the wildlings.

Rhaegar, resigned to his fate, didn't resist as he was restrained. He kept his gaze fixed upon Xander with a penetrating intensity.

"Little brat, behave yourself if you want to live," Xander warned, a grin playing upon his lips as he caught Rhaegar's stare.

Rhaegar acknowledged his worth and said, "Indeed, I am valuable."

"Then be honest," Xander warned, his tone hinting at a hint of menace. "Or face the consequences."

"I assure you, honesty will be my virtue," Rhaegar replied.

...

As the sun started to set, a few savages were out scouring the area, gathering up their scattered friends and family, regardless of age or gender.

They were all brought together in a reluctant alliance.

Together, they walked carefully towards the temporary encampment of the Soldier Pine Tribe, with a feeling of unease hanging over them.

The familiar valley greeted them with an ominous air, tainted by the stench of blood and littered with the fallen from the Hawk tribe.

Rhaegar was led before the leader of the Soldier Pine Tribe, and his gaze swept the scene.

He felt his heart sink as he realized they were not the only enemies besieging the Hawk tribe.

Surrounding the Soldier Pine leader were four imposing wildling chieftains, hailing from different tribes. Their presence cast a shadow over the grim proceedings.

The Soldier Pine leader looked at Xander with disdain and ordered his subordinates to break Xander's arms and legs before sending him off to his fate.

The White Pine leader pointed an accusatory finger at Rhaegar, who was roughly thrust forward.

He was impatient as he delivered his decree. "This little brat will be confined with the women and children, while the others are reserved for the sacrificial rites."

"Yes!" came the confirmation, cutting off any chance for Xander's group to offer an explanation before they were forcibly dragged away, their limbs shattered in agony.

Despite their cries of pain, they clung to a sliver of hope, willing to barter Rhaegar's safety for their own lives.

But their pleas fell on deaf ears. The leaders didn't see them as anything but savages in a remote ravine.

But amidst the callous indifference, one chieftain's greedy gaze fixed on Rhaegar's bracelet. His lust for wealth overpowered any semblance of compassion as he snatched it away wordlessly.

Before Rhaegar could say anything, a quick punch sent him sprawling to the ground, his voice silenced.

"Take him away," the chieftain commanded dismissively, deeming Rhaegar a useless nuisance to be dealt with later.

Struggling to rise, Rhaegar remained silent, resigned to his fate as he was unceremoniously thrown into a fenced enclosure alongside the other prisoners—a motley assortment of women and children.

Among them, Rhaegar's gaze locked onto the siblings, their once-vibrant spirits now dimmed by the harsh realities of captivity.

Skylar was covered in mud and dirt, and she shielded Tormund in a corner.

Rhaegar spotted this acquaintance among the prisoners.

"It's you. Weren't you with Uncle Falcon? Why are you here?" Skylar inquired, with concerned face as she met Rhaegar's gaze.

Rhaegar's words hit her hard as she processed the news. "Falcon was a good person, but life can be cruel," he murmured as her eyes tinged with sorrow.

"Falcon Uncle died..." Rhaegar's admission hung heavily in the air, disbelief clouding Skylar's features.

"He was murdered by a traitor on our escape," Rhaegar added, resentment evident in his tone.

Skylar acknowledged the grim reality. "If even Uncle Falcon couldn't survive, what hope do we have?"

"Maybe there's still a chance," Rhaegar said, sounding a bit more optimistic.

After hearing Tormund talk something about sacrifices, Rhaegar thought about the situation.

"So, sacrificing traitors to appease the spirits of the dead... Is that something your people do often?" he asked, his tone a mix of curiosity and concern.

Tormund, hunched over on the ground, nodded solemnly. "Yes, I heard from my captors earlier that the surrounding tribes believe the recent attacks by monsters are the work of vengeful spirits."

"They've resorted to capturing other tribesmen for sacrifice in hopes of appeasing them," he explained, his voice trembling with fear.

Acknowledging Tormund's words with a silent nod, Rhaegar refrained from pressing further.

He quietly retreated to another corner of their makeshift prison, his mind racing as he searched for a solution.

As he sat alone, Rhaegar couldn't shake the feeling of despair that hung heavy in the air.

The Hawk Tribe had never been known for their strength or cunning, and the other tribes gathered in the valley seemed equally ill-equipped.

With a resigned sigh, Rhaegar thought out loud, "Well, for now, it might be best to stay low and wait it out."

...

Night fell over the valley.

The victorious savages celebrated their triumph, lighting bonfires that illuminated the darkness and echoing their primal celebrations throughout the night.

But as the hours passed, the fervor died down, and a somber peace settled over the encampment.

People were tired from the day's events, so they went to sleep with loved ones.

Some people fell asleep quickly, while others struggled to get to sleep.

Amidst the eerie stillness, Rhaegar stirred from his feigned slumber, his senses sharp and attuned to the quietude of the night.

With a sense of purpose, he got up from the ground, looking at the scared women and children huddled together before he quietly made his way to the edge of the prison.

The fence, which was poorly manned by tired guards, provided little resistance as Rhaegar slipped through the gaps.

His small frame and dark attire blended seamlessly into the shadows.

He avoided the vigilant patrols and traversed the valley until he reached a precipice overlooking the captive Xander and his men.

They lay battered and broken, their bodies bearing the cruel marks of torture.

With a heavy heart, Rhaegar picked up an old iron axe from a nearby campfire. He felt his resolve strengthen as he approached Xander, who was unconscious and bleeding.

Rhaegar paused to think about what he was going to do next.

In a last-ditch effort to wake Xander from his slumber, he resorted to force, delivering a series of urgent kicks until Xander stirred, his eyes wide with fear.

"Look at me, Xander!" Rhaegar commanded, his voice cutting through the night.

As Xander's gaze met his own, Rhaegar's resolve hardened, his grip tightening on the axe.

"It's you..." Xander's words trailed off as Rhaegar's axe descended swiftly.

With a sickening thud, the blade severed Xander's artery, unleashing a torrent of crimson that drenched Rhaegar in a chilling baptism of blood.

Bowing his head in silent reverence, Rhaegar uttered a solemn farewell: "You and Falcon, halves of a whole. May your souls find peace."

With each swing of the axe, he was seeking not only vengeance but closure, as the echoes of his actions reverberated through the night.

Chapter 75: Return of the Dragon

With each swing of the axe, Rhaegar felt the weight of his actions, his hands stained with blood.

But as his enemy's head rolled to the ground, he felt a strange sensation, mixed with a deep sense of dread.

"It's not as simple as it seems," he said to himself, his voice barely audible over the noise of the camp. "But this axe... it's surprisingly balanced."

Rhaegar put the bloody weapon aside and took a look around. This was just the start. There was still a lot more to do.

For once, he didn't try to hide from the patrolling savages. Instead, he walked right into the heart of the camp, his purpose clear.

Before he knew it, he was surrounded by a group of wary warriors, their weapons drawn and their eyes blazing with hostility.

"Hey, kid, what are you doing here?" one of them demanded, his voice dripping with contempt.

Rhaegar remained calm in the face of their hostility. "You'd do well to show a Targaryen some respect," he replied, his words laced with a hint of defiance.

The crowd let out a loud, derisive laugh. "You say you're a Targaryen? More like a dead man walking!" taunted one particularly vile savage, his face contorted with malice.

In response, Rhaegar just held out a hand, pointing upward. This caught the savages' attention.

"Look up," he told them, his tone calm despite the danger looming overhead.

Two glowing green orbs moved through the night air, cutting through the darkness like ethereal lanterns, casting an otherworldly glow on the scene below.

The savages stopped in their tracks, their breath catching in their throats as they watched the incredible show unfold above them.

With a subtle tremor, the green lights swayed, causing the very fabric of the night sky to ripple.

Then they saw it: a huge creature, its black scales shining in the moonlight, surveying the valley with an air of unquestionable authority.

As they took in this sight, fear gripped their hearts, leaving them powerless in the presence of the beast.

They fell to their knees, their weapons forgotten, as they cowered before the mighty predator.

"Devour him," Rhaegar said, his voice breaking the tense silence as he approached the trembling savage.

With a menacing roar, the dragon asserted his dominance, sending the victim sprawling backward.

Before he even hit the ground, the dragon's agile jaws seized the man and dragged him into its gaping maw.

The crunch of bones echoed through the night as the dragon devoured its prey, sating its hunger with mercilessly.

With this display of power, Rhaegar's dragon, Cannibal, reclaimed its rightful place as the apex predator of Dragonstone.

Sensing his master's distress during the day's ordeal, Cannibal had returned of his own accord, guided by the bond between dragon and rider.

Now reunited, man and dragon stood as one.

With a determined look, Rhaegar mounted his loyal steed, his expression showing no hint of mercy as he surveyed the trembling natives below.

All that patience he's had all day is for this moment of vengeance. Now, Rhaegar will take his dragon and burn all those who have disrespected him with dragonfire.

As Cannibal walked past them, Rhaegar's voice rang out with a cold indifference.

"Summon your leaders. I will await their arrival."

Perched atop the formidable dragon, Rhaegar commanded the remaining savages with an air of authority as he demanded their obedience.

"Monsters... monsters..." The onlookers were so shocked that they couldn't speak. They were reeling from the sight of their comrades being killed.

Each word Rhaegar spoke seemed to carry a sense of doom, sending shivers down their spines and igniting a primal instinct to flee.

They jumped to their feet and ran in all directions, screaming in panic.

But even though they were scared, the dragon stayed perfectly still, its dragonfire still held in check.

Instead, it extended a sinuous tail, scooped up the savage leader, and delivered him to Rhaegar with effortless precision.

Rhaegar accepted the recovered bracelet with a casual flick of his hand and looked at the fallen leader with icy detachment.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Your fate is in your hands," he intoned, his voice devoid of emotion.

As Rhaegar's gaze fell once more on the trembling savages below, the dragon picked up on his intent.

With a roar, it unleashed a torrent of dragonfire that lit the valley in a blazing inferno, sending shockwaves of heat through the air.

The savages, with their psychological defences shattered, cowered in fear before the power of the dragon.

They knelt before the dragon's power and surrendered their weapons. They joined in a chorus of fear and awe for the deity before them—the god of fire incarnate.

Rhaegar's voice cut through the tumult. It was cold and commanding. He asked, "Which one of you is the leader of the Soldier Pine tribe?"

His words, though soft, silenced the clamor around them.

Whispers rippled through the crowd as they, driven by fear, pushed forward the leader of the Soldier Pine tribe - a stalwart figure, his features etched with fear.

Rhaegar kept his cool as he asked the trembling savage, "Many tribes have joined forces against the Hawk Tribe. Who orchestrated this?"

"I did!" The leader admitted, "We joined together in the face of the evil spirits' curse." His resolve faltered under Rhaegar's scrutiny.

"Your honesty is commendable," Rhaegar remarked, his hand caressing the dragon's smooth scales. With a casual gesture, he uttered a command in High Valyrian: "Dracarys."

Confusion clouded the savages' faces as they failed to understand the ancient tongue.

In an instant, emerald flames erupted from the dragon's maw, engulfing the leader of the Soldier Pine tribe in a blaze of dragonfire.

In an instant, flesh turned to ash, consumed by the dragonfire.

Rhaegar looked away, unwilling to witness the carnage he had wrought.

The act weighed heavily on him, but he remained decided. He'd made a promise and he was going to keep it.

"Run! Run for your lives! This demon child rides a beast to bring destruction upon us all!"

The dragonfire stirred the courage in some of the onlookers. They didn't dare face Rhaegar and his fearsome mount directly, but they grabbed their weapons and fled in terror.

Despite the panic, Rhaegar watched the chaos with a calm face. He gave a low command, and the dragon responded by spreading its wings and rising into the night sky.

Flames rained down upon the fleeing savages from the dragon's gaping maw, engulfing them in destruction.

Bored with the spectacle, the dragon circled above the valley, showing its contempt for the scattered savages.

As the survivors knelt in abject submission, begging for mercy, Rhaegar rode atop his dragon, watching the scene below with detached interest.

He couldn't understand the words of the wildlings because their various dialects blended into an incomprehensible language.

But amidst the chaos, he found comfort in the quiet of his own heart, secure in his position of power.

The dragon circled the valley, unleashing dragonfire.

Several times, Rhaegar broke from his reverie to issue commands to the kneeling wildlings below.

"Rescue the Hawk tribe members and keep an eye on the Soldier Pine tribe."

"Yes, Lord, we will obey," they replied, their voices trembling with reverence.

At that moment, whether you are a savage leader or a savage warrior who only knows how to fight, all you can do is kneel and beg for mercy.

Under the dragon's outstretched wings, all beings were equal, united in awe and fear.

Pointing to the charred remains that littered the ground, Rhaegar spoke with a hint of regret, "Gather the bodies and give them a proper cremation."

Chapter 76: The Shadow That Couldn't Be Killed

Rhaegar's youthful voice carried an air of authority from everyone who heard it.

A few brave natives got up from the ground and looked up at the huge dragon with a mix of fear and awe.

They bent down to collect the charred remains left by the dragonfire.

In a rare moment of satisfaction, Rhaegar showed mercy.

He gestured to several other wildling leaders and asked, "Identify yourselves and explain the reason for your gathering."

He didn't really care about their tribal names, but the curses they were talking about gave him pause.

He'd seen what the Shadow Creature did to the Hawk tribe, so he figured these tribes had banded together because they were facing a common threat.

He wanted to know more about the curse.

"My name is Gram, this is Moriyama, and this is Trangal..." The pointy-headed savage leader was visibly shaken, giving an honest account like a submissive lamb.

In total, five tribes of wildlings had gathered in the valley.

Except for the leader of the Soldier Pine tribe, who met his end by dragonfire, and the other wildling leader who was dragged away, the remaining three were present.

Rhaegar motioned for Cannibal to descend, his massive form kicking up a cloud of dust that momentarily blinded the wildlings.

Seizing the chance, Rhaegar turned to one of the wildling leaders.

"What exactly is this curse you're talking about?" he asked.

The bearded savage named Trangal spoke up, trembling with fear. "The curse comes from the shadows—a silent threat that takes men's lives without mercy."

"It can't be captured or killed. Our only option is to offer living sacrifices in an attempt to appease it."

Indeed, the presence of a Shadow Creature seemed all too real.

Rhaegar nodded in understanding and asked, "How widespread is this curse? Does it affect every tribe?"

"There's only one curse that prowls the darkness of the swamps and pine forests in search of prey," Trangal replied.

"Have you seen firsthand the victims slain by this shadow?" Rhaegar inquired, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Yes, lots of people have seen the cursed shadows rise and claim the lives of the living," Trangal confirmed.

"It seems to be a strange and dangerous creature," Rhaegar said quietly, realizing the seriousness of the situation.

A malevolent that can move through shadows would be a serious threat anywhere. And now it was haunting Crackclaw Point. Who knows if it'll spread to the mainland?

Rhaegar, accompanied by his dragon, felt he had to get involved.

He waited for a while until they returned with the prisoners from the Hawk tribe. The Soldiers Pine tribe members were also brought forward and forced to kneel on the other side.

After a moment of thought, Rhaegar spoke up, his voice cold. "Bring these traitors forward and lure out the Shadow Creature. Let's assess the threat it poses."

The pitiless savages immediately obeyed and led the traitors forward, including the corpse of Xander, who had met his end.

Riding on the dragon's back, Rhaegar watched as the savages tied the traitors to a tree and extinguished the surrounding campfires, plunging the area into darkness.

At this point, they had to wait.

The wildling leaders said that the Shadow Creature came almost every night, killing tribe members and scaring the community.

After much discussion, they decided to unite, forming a coalition of five small tribes into one larger tribe. They raided neighboring tribes for resources and prisoners.

They used these prisoners as sacrifices to feed the cursed shadows that plagued their tribes.

Time passed slowly, the stillness of the night broken only by occasional murmurs and shifting shadows.

By two in the morning, a collective unease had taken hold in the air as the wildlings knelt nervously, unsure of what was going to happen to them.

Rhaegar was lying on Cannibal's broad back, his senses dulled by weariness and anticipation.

Then, suddenly, a piercing scream shattered the silence, jolting everyone to attention.

Rhaegar suddenly sat up, his eyes snapping to the source of the disturbance.

It wasn't coming from where the prisoners were being held, but from near the Soldier Pine tribe.

The terrified scream of a female wildling cut through the night, causing the crowd to part and revealing the scene of the curse's attack.

Rhaegar jumped to his feet and looked around.

There he saw a male wildling sprawled on the ground, caught in writhing black tendrils that emerged from the shadows below. Beside him lay another unfortunate soul, lifeless and bleeding from every orifice.

"Clear the way!" Rhaegar barked, scattering the surrounding savages and urging the Cannibal forward. "Dracarys!"

The dragon, taken aback by the shadows, paused for a moment. But at its master's command, it unleashed dragonfire at the encroaching shadows.

Boom!

The green fire lit up the night, burning a path through the shadows and leaving a scorched crater in its wake.

But to Rhaegar's surprise, the Shadow Creature was unharmed.

"It's not burned?" Rhaegar asked himself aloud.

Before he could make sense of the situation, another scream cut through the air. This time, it was from the wildlings of the Hawk Tribe.

Rhaegar quickly turned his attention to see the tentacles of darkness seize several female wildlings and their children.

The tendrils were incredibly efficient, plunging into their bodies and snuffing out their lives.

Rhaegar was astonished as the shadows on the ground expanded with each life taken, and the tentacles grew longer and more menacing.

"Dracarys!" Rhaegar gave the order, and Cannibal let loose another blast of fire.

This time, the Shadow Creature didn't stand a chance. It retreated instantly into the darkness as the dragonfire engulfed it.

The creature writhed and convulsed in agony, unable to withstand the flames.

It tried to get closer to Rhaegar, but Cannibal's dragonfire repelled it.

At last, it let out a piercing hiss and retreated into the nearby shadows.

"What kind of creature is that?" Rhaegar was amazed by the creature's resistance to the dragonfire.

The dragonfire was a force to be reckoned with, capable of melting even stone, yet this monstrous creature had withstood it, evading capture in the darkness.

Rhaegar was intrigued by the Shadow Creature's mysterious nature. It was unlike anything he had encountered before.

Meanwhile, the sight of the dragon battling the Shadow Creature filled the onlookers with a mixture of awe and terror.

Rhaegar was getting tired of their constant pleas for divine intervention. He signaled Cannibal to silence them with a resounding roar.

"I'm not a god," he said firmly, cutting through the noise. "I'm a Targaryen. So silence!"

Amid the crowd, Skylar grabbed Tormund's arm, her eyes gleaming with admiration and wonder as she looked up at Rhaegar.

She spoke with great enthusiasm, saying, "You command the dragon, you are a Dragonlord!"

Her declaration inspired the other savages to join in, chanting the title "Dragonlord" in unison.

Rhaegar looked at Skylar with a raised eyebrow, acknowledging her proclamation.

Even though he wasn't the legendary Dragonlord himself, the title the savages gave him had a certain power and respect.

Rhaegar looked down at the tribesmen, who were submissive and fearful. He began to form a plan.

He was determined to get revenge on Falcon's tribe, but he realized that one wildling leader wouldn't be enough.

As he considered his options, he decided against a slaughter and instead opted for another approach.

The Shadow Creature was a serious threat, and if he wanted to get rid of it, he'd need the help of these very wildlings.

With a firm voice, Rhaegar addressed the crowd. "The curse that plagues Crackclaw Point is putting your very existence at risk. It's forcing you into migration and turmoil."

"I'm Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, the King's eldest son, and I ride the strongest wild dragon that can burn everything with dragon fire!"

"Submit to me and I will protect you from the curse and together we can kill that shadow!"

Chapter 77: Conquering the Peninsula

Though Rhaegar's voice was youthful and his stature small, the presence of Cannibal at his side loomed large, casting a formidable shadow over the assembled wildlings.

At his command, the wildlings bowed in awe before the imposing figure of the dragon.

Taking control of the situation, Rhaegar continued, his tone firm, "Now that you've pledged your allegiance to me, you'll obey my every command without hesitation or risk facing the wrath of dragonfire."

The wildling leaders, at first filled with fervor, submitted, understanding that resistance would only lead to their destruction.

For the wildlings were not stupid; they knew that the curse meant death for them, while the dragonfire offered a chance at salvation.

In the presence of the mighty dragon, the previously disparate and rebellious wildlings were drawn to the prospect of a stronger leader.

Watching the newfound admiration in the savages' eyes, Rhaegar's own emotions stirred, a sense of responsibility settling on his shoulders.

After a moment of reflection, he issued his first command.

"The Shadow Creature threatens all tribes besides yours. Before it becomes too powerful, you will unite under my banner and take control of the peninsula!"

This was Rhaegar's improvised strategy: gather the wildlings, draw out the Shadow Creature, and destroy it with dragonfire.

A chorus of excited cheers erupted from the wildlings at the promise of conquering the peninsula and subjugating rival tribes.

Among this tribe of fierce warriors, who engage in perpetual combat, nothing rivals the intensity of their passion, whether in battle or in love.

...

The Next Day

The next day, Rhaegar gathered the wildling leaders and entrusted them with the responsibility of leading their respective tribes.

Having lost their leader, the Soldier Pine tribe chose a successor and united under the name Crab Claw, signifying their allegiance to Rhaegar as their supreme leader.

The valley proved to be an ideal location for their settlement, offering abundant resources and natural defenses.

Rhaegar ordered the women and children to remain in the valley, guarded by a hundred skilled warriors drawn from the five tribes of the wildlings. With the addition of the elderly, infirm, and non-combatants, their numbers swelled to over three thousand.

After weeding out those unfit for battle, Rhaegar was left with a force of about a thousand warriors, a formidable contingent for his purposes.

Their mission was clear: to fan out across the swamps and pine forests, seeking out and subduing the tribes of savages throughout the peninsula.

At the mere sight of his dragon circling twice overhead, the savages willingly submitted, their silent acquiescence speaking volumes.

In just five days, Rhaegar's dragon traversed the eastern reaches of Crackclaw Point, quickly bringing more than a dozen small tribes under his control and swelling his ranks to tens of thousands.

On the edge of a poisonous swamp, Rhaegar reclined in a rudimentary shelter made of animal skins.

Sitting amidst the animal skins, Rhaegar inquired, "How many have we assimilated today?"

"Prince, we've assimilated over two thousand in total, with only about eight hundred of them fit for combat," Skylar, now dressed in linen, reported, presenting the latest tally of recruits.

The strategy of the Peninsular Savages was remarkably simple.

Rhaegar was largely inactive, except for the occasional dragon ride to intimidate rebellious tribes, relying mainly on the manpower provided by the Crab Claws.

Skylar continued, "You have traversed the eastern peninsula on dragonback and integrated the wild tribes. However, there are noble castles in the western region, so we've refrained from rushing in."

"No matter, the nobles of the peninsula are sworn to the Iron Throne," Rhaegar replied somewhat nonchalantly.

The conquest of the peninsula proved to be less exciting than expected, more like a game of make-believe.

The ignorant savages fell to their knees at the mere sight of the dragon, sparing Rhaegar any significant effort.

At that moment, the tent flaps parted to reveal a tall figure.

"Prince, the leader of the White Crow tribe refused to surrender, so I've brought you his head," Trangal, one of the first Crab Claws to swear fealty, knelt before Rhaegar and offered a bloodied head.

They met regularly with Rhaegar, and though he refused the title of Dragonlord, they gladly addressed him as Prince.

Frowning in disapproval, Rhaegar commanded, "Dispose of the remains and spare me of such display."

Were it not for the Shadow Creature, he would have gladly distanced himself from these brutal displays.

Each of them seemed as dense as a block of stone. How much longer would he have to endure such barbarism?

He nodded and left, announcing, "The White Crow tribe has been subjugated, and the eastern peninsula is tribe-free. We will rest tonight and move on the western region at dawn."

"Agreed, Prince," Trangal affirmed, preparing to take his leave.

Skylar interjected with concern, "We're running low on supplies, and with so many mouths to feed, the valley's resources won't last long."

"How long can we sustain ourselves?" Rhaegar inquired, straightening his posture.

"Three days at the most," Skylar replied curtly.

"Alas, with tens of thousands to feed every day, how did you manage before?" Rhaegar lamented, never having dealt with logistics.

"Tormund and I struggled to feed ourselves for half a year under Uncle Falcon's care," Skylar recounted.

"Let's hurry to the western peninsula and deal with the Shadow Creature quickly," Rhaegar instructed, with a worried expression. "Was there any sign of the creature?"

"No, it looks like he hid, knowing it was being chased," Skylar replied, expressing her frustration.

...

Two days later, on a desolate mountain pass, a procession of wildlings hurried westward.

Above them soared a colossal black dragon, its vast wings casting a shadow over the land below.

With the eastern reaches of the peninsula secured, Rhaegar led the wildlings on a great migration.

But he exercised prudence, choosing not to take everyone.

The elderly, the infirm, children, women, and half of the warriors remained in the east, living off the hunt.

The remaining contingent, consisting of over two dozen Crab Claw leaders and more than 2,300 men, accompanied Rhaegar westward, carrying provisions for three days.

Though seemingly modest for a force renowned across the continent, their numbers made for a formidable army on this desolate peninsula.

Along the way, they encountered several small noble clans, entrenched in the valleys for generations, with noble titles but mired in poverty.

As Cannibal's wings passed overhead, these lesser nobles emerged from their dwellings and pledged allegiance to the prince.

But their loyalty proved weak when Rhaegar demanded supplies for the wildlings.

They refused even when he promised double repayment, and only relented when they saw the power of the dragon.

...

"Attack!"

"Kill the dogs of House Brune!"

"Damn you Crabbs, slaughter them all!"

Hovering above, Rhaegar watched a chaotic melee unfold in an open field below.

"Cannibal, let's descend and survey the scene," he commanded, tapping the dragon's spine as they descended.

Below, a motley group of iron-clad "soldiers" clashed, their clothing lacking proper armor, most wearing rough linen robes.

Their weapons, aged and worn, betrayed the appearance of a formal army.

Rhaegar watched the skirmish, noting the banners on both sides, marsh marigolds and a deadwood adorned with skeletons hanging on both sides of the clearing.

Chapter 78: The Loyalty of House Crabb

As the confrontation between the opposing forces increased, the intensity of the battle reached its peak.

Knights under their respective banners led the charge, their war cries echoing across the field.

Upon seeing the two banners, Rhaegar immediately recognized the insignia of the largest noble families on the peninsula: House Brune of the Dyre Den and House Crabb of the Whispers.

Though often considered half-wild, these two families maintained a semblance of family honor, especially House Crabb, which boasted a history of prominent members, including former members of the Kingsguard and the Small Council.

Rhaegar couldn't help but wonder about their motives for conflict, given their impoverished state.

"Why would these families fight?" he mused, puzzled by their seemingly incongruous actions.

Preferring not to act impulsively, Rhaegar remained atop the dragon, watching the battle unfold.

In times of war, animosity knows no bounds and cannot be quelled by mere words.

As the melee continued, Rhaegar decided to take the initiative and intervene, attempting to stop the bloodshed and negotiate with the defeated and wounded members of both families.

Despite his efforts, the battle raged on, with combatants on both sides fighting desperately, their screams filling the air.

After half an hour of relentless fighting, fatigue began to take its toll on the combatants.

At that moment, Rhaegar's own forces arrived from the rear, encircling the battlefield at his command.

Asserting his authority, Rhaegar sought to direct and organize the chaotic battle, recognizing the opportunity to learn from the experience despite his youth.

The battle below came to an end, prompting Rhaegar to intervene. He patted the Cannibal's spine gently, signaling him to descend through the clouds.

With a roar, Cannibal let out a long whistle as his colossal form emerged from the clouds, casting a shadow over the battlefield like a dark storm descending upon a city.

The soldiers caught in the melee were thrown into disarray by the sudden appearance of the dragon, and chaos erupted in their ranks without any command from their leaders. Hovering in the sky, Cannibal unleashed a display of green dragon flames without waiting for orders from either side's commanders.

"Dragons! There are no dragons on this peninsula!"

"Run! What kind of monster is that?"

The battlefield was thrown into utter chaos the moment the dragon appeared. Terrified soldiers abandoned their armor and fled, only to be blocked by the wildlings on the outskirts of the battle.

Led by the Crab Claws, the wildling army closed in, screaming and provoking. Seizing the opportunity, Rhaegar led Cannibal into the clearing, drawing the attention of both commanders.

When they saw the figure atop the dragon, its silver-gold hair catching the light, the hearts of both sides skipped a beat. A dragon with a rider was far more manageable than a wild dragon unleashed upon men without restraint.

From the back of his dragon, Rhaegar surveyed the battlefield below and proclaimed in a resounding voice, "I am Rhaegar Targaryen, eldest son of King Viserys I. Where are the knights loyal to the Iron Throne?"

His words reverberated across the field, causing both commanders and their retinues to rush forward and kneel before him, heads bowed, offering their allegiance.

"Greetings, my lord. The Brune House and the Crabb House send you their most sincere greetings," they chanted in unison.

Rhaegar surveyed the commanders and their aides, all clad in iron armor and robes of office, and asked, "The noble families of the peninsula have always maintained their independence. Why did you engage in this private war?"

"Prince, it is the Bruners who have been oppressing us and invading our lands!" the knight of House Crabb replied indignantly.

"Nonsense! It is you, the Crabbs, who have plundered our merchant ships before, yet you refuse to acknowledge it!" the Brune commander shot back, his expression filled with resentment.

Frowning at the heated exchange, Rhaegar tried to determine the cause of the conflict. But as soon as he asked the question, the two sides began a heated argument, drawing their swords and advancing on each other.

As he watched the scene unfold, Rhaegar could not help but feel a sense of frustration. The rough nature of the half-wild families on the peninsula left no room for diplomacy; they were quick to resort to violence to settle their disputes, with no time for reconciliation.

Rhaegar commanded the Cannibal to let out a deafening roar, instantly silencing the battlefield.

With a stern expression, Rhaegar addressed them with clear dissatisfaction, "Summon your lords and pay homage to the king's eldest son! Or bring forth whoever holds authority in their place."

"Yes, Prince..." The two sides dared not delay, their mutual hatred and anger momentarily set aside as they ordered their adjutants to summon their respective lords.

Meanwhile, Rhaegar ordered the remaining troops to gather the bodies of the fallen soldiers.

He then ordered the wildling army to form a defensive perimeter, consolidate their position, and send scouts to the eastern reaches of the peninsula for any remaining wildling tribes.

...

It was near noon when a few swift horses carrying the lords of the two castles reached the open field of the battlefield, where the lingering scent of blood still hung in the air.

Their first sight was the imposing figure of Cannibal, sprawled on the ground like a small mountain.

"Seven above! A Targaryen prince has graced Crackclaw Point with his presence," exclaimed the head of the Crabb family, a tall, elderly man with half-white hair and a stout frame, as he gazed upon the pitch-black dragon.

The peninsula was so desolate that encounters with outsiders were rare. For many years, the sight of a member of the royal family commanding a dragon was almost unheard of.

Ignoring the advice of his guards, the Lord of Whispers, Sam Crabb, quickly dismounted his horse and raced to the dragon.

When he saw the drowsy Rhaegar on the dragon's back, his eyes widened in disbelief.

"To tame such a colossal dragon at such a young age!" he marveled.

Kneeling on one knee with his sword raised in respect, he called out in a strong voice, "I, Sam Crabb, Lord of the Whispers, pay homage to the prince!"

Rhaegar looked down at the old man and remarked, "Lord Sam, it is not customary to offer one's sword in greeting to a prince."

"I am aware of that," Sam replied, breathing heavily. "But when faced with such noble blood and the sight of such a dragon, I can only humbly offer my allegiance. The Crabb House wishes to pledge our allegiance and become your bannermen."

"My ancestor, Ser Clarence Crabb, known as Clarence the Short, was a Knight of the Kingsguard."

"And my uncle, Ser Clement Crabb, was a Knight of the Kingsguard during the reign of King Jaehaerys I Targaryen."

Rhaegar listened intently as Sam recounted his family's history, weaving a tale that stretched back to the days of House Targaryen. But Rhaegar remained perplexed by the fervor of Sam's loyalty.

"I'm only a prince, not heir to the Iron Throne." Rhaegar was even more confused.

Sam's smile held as he continued, "Today, House Crabb has long since distanced itself from House Targaryen. Whether you ascend the Iron Throne is of little consequence to us. All we seek is to pledge our allegiance to you, noble prince, and to see the banner of the Marsh Marigold once again embraced by the glory of the crown."

Rhaegar hesitated, his mind swirling with conflicting thoughts. While House Crabb's allegiance could be of great help, it would also draw unwanted attention.

With a furrowed brow, Rhaegar carefully considered his answer. "Lord Sam, I appreciate your unwavering loyalty, but as a prince without claim to the Iron Throne, I cannot rightfully accept a lord's allegiance."

Chapter 79: The Shadow Lands

"Prince..."

Sam began, but was cut off by a younger man at his side.

"Old Sam, the Prince does not want your old bones, do not embarrass him any further," the man interjected.

Dressed in black, he was the Lord of Dyre Den, and he too knelt before Rhaegar and offered his greetings. "Wells Brune pays his respects to the Prince and offers his sincerest blessings."

Anger flashed across Sam's face and he turned his head away from Wells with a contemptuous snort.

"Rise, both of you," Rhaegar commanded, motioning for them to stand.

As the appointed leaders gathered, Rhaegar wasted no time with formalities. "I have no interest in the squabbles of the nobles of the peninsula. I'm here for only one reason."

"Have any of you heard of or encountered an unnatural shadow creature?"

Wells replied bluntly, "Not really, Prince."

Sam hesitated before speaking. "Prince, I have heard rumors of such a creature."

"Please, tell me more," Rhaegar urged, his curiosity piqued by the unexpected lead.

Sam's expression turned serious as he recounted, "About half a moon ago, a merchant ship was shipwrecked in a storm in the Narrow Sea. It washed ashore on one of the beaches of our peninsula."

"Our soldiers from The Whisper were sent to investigate. When they boarded the ship, they found it deserted, with no cargo or survivors."

"Disappointed, they began to disembark, only to be ambushed by a creature lurking in the shadows. It killed three men before vanishing without a trace."

Wells opened his mouth to interrupt, "Wrong, that freighter was a ship trading with the Dyre Den, shipwrecked on the Narrow Sea and plundered by you."

"In your words, it became an empty ship with no money and no people!"

"Enough," Rhaegar interjected sharply, silencing the young lord's attempt to intervene. "I didn't ask for your opinion. Be quiet."

Stunned by the rebuke, Wells hesitated for a moment before lowering his head in submission, his words stifled.

Turning his attention back to Sam, Rhaegar urged him to continue.

Sam recounted the incident with the cargo ship and the subsequent conflict between their families, emphasizing the accusations made against them by the Brune House.

Rhaegar rubbed his temples, frustrated at the lack of useful information despite his inquiries. He shifted the conversation to the origins of the shadow creature.

"Where did the cargo ship come from and what route did it take?" he asked, directing his question at Wells.

Wells replied in a subdued tone, "The freighter departed from Qarth, passing through Slave Bay, the Stepstones Islands, and the Free Trade city-states. Occasionally it would stop at Crabs Bay on its way back, trading goods with Gulltown and the Dyre Den."

"Qarth?" Rhaegar mused, remembering the world map he had studied in the Red Keep.

Qarth lies at the Jade Gates, which connect the Summer Sea to the fabled Jade Sea. The city lies southeast of Lhazar and the Red Waste, and southwest of the Bone Mountains.

Qarth's location also makes it the gateway between the lands of Westeros, the Free Cities, and Slaver's Bay, and the more eastern lands of Asshai, the Shadowlands, and Yi Ti.

As the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, Rhaegar's suspicions grew. "The Shadowlands... shadow creatures..." He pondered the connection between Qarth and the Shadowlands, his mind racing with possibilities.

Sam offered a reminder, "Prince, the Shadowlands is a realm shrouded in darkness, filled with sirens and blood witches, a realm of fear and chaos."

"Perhaps the Shadowlands is too far from Westeros to be detected," he added.

Rhaegar paused for a moment, considering Sam's words. "Lord Sam, in the western part of the peninsula, a shadow creature terrorizes the wildlings and thrives on taking lives. I've come here on my dragon to destroy it."

"House Crabb stands ready to serve you, Prince," Sam declared solemnly, his commitment unwavering.

Rhaegar acknowledged Sam's loyalty with a nod before turning his gaze to Wells.

Wells scowled at Sam and the nearby wildlings. "Prince, you should not pay attention to old Sam's story. He's just trying to distract you from the fact that the freighter was plundered and to deceive you."

"So Lord Wells believes the shadow creature I saw is a fabrication?" Rhaegar's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I dare not suggest that, but considering the prince's youth, it might be wise to stay away from savages. They're nothing more than ignorant beasts," Wells replied weakly.

Rhaegar's expression hardened. "Enough, Lord Wells. The Shadow Beast is real and it consumes life to strengthen itself. It's time for the people of the peninsula to put aside their prejudices and unite to defeat it."

"With all due respect, I have never encountered this supposed shadow creature, and I refuse to work with savages and enemies," Wells countered, his tone defiant.

Rhaegar waved his hand dismissively. "Then you may leave."

When Wells tried to interject, Rhaegar cut him off. "Go, Lord Wells. Return to your castle and refrain from provoking conflict until the shadow creature is defeated," he commanded firmly.

Seething with rage, Wells glared at Rhaegar before the cannibal's low growl filled the air, signaling his displeasure. As dragon saliva splattered over Wells, the Dyre Den commander quickly stepped in and led him away from the scene.

With the forces of the Dyre Den in retreat, Rhaegar turned his attention back to the task at hand and waited for everyone to leave.

Sam glanced up at the sky and extended an invitation to Rhaegar, "Prince, would you care to join us at The Whispers? The Crabb House would be honored to host you for a sumptuous dinner."

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow at the offer. It was a tempting offer, especially considering his recent focus on the shadow creature and the fatigue that accompanied it.

"If there is any surplus food in the Whispers, I would like to distribute it to the warriors of the Free Folk. Upon my return to King's Landing, I will see to it that you are repaid twice," Rhaegar added, his tone sincere.

Sam hesitated, weighing the request against the resources available. Despite his reservations, the opportunity to forge a bond with the prince was too valuable to pass up.

After a moment's consideration, Sam nodded and conceded, "Certainly, the Whispers will provide food for the savages for three days. Any additional assistance will strain our resources, but we will try to accommodate it."

With over two thousand men in his army, Rhaegar knew the burden of his request. Still, he was grateful for Sam's willingness to help.

"Your generosity is greatly appreciated, my lord," Rhaegar acknowledged, relieved to have solved the immediate food shortage.

As they prepared to leave for The Whispers Castle, Rhaegar found his opinion of Sam Crabb greatly enhanced, appreciating the lord's willingness to extend hospitality despite the difficulties of it.

Chapter 80: Dyre Den Castle

The next morning, Rhaegar emerged from the embrace of a soft goose down bed, his brow furrowed with the fragmented memories of dreams he had had the night before.

"Prince, Lord Sam awaits you in the breakfast room," a maid's voice called from beyond the ornate stone bedroom.

"I am aware of that," Rhaegar replied, rising to his feet with a trace of fatigue clinging to him.

Throughout the night, his sleep had been interrupted by haunting visions. In one, Rhaenyra's tear streaked face loomed before him, her grip on his hand tight as she voiced her concerns. In another, his father's normally placid face was distorted with rage as he ordered severe punishments, heads impaled on spikes as reminders of his wrath.

"Rest assured, I'll be back soon," Rhaegar murmured to himself, determined to finish his mission and return to Dragonstone Island once the threat of the Shadow Creature had been defeated.

...

Rhaegar pushed open the door to find a young girl in a delicate silk gauze dress waiting for him.

"Lady Yara, there was no need for you to come to inform me personally," Rhaegar remarked, acknowledging her presence with a nod.

Yara offered a small smile. "Father assigned me that duty, Prince. It's no trouble at all."

"You are too kind," Rhaegar replied, returning her smile with one of his own.

Indeed, Sam Crabb knew a thing or two about hospitality. The dinner he had arranged for Rhaegar the night before had been a pleasant experience, with good food and mild company.

They descended the stairs together to find Sam already seated at the table in the waiting room.

"Prince," Sam greeted warmly as Rhaegar approached.

Rhaegar returned the greeting and gestured for Sam to sit down, taking his own seat across from him.

As they began to partake of the simple but exquisite meal, Rhaegar addressed the subject of the previous evening.

"Lord Sam, what do you think of my proposal?" he asked.

Sam paused thoughtfully before answering. "The Shadow Creature poses a grave threat to the peninsula, and the Crabb House stands ready to fight alongside you."

He went on to outline the complicated dynamics of the region. "In the eastern part of the peninsula, controlled by the Brune and Crabb Houses, the presence of wildlings is scarce. If we are to confront the Shadow Creature and rally the scattered wildlings, cooperation between our two families is essential."

Rhaegar, well-versed in history and politics, understood the importance of gaining the support of the local nobles. While the encounter with the Brune House had been less than favorable, the prospect of working with the Crabbs seemed promising.

Sam's willingness to offer assistance was evident, and Rhaegar gratefully accepted.

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Breakfast ended, but Rhaegar remained unsure of how to confront the Shadow Creature.

Sam, however, had a suggestion.

"The ship where the Shadow Creature first appeared is still stranded on the beach. I didn't dare approach it before, but now that you're riding a dragon, I can try to investigate it," Sam suggested.

After a moment's thought, Rhaegar agreed, "Proceed as you think best, Lord Sam."

With the plan in motion, a hundred fully equipped soldiers were gathered from the Whispers, led by Sam himself.

Meanwhile, Rhaegar ascended Cannibal the Dragon to oversee the operation from above.

The wildling army remained on standby, stationed in the wilderness for the time being.

As they traveled toward the beach, located along the coast, came into view after an hour's journey.

Upon reaching the beach, they spotted the stranded junk ship in the distance, the site of the Shadow Creature's first appearance.

"Cannibal, land," Rhaegar ordered, motioning for Cannibal to descend onto the beach.

The abandoned ship, battered by the elements, lay in disrepair, its hull weathered and its mast partially broken.

Sam dispatched ten soldiers to search the ship, paired off for safety, ready to alert the others at the slightest sign of danger.

To their relief, the search revealed no threats.

"The ship is empty," the soldiers reported upon their return.

Rhaegar and Sam exchanged looks of disappointment.

"Return to The Whispers and see if there are any developments among the wildlings," Rhaegar ordered, causing Cannibal to take flight again.

A simple search had proved futile; a more strategic approach would be needed to draw out the Shadow Creature.

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At Rhaegar's command, the Cannibal gracefully soared to the Whispers.

Moments after landing, Rhaegar noticed a messenger on a white horse engaged in a heated argument with the guards at the walled gate.

Confused, Rhaegar approached, his curiosity piqued by the unfolding scene.

"Where do you come from as a messenger?" Rhaegar inquired, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Seeing Rhaegar's arrival atop the dragon, the messenger quickly disengaged from the guards and addressed him, "Prince, I come from the Dyre Den. Please read this letter."

"Dyre Den... House Brune?" Rhaegar murmured, his expression troubled. "What of Wells? I informed him of the temporary truce on the peninsula."

"Lord Wells died!" the messenger declared, his face heavy with grief as he knelt before Rhaegar.

"What?" Rhaegar's voice cracked with disbelief, his mind struggling to comprehend the sudden turn of events.

The messenger continued, recounting the grim details: "After bidding you farewell yesterday, Lord Wells returned to the castle and secluded himself. No one dared approach him. When the maid entered his chamber this morning, she found him lifeless in his bed. There were no signs of external injury, but the Maester determined that blunt force trauma had penetrated his mouth, nose, and ears, causing fatal brain damage."

Rhaegar's mind raced as he processed the information, a shiver running down his spine at the implications.

"The Shadow Creature..." he murmured, a sense of foreboding settling over him.

Previously, the Shadow Creature had only targeted the savage tribes, but its brazen attack on a noble lord marked a dangerous escalation.

Shaking off his unease, Rhaegar decided, "From now on, we must all stay close to the Cannibal for safety."

Determined to address the situation, Rhaegar accepted the messenger's letter and quickly scanned its contents.

The letter explained Wells' death, had an agreement for a truce with the Whispers, and an invitation to a banquet at the Dyre Den signed by Bart Brune, Wells' brother.

After reading the letter, Rhaegar instructed the messenger, "Wait here for Lord Sam. I will go on ahead."

With a heavy heart and a sense of urgency, Rhaegar spurred the Cannibal on, heading straight for Dyre Den, which lay across from the Whispers. The two castles were built on the south and north shores of the eastern part of Crackclaw Point, separated by a large area of wilderness.

Fortunately, the Cannibal is very fast, a half hour is enough for a round trip.

As the sea breeze whipped around him, Rhaegar's mind raced with the weight of impending danger, spurred on by the threat lurking in the center of Crackclaw Point.

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Rhaegar and his dragon soon arrived at the Dyre Den, a foreboding castle perched on a rugged mountaintop. The Cannibal circled the fortress before descending gracefully, its menacing roar echoing through the air as emerald flames erupted from its maw, signaling the arrival of a Targaryen prince.

The soldiers stationed on the city walls, stunned by the imposing sight, wavered in their resolve.

Looking down at the closed gates of Dyre Den Castle, Rhaegar awaited the lord.

As expected, the sturdy wooden doors swung open to reveal a procession of finely dressed men and women emerging from within.

In the forefront was a tall, slender youth reminiscent of the late Lord Wells.

Close behind were a woman with a prominent red eye and a weathered, armored middle-aged man.

As the Cannibal landed in the courtyard, the gathering of nobles found themselves face to face with both man and dragon, their astonishment palpable as they gazed upon the figure astride the dragon's back.

Recognizing Rhaegar as a representative of House Targaryen, the young man stepped forward and bowed respectfully. "Your Grace, Bart of House Brune, at your service."

Rhaegar looked at him with a puzzled expression. "Your brother has died?"