

G.O Thrones 81

Chapter 81: The Truth

"Yes, he was killed in an attack last night," Bart said with a heavy heart before extending an invitation, "Prince, please let us host a welcome feast in your honor."

"Your brother's departure makes such festivities unnecessary," Rhaegar said with a gentle shake of his head.

Bart paused for a moment, unsure of what to say.

The middle-aged man accompanying him interjected, "Wells was a fool, and his passing doesn't bother us. A Targaryen prince deserves far more than what he did."

"In that case, maybe we could just take a quick tour of your place?" Rhaegar suggested with a faint smile as he dismounted the dragon.

With the Cannibal stationed outside, Rhaegar remained unfazed by any potential hostility from the assembled group.

His status and the fact that he was there with the dragon meant that he was treated with respect, no doubt about it.

Once he'd dismounted from the dragon's back, Rhaegar was led into the castle by his hosts. The atmosphere was noticeably different from what it had been when Wells was there – no trace of his former arrogance.

Indeed, fools often met an early end, leaving behind survivors who, while not necessarily wise, had a certain level of prudence.

Once they got inside the fortress, Rhaegar acted like a curious kid, asking Bart to show him around.

Dyre Den Castle looked impressive from the outside, but the inside was pretty simple, just a three-story building with strong stone walls.

After his brief exploration, Rhaegar retired to a waiting room to rest.

As he sipped the juice the maid brought him, Rhaegar noticed Bart standing nearby and asked, "Ser, it seems you have something on your mind?"

"Yes, Prince," Bart immediately took the lead in the conversation.

He dropped to one knee, received a sword from his servant, and presented it with reverence, bowing his head as he spoke, "I've heard that House Crabb has pledged allegiance to you."

"I, Bart Brune, representing House Brune, offer you our allegiance as well and await your response."

Rhaegar tasted the grape juice, feigning curiosity as he remarked, "Ser, your brother's death has already made you Lord of Dyre Den?"

To pledge allegiance on behalf of the family required the authority of the lord, a position Bart had not yet officially assumed.

"Not yet, but I've sent a raven to King's Landing with the request and expect an answer soon," Bart replied, his forehead beading with cold sweat.

Setting down his glass, Rhaegar shook his head gently, "I'm afraid, Ser, I cannot accept a lord's allegiance without proper authority, nor can you swear it in your brother's stead."

"Prince..." Bart's disappointment was obvious.

The older man with him stepped in and scolded, "Enough, Bart. The honor of House Brune has already been tarnished by your brother's actions."

Bart bowed his head obediently and refrained from speaking further.

Rhaegar's attention shifted to the middle-aged man, noting that the emblem on his chest differed from House Brune's. It was a brown bear's claw on a white background, bordered by two brown lines.

Unable to recall the origin of the crest, Rhaegar inquired, "Ser, what house do you represent?"

Sorrel Brune left Bart alone and said, "Sorrel Brune. I'm from the Brune branch of knightly families, and our territory is in Brownhollow."

Rhaegar thought for a moment. "I see, the descendants of the Brune brothers, the famous conquerors of Crackclaw Point."

After the meeting, Rhaegar leaned back in his seat and asked, "Ser, could you tell me what the real reason for your invitation is?" He didn't think a simple letter of condolence was the only reason for summoning a prince.

He tightened his smile and spoke solemnly, "This time, it's Bart who's extending the invitation to you, seeking your help in saving House Brune."

"Interesting," Rhaegar's interest was piqued.

Sorrel continued, "Dyre Den is plagued by a curse, born of Wells' folly and greed."

"The ship was from Qarth, but it had no business with House Brune."

"It was returning from Braavos when it fell victim to a storm and washed ashore near Dyre Den, where it was found and rescued by local fishermen."

"Wells, as the lord, questioned the captain and crew when he heard about the valuable cargo on board."

"Driven by greed, Wells orchestrated a night raid on the ship, resulting in the slaughter of the crew and mercenaries, save for one enigmatic figure—a black-robed man in a red mask."

"This man identified himself as a Shadowbinder from the Shadowlands."

Rhaegar's expression changed, "A Shadowbinder! The mysterious figures of folklore?"

"The leader of the raid dismissed it as mere legend and beheaded the Shadowbinder," Sorrel confirmed, his tone serious.

"Did the Shadowbinder's death end the curse?" Rhaegar pressed eagerly, his curiosity burning.

Sorrel hesitated before answering, "Not quite. After the Shadowbinder died, his headless body turned into a shadowy specter."

"It lurked in the darkness, following the soldiers back to Dyre Den, where it continued its deadly rampage, claiming several lives that night.

"For a time, the shadow seemed to disappear, leading Wells to believe that the curse had been lifted.

"But it reappeared and claimed his life."

Sorrel's account of the incident lacked any sense of sadness for the fallen lord. Instead, it was filled with a strong sense of hatred.

"So Wells lied to me. He knew about the Shadow Monster from the beginning," Rhaegar grimaced.

Bart fell to his knees and pleaded, "He didn't want to hide it. Intercepting and killing a passing merchant ship is a crime, and he didn't dare..."

"Since he knew it was a crime, he should not have taken the risk," Rhaegar interrupted sharply.

Apparently, these two brothers were both fools. One was bold enough to face the consequences, while the other was too stubborn to admit when they were wrong.

Rhaegar's anger flared. "The curse was wrought by the crimes of Dyre Den and has stained all of Crackclaw Point. That alone warrants Wells' head a dozen times over. And you, you should be thinking about how to atone for those sins."

"Should we... report this to the king?" A timid woman spoke.

Rhaegar's gaze, lacking warmth, shifted to Bart and Sorrel.

Bart quickly interjected, "She is my brother's wife."

"Do you propose to report this matter?" Rhaegar asked, his tone measured.

After days of nonstop travel, Rhaegar was feeling the effects of his journey. But he just couldn't bring himself to ask his father for help. He figured he could handle this on his own now that he'd mastered the Cannibal. It was his adventure with the dragon.

"Of course not," Sorrel, the oldest and most thoughtful of them, answered first.

Bart quickly followed up, pointing out that House Brune's honor would remain tarnished until the curse was lifted.

Rhaegar shrugged and let out a sigh. "All right, you're wearing me out."

Chapter 82: Notes of the Forest Witch

The Brune House finally revealed its secrets, and the truth came out.

"You've had dealings with the Shadowbinders in your family. Any thoughts on how to resolve this?" Rhaegar studied them closely.

Bart swallowed nervously before answering, "Not exactly, but the head of the Shadowbinder who was killed is still kept in the castle for safekeeping."

The headless body of the Shadowbinder had undergone a strange transformation.

Wells realized the significance of the head, so he had his soldiers retrieve it.

"Take me to see it," Rhaegar said firmly.

"As you wish, Prince," Bart agreed, leading Rhaegar to the attic on the sunlit side of the castle.

The attic was pretty desolate and covered in dust, except for a circle of tallow candles casting light on a single object in the center: a pale, white head.

"This is our defense against the curse. By illuminating the head with candles, we prevent the curse from taking hold of it," Bart explained.

"And the shadow creature tried to take the skull?" Rhaegar asked, his brow furrowed in curiosity as he surveyed the eerie sight.

"Not exactly. The creature seems to lack intelligence; we take this measure only as a precaution," Bart explained respectfully.

Before Rhaegar could fully absorb the disturbing sight before him, the creaking of stairs echoed from below.

Sorrel hurried up to the attic, his expression urgent as he delivered the news: "Prince, there's a large group of wildlings surrounding the castle. They claim allegiance to you."

Rhaegar's surprise was obvious.

"Yes, I've put together a group of free folk and they pledged their allegiance to me, seeking refuge from the shadow monsters that roam the lands."

Grateful for Sorrel's initiative, Rhaegar turned to descend the stairs and instructed, "Keep an eye on the head; it may come in handy."

Bart nodded earnestly, "Yes, Prince."

With a quick glance at Bart, Sorrel followed Rhaegar down the stairs.

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As Rhaegar left the castle, he heard the wildlings howling.

"Roar..."

Cannibal, sensing his approach, lowered his body and offered his back for Rhaegar to mount.

"Head for the walls," Rhaegar said briefly, settling on the Cannibal's sturdy spine.

To Sorrel's astonishment, the black dragon lurched forward, spreading its massive wings to take flight.

Outside the castle walls, a huge crowd of wildlings was waiting.

Some looked scared, while others had the scars of recent battles on them.

As Cannibal circled overhead, his presence caused the wildlings to scatter and fall to their knees in awe.

With a loud thud, Cannibal landed on the ground, his green eyes looking calm and uninterested.

Perched on the dragon's back, Rhaegar surveyed the scene below and asked, "What brings you here? Why have you gathered?"

Amidst the crowd of wildlings, a towering figure emerged, blood seeping from a gash in his shoulder.

"Prince, we were searching for other tribes when we were ambushed by a the creature. Many of us were wounded," Trantal explained, his voice strained with pain.

Rhaegar's eyes widened in surprise. "How many casualties and how large has the shadow monster grown?" he asked.

Trantal grimaced. "Nearly a hundred of our warriors and over three hundred of the local tribe. The shadow creature covers a large area. If it weren't for the bonfire that inadvertently thwarted its advance, our escape would have been perilous."

Rhaegar's concern deepened. "Can we track the Shadow Creature?" he asked eagerly.

"I'm afraid not," Trantal replied with a heavy heart. "The creature is avoiding capture, lurking in the shadows beyond our reach."

Rhaegar furrowed his brow as he considered their next move. He realized that their enemy was hard to find. "We need to act fast," he said aloud, thinking through different ways to deal with it.

Meanwhile, Sorrel, stationed on the city wall, overheard their conversation and voiced his concern. "Prince, if left unchecked, that cursed creature will continue to threaten the peninsula," he warned.

Acknowledging the gravity of the situation, Rhaegar nodded thoughtfully. "Prepare provisions for our guests," he instructed, "and send word to Lord Sam. We will need his counsel to formulate a plan."

As he spoke, Rhaegar could feel the weight of his responsibility bearing down on him.

Although he was young, he knew that it was important to get advice from someone who knew what they were doing when things were unclear.

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At noon, Sam Crabbe rushed toward Dyre Den with a group of soldiers, relieved to see Cannibal's towering silhouette in the distance.

Entering the fortress with a sense of urgency, he was greeted by Bart, who had been expecting his arrival.

Sam was pretty upset when he heard about Wells' death and the Prince's unexpected visit.

In the waiting room, Sam's meeting with Bart and Sorrel was pretty tense, given that they had a lot of history and a lot of bad blood between them.

Upon discovering Wells' treachery in killing the Shadowbinder and stealing his farmland, Sam's anger only intensified.

Feeling deeply wronged by Wells' actions, Sam seethed with resentment and humiliation.

Unable to remain a silent observer, Rhaegar intervened.

When Bart took control of the Dyre Den, he offered a profuse apology on Wells's behalf, along with double compensation for the confiscated farmland and a thousand gold dragons.

Although he was still unhappy, Sam reluctantly accepted House Brune's compensation, mindful of the looming threat of the Shadow Creature and the Prince's authority.

After all, Wells is already dead, and it is not a good decision to fight House Brune for no reason.

As the meeting got more and more heated, Rhaegar and his advisors gathered around the council table to come up with a plan to deal with the Shadow Creature.

Sorrel's idea was pretty straightforward: "We've got about ninety percent of the wildlings on the peninsula gathered up. We could use some of them as bait in the wilderness."

Trangal's response was venomous: "Black-hearted bastard, why don't you use your old man as bait?"

Sorrel's retort was equally aggressive: "Foolish savage, allowing you to enter the castle is already a generous gesture; don't provoke me into severing your head."

Trangal's taunt escalated the tension. "Let's see if I can't take your head off first and use it as a wine jug."

Rhaegar was getting pretty annoyed, so he bellowed, slammed his fist down on the table, and shot them a stern glare to stop their argument.

As the room fell silent, Rhaegar was pretty annoyed at the way his advisors were arguing with each other.

"What's with all the bickering?" he asked, his frustration evident in his tone.

The two opponents snorted in disdain, each turning their heads defiantly, unwilling to back down.

Sam, who had been watching the exchange from the sidelines, stood up to speak to the prince after the argument had died down. "Prince, the curse seems to be magic-related. Perhaps we could use similar magic to fight it."

"Magic is dangerous. Who among us has the knowledge of such arts? Aside from dragonfire I can't think of anything else." Rhaegar asked.

With a confident grin, Sam stepped forward. "Prince, you must have heard of my ancestor, Clarence Crabb. He was a legendary hero who unified Crackclaw Point and left behind extraordinary stories."

"For example, do you know the origin of Whispers Castle, which belongs to the Crabb House?"

Rhaegar's face clouded with confusion. He wasn't well versed in such history. He looked to Bart for more information.

Understanding the hint, Bart elaborated, "The legend speaks of Clarence's great power and his wife, rumored to be a forest witch. It's said that for every person Clarence killed, a severed head was brought home."

"The forest witch would then kiss these skulls, bringing them back to life, and they became Clarence's silent advisors."

"Since they didn't have any vocal cords, they could only communicate in whispers, which is why the castle is called that."

Rhaegar's eyes sparkled with intrigue as he turned to Sam. "Lord Sam, are you familiar with such magical practices?"

The idea of resurrected heads was indeed rare and intriguing.

Sam cleared his throat, his tone subdued. "We cannot replicate the feats of our ancestors."

"We can't?" Rhaegar's disappointment was palpable. What was the point of mentioning it if it couldn't be replicated?

Sam added, "I don't know anything about magic, but the Forest Witch's notes on it are still in the Whispers."

"Those notes were written in Valyrian, a language that's no longer spoken in our family. However, since you're of ancient Valyrian descent, perhaps you could decipher them."

"Would you be willing to share these priceless magical texts?" Rhaegar's youthful demeanor changed to one of seriousness.

"It's not like there's a shortage of people who know about magic. There are occult studies at the Citadel, but they've never really proven useful."

As he explained, Sam got up from his seat and started to move around the room.

Kneeling before Rhaegar, he spoke with reverence, "Yet I remain hopeful, Prince, that I can assist you in restoring peace to the peninsula and achieving unrivaled greatness."

Chapter 83: Marsh Marigolds

Rhaegar looked at Sam Crabb with a thoughtful expression, as if he was trying to decide what to say.

The man's unwavering loyalty was both admirable and a bit of a challenge.

But as he kept thinking about it, the Forest Witch's arcane knowledge started to look pretty appealing.

If these notes held the key to defeating the shadow creature, they might also open a path for him to delve into the mysteries of magic.

Who wouldn't want to have such mystical powers at their disposal?

Taking a deep breath, Rhaegar said, "Lord Sam, I think the contents of these notes could be really useful. I'll give your request some thought."

"Yes, Prince."

Sam's astonishment was evident in his eyes as he replied with equal gravity, "May the glory of heroes shine upon you. I sense that you will be the new hero of Crackclaw Point."

"I hope so."

Rhaegar's smile was faint as he murmured, "Time is of the essence. We must move quickly. First, we must retrieve the Forest Witch's notes."

"Lord Sam, since our time is short. I will ride Cannibal to The Whispers Castle. Can you tell me to the location of the notes?"

Without hesitation, Sam replied, "They're stored in the basement of the castle. Ask Yara for help. She'll show you where they are."

"Very well. I will leave immediately."

With his mind on defeating the shadow creature, Rhaegar told Trungal to deal with the wildlings outside the city walls. Then, he rode Cannibal towards the Whispers on the southern coast.

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The Cannibal reached its destination in just ten minutes, landing gracefully at the castle gates. The guards stepped forward to salute, recognizing the dragon rider.

As Sam's children emerged from the castle to greet him, Rhaegar exchanged brief pleasantries before seeking out the young girl, Yara.

Though initially confused by his request, Yara, ever the resilient daughter of the Crackclaw Point, wasted no time in leading Rhaegar down to the castle's basement.

Descending through two levels, one well-lit and the other shrouded in darkness, they reached their destination.

With the flicker of an oil lamp, Yara illuminated the dim surroundings, revealing an eerie room filled with various objects and boxes. In one corner sat a desk decorated with an array of skulls.

"This is it, Prince," Yara murmured softly, making her way to the desk and lighting a large candle.

Though taken aback by the strange sight, Rhaegar steeled himself and approached the table, noticing a wooden box resting on it.

Yara pulled a key from one of the skulls and unlocked the box, revealing a thin, yellowed book inside. With great care, she handed it to Rhaegar and cradled it in his hand.

As Rhaegar accepted the book, he felt the smooth texture of parchment beneath his fingertips and realized it was no ordinary paper.

"Let's step outside, Prince," Yara suggested, noting his discomfort in the dimly lit cellar.

"Agreed. Let's go outside," Rhaegar replied.

As they walked, Rhaegar studied the Forest Witch's notes, his brow furrowing with each line he deciphered.

The writing was indeed Valyrian, but it was a far cry from the traditional High Valyrian of the Targaryen family. It was a mixture of various dialects, interspersed with both common and obscure scripts, creating a tangled web of words.

Fortunately, Rhaegar's knowledge of Valyrian allowed him to make sense of the jumbled text, though it would have been dizzying for anyone else trying to read it.

"Nature Magic... Flower of Life... Dead Man's Murmur..."

By the time he came out of the cellar, Rhaegar had read the whole book, which was only a few pages long.

The book was pretty slim, with just three spells and some basic info on nature magic. Of the three spells, Rhaegar could only fully understand one: the Forest Witch's "Dead Man's Murmur," a spell that can resurrect severed heads.

The other two spells were harder to get. One spell involved animal shapeshifting, which required an innate ability that most humans don't have. The third spell focused on connecting with the essence of nature, which meant having a deep understanding of the natural world.

Mastering these spells would require not only a deep understanding, but also an innate talent for natural magic—which is a challenge even for someone like Rhaegar.

"Luckily, Dead Man's Murmur is pretty straightforward. It doesn't require any special talent, just certain materials," Rhaegar said thoughtfully.

The magic was based on a unique substance: the Flower of Life. The Flower of Life has a powerful vitality that preserves the head from decay, allowing the spell to awaken the memories of the deceased.

But there was one key difference: memory wasn't the same as consciousness. The skull was able to speak, but it didn't have any real intelligence. It was just a puppet, a hollow echo of the life it once held.

This realization left Rhaegar with a sour taste in his mouth. He recoiled from the idea of manipulating corpses for personal gain, finding it morally repugnant.

"What a despicable form of magic," Rhaegar muttered, his brow furrowed in disgust.

This wasn't the kind of magic he was looking for. He was drawn to the awe-inspiring magic flames or great swords, the magic of heroes and warriors.

"No wonder the Citadel shuns such practices; they only breed corruption," he mused, his disappointment evident as he handed the book back to Yara.

"Did you not like the contents?" Yara inquired, her tone soft.

"Valuable knowledge, perhaps, but not the kind I seek," Rhaegar replied with a shake of his head. Still, he formulated a plan.

The Shadowbinder's head stayed put in the Dyre Den.

If he could revive it, there might be a chance to gain insight into how to fight the shadow creature.

Turning to Yara, Rhaegar asked, "Do you know anything about the Flower of Life?"

He had memorized the incantation for Dead Man's Murmur, but the spell required a crucial component: the Flower of Life.

Yara's expression turned curious as she gestured to the family banner that adorned the wall of the waiting room. "Prince, our emblem - the Marsh Marigold - is also known as the Flower of Life."

Rhaegar glanced back, taking in the intricately wrought golden flower - a stark contrast to its origins in the murky swamp.

"I had assumed it was just a common marsh orchid," Rhaegar admitted in surprise.

Yara explained with a smile, "While marsh marigolds may resemble orchids, they have a distinct coloration and thrive in different environments."

"The marsh marigold, said to be hardy and teeming with vitality, is hailed as the flower of life."

Undeterred, Rhaegar pressed on. "Where might one find it?"

Yara shook her head. "Marsh marigolds are extremely rare, thought to have disappeared over a century ago, probably driven to extinction."

Rhaegar said, "If I go on an expedition on the dragon's back through the swamps of the Peninsula, Is there any chance of finding one?"

Yara gave a realistic assessment. "Given that half of the peninsula is covered by swamps and barely inhabited, the chances of finding a Flower of Life in the middle of the swamps are pretty slim."

"That's fine," Rhaegar replied confidently, sounding sure of himself and his abilities. "As long as it's still out there, there's a chance."

Then he turned to a more pressing matter. "Regarding the notes, please keep it safe, the Forest Witch was clearly good at natural magic."

Chapter 84: The Shadow's Approach

With a farewell to Yara, Rhaegar mounted the dragon and left the Whispers.

According to legend, the last sighting of a marsh marigold in the heart of the swamp, nestled in the center of Crackclaw Point, the largest swamp on the peninsula.

The swamp was shrouded in a perpetual miasma and plagued year-round by poisonous insects, so it had remained untouched by human presence for many years.

Despite the swamp's reputation, Rhaegar was determined to use his dragon to find the marsh marigold.

As they neared the edge of the swamp, Rhaegar looked to the sky. The sun was still high; there was still time to find the flower and return to Dyre Den before nightfall.

"Roar..."

Hovering over the marsh, its vast expanse stretching endlessly below the edge of the sky, the Cannibal let out a low growl, expressing its reluctance to move forward.

Rhaegar tenderly stroked the dragon's scales and wondered aloud, "What is it, Cannibal?"

The dragon shook its head and flapped its wings, signaling its discomfort.

"Do you think there might be something dangerous lurking in the swamp?" Rhaegar ventured a guess.

"Roar..."

The Cannibal's tail lifted and tapped Rhaegar lightly on the shoulder.

"Am I in danger here?" Rhaegar's voice trailed off as he was frozen by the dragon's warning.

In response, the dragon flew over the swamp and directed a stream of dragonfire at a patch of mud.

Boom!

The explosion erupted in mid-air, dragonfire igniting gases and sending up a noxious blast that churned the muck below.

Rhaegar watched the show with a frown.

"Is that... miasma?" He remembered the Maester's lectures on the subject.

The swamp air is pretty toxic, full of noxious gases, ready to burn if exposed to fire.

The dragon's flame had accidentally set off the dangerous miasma.

"Are you worried that I might breathe in the poisonous fumes?" Rhaegar thought for a moment, then placed a reassuring hand on the dragon's spine.

The Cannibal, who was more clever than he let on, knew what he was doing, his green eyes saying it all.

"Have you crossed this swamp before?" Rhaegar asked, trying to figure out what the dragon was up to.

"I'm looking for a particular hardy flower. Do you know where it is?" Rhaegar showed him the Crabb House crest, adorned with the distinctive marsh marigold.

The Cannibal paused for a moment, then took the emblem in its mouth and spread its wings to lead Rhaegar on a new path, moving quickly and purposefully.

In a matter of moments, Rhaegar and the Cannibal came to another corner of the swamp. This area was a mix of marsh and pine forest, with the marshes encroaching on the forest and creating a pretty unpleasant landscape.

Here, the miasma was much weaker than in the heart of the swamp, which gave them a bit of a break from the noxious fumes.

Cannibal glanced back at Rhaegar and let out a low growl, as if to convey a message.

Rhaegar understood the dragon's silent warning and reached for a handkerchief from his bracelet, moisten it with water, and cover his mouth and nose.

The dragon snorted in apparent discontent and motioned for Rhaegar to dismount. However, he seemed to be completely unaware of the gesture.

Cannibal lowered himself, prompting Rhaegar to reluctantly comply.

The dragon moved over the swamp, its huge body brushing against the occasional pine trees, snapping them like twigs as it moved.

Its head swivelled back and forth, scanning the landscape as if searching for something.

Rhaegar guessed that Cannibal must have encountered marsh marigolds before, probably during its time away from Crackclaw Point, when it had been nursing its wounds.

During that time, Rhaegar didn't know where the dragon was, but it seemed like Cannibal had looked for the Flower of Life before.

As the dragon kept looking, not bothered by the bad smell, Rhaegar stayed on its back, resting a bit as it went up into the air. He was waiting for Cannibal to find the marsh marigold.

With his mature instincts and keen senses, Cannibal would surely find the marsh marigold.

But in the silent gloom of the swamp, Rhaegar couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that he was being watched.

"Cannibal, I have a bad feeling about this. Stay alert," he ordered, his senses heightened since the ambush at Dragonstone.

Every rustle of leaves and sway of grass caught his attention.

The Cannibal roared in response, acknowledging the warning, and its wing shifted subtly to reflect its heightened vigilance.

As they flew on, a sudden movement caught Rhaegar's eye.

Without hesitation, he commanded, "Dracarys!"

At the same time, the Cannibal unleashed a stream of flame that engulfed the shadow tentacle that lunged at them like a snake.

With a sizzling sound, the tentacle disintegrated into viscous droplets upon contact with the dragonfire, falling harmlessly to the ground.

Rhaegar quickly identified the source and turned the Cannibal's fire on a decrepit pine tree, reducing it to charred remains in moments.

But the elusive shadow tentacles remained hidden, vanishing without a trace.

As Rhaegar and the Cannibal considered their next move, shadow tentacles suddenly appeared from all directions, encircling them like a tightening noose.

Cannibal reacted quickly by flapping his powerful wings and soaring upward, avoiding the attack.

From above, jets of green dragonfire cascaded down, engulfing the shadows below, reducing them to ashes in an instant.

Surveying the aftermath with a grave expression, Rhaegar remained vigilant, expecting more attacks from the Shadow Creatures.

But to his surprise, none came.

With a firm nod, Rhaegar refocused on their main goal.

"Cannibal, let's move on. Let's focus on finding the marsh marigold first."

Cannibal agreed and turned in a new direction, acknowledging the lack of immediate danger.

There were lots of swamps in Crackclaw Point, and each one could hide treasures beyond belief.

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As the sun set, casting a warm glow over the landscape, Cannibal led Rhaegar through several small swamps until they reached one near a rushing stream.

A macabre scene unfolded before them: a carpet of white bones covered the swamp, the remains of wild beasts drawn to the water's edge by the poisonous miasma.

With a loud thud, Cannibal landed in the middle of the eerie scene, his huge weight crushing a few pine trees under his huge talons.

Amid the devastation, Rhaegar caught sight of something—a marsh marigold blooming on a patch of green stone.

"Cannibal, you've outdone yourself," Rhaegar murmured, awed by his dragon's keen senses.

Cannibal shot a disdainful look at him, as if to say, "That's easy, ignorant boy."

Ignoring this, Rhaegar descended from Cannibal's back and traversed the gnarled roots and sinking pine trunks to reach the precious flower.

Navigating over the sunken pine logs and through the muddy terrain, Rhaegar approached the patch of green stone where the marsh marigold thrived. With gentle hands, he cradled the flower's rhizome.

"Rare specimen detected, containing traces of magical essence. Initiating analysis..."

The system's prompt echoed in Rhaegar's mind, letting him know that it had successfully detected the flower's unique properties.

With bated breath, Rhaegar studied the flower, his excitement palpable. "Who knew such a humble place held an opportunity for exploration?"

He quickly accessed his system interface and examined the newfound discovery.

[Flower of Life]

Exploration progress: 0.5%

Chapter 85: Life Essence

"The initial exploration progress is low, so it seems the quality of the marsh marigold flower isn't bad," Rhaegar mused, assessing the situation.

With his experience in exploration, he eagerly reached out to pluck the flower, anticipating its potential.

But before his fingers could grasp it, a sinister shadow tentacle lunged out of the darkness, catching him off guard.

In the blink of an eye, Cannibal's tail intercepted the attack, severing the tentacle in one swift motion.

Reacting quickly, Rhaegar grabbed the marsh marigold and retreated hastily.

Once again, the shadow tentacles closed in on them, prompting Cannibal to unleash a torrent of dragonfire in defense.

But in the midst of the chaos, a new threat emerged.

A headless figure emerged from the shadows, wielding a steel spike and pierced Cannibal's tail with alarming precision.

The dragon's blood sizzled as it struck the searing metal, filling the air with a pungent scent.

The headless figure stuffed the steel spike stained with dragon's blood into its stomach and turned around without moving.

As Rhaegar locked eyes with the enigmatic figure, a shiver ran down his spine, sensing an unnerving connection between them.

Splatter...

In the next moment, Cannibal recoiled in pain from the blow to his tail and quickly swatted the headless figure away with a flick of his tail.

As the shadow silhouette dispersed, the tentacles lurking in the darkness vanished one by one, along with the steel spike hidden in the headless apparition's stomach.

Rhaegar quickened his pace toward Cannibal, clambering onto the dragon's back with urgency, the marsh marigold clutched tightly in his pocket.

"Let's go, Cannibal!" he urged, a feeling of unease gnawing at him.

The encounter with the headless figure had left him unsettled, defying the typical behavior of the shadow creature.

They were usually mindless creatures, driven by instinct alone. But this one felt different, almost human.

Rhaegar's mind raced as he considered the implications, his unease growing with each passing moment.

Sensing his rider's apprehension, Cannibal wasted no time, flapping its powerful wings to rise into the sky, putting distance between them and the disturbing sight below.

As they ascended, Rhaegar's thoughts raced, pondering the possibility that the shadow monster had evolved, gained intelligence beyond its primal instincts.

...

Late at night, Rhaegar guided Cannibal in a slow hover over Dyre Den, taking his time before descending.

"This exploration is complete, please retrieve the lost treasure," he heard the familiar beep of the system.

Rhaegar eagerly checked the survey report.

[Flower of Life]

Progress of exploration: 100%

"It's finally done, just in time," Rhaegar sighed with relief, quietly celebrating the completion of his exploration.

Instead of heading straight back to Dyre Den Castle after leaving the Swamp Forest, he took a detour to The Whispers. There, he briefed Yara on the situation, advising her to increase patrols and fortify defenses against possible attacks by shadow creatures.

At the same time, he mobilized a portion of the wildling army stationed nearby and instructed them to assemble at Dyre Den.

After a day of activity, they finally returned to Dyre Den.

"Now let's see what treasures the Marsh Marigold has yielded," Rhaegar said, cupping the golden flower in his arms as he activated the exploration reward.

A shimmering purple light emerged from the exploration and settled on Cannibal's back in the form of a small, coconut-sized mass.

"Purple... It's supposed to be epic level, right?" Rhaegar wondered aloud, his excitement palpable as he reached out to touch the glowing light.

When he made contact, a cascade of bright purple sparks erupted, accompanied by the familiar beep of the system.

"Relic successfully detected..."

"Detection successful, determined to be an epic relic, Cannivorous Flower."

"Great, it's really an epic level reward, second only to legendary," Rhaegar exclaimed, a broad grin spreading across his face at the prospect of their newfound discovery.

Immediately after, Rhaegar examined the text clues on the quest interface.

"Rooted in death but blossoming with the light of life."

Scowling, Rhaegar pondered the cryptic message.

"Cannivorous Flower... Death and life..."

He examined the delicate flower in his hand, sensing that its activation must involve some interplay of life and death.

After much deliberation, Rhaegar gave the order to land.

Cannibal gracefully folded its wings and settled outside the city walls.

The wildling army gathered, kneeling in reverence as Rhaegar approached.

"Do you have any freshly hunted animals? Bodies will do," Rhaegar inquired.

"Yes, Prince," a newly inducted member of the Crab Claw tribe replied eagerly, scurrying off to retrieve a stag carcass.

Dismounting from the dragon's back, Rhaegar placed the Cannivorous Flower on the carcass.

A faint glow emanated from the flower.

In an instant, the stag's body disintegrated into a pile of dry bones, a spectacle that sent shivers down the spines of onlookers.

Even Rhaegar himself was taken aback.

He had not anticipated the flower's insatiable appetite.

It seemed to demand more victims, its glow lingering as if demanding more.

Quickly, Rhaegar ordered more animal carcasses to be brought forth, each meeting the same fate as the last.

Fortunately, after several sacrifices, the flower seemed satiated.

Its glow faded, accompanied by the familiar beep of the system.

"Congratulations, Cannivorous Flower has been activated. You have received..."

[Life Essence].

Grade: Epic (Purple)

Effects: Majestic vitality, stimulates latent talents.

Evaluation: "Cannot be consumed by non-magical creatures!"

The flower's stamen withered, releasing a single drop of golden dew that landed in Rhaegar's palm.

Examining the quest interface, Rhaegar's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Increasing vitality and talent... What an extraordinary ability."

Reading the special notation in the evaluation column, Rhaegar shook the dewdrop and couldn't help but marvel.

Even as a human with the Dragonlord's bloodline, he had no innate magical abilities. He was not a magical creature and could not benefit from the effects of the dewdrop.

He glanced back at Cannibal, who returned his gaze with great interest.

The dragon's green eyes seemed to appraise the dewdrop in Rhaegar's hand.

Stepping forward, Rhaegar raised his palm and smiled, "Here, Cannibal, this is your well-deserved reward."

Cannibal had played a crucial role in finding the marsh marigold, so the dewdrop belonged to him.

Cannibal stared at the dewdrop intently, then lowered himself and let out a low roar, bringing his dragon's snout closer to the ground.

"Catch."

Rhaegar chuckled and tossed the dewdrop into Cannibal's mouth.

In an instant, the tiny dewdrop dissolved in Cannibal's abyssal mouth, swallowed along with his saliva.

Swallow~~~

Cannibal swallowed obediently and lifted his head, shaking it slightly.

Rhaegar watched Cannibal, looking for any changes.

"Roar..."

Apparently tired of Rhaegar's scrutiny, Cannibal flicked his tail and rolled it up, placing him on his spine.

Then, without further ado, it soared over the outer walls of the castle.

"Well, it looks like the dewdrop hasn't taken effect yet," Rhaegar muttered, gripping the dragon's scales tightly and feeling a tinge of disappointment.

...

The Cannibal settled outside the castle walls, his eyes closed in rest.

Rhaegar was welcomed through the gates of Dyre Den Castle, a marsh marigold tucked safely in his pocket. Despite the late hour, the castle's inhabitants showed no signs of sleep. Fear of the attempted assassination of their lord kept them alert and on edge.

Entering the waiting room, Rhaegar found Sam, Sorrel, and Bart waiting anxiously. Sam was the first to speak, his voice tinged with relief and concern. "By the seven hells! You've returned safely at last. We feared the worst when you didn't arrive in time."

Chapter 86: Shadowbinder

Rhaegar gently declined Sam's greeting and began to explain, "There was an incident on the journey, but it did not impede our progress."

Sam's eyes darted between Rhaegar and the marsh marigold, his curiosity evident. "What happened? And why do you have our family crest flower with you?"

With nothing to hide, Rhaegar recounted his experiences, from deciphering the Forest Witch's notes to finding the marsh marigold.

As they listened, the faces of those gathered grew increasingly tense. It was amazing how much could change in just ten hours of separation.

Sorrel focused intently on the marsh marigold. "Prince, magic has been absent for so long. Are you sure the spells the Forest Witch left behind still work?"

Rhaegar replied unperturbed, "There is only one way to find out. We must try. The steps of the Deadman's Murmur are not overly complex; it's a matter of having the right ingredients and perhaps a touch of talent."

"If I fail, perhaps one of you can try."

He climbed the stairs to the attic, his anticipation palpable. "The key to activating spells lies in the mind. I may not have high hopes for success with the Deadman's Murmur spell, but we won't know until we try."

"You speak wisely, Prince," Sorrel acknowledged, exchanging a glance with Bart before following Rhaegar to the attic.

Sam trailed behind, his gaze fixed on the marsh marigolds with unbridled curiosity.

...

In the cellar, the Shadowbringer's head remained in the center of a circle of candles.

Rhaegar stepped carefully over the candles and placed the marsh marigold atop the skull. He instructed his servant to fetch some dove's blood and follow the procedure outlined in the Forest Witch's notebook to paint the skull.

Then he took out a piece of paper with the translated spell. Though he despised it, he recited it anyway, driven by the hope of vanquishing the shadow monsters.

"Atala... Gugino..."

His recitation was strange, but his demeanor remained calm, as if he was reading from an ordinary book. The skull before him, however, showed no reaction.

"It didn't work?" Rhaegar frowned, glancing back at Sam and the others before attempting the spell again.

This time, as he recited it, Rhaegar's eyes narrowed slightly, his focus unwavering as he recited the spell with reverence.

Buzz...

The marsh marigold began to flicker with a shimmering light, coinciding with the cessation of Rhaegar's voice.

Suddenly, an intense heat surged through his limbs and his body temperature soared. His pale skin flushed red, wisps of white smoke curling from his body as if he were emerging from a steaming basket.

Whew...

A flash of fire engulfed Rhaegar's hands, reducing the paper to ash in an instant, the remains drifting to the ground.

His eyes widened in shock, and he stepped back as if recoiling from the sudden heat coursing through his body.

"Is my blood boiling?" He muttered, the realization dawning on him as he felt the intense heat coursing through his limbs.

Sam's voice broke through his confusion, tentative yet filled with wisdom. "Prince, I once heard my grandmother say that magic is a manifestation of choice. With dragon blood coursing through your veins, it's only natural that you would reject the necromantic magic that seeks to raise the dead."

Rhaegar looked at him skeptically. "Do you know the laws of magic?"

"No," Sam admitted, shaking his head. "I have never been exposed to magic, only the legends of the witches of the forest, passed down through generations."

"Would you like to try, Lord Sam?" Rhaegar challenged, stepping out of the circle of candles. Magic was a fragmented puzzle lost to time, and his expectation of failure left him unfazed. But Sam's answer hinted at something more.

Sam hesitated before answering, his expression a mixture of eagerness and uncertainty.

"Old Sam, if you are willing, try. You carry the blood of the Forest Witch within you, perhaps it will respond to your touch!" Sorrel interjected, his tone cool and commanding.

Sam reluctantly agreed, his eagerness barely concealed beneath his facade. "Fine, I'll try it."

Observing his demeanor, Rhaegar couldn't help but see through Sam's true intentions. Nevertheless, he gave him a new translation of the spell and urged him to memorize it.

As a nobleman from Crackclaw Point, Sam's reading skills were lacking, so he needed Rhaegar's help to learn the short incantation.

The trial began.

Sam stepped into the circle of candles, holding the skull and marsh marigold in one hand and the translation in the other.

With cracked lips, he began to recite the incantation. "Atta la... gujino..."

His voice, thick and trembling with excitement, filled the attic, but when the incantation ended, there was no response.

Disappointment clouded Sam's expression as he stood frozen, the weight of failure evident in his posture.

He rested his head on the floor and sighed heavily. "Prince, it seems I have failed as well."

Rhaegar offered words of comfort, acknowledging the dormancy of magic over the years. "It's all right, Sam. It's only natural for ordinary people to struggle with magic."

Turning to Sorrel with a wry smile, he continued, "We need to explore other avenues."

Sorrel nodded in agreement, his expression grim.

Just then, a chilling voice pierced the air, sending shivers down their spines.

The Shadowbinder's head stirred, its pale skin glowing with an eerie reddish hue. His closed eyes fluttered open, revealing a glazed, disturbing gaze as he muttered incomprehensibly.

At the same time, the marsh marigold wilted, its vibrant petals fading until only the rhizome remained, attached to the skull, sustaining its life.

Sam, pale with fear, stumbled backward, nearly losing his balance.

Bart, visibly shaken, trembled in silence.

"Lord Sam, you did it!" Rhaegar exclaimed, taking a cautious step back to stand behind Sorrel.

He had had enough of these bizarre events and wanted no part of whatever the talking head had in store.

Enough was enough.

Sam stared at the living skull, disbelief etched into every line of his face. He slapped himself twice, as if seeking confirmation of the truth, before turning tentatively to Rhaegar. "Prince, is it possible that it was I who brought this skull back to life?"

Even as he asked the question, Sam found it hard to believe that such a miraculous feat could be accomplished with just a few words of magic.

Rhaegar, avoiding Sam's gaze, offered a speculative answer. "Who knows? Perhaps you have a latent talent for magic."

Then he gave instructions. "The Shadowbinder's head retains memories of his past life. Let's ask how to resolve this situation with the shadow creature."

Nodding shakily, Sam stepped to the edge of the candle circle, his voice trembling as he addressed the skull. "Tell us of your origins and why your remains have become a curse upon us."

The skull rattled its mouth, its eyes fixed on the small group as if delving into forgotten memories. After a long silence, it uttered a faint, barely audible murmur. "The ebb and flow of magical tides, depleted yet potent..."

Impatient for answers, Sam continued his questioning, urging the skull to provide clarity on the curse's invocation and its resolution.

"I am a servant of the Lord of Light," the skull began, his voice weak. "A priest charged with predicting the fluctuations of magical energies. I sent my most elite Shadows to observe the changing world..."

Increasingly frustrated by the cryptic answers, Sam interrupted tersely, "Get to the point, what's the solution to the curse?"

As Sam kicked the skull in frustration, a shiver ran down the spines of Rhaegar and the others. The skull's unsettling words, combined with Sam's actions, created an atmosphere of eerie dread that chilled them to the bone.

Chapter 87: The Red Mask

"The individuals who devised such dark magic, including the Forest Witch, are truly despicable," Bart remarked, his voice trembling with anxiety. However, his words went unnoticed amidst the unfolding events.

Meanwhile, the Shadowbinder head continued his chilling whispers, recounting the grim details of the curse's origins.

"The curse is etched into the flesh of the Shadow's kin," he intoned, his voice filled with foreboding. "Upon their death, their souls are consigned to the embrace of the Cold God, the arbiter of mortal sins..."

"He is the harbinger of death, stalking the living with relentless hunger, feasting on their shadows..."

"His wrath can only be quenched by finding the token of the Lord of Light and returning it to his fallen servant."

The revelation seemed to light up Sam's face with anticipation as he eagerly inquired about the token needed to appease the curse's wrath.

"The token... My mask... Where is my mask?" the Shadowbinder's head suddenly erupted, his demeanor changing erratically as he fixated on the subject of the mask.

Understanding dawned on Rhaegar as he turned to address the group. "The Shadowbinder usually hides his identity behind a painted wooden mask, rarely revealing their true face."

"Sorrel, do you know where the mask might be?" he asked.

Sorrel nodded affirmatively. "The Shadowbinder's mask is usually kept in the personal quarters of the former lord. It was considered a prized possession."

Bart, eager to contribute, raised his hand. "My brother kept the mask in his private chamber. It was removed when the soldiers took his head as proof of their victory. He tucked it away in a secret compartment for safekeeping."

"He always had a penchant for collecting trophies," Sorrel remarked with a hint of disdain, urging Bart to retrieve the mask immediately.

Bart wasted no time in leaving the attic, seemingly relieved to escape the unsettling atmosphere.

Meanwhile, Rhaegar's gaze fell on Sam, who hovered around the Shadowbinder's head with a mixture of fascination and apprehension.

He persistently sought answers on how to defeat the shadow creature, while the skull's ramblings became increasingly erratic, alternating between mentions of the Light of Light and something about magical tides.

"Enough, at least I've gathered some clues," Rhaegar sighed, realizing the futility of further inquiry.

But Sam seemed oblivious, his gaze fixed on the spinning skull, his fervor growing with each passing moment.

"Something is wrong, Ser Sorrel!" Rhaegar's tone betrayed concern as he called to the knight for help.

Responding quickly, Sorrel charged into the circle of candles, stopping the head's erratic movements with a powerful stomp before delivering a resounding blow to Sam's face, rendering him unconscious.

As Sam lay sprawled on the ground, Sorrel quickly tied the head securely with a belt and fastened a dagger beside it.

With the task complete, Sorrel hoisted the unconscious Sam onto his shoulders and glanced back at Rhaegar.

Their shared look conveyed a sense of deep resignation.

Concerned for Sam's well-being, Rhaegar asked anxiously, "Will Lord Sam be all right?"

"Fear not, Prince. A mere magical trance, another blow will awaken him," Sorrel reassured, preparing to leave.

Realizing the potential embarrassment of leaving Sorrel to handle the situation alone, Rhaegar stepped in and suggested, "Let Sam rest undisturbed. We'll leave him in the care of his guards."

With a nod of agreement, Sorrel complied, and they quickly left the attic, leaving Sam and the subdued head of the Shadowbinder behind. Rhaegar could not shake the chill he felt at the sight of the head and hastened his departure.

...

The next day, a throng of people gathered outside the walls of Dyre Den, forming a formidable assembly. Among them were two hundred soldiers from the House of Brune, three hundred from the House of Crabb, and over two thousand free folk from the wildling army, each faction occupying its designated area.

Dominating the sky, a black dragon spread its wings, casting an ominous shadow over half of the castle and serving as a stark reminder of the looming threat.

Beneath the Cannibal's towering form stood Rhaegar, clad in gloves and clutching a red-painted mask. The mask, with its simple yet sinister design, held a great importance.

Turning his gaze to Bart, who waited with his head bowed, Rhaegar gave a decisive command: "Let us go."

Bart hesitated, voicing his concern, "Prince, are we really abandoning the defenses of the castle to face the shadow in the field?"

"Did the castle protect your brother from the shadow creature's wrath?" Rhaegar's answer hung heavy in the air, causing Bart to fall silent.

After a night of deliberation, Rhaegar had decided to take proactive measures. With each kill, the shadow creature grew stronger, leaving no room for delay. Armed with the Shadowbinder's head and the Red Mask Token, coupled with Cannibal's formidable Dragonflame, they had the means to confront it head on.

Sorrel agreed with Rhaegar's strategy. To him, the dragon embodied invincibility, capable of incinerating all manner of evil.

Sam, now fully conscious, also regained his composure. He found himself astride a horse, the Shadowbinder's head in his hand, his gaze averting from the macabre head.

Rhaegar's plan was to use the Shadowbinder's head as bait, a risky gambit, but one that might yield results.

"Let's move!" Rhaegar's command echoed as he mounted the Cannibal and hovered above the wildling army. His orders spurred the Crab Claws into action, their ranks cheering as they brandished an array of weapons.

For them, to fight alongside a dragon was an unparalleled honor.

With Sorrel and Sam leading the way, the procession moved forward, their destination neither near nor far. Their path led to the clearing where the two houses had clashed before, a vast expanse that provided ample room for the Cannibal's fiery breath to wreak havoc.

...

When they arrived at the clearing, the remnants of the recent battle were still there, evident in the bloodstains and the lingering scent of death. Sam's gaze swept the area, his eyes flashing with anger at Sorrel's contingent. These bloodstains represented the lives of House Crabb soldiers sacrificed in the conflict.

Sorrel, however, remained indifferent. What did the dispute between the Brunes and the Crabbs have to do with his branch, House Brune of Brownhollow? Were it not for the deaths within his fiefdom and the pleas of a distant relative, Bart, he would not have intervened at all.

As the cannibal descended upon the clearing, Rhaegar gave orders. "Surround the clearing with oil."

"Understood, Prince," came the reply as House Brune soldiers set to work unloading barrels of oil from wagons.

Shadow creatures feared fire, so Sorrel suggested surrounding the area with flames. Soldiers stood by, armed with flaming arrows to aid the effort.

Meanwhile, Sam sprang into action. He led several hooded prisoners forward, thrusting the skull into the arms of one and saying, "Survive and your sins will be forgiven."

"Mask... my mask..." The skull's incessant muttering sent shivers down the spines of the prisoners, one of whom collapsed in terror, soiling himself.

The head rolled to the ground, still muttering incoherently.

Sam's expression wavered between horror and dismay as he watched.

Rhaegar turned away from the scene, his thoughts on the skull's warning: the shadow creature would prey on the living. With nearly three thousand people present, the risk of attack was high. Essentially, all present were bait, but the prisoners were in greater danger.

Accepting the grim reality, offering the prisoners a chance at redemption through survival was a more humane alternative to execution.

With everything in place, Rhaegar gave Cannibal a reassuring pat and gave the order: "Take flight!"

Given the shadow creature's recent abnormal behavior, it was clear that something had disrupted its usual fear of the dragon's flame. Still, if Rhaegar and Cannibal left the clearing, it would be easier to draw the shadow out.

Instead of venturing far, they positioned themselves on a nearby mountain, ready to move in at the first sign of trouble below.

Chapter 88: Shadow Wyrms

As night fell, the plan slowly unfolded.

The soldiers and horses of the three factions in the open field went about their routines, building campfires and settling in as if preparing for a peaceful night.

But beneath this facade of tranquility, tension simmered.

As darkness enveloped the landscape, a multitude of campfires lit up, casting flickering shadows that danced across the ground.

In the midst of this orchestrated chaos, the savage army began to stir, their primal chants rising into the night.

It was all part of the ruse, a performance designed to draw out their prey.

But amidst the frenzied dance of flames and shadows, a subtle dissonance emerged.

The rhythm of the shadows diverged from the pulsing beat of the dance, a subtle shift not lost on the wildlings' keen eyes.

A ripple of unease spread through the ranks as they sensed the impending danger.

In a swift and coordinated move, the wildlings stopped their celebration, their expressions now etched with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

"Sound the alarm!" Skylar's voice broke the tense silence as she quickly ignited an arrow and shot it into the night sky.

Her actions spurred the others into action.

With a chorus of shouts and the hiss of arrows cutting through the air, the savages prepared for battle, their weapons gleaming in the firelight.

Meanwhile, the shadows, enraged by the disturbance, twisted and writhed with malevolent intent.

Amidst the chaos, a serpentine tendril of shadow lashed out, its razor-sharp tip piercing the throats of unsuspecting victims, snuffing out their lives in an instant.

"Scatter! The Shadow is here!" The warning rang out, but for some it was too late.

As the wildlings fell, panic swept through the remaining ranks, sending them scrambling for safety.

But the shadow creature showed no mercy, its amorphous form coalescing into a grotesque creature with writhing tentacles, ready to strike at any moment.

"Light the fire! Let's burn this fiend!" Skylar's voice cut through the clamor, her swift action inspiring courage in the face of danger.

A brave soul, indeed, though her leadership lacked conviction.

But it was Trangal, the burly warrior of the Craw Claw tribe, who emerged as the true hero, wielding a sturdy wooden club as he rallied the terrified wildlings.

"Stand your ground! If any of you run, I'll see to it that your heads are cut off!"

His thunderous roar silenced the chaos, creating a semblance of order amid the turmoil as the wildlings steeled themselves for the battle ahead.

On the other side of the battlefield, Rhaegar sat astride Cannibal's back, patiently awaiting the signal and munching on sour wild fruit to replenish his strength.

Suddenly, a faint flicker of fire streaked across the night sky, instantly drawing Rhaegar's attention.

He lifted his eyes, wondering if his senses had deceived him.

Moments later, a cluster of flames burst into view, confirming his suspicion.

"It's time! Cannibal, let's go!" Rhaegar's voice crackled with determination as he urged his dragon into action.

The impatient Cannibal roared in agreement, wings beating furiously as they descended from the mountain, hurtling toward the source of the fire.

With only a few miles separating them, they quickly closed the gap, Cannibal's powerful wings propelling them forward at incredible speed.

As they approached the clearing, chaotic shouts and the growing flames greeted them from below.

Rhaegar surveyed the scene, noting the shadow creature's ominous growth.

"Cannibal, ignite the surrounding oil," he ordered calmly, sticking to their carefully planned strategy.

Positioning himself at the edge of the clearing, Cannibal unleashed a torrent of dragon flame, engulfing the surrounding area in a fiery inferno.

The moment the emerald dragon flame touched the ground, it ignited the pre-poured oil in a spectacular display.

In an instant, the flames erupted from a single point and spread rapidly in all directions, enveloping the entire clearing in a blaze that illuminated the night sky.

Amidst the flames, the soldiers of all three factions stood in awe and disbelief, their apprehension replaced by a newfound sense of security as they gazed upon the majestic sight of the black dragon hovering above them.

With the formidable creature at their side, their confidence soared, knowing that they had a powerful ally in this battle.

"Roar..." Sensing the attention being directed his way, Cannibal's emerald eyes gleamed with pride as he raised his head and let out a thunderous roar that echoed through the air.

"Cannibal, Dracarys!" Rhaegar's voice echoed with excitement as he gave the command.

Boom...

The emerald dragon flame leapt forth, slicing through the darkened earth and colliding head-on with the writhing shadow creature.

In an instant, the beast was sliced in half by the ferocious blast of dragon breath.

The crowd roared with excitement as they hailed the dragon's might, their cheers echoing across the battlefield.

Thousands of soldiers, stationed separately under the banners of House Brune and House Crabb, rushed forward in response, motivated by the dragon's charge.

Led by a vanguard of torch-wielding cavalymen, they charged toward the shattered remnants of the Shadow Creature, intent on delivering the final blow.

But just as victory seemed within reach, the situation took a sudden turn.

The severed halves of the shadow creature began to twist and contort, each fragment giving rise to smaller shadows.

A billowing cloud of inky blackness erupted from the twisted mass, enveloping the charging cavalry in its suffocating embrace.

Screams pierced the air as the riders, consumed by the shadowy haze, met a swift end.

"Roar..." The dragon's roar echoed through the chaos, its emerald flames lashing out once more to sever another part of the shadow creature.

But Rhaegar sensed something strange.

The creature had deliberately disemboweled itself, sacrificing part of its body to escape the dragon's flames.

"What a cunning creature, Cannibal, strengthen the Dragon Flame!"

With a primal growl, the Cannibal unleashed a torrent of searing green flames, engulfing the Shadow Creature in fire.

Amidst the billowing black smoke, the shadow creature continued to twist and turn, bursting into fleeting flames before it could touch the ground.

With nowhere to hide from the fire, the creature's form quickly shrank under the onslaught, teetering on the brink of destruction.

"Roar..."

Suddenly, a sinister rumble pierced the air, accompanied by a gust of wind that swept through the open space.

Rhaegar's eyes snapped to the source, his expression taut with unease.

To his horror, the shattered pieces of the Shadow Creature had reassembled into a grotesque, bipedal, two-winged creature - a shadow wyrm.

Its wings, shrouded in an eerie black mist, bore the semblance of terrified faces, while its head, instead of that of a dragon, bore the grotesque visage of a one-eyed goat.

In an instant, the shadow wyrm lashed out at the nearby humans, its head and tail sweeping them aside as it lunged at the Cannibal with a menacing hiss.

The Cannibal, sensing the imitation, bristled with rage as he fixed his gaze on the approaching abomination.

In a twisted mockery of its counterpart, the shadow wyrm scampered to its deformed feet, its wings flapping furiously as it struggled to reach the sky.

Cannibal abandoned his dying prey and unleashed a torrent of dragon flame upon the impostor before him.

Boom!

The fiery blast struck its target with deadly precision, shattering the shadow wyrm's skull and sending its gooey form reeling in a chaotic frenzy that nearly toppled it to the ground.

Chapter 89: Headless Shadow

But the Shadow Wyrms proved resilient, gradually regaining its footing amid the chaos.

Its writhing tentacles coalesced and morphed into a new one-eyed goat's head on its neck.

"Roar..."

The sight further fueled Cannibal's fury, causing him to rise higher into the sky, his wings beating with increased intensity as he unleashed torrents of dragon flame.

With each blow, its form was shattered and rebuilt, yet it seemed to grow more agile, quickly adapting to Cannibal's attacks.

Recognizing the pattern, Rhaegar urged Cannibal to stay alert, realizing that the creature was mimicking the dragon's movements.

"Cannibal, stay alert! It's mirroring your every move," Rhaegar warned, his voice echoing over the tumultuous battle.

Cannibal continued his assault, unleashing dragon flames from every angle.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground was rapidly deteriorating.

The monstrous remnants of the shadow creature, still lurking amidst the chaos, continued to attack any living creature within range with their shadowy appendages.

The night air was thick with the dissolved goo of the Shadow Wurm, only to rise from the ground and attack again.

In the face of overwhelming odds, the morale of the human forces plummeted.

The once unified wildling army was now scattered, crumbling under the Shadow's relentless onslaught.

Driven by fear, many sought refuge beyond the outer ring of fire, their panicked flight adding to the chaos unfolding in the open space.

In the heart of the clearing, prisoners lay sprawled on the ground, their ears filled with the shouts and screams of battle.

Meanwhile, the Shadowbinder's head continued to mutter.

"The Shadow is coming... to slay all the living... to gather more Shadows..."

A lone figure on horseback approached, reining in his mount with a decisive halt.

Quickly dismounting, the figure grabbed the head and silenced it with a prepared rag.

"Silence!"

It was Sam, his guards scattered in the confusion, leaving him no choice but to retrieve the head himself.

As he straightened, a sudden gust of wind alerted him to danger from behind. With a quick dodge, he deftly intercepted the attacker and severed the head with a swift stroke of his sword.

The figure collapsed into a pool of viscous goo, writhing on the ground in agony.

Sam quickly remounted and spurred his horse away from the battle.

Elsewhere, the Brune soldiers, all under Sorrel's command, clashed fiercely with the shadows.

Nearby, Bart crouched by a flickering campfire, protected only by two guards.

A shadowy figure emerged from the ground, overpowering the guards and pinning Bart to the ground.

Terrified, Bart flailed wildly and caught sight of the figure's blurred visage.

In the distorted features, he saw a grotesque resemblance to his late brother, Wells.

Bart's fear overwhelmed him and he involuntarily lost control of his bladder.

With a desperate plea, he cried out, his eyes squeezed shut in terror, "Brother, I had nothing to do with your death, I swear! Please, spare me! I have never betrayed you or our family!"

...

High above, the Cannibal, following Rhaegar's orders, engaged the Shadow Wyrn in a fierce battle. But his cries seemed futile against the relentless onslaught.

Boom...

Once again, the emerald dragon flame obliterated the Shadow Wyrn's brain, but this time it reacted differently. Without waiting for its brain to reform, it lunged forward, wings beating furiously as it charged the Cannibal.

From the goo dripping from its neck, a swirling black mist coalesced into a familiar figure - the headless shadow that had attacked Rhaegar and the Cannibal earlier.

Rhaegar's blood ran cold at the sight, his heart pounding with adrenaline.

"Dracarys!"

With a steely resolve fueled by a surge of emotion, Rhaegar's icy facade cracked and he gave the order to attack.

In that moment, he understood the source of Cannibal's rage. The crude imitation stirred something primal in him, driving him to destroy the twisted mockery before him.

Meanwhile, the Shadow Wyrn's head reappeared, setting the stage for a showdown between the two dragons. Cannibal's flames collided with his opponent's shadows as they clashed in the sky for the first time.

Boom!

The emerald flames tore through the shadow mist and collided with the shadow wyrn with unyielding force.

In an instant, the Shadow Wyrn's brain and neck were incinerated into nothing. The headless shadow perched on its neck vanished into thin air.

"Continue the attack, Dracarys!"

Rhaegar's command echoed across the battlefield as he urged Cannibal on. The dragon responded with a rumbling growl, circling and unleashing flames.

To Rhaegar's astonishment, the headless shadow reappeared on the back of the shadow wyrn. As they made contact, shadowy tentacles sprouted from the Shadow Wyrn's body and plunged into the headless figure.

The Shadow Wyrn was restored to its former glory. At the same time, half of the Shadows on the ground vanished, easing the chaos below.

"Damn it, it's consuming the other Shadows," Rhaegar cursed. He warned the Cannibal to increase the intensity of his dragon flame to prevent the production of the slimy substance.

"Roar..."

With renewed strength, the Shadow Wyrn let out a terrifying roar and charged at the Cannibal, attempting to engage the dragon in close combat.

The Cannibal roared defiantly, unleashing dragonfire at its foe.

In an instant, the Shadow Wyrms sliced through the dragonfire, leaving behind only one wing and half of its tail as it wrapped itself around the Cannibal from below.

Its body, adorned with shadow tentacles, slashed at the Cannibal's scales. The black dragon's armor-like scales proved impenetrable, however, and it easily parried the attack.

Seizing the opportunity, the Cannibal sank his razor-sharp fangs into the Shadow Wyrms' neck, leaving a gaping wound. Despite the thrashing and twisting, the Cannibal maintained its grip.

Unbeknownst to Rhaegar, the true threat lurked unseen - the headless shadow, wielding a steel spike stained with dragon blood, stealthily made its way to the dragon's back.

A surge of adrenaline coursed through Rhaegar as he sensed the impending danger, his body temperature rising and his skin flushing. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed the headless shadow, sending a shiver down his spine.

Stifling his rising panic, he steeled himself for the confrontation, his face flushed and a glint of determination in his eyes.

"I refuse to be defeated without a fight," he said, quickly pulling a bottle of oil from his storage bracelet.

With practiced precision, Rhaegar ignited the cloth at the bottle's mouth and hurled it at the Cannibal's pitch-black scales. Immediately, a fierce blaze erupted, engulfing the dragon and him in flames.

Chapter 90: Defeating The Creature With Its Own Mask

Armed with the formidable enchantments of **【Blood and Fire】** and **【True Dragon's Blood】**, Rhaegar remained impervious to the scorching heat unleashed by the kerosene inferno.

Despite this, the flames served to draw the encroaching shadows nearer, compelling them to converge.

Yet, shadows were ephemeral entities, destined to distort and dissipate upon encountering the searing embrace of flames, rendering them harmless to Rhaegar.

Amidst the crackling inferno, the Cannibal sensed a shift in its master's emotions, prompting it to whirl around in alarm. With a thunderous roar, it confronted the advancing headless shadow crawling up its body.

Discarding the remnants of the smoldering shadow wyrm, the Cannibal unleashed a torrent of dragon flame, forming a barrier of searing emerald fire before it. With a powerful beat of its wings, it propelled itself forward, passing through the roaring conflagration unscathed.

Reacting swiftly, Rhaegar hastily stowed away the red mask, shielding his face with one hand as he crouched.

As the flames licked at his clothing, searing his skin with their heat, Rhaegar braced himself. Within the green flames, all shadows seemed to be obliterated.

Unscathed, Rhaegar rose to his feet, scanning the surroundings with heightened vigilance. Yet, the headless shadow had vanished without a trace again, leaving him to lament its escape.

With a resigned sigh, he retrieved a set of loose garments from his bracelet and swiftly changed into them.

"Roar!"

The timely roar from Cannibal jolted Rhaegar back to focus, prompting him to steady himself as the dragon descended, casting a shadow over the remnants of shadow wrym.

Even as the monstrous entities continued their relentless assault on the living, the battle raged on, far from its conclusion.

Rhaegar retrieved the red-painted mask once more, contemplating its significance.

"The mask is a token, but how can I return it?" he mused aloud, pondering headless shadow.

Unlike other shadow creatures, this one possessed a distinct purpose, almost as if imbued with intelligence.

Recalling its previous attacks, including the attempt on his life and the Cannibal's tail, Rhaegar couldn't shake that the headless shadow was the Shadowbinder's original creation.

"A shadow without a head... and a mask..." His thoughts raced, and suddenly, a realization dawned upon him.

"Cannibal, lead me to those prisoners!" he commanded abruptly, envisioning a plan to break the curse.

Having teared the shadow wrym apart, Cannibal responded dutifully, soaring through the air while spewing dragon flames to vanquish the figures below, drawing closer to the prisoners at the heart of the clearing.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the clearing, the headless shadow reappeared, perched atop the monstrous creature, orchestrating another rampage to claim more lives and replenish the shadows lost in battle.

Whoosh--

A flaming arrow streaked through the air, piercing the chest of the Headless Shadow.

Clutching the wound, the headless figure stopped, fixing its gaze on the source of the arrow—a girl with brown, curly hair who was reloading her bow for another shot.

Twisting and contorting, the headless figure dissolved into a shadow, merging seamlessly and closing in on the girl.

"Run! The dragon is coming!" Skylar shouted urgently, her voice drowned out by the chaos as a burly wildling shoved her aside, forcing her into the throng.

With a roar, green dragon flames descended, engulfing the creatures. As the last remnants of the shadow were consumed by the dragon's flame, the battle drew to its end.

The combined forces of the wildling army, the soldiers of House Brune and House Crabb stood united against the waves of shadows, wielding oil-coated weapons, drastically reducing casualties.

Rhaegar and Cannibal landed on the ground, searching for the heads of the Shadowbinders among the slain prisoners, but it was nowhere to be found.

Determined to find it, he called out to Skylar, "Have you seen the head of the Shadowbringer?" Before she could respond, another voice chimed in.

"I have it! The skull is here!" Bart, disheveled and panicked, ran towards Rhaegar, clutching the head with a distressed expression, his guards nowhere in sight.

Meanwhile, Sam, tall and stout, fended off the approaching figures with his longsword, steadily making his way towards the dragon.

Spotting Bart with the skull, Rhaegar's eyes sparkled as he urgently commanded, "Destroy it! Smash the head!"

"Yes, Prince!" Bart, momentarily bewildered, swiftly complied, tossing the skull into a nearby bonfire without hesitation.

...

As the skull made contact with the flames, black smoke billowed forth, but any attempt to howl was stifled as it was quickly reduced to charred remains, crumbling to bone under the trampling feet of the crowd.

Buzz...

A profound silence fell over the scene. The shadows seemed frozen, allowing the living to cut them down, each one reverting to nothing as they fell.

Amidst the scattered bone fragments, a headless figure emerged. He watched as the empty neck writhed, gradually giving rise to a new head—a face identical to that of the slain Shadowbinder.

Yet, devoid of emotion, the face remained quiet. Though its mouth opened as if to speak, how could a mere shadow speak?

In a swift transition, the headless figure adjusted to its new appearance, and the shadows on the ground began to stir once more.

"Skylar, shot it!" Rhaegar's command

Whoosh...

An arrow flew, its tip piercing a red mask, aimed directly at the shadow of the Shadowbinder..

Splat...

The arrow struck true, embedding itself in the Shadowbinder's forehead, the red mask enveloping its face.

In an instant, the red mask unleashed an infinite suction force, swallowing the shadow within.

With the disappearance of the Shadowbinder's shadow, all the shadows in the clearing dissipated, dissipating into wisps of black smoke that dispersed on the wind.

Even the monstrous creatures and remnants of the shadow wyrm could not withstand the wind, shriveling and crumbling into dust.

In the blink of an eye, the enemy vanished, leaving the stunned onlookers in disbelief.

They still lingered in a state of uncertainty, their eyes scanning the clearing for any sign of the battle's resolution.

"Did it work?" Rhaegar's voice carried a note of skepticism as he watched the shadow creatures vanish into thin air.

Cannibal's growled, lazily shifting its weight and stretching its wings—a assurance that the danger had passed.

The wildling army and soldiers, their muscles still tensed from combat, turned their attention to the young prince and the dragon.

Uncertain if the curse had truly been lifted, their resolve remained steadfast as long as the dragon and its rider stood beside them.

Interpreting Cannibal's demeanor, Rhaegar couldn't help but feel a surge of admiration. "Who would have thought defeating the Shadow Creature could be so straightforward?" he mused, aware of the expectant gazes fixed upon him.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he straightened his posture upon the dragon's back, raising his arm high to address the assembled crowd.

Among them were wildling savages, armored soldiers, and nobles like Sam and Bart.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he straightened his posture upon the dragon's back, raising his arm high to address the assembled crowd.

Among them were wildling savages, armored soldiers, and nobles like Sam and Babette.

As Cannibal shifted beneath him, lifting him higher, Rhaegar took a deep breath of the moonlit air, his voice resonating with authority: "Gentlemen! After all your efforts, I am pleased to announce..."

"The curse is over!"

The declaration reverberated across the desolate battlefield, the hoarse yet powerful voice like music to their ears.

"We've won!"

"Curse be damned, we've triumphed!"

"Long live the dragon... Long live the prince!"

Their joyous cries filled the air, weapons raised in celebration of their hard-won victory.

Surveying the jubilant throng, Rhaegar felt an inexplicable surge of excitement, a smile spreading across his face.

He hadn't relied on his family; it was him and Cannibal against the dreaded curse.

This was their adventure.

Their first triumph together.

"My friend, we did it!" Rhaegar exclaimed, his praise directed at the towering figure of Cannibal.