**Chapter - 41**

The Creator had given her a new mission.

It wasn't her first, but it carried a certain weight unlike any other. This mission was linked to the only failure that marred her otherwise immaculate record: the protection of the Creator's mate.

Although the girl had fended off her attackers herself, and the Creator had never uttered a word of blame, the truth remained.

She had been charged with the safety of his mate, and she had failed.

…

‘*SHE HAD FAILED!!*’

That was not acceptable.

Now, this mission offered a chance at redemption.

She accepted without hesitation, for failure was something she refused to entertain again.

She would completely embrace the role of executing the Creator's vengeance.

Her task was clear: unearth the origin of the peril that had once ensnared the Creator's mate and eliminate it.

She trailed her target with the patience of a seasoned hunter. After weeks of stealthy pursuit, her target finally entered a sprawling tower. Yet, this did not deter her; it merely marked the next phase of her mission.

As her target hastened up the spiraling staircase of the ancient tower, she followed silently, invisible to all. Her movements were fluid, like a shadow gliding effortlessly along the walls, unbound and unseen. The tower's old stones echoed with the hurried steps of her quarry, yet her own passage was soundless, a mere wisp traversing the air.

Her presence was as imperceptible as the whisper of wind — she was invisible to the world, yet ever vigilant, watching every move of her target with relentless precision.

She followed her target into a large room where several men, dressed similarly and of the same age as her target, had gathered.

She listened intently as the plotters, these vermin, schemed the downfall of her Creator. As she did, a new emotion surged within her, unfamiliar and potent. This feeling had started to stir ever since she had been awakened, when the Creator endowed her with a remarkable new gift.

And what a gift it was.

She channeled the burgeoning emotion into the vast network of latent links she felt nearby. It barely took a few minutes before her swarm gathered, ready to follow her every command.

She watched her target grow restless as he heard the swarm growing louder and louder every second.

He moved cautiously towards the door, each step a quiet echo in the ominous silence, like prey unknowingly venturing into a predator’s den.

Watching the dawning horror etch across the man’s face as he fell to his knees brought a grim satisfaction, but the spectacle had drawn on long enough.

It was time to conclude this chapter. With a mere thought, she unleashed her swarm.

Chaos erupted in the chamber as the conspirators scrambled desperately for shelter, but there was nowhere to hide. She observed with a cold satisfaction as the swarm engulfed them, their deceitful murmurs overwhelmed by the roaring tide of her fury.

Her army was relentless, a tide of fury and precision, yet she controlled them with an iron grip. It was crucial that their wrath be directed solely at those involved in the conspiracy against her Creator. Innocents would not suffer.

For a few intense minutes, the swarm converged, a whirling vortex of vengeance.

Once she was certain that every coconspirator lay lifeless, their sinister plans forever silenced, the swarm disappeared as swiftly as it had assembled.

With her mission accomplished, she vanished without a trace, slipping away into the shadows from which she had emerged.

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The first light of dawn filtered through the curtains, casting a soft glow across the room as I stirred from a deep sleep.

‘That was an amusing dream’. Was my first thought.

But as I fully awoke, I realized it wasn't just a product of my imagination.

I was having Warg dreams.

Exactly how that was happening, I didn't know, but I intended to find out. Later though.

More importantly, Skitter had unleashed a biblical plague, albeit briefly, upon the maesters of the Citadel. And it wasn't just directed at the one guy who had the bright idea of kidnapping Freya, but the entire council of morons who believed they could puppeteer the world from the shadows.

I had no particular sympathy for those struck down. As I considered the chaos that was sure to follow,I leaned back against the headboard, the mattress creaking slightly under my weight.

"Well... I did not see that coming," I murmured, careful to keep my voice hushed to avoid disturbing Freya's peaceful slumber beside me.

The quiet of the room seemed to amplify my thoughts, and a wry smile tugged at the corner of my lips. "That might cause some issues," I mused aloud, the words a mix of resignation and a spark of delight.

"But you know what? Let's see what the fallout is going to be and figure out what to do from there."

I didn’t doubt that some might eventually piece together who was responsible, but given my distance from the scene, I was confident most would dismiss the incident as some sort of divine retribution instead of linking it back to me.

My thoughts, however, couldn't help but drift back to Skitter. I was getting that odd feeling parents get when their child does something incredibly smart and stupid at the same time.

It was baffling how she had grown into her powers—powers that, until now, I hadn’t fully grasped the full extent of.

All I had done was make a few tweaks to enhance her warging abilities, thinking it prudent before sending her across the continent. It had seemed a necessary precaution, a simple adjustment.

Yet, I had never anticipated that these minor tweaks would trigger such a catastrophic chain of events.

"I just unknowingly gave Skitter the power of her namesake," I chuckled softly to myself, the irony of the situation not lost on me. Although I doubted the power was as formidable as the legendary abilities from which its name was derived, the possibility stirred a thrill within me.

But any real assessment would have to wait until Skitter returned, which could take some time. And who knows? Perhaps she would grow even stronger on her journey.

Glancing out the window, I saw Fenrir, completely oblivious to the world, lost in his dreams. An idea sparked briefly. "Maybe I should send Fenrir on a journey too."

But then I remembered that Fenrir, despite looking like a large dog, had grown more akin to a cat than anything else.

Disturbing him for anything less than food was likely to earn nothing but his ire, so I shelved that thought.

For now, my focus needed to be directed elsewhere.

Careful not to wake Freya, I slipped quietly out of the house. She deserved a day off now that I was back.

The crisp morning air invigorated my senses as I stretched my back and neck, more from habit than necessity.

In the next instant, I was flying, my form cutting through the early dawn with ease.

The flight to Winterfell took only a few minutes, a testament to my increasing speed. The town was already bustling despite the early hour, a hive of activity under the pale light of dawn.

I landed discreetly on the outskirts and made my way through the gates, greeted by the familiar faces of townsfolk whose lives intertwined with my own. Their warm welcomes were once foreign to me, but had now become a comforting routine. I offered smiles in return, pausing now and then to bestow quick bouts of healing upon those in need.

I soon found myself in the courtyard of Winterfell, where the clashing of steel drew my attention. The eldest Stark sons, Jon and Robb, were engaged in a vigorous sparring session. I watched from the sidelines, admiring their skill and the intensity of their duel. It was clear that Jon had the upper hand; his movements were sharp and calculated. Robb, in his effort to parry a particularly aggressive strike, stumbled and tumbled onto the ground, his pride bruised more than his body.

The sound of my applause broke their concentration, and they turned towards me. Jon's face lit up with recognition and a broad grin spread across his features.

"El, you're back!" he exclaimed, sheathing his sword as he approached.

"Yup, just had a quick errand to run in Dragonstone."

"But you were only gone for three days?" he asked, a hint of confusion in his voice.

"What can I say, I've gotten pretty fast recently," I said with a grin.

"El," echoed the excited chorus of the younger Stark children, who had been watching the duel from the sidelines.

Bran was the first to sprint over, his laughter ringing through the courtyard as he rushed up to me. "Look who's gotten all big," I remarked, a smile spreading across my face as I bent down to ruffle his hair, taken aback by how much he had grown since I last saw him.

Looking around, I noticed that all of them were inching closer to the ages I remembered from the stories. It was a sobering reminder of the timeline I was on, and how close things were to unfolding as they had in the tales that had first brought me to this world. Doing some quick mental calculations, I estimated it would be another two years before the royal procession headed south after the hand's death.

But that was before my intervention in the south. Given all the minds I had influenced and the events I had set in motion, I was no longer completely certain that things would proceed as they once had. Jon Arryn might not die when expected, or he might pass away much sooner. The future had become a fluid, unpredictable thing.

So, considering my luck, I surmised that it was more likely for things to kick off sooner rather than later. With this thought, I looked over the gathering of Stark children, each one a reminder of the roles they might play in the events to come. It was essential to prepare them—and myself—for whatever the future held.

I chatted with the Stark children for a while, catching up on trivial matters and enjoying their company.

"Anyway, see you kids later. I've got to go talk to your father. Any idea where I could find him?" I asked, already preparing to leave.

"He should be in his solar," Bran replied, his youthful voice clear and helpful.

I thanked him before setting off toward my destination. Having visited this place numerous times for various reasons, finding the solar was straightforward.

The guard at the door recognized me immediately and informed Lord Stark of my arrival before opening the door for me. As I stepped inside, the first thing I heard was Ned Stark's voice, laced with a hint of weary anticipation.

"Please tell me there isn't a raven heading to Winterfell from Dragonstone with another headache for me to look forward to," he said.

I let out a snort of amusement before adopting a scandalized expression. "I'll have you know, Lord Stark, I was on my best behavior," I declared, feigning indignation.

He turned, giving me the blankest expression I had ever seen. I couldn’t maintain my facade any longer and burst into snickers.

“Nothing happened. I healed the princess, explored the castle a bit, and came back,” I explained.

"Thank you," he acknowledged, "What did you want to talk about?"

"How do you feel about starting a school that teaches only medicine in Winterfell?"

**Chapter - 42**

"How do you feel about founding a medical school in Winterfell?"

He took a moment to grasp the proposal.

"Can you elaborate?"

"Actually, it's mainly Freya's idea, and she'd handle most of the teaching. That way, I can continue my own work and mentor Freya whenever possible."

The idea seemed excellent.

Nobody would object to learning from Freya.

She had become a cornerstone of Winterfell. As El appeared less frequently, Freya managed most of the medical care for all the patients, even without El's magical touch she was able to stabilize critical cases and keep patients alive until El could arrive.

It was no exaggeration to say that the entire North would rise up in arms to defend their new healer.

These were all compelling reasons; there was no reason to object. Yet, the look on El's face suggested there was more to discuss.

"The admission criteria will be quite brutal. We'll enroll new students each summer. I intend to personally select the inaugural class, limiting it to no more than six, primarily from the smallfolk."

There it was. That was something so out of the norm that it would cause every single noble to be pissed off at him. But he trusted him not to do something without a fair reason.

So he asked patiently, "Why?"

"It's primarily about growth. I can offer free tuition to smallfolk students who, in return, would commit several years to teaching after they eventually graduate. This arrangement wouldn't apply to nobles, who would instead have to pay full tuition, which is going to be quite high, ensuring fairness."

"But initially, I need dedicated students who will commit to educating future classes."

That… made a lot of sense. He understood what he was planning. There would be a lot of complaints, but they wouldn't matter in the larger scheme of things.

"What exactly would you be charging for tuition?"

"That's your decision, since you'll be paying for the first student. Just remember, subsequent noble families will pay around the same rate," El said with a grin.

He appreciated the gesture of trust but he knew he would need to give that matter some more thought, as it was too important to decide without a lot of consideration.

So, he asked something else, "Which one of my children would you recommend I send?"

"Honestly, the only one I could see successfully becoming a healer is Sansa, but even there, I need to warn you—learning how to mend the human body is quite a gruesome process. I cannot guarantee that she will be able to handle it."

“And the rest of my children?”

“Well, they would not have any issues with the gruesome aspects, but the art of medicine values the skill of patience too much, and it is a skill that I believe the rest of your children lack,” El responded thoughtfully.

He grimaced at that and had no way to refute his statement, but he responded, "While I agree with your last statement to some degree, Sansa is not as weak-willed as you believe. She is a Stark. She is but a child now; she just needs to grow up," he said with a tone of finality.

El nodded in understanding.

"I'm relieved we've settled that. What's new in Winterfell? I heard you have some guests arriving soon. Is there anything you need help with?" El inquired, smoothly changing the subject.

"Just the Martells and Tyrells are on their way here," he said, recalling the letters he had received about their arrival.

"Ah, that could lead to some tension, especially with a Tyrion already in town," El remarked, sensing the potential for conflict.

"That's exactly what I'm concerned about," he grimaced, the prospect clearly weighing on him.

"Come on, cheer up. It'll likely be no more than harmless fun. Given they probably need something from me, I doubt they'll cause too much trouble."

Ned sighed. "I hope that's the case."

"When are they arriving?" El asked, leaning forward with a keen look.

Ned pondered for a moment before replying, "If they set out immediately upon hearing about your escapades in King's Landing, it should be a week or two."

"That gives you plenty of time to prepare, then,"

"I suppose you're right," Ned conceded. "However, there's some additional news from King's Landing that might interest you." He extended a folded letter toward El.

Taking the letter, El quickly scanned its contents, then let out a snicker. "I can't believe that little rat still managed to slip away. His ability to run away is truly unparalleled."

Ned raised an eyebrow. "You were aware of this?"

"Well, I was the one who tipped off the Hand about the Master of Coin's questionable antics. He must have taken my advice seriously and investigated. Everything unfolded after I left, but it seems he managed to escape even after being thrown into the dungeons."

"I doubt they'll catch him though, he might already be in Essos. He's quite adept at running away." He continued.

"Have you told your wife? I think they were childhood friends or something," El said, a knowing smile playing on his face.

Ned let out a long sigh. That was one conversation he was dreading. The prospect of telling his wife that one of her childhood friends, who until recently had been the Master of Coin, was now a wanted man on the run from the King's justice for stealing almost half the royal treasury, was not an appealing one.

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After that fun conversation I left the castle and headed toward the clinic, where I could see the ever-present line, which seemed to have fewer locals than before.

I presumed this was a good sign that the health of the locals was improving. Additionally, the population appeared to have grown, as I could visibly see more children running around the streets.

I noticed the line of patients perking up happily as they spotted me approaching.

I greeted them and told them to start coming in.

Upon opening the door, I was greeted with an unexpected sight.

A teenager with blood-blond hair was lounging in my chair as if he owned the place.

Before I could kick the brat out, he caught sight of me and quipped,

"El, forget healing—you could make a killing selling this throne. Actually, forget selling it; I know at least one king who would go to war for this throne."

Any sarcastic retort I had ready, died in my throat as I realized he was probably right. I had spent quite the amount of gold to get a nice comfy cushioned chair made.

I exhaled deeply and asked, "What are you doing here, Tyrion?"

He flashed the biggest smile and said, "Oh, haven't you heard? I work here now."

It was way too early for me to deal with this.

"What?"

"What what?"

"Who hired you???" I yelled, my left eye twitching.

"Your pretty little apprentice did, of course."

His grin widened with each question I threw at him, clearly enjoying the rising frustration in my voice.

Before I could take the bait further, I heard said pretty little apprentice retort from behind me.

"I most certainly did not," said Freya in a dry tone.

"He just showed up one day, started asking an annoying number of questions... but he has been helping out, especially with translating for patients from outside Westeros."

It took me a moment to come to terms with the fact that Freya wouldn't have let him stay if he were truly a menace, but I still could not let this child in front of me win.

"I'm not paying you," I said flatly.

His infuriating smile still hadn't disappeared.

"Well, considering that I am in considerable debt at the moment, it is my hope that I will be able to pay some of it off during my employment here."

Now I was truly speechless.

The sheer audacity.

Nevertheless… I couldn't help but be impressed. I already knew he was here for ulterior motives, but I highly doubted any of them were malicious.

"Well played. Sure, you can work off some of your debt," I conceded.

Before he could adopt a fully smug expression, I added, "At minimum wage."

Then I grabbed him by the collar and gently ushered him outside the clinic, but not before adding, "You start at sunrise tomorrow."

I gestured for the first patient to come in quickly before closing the door behind them.

Barely a moment later, I heard a shout from outside, "What's the minimum wage?!"

I snorted before ignoring him, confident he wouldn't cause too much trouble outside the clinic—or he would risk getting lynched.

Turning to my patient, I asked, "So, what seems to be the problem, other than the obvious, of course?" looking at his broken arm.

--------

She was very close to her breaking point; nothing brought her joy anymore.

"Why can't I forget?" she whispered into the emptiness of her room, her voice a blend of anger and pain. "Why can't I erase that demon from my mind?"

His face haunted her relentlessly, an unwelcome specter lingering in every corner of her thoughts.

"Cersei," came a voice, startling her from her reverie.

It was Jaime. She hadn't heard him enter. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she lied automatically, a reflex that had become all too familiar.

"You can't keep saying that when the entire Red Keep clearly knows something is troubling you," Jaime pressed, his gaze intense and probing as he searched her eyes for the truth.

His words surprised her, but as she reflected on the past few weeks, it made sense. Her struggle had been more visible than she realized.

The usual compliments from her handmaidens, who constantly remarked on her enhanced beauty, only deepened her bitterness—a cruel reminder of the steep price she had paid.

In a fit of rage, she had dismissed them all, commanding them never to return to her chambers.

Even her visits to her children, including her perfect little lion, had ceased.

Joffrey had come to visit her once, of course.

But his ceaseless complaints quickly wore on her already frayed nerves, forcing her to feign illness just to escape his presence.

She was painfully aware of her uncharacteristic behavior and knew well how quickly gossip spread among the servants.

That realization struck Cersei, but she found herself indifferent to the whispers and judgments.

She no longer cared.

Even her clandestine encounters with Jaime, once a source of thrilling risk, had dwindled to nothing. The excitement that once sparked between them was extinguished, leaving her with no desire to continue their forbidden liaisons.

Wait.

Was that why Jaime had come in now, demanding answers?

Her expression turned blank as she faced him. The slight satisfaction she felt at seeing him flinch and take a half-step back was a fleeting euphoria for her pleasure-starved mind.

But it did nothing to quell her simmering rage.

*"Jaime,"* she said, her voice icy.

*"Get out."*

She didn't bother watching him scramble to get out. She had other important things to do.

She needed to see *him*.

She needed to go north.

But that was easier said than done.

If she, the queen of the seven kingdoms, did something like that, many questions would be asked.

Questions she could not answer.

Wait, If she couldn’t go to him, she would bring him to her.

She had to somehow get The Mage called to King's Landing again.

Yes, she could do that.

But she needed to be smart about it;

*He* could not find out that she had orchestrated this.

That would surely jeopardize any chance of convincing him to lift the curse he had placed on her.

She had to make sure it was something obvious. If she could successfully pull this off, she would be able to convince him to end his curse without threatening him.

How exactly she was going to do that, she didn't know yet.

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**Chapter - 43**

In the waning light of the late afternoon, I completed my work at Winterfell and made my way to my secret laboratory, buried deep beneath the forest.

The lab was as silent as ever, utterly devoid of life. Freya, the only other person who knew of this place, was engrossed in her studies at the clinic, leaving the space hauntingly empty.

I wound my way through the familiar corridors, delving deeper into the bowels of this labyrinth I had created until I arrived at an unremarkable door.

This room, unknown to anyone but myself, was designed specifically to house my most dangerous experiments.

Sparse and dimly lit, the chamber was only illuminated by the flicker of a single overhead light which was basically an aquarium with glowing fish in it, which cast ghostly shadows over the small collection of vials on the shelves.

Each vial held a swirling, dangerous concoction.

But I wasn't here for them today.

In the center of the room stood a lone pedestal, a recent addition that perhaps marked the beginning of my hoarding tendencies. I had set it up just the day before, intending it to be a placeholder for my newest acquisition.

As I walked toward it, the silence was abruptly broken by a sharp voice. "Finally decided to stop being a bitch after one little accident?" Vaylara taunted, her specter materializing from the pages of the grimoire, a haughty smirk curling her lips.

Meeting her gaze squarely, I responded firmly, "I don't appreciate things slipping out of my control."

The air thickened with tension as Vaylara's eyes narrowed, piercing through me as if she could uncover my deepest insecurities with a mere glance. Her skepticism was palpable, yet a flicker of curiosity sparked behind her scrutinizing eyes as she considered my resolve.

"Very well, I won't pry any further," she conceded,”But I need to know what we are going to be doing from now on," she said, folding her arms as she leaned against the cold, stone wall.

I thought about it for a second. After all the crazy shit that had gone down lately, both good and bad, I knew I had to be smarter about this.

I just have to do this methodically instead of rushing ahead.

"Teach me just the basics, and help me with the projects I have before throwing around spells I have no idea what is going on in," I finally said.

She nodded, her expression softening slightly. "That is understandable. It is what we should have done from the start," she admitted, floating closer to me.

"Have you given some thought to what you wish your first project to be?" she inquired, her tone now tinged with professional curiosity.

"Yes, I have. I've studied dragons sparsely; the only information I have on them are from the bones of a dragon that had been dead for centuries, and I understand that they are much more magical than I first thought.”

"So, I envision crafting a dragon that will eclipse all others, a magnificent beast whose splendor and might will be the stuff of legends, unmatched by any other." I declared, my voice filled with a mix of excitement and a tinge of madness.

"That is quite a big task. Are you sure you don't want to start with something simpler?" she asked skeptically, her eyebrows raised in doubt.

Her question hung in the air between us, challenging yet not dismissive. I knew her concerns were valid—the complexity of creating a dragon, especially one like the one I had in mind, was immense.

But she was forgetting something.

I grinned like a maniac. "Oh ye of little faith."

I held up my right hand with a flourish, and in the next second a tiny dragon the size of my hand was created.

"Or did you forget that I can craft flesh onto anything I want to do as long as I understand what I am doing"

In the blink of an eye the tiny dragon was encompassing the whole room.

I enjoyed the look of surprise on Vayara's face.

The dragon, however, as magnificent as it appeared, was merely a construct of flesh—it lacked the true essence of dragonkind.

"The only issue, you see, is what is essentially in front of you could as well easily be a dog in a different shape. It's no true dragon," I admitted, acknowledging the limitations of my current abilities.

Vaylara recovered, smirking back at me. "Well well, looks like we've both got a lot to learn from this little project of yours," she said, sounding excited and maybe something else I couldn't quite place.

"What are we waiting for then? There's no time like the present to start,"

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The travel so far had been rough, with the journey from Dragonstone to White Harbor completed in a single arduous stretch.

Arriving at White Harbor gave her some of the respite she desperately needed. After what felt like an eternity confined within a ship, the sight of the bustling port brought a sense of relief.

The formalities were brief; it was clear they were expected. Lord Manderly, along with his daughter, announced they too would be traveling north. He mentioned it was for business but did not elaborate further. This meant that the next leg of their journey would be a slow one as well.

As they trudged on, winter started biting harder. Ellaria bundled up in furs she'd packed, cursing herself for not wearing them sooner.

Despite the slower pace and the biting cold, there was a certain peace to the journey. The landscape unfolded in a vast expanse of stark beauty, the barren trees standing like silent sentinels against the gray sky.

She couldn't help but think back to their missed opportunity at Dragonstone. They had narrowly missed crossing paths with the White Mage.

They would scarcely have believed the rumors just a few moons back, but there was only so much skepticism one could keep up against the hoard of rumors without believing that some of them might be true.

As Ellaria recalled the little girl they had met in the castle, she was struck by the vivid memory of her clear, unmarred skin—devoid of any sign of the sickness that once ravaged her.

A sickness that had plagued the world and traded as curse of madness and death was healed in a few moments if the stories were true.

Her daughters were fascinated at the thought of meeting a sorcerer, of course, but they were too young to grasp the full implications of what was transpiring around them. She herself barely understood the depths of it.

As the road to Winterfell stretched ahead, winding through ancient woods and past silent, snow-draped fields, they edged closer to the answers she sought.

But the larger company was a welcome change. Traveling alongside a local lord promised not only protection but also the opportunity to glean deeper insights into the enigma of the North.

Ellaria and Oberyon engaged in amiable conversation within the slow-moving procession. Throughout these exchanges, they gradually unraveled more about the elusive mage.

It seemed that Lord Manderly himself had only met the mage once, despite the fact that he had visited Winterfell several times.

"He only sees the really urgent cases himself," Manderly explained. "Everyone else gets his apprentice."

"He can actually teach his magic to others!" Oberyn blurted, looking shocked.

"Nothing like that," Lord Manderly corrected gently. "From what I've been told, his magic works uniquely for him alone. However, he can teach others the secrets of the flesh, enabling them to slowly achieve what he can do with but a touch."

Wasn't that a revelation? Even if the mage could not directly impart his magic, he was willing to pass on his knowledge of healing.

That, in itself, was immensely valuable.

They eventually reached Winterfell without any trouble.

The ancient stronghold loomed before them, its massive walls a testament to the storied history of the North.

The sight of Winterfell was indeed impressive. She had seen magnificent castles in Sunspear and throughout her travels, but there was something distinctly ancient about this fortress. It radiated the weight of centuries, each stone imbued with the stark resilience of the North.

As they were let through the great gates, Oberyn, riding slightly ahead of her, turned back with a quizzical expression. "Have you noticed something, my love?" he asked.

"The people here would not be out of place in a city in Braavos,"

She glanced at the townsfolk milling about. She had envisioned the North as a land of rugged, insular warriors, but the faces she saw were diverse, their garments a tapestry of styles that one might indeed find in a cosmopolitan Braavosi square.

This was not the Winterell she had expected.

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Oberyn was practically bouncing with excitement. Every rumor, every whisper he'd heard about this trip promised it'd be one hell of a ride. And so far? It hadn't disappointed.

As Oberon and his entourage approached the entrance, a figure clad in the dark furs emerged to greet them. The voice that followed was as harsh and weathered as the land itself.

"Prince Martell, Lord Manderly, welcome to Winterfell," announced Eddard Stark, his title as Warden of the North as evident as the steel in his tone.

Oberon, his face breaking into a charming smile, responded with a graceful nod. "Lord Stark, we are honored by your hospitality. Allow me to present my paramour, Ellaria Sand, and my daughters, Nymeria and Obara."

After exchanging pleasantries, they were guided indoors, drawn by the promise of a much-needed meal.

"Your journey must have been exhausting, and the hour is late," Stark said, his voice echoing slightly in the vastness of the entryway. "Please, join my family for dinner, and afterward, I will have someone show you to your quarters," he offered, gesturing with a broad sweep of his arm toward the welcoming warmth of the great hall.

As they trailed their host, Ellaria, driven by her ever-curious nature, stepped forward. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Stark, but might we have the opportunity to meet with the White Mage today?"

Lord Stark halted, his gaze deepening in contemplation before he responded. "The Mage will be available tomorrow. He hasn't been in Winterfell for the past week."

The news was a letdown, but after such a lengthy anticipation, one more day seemed a minor delay.

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A/N: If you wish to read ahead you can find me on Pa treon

**Chapter - 44**

The streets of Winterfell echoed with the faint rustle of the dry leaves as they stirred in the morning breeze.

Standing by the window, her gaze fixed on the distant horizon, she couldn't help but feel the weight of responsibility settling upon her shoulders.

Lord Stark's words from yesterday still rattled around in her head. He'd dumped quite the responsibility in her lap.

"The Martells will be arriving soon followed by an unending line of privileged cunts, and I doubt El will be here to welcome them. But I believe it's for the best," he had declared.

His statement tangled her thoughts further.

She found herself voicing a question, her tone respectful yet tinged with hesitation. "May I ask why, Lord Stark?"

He fixed her with a steady gaze, his voice lowering slightly. "You may not be aware, but a tide of nobles is en route here, each seeking an audience with the White Mage for various healing requests. I was hoping you could serve as a barrier to prevent these people from using their supposed need for healing as an excuse to meet with El."

"Many will come to your clinic's doorstep seeking healing, yet their true intentions will be otherwise," Lord Stark began, his tone imbued with a seriousness that matched the gravity of his words. " It is not that bad right now but it will be soon and you are the only one, aside from El himself, capable of discerning whether someone genuinely needs to meet him.

I know you've been performing admirably in this role, and I just wanted to emphasize the importance of making no exceptions to this rule—not even if the King of the Seven Kingdoms himself demands an audience."

He paused for a moment to let his words sink in.

"From now on, I want you to handle this as the sole gatekeeper. You will only need to justify these decisions to El and no one else." His expression was stern, reinforcing the critical nature of her role in guarding the gate to El's invaluable time and expertise.

"But, Lord Stark, I... I can’t do that," she stammered, the weight of his expectations bearing down on her with uncomfortable intensity.

"Why is that? Because it's disrespectful?" Lord Stark's question cut through the air, his laughter sharp and humorless.

Ned leaned in, his face stern. "I know I'm asking a lot. It's not fair to put this all on you. But you're the only one who can do it."

His voice got harder, almost like he was giving orders on a battlefield. "These southern lords don't get it. They don't understand that I can't just order El around. I need you to make that clear to all of Westeros."

He paused, his words heavy in the air. "Even if it makes people think I can't control my own people."

Freya felt a chill run down her spine. She'd always respected the Starks, but this... this was something else. They were willing to risk their reputation to protect El. To protect his freedom.

She knew what she had to do. This wasn't just some job - this was important. This could change everything.

Freya straightened her back. If Lord Stark thought she could do this, then by the gods, she would. She'd be El's shield, keeping all the bullshit away so he could focus on his work.

She thought back to two days ago, when El had stumbled out of that crazy workshop of his. His eyes had been bright, words tumbling out as he tried to explain his latest idea.

She'd asked him to come back soon, but she knew better. His mind was already a million miles away, lost in whatever new puzzle he'd found.

Freya sighed. Well, if El was going to be El, then she'd just have to step up. Someone had to keep the wolves at bay.

As she pondered her options, the thought of sending Fenrir to retrieve El briefly crossed her mind, knowing well that his mere presence could solve all her troubles.

However, she ultimately decided against it, choosing instead to confront the challenges on her own. This seemed a minor sacrifice compared to everything he had done for her.

After all, their fateful meeting had pivoted her life into unforeseen directions, blessing her with opportunities she could never even dream about like the founding of the school of medicine—a project close to her heart, despite El’s jests about using the students as free labor.

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Deep beneath the earth, in realms untouched by light or life, a cavernous expanse revealed its chilling secrets. The chamber's vastness stretched into the unseen, testing the limits of my augmented endurance. The air hung heavy and oppressively hot; had my lungs been those of an ordinary man, I might have been gasping for breath in the stifling heat.

Darkness reigned, punctured only by the sinister red glow emanating from an enigmatic mass suspended at the room's center. Millions of delicate, blood-like strands, seemingly alive, held it aloft, each pulsating with a ghastly luminescence that set a horrifying tone—a scene that would not be out of place in a scene in the Alien franchise, yet it harbored a unique terror that surpassed mere cinematic horror.

The mass in the middle was essentially a cradle that housed a dragon edd of my creation and it would act as a shield and a filter to let the egg have anything and everything it needed

The shell was a marvel of my own creation, intricately lined with magical veins. Upon closer examination, one could see that tiny runes, each meticulously etched, shimmered with a faint light across the surface of the shell. Each glowing symbol was a testament to the deep magic infused within the very walls of this ominous nursery.

I stood next to Vaylara in silence and looked up at what we had created with awe and glee on our faces.

My fellow visionary in this audacious project had grown increasingly passionate—her enthusiasm exceeding my own at some indistinct point.

After many intense discussions, bursts of brainstorming and sleepless nights of work we were finally done.

Vaylara had taken care of the most crucial step needed for this entire project as I was nowhere near skilled enough to play with souls yet.

The breakthrough had come unexpectedly, borne out of Vayalara's exasperation with my very imaginative aspirations for our creation.

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1 week ago..

As we delved deeper into these theoretical discussions, it became clear to me that I was less interested in definitive answers and more in understanding Vayalara's perspective on scenarios that had only ever existed in my imagination. Observing her reactions helped me gauge what was feasible within a reasonable timeframe and what might take a lifetime to achieve.

Those ideas were shelved for future exploration.

During one of these conversations, I posed what I thought was a simple question, which finally prompted Vayalara to raise her voice in frustration.

“No, you can’t have a dragon that can breathe both fire and ice.”

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“The kind of balance required for naturally opposing forces to coexist in harmony indefinitely is not possible,” Vayalara explained, her tone a mix of exasperation and patience. “You would have to etch the concept of balance into their soul, and for something as complex as this, I don’t think a single concept will cut it.”

I paused, processing her words. “Wait, wait, wait—backtrack a bit here. What exactly do you mean by etching concepts into souls?” I was intrigued by this new avenue of magic Vayalara referred to.

She paused, halting whatever tangent she was previously pursuing.

With a moment's hesitation, she began to explain, "It's the art of embedding meaning into souls. It's so perilous that no one has ever managed to do it without encountering some unforeseen consequences."

“Really no one in history? Why is it so hard?” I enquired

Vayalara continued, her tone earnest and patronizing. "Imagine the soul as a painting, where each significant moment in life adds a single unique brush stroke."

She then drew an analogy to highlight the complexity of the process. "The best attempt at etching concepts I've seen performed could be likened to a child with a fistful of paint trying to improve the greatest painting you've ever seen. They aim to improve it and imbue it with new meaning, but almost every time, the result is… ugly." Her explanation resonated with me in a way that was as baffling as it was enlightening.

"So, it's a lost cause?" I asked.

"Unless you want to dedicate a lifetime to just this and are happy with ambiguous results," she replied, her voice laced with a mix of caution and challenge, suggesting the enormity of the task yet leaving the door open for the possibility, however remote.

Seeing that she wasn't very confident about getting results I almost dropped the idea entirely before a question popped up into my head

"What if the painting was blank?" I asked

"What do you mean?" Vayalara's brows furrowed, her interest piqued.

I clarified, "What if we do the etchings when the canvas is blank and let the painting grow around it?" The concept of starting with an empty soul seemed to present a different angle to our previous considerations.

Vayalara took a long pause, visibly weighing the implications of such an approach. Finally, she spoke, her voice cautious, "That would, in theory, work. But you need to understand that a new soul is very fragile."

"But possible?" I pressed, eager to explore every potential avenue, despite the risks.

"... Yes, but it comes with its own list of problems," she admitted, her expression serious.

My statement seemed to capture her interest more firmly, perhaps because it suggested a realm of possibilities that hadn't been fully considered before.

"Ah, but since you haven't named any, I'm going to assume they are slightly manageable," I ventured, a slight smile playing at the corners of my mouth.

This seemed to spark something in Vayalara; she looked genuinely intrigued and began to consider the proposition more seriously.

"I do not know much about the formation of souls," I confessed, voicing my concerns. "But I've recently discovered that the animals I use my abilities on and spend more time with eventually begin to slowly gain consciousness. It's the most baffling thing I've seen, and I still have no clue how it happened."

The revelation seemed to strike a chord with her. Her eyes widened in surprise before shifting to a contemplative and excited expression. "That will definitely help cut down the time this is going to take," she mused.

The notion that we could potentially use anything I create to speed up the experimental process was a big plus but I had more questions.

Vayalara listened patiently as I asked. "What concepts can be etched? Is there some sort of limit? What language should they be in?"

"They have to be words that hold a fixed deep meaning and it's most stable when you use one word. Normally, it is in the language of the person whose soul is being changed. But since we're working on a blank canvas of your creation, I would suggest we use the language that you are most comfortable associating with," she explained, adapting her expertise to our unconventional approach.

But she didn't stop there and asked. "You sound like you have an idea in mind already. Why don't you just tell me."

My grin widened, the audacity of what i was about to do just after a few weeks of promising myself that i would not do reckless experiments, and this I had no fucking idea how it would turn out.

"We are going to create a dragon egg, then etch the concept of adaptability on it, and then drop it down a hole that goes as close to the center of the planet as possible and wait and see what comes out."

The realization of what we were about to create finally dawned on her, and the smile that spread across her face should have worried me, but I doubted I looked any different.

“You do know that there are a million different ways this can go horribly wrong,” she remarked, her smile still in place.

My smile grew even more demented at that.

“I know of no better purpose in life than to perish attempting the impossible.”

*The divine general wasn't going to have shit on my dragon.*