# Chapter - 57

A few minutes of exploring later, I found the place I was looking for: the library.

It was smaller than expected, but that wasn't surprising given Castle Black's limited resources.

"Can I help you, young man?"

I turned to see an elderly man sitting in one of the corners of the library, his cloudy eyes seeming to look through me rather than at me.

I recognized him immediately: Aemon Targaryen.

"How did you know I wasn't just another brother of the Night's Watch?" I asked, curious.

"Your footsteps are unfamiliar," he explained."And anyone I normally expect would have knocked first, and a thief would know that there was nothing of value in here so you have to be someone new."

"Ha! On that, I disagree. If I ever do become a thief, I am pretty sure I would steal books well first additions at least, but I do apologize for entering without knocking."

"Well, at least you have manners. Go on then, tell me who you are. It's pretty rare that someone new comes in here."

I grinned, though he couldn't see it. "How about I show you instead of telling you?"

I approached him and gently placed my hand on his shoulder, channeling my power to heal his eyes and a few other minor ailments. The change was immediate - his cloudy eyes cleared, and he blinked rapidly, looking around the room in wonder before his gaze settled on me.

There was silence for a few moments before Aemon said, "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, El. I have heard so much that I wasn't really sure if it was all one big jest, thank you for giving me my sight back."

"No worries, it's also been paid for, and to be fair, you were kind of creeping me out by not looking at me while talking," I said with a smile.

He laughed at that. "So, what brings you here?"

I told him.

Aemon's expression grew grave as he processed the information. "That is indeed troubling news. If you're right, we need to start preparing immediately. What do you plan to do?"

"For now, I'm only telling people I trust won't start a panic," I explained. "I'll make sure the right people are aware, so you don't need to worry about that."

Aemon nodded slowly. "I understand. Discretion is wise in matters like these."

"That brings me to the other reason I came here," I continued. "Would you happen to have any books on this topic that I wouldn't find in Winterfell's library?"

---------

Margaery sat in her chambers, frustration evident on her face. "This is impossible," she muttered.

Her brother Willas looked up from the letter he was reading. "What's troubling you, sister?"

Margaery sighed. "How am I supposed to get close to El when he finds an excuse to run away every time I try to talk about anything but healing? And he already seems to be in love with his apprentice, Freya. Now he's just up and left on some journey north of the Wall. What am I supposed to do?"

Willas gave her a sympathetic look. "I can see you've tried your best, so don't beat yourself up over it. Besides, it seems you won't need to push anymore. I just got a letter from Grandmother. Here, it's best if you read it yourself."

Margaery took the letter, finally noticing the worried expression on Willas's face. "Willas, is everything alright back home?" she asked, anxiety rising in her voice.

"Everyone's fine back home. Just read it first."

Margaery read the letter, her eyes widening with each line. When she finished, she looked up at her brother in disbelief. "Are you sure this is real?"

Willas nodded grimly. "Yes, I made sure. I've also uncovered what might have caused such a reaction based on what I've asked around."

"What happened?"

"A couple of mercenaries tried to abduct Freya."

"What?!" Margaery exclaimed.

"Yes, apparently it's not common news because they didn't even manage to get out of Winterfell before they were caught by El himself."

Margaery sat back, processing this information. "It's entirely possible for the two events to be related. But still, to think he's capable of doing something like this..."

"So what do we do now?" she asked after a moment.

Willas sighed. "With this news and El gone for who knows how long, I think it's best we depart for Highgarden soon. We can't extend our stay here much longer."

"I have to finish a trade discussion with Lord Stark," Willas continued. "After that, we shall depart in a few days."

---------

I spent some time talking with the maester of Castle Black about the Others, hoping to learn something new. Unfortunately, he didn't have much to add beyond what I already knew, so I decided to move on from the library.

After wandering around for a bit, I found myself on a balcony overlooking the training yard.

I watched as Alliser Thorne barked orders at what looked like a group of new recruits, his harsh voice carrying across the yard.

After a few minutes, the men started to notice me, and their distraction caught Thorne's attention. He looked up, his eyes narrowing as he spotted me.

"Who might you be?" he called out, his voice dripping with disdain.

I smiled. "Oh, please don't mind me. You guys go on, I'm just passing by."

Thorne's face reddened. "I am the master-at-arms here at Castle Black, boy, and you look like fresh meat who doesn't know his place yet. So get down here before I need to get my whip."

I was flabbergasted at the gall and frankly, the stupidity on display.

‘Did he really just assume that I was a new recruit just because he had never seen me before?’

But then I realized this could be a lot more fun than I'd anticipated.

With a grin, I vaulted over the balcony railing, landing lightly in the yard below. The recruits backed away.

"Alright then, it's been a while since I've used a sword," I said, my smile widening as I caught the blunted training blade Thorne tossed my way.

Thorne's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You'll regret that, boy," he growled, lunging forward with surprising speed for a man his age.

I sidestepped effortlessly, the steel blade whistling past me. Thorne's eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly recovered, unleashing a flurry of strikes that would have impressed me if I hadn't seen better.

The yard echoed with the sharp clang of steel on steel as I parried each blow with ease. The recruits watched in stunned silence, their fearsome master-at-arms reduced to swinging wildly at thin air.

This dance continued for several minutes, Thorne's face growing redder with each failed attempt to land a hit.

"Stand still, you little shit," he snarled, chest heaving with exertion.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Now where's the fun in that?" Then, deciding to add insult to injury, I grinned and said, "But I can see you're getting tired, and I've been taught not to make fun of the elderly. So, sure. I will make sure that my feet stay put and only use my sword arm."

To emphasize my point, I casually slipped my left hand into my pocket, holding the blunted sword loosely in my right.

Thorne's face contorted with rage. He charged forward, sword raised high. This time, instead of dodging, I met his strike head-on, blocking it with my blade and effortlessly pushing him back.

"Come on now, surely you can do better than that," I taunted, not even breaking a sweat.

The one-sided duel dragged on, Thorne's attacks growing increasingly desperate while I barely moved from my spot. Finally, boredom overtook me. With a lightning-fast, well-placed strike, I sent Thorne's sword flying from his grip, the blunted steel clattering across the yard.

He stumbled backward, struggling to keep his footing on the muddy ground. His chest heaved as he glared at me.

"Had enough?" I asked, twirling the training sword casually. "Or shall we continue this little… lesson?"

The gathered crowd held their collective breath, a sea of wide eyes and slack jaws. Alliser Thorne stood before me, a man caught between rage and humiliation, his pride visibly battling with the undeniable truth of what had just transpired.

Before Thorne could muster a response, a gruff voice cut through the tension.

"What is going on here?"

The crowd parted, revealing the imposing figure of Jeor Mormont, the Old Bear himself.

He looked at me and the state Ser Alliser was in.

"Lord El, why does my master-at-arms look like he tried to outrun a horse?"

"Ah well, I was just exploring the castle after having a delightful conversation with Maester Aemon. Then I stopped to watch Ser Alliser here training some men, and when he spotted me, he just told me to come join him for training or get whipped,"

I shrugged, my tone light. "Now, I don't know about you, Lord Commander, but I'm not particularly fond of being whipped. So, I played along."

His gaze shifted between me and the still-panting Thorne.

"I see," Mormont said slowly, his eyes narrowing. "Ser Alliser, perhaps you'd care to explain why you thought it appropriate to threaten our guest with a whipping?"

It was at this moment that realization dawned on Alliser's face – the dawning horror of a man who's just realized he's fucked up.

Thorne's face, already flushed from exertion, turned an even deeper shade of red. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, resembling nothing so much as a fish out of water.

“I apologize. ”

I decided to throw him a lifeline – of sorts. "Oh, I'm sure it was all just a misunderstanding, Lord Commander. Perhaps Ser Alliser merely mistook me for a new recruit."

Mormont's lips twitched, fighting back what might have been a smile. "Is that so, Ser Alliser? Did you mistake our guest for a recruit?"

Thorne, caught between pride and self-preservation, managed a stiff nod. "It... appears I may have... misjudged the situation, Lord Commander."

"Indeed," Mormont replied dryly. He turned back to me, his expression softening slightly. "Lord El, on behalf of the Night's Watch, I apologize for this... misunderstanding. "

"Oh, it's not necessary, Lord Mormont," I said, waving off his concern. "No one seems hurt, anyway. Just a bit of exercise, really."

The Old Bear grunted, his eyes still narrowed with suspicion. "Very well, if you insist. As it happens, I came here to inform you that Benjen will have everything you need for your trip ready at dawn."

"Wonderful," I replied, my face brightening. "Oh, and while we're at it, could you point me towards your infirmary? I'd like to hold up my end of the deal as well."

He nodded. "Of course. I'll have someone show you the way." He turned to one of the nearby recruits. "You there, escort Lord El to the infirmary."

As I prepared to follow my guide, I couldn't help but notice Thorne's still confused expression. It was clear he was still trying to piece together exactly what was happening and who I was.

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# 

# Chapter - 58

The gate creaked open slowly, revealing the vast field of snow beyond. Benjen and I sat atop our horses, ready to embark on our quest to catch ourselves an ice-type Pokémon. Well, a White Walker, but same difference, right?

As soon as the gate was fully raised, we set off in the general direction towards Craster's Keep.

I'd given both our horses some upgrades, including a few new tricks I'd figured out to help them adapt to the cold. They ate up the miles with ease, unfazed by the biting wind and uneven terrain.

My thoughts wandered during the journey. I wasn't exactly looking forward to what we'd find at Craster's Keep.

If my memory served me right, Craster was a sick son of a bitch who had some sort of deal with the Others, trading his newborn sons in exchange for being left alone.

The thought made me quite queasy.

We rode in silence for hours, the landscape unchanging - just an endless sea of white.

Eventually, even the enhanced horses needed a break, and so did Benjen. We stopped to set up a small fire and rest for the night

As we sat around the flames, I decided to break the silence. "Hey, I just realized I'm pretty clueless about the wildling tribes up here. Mind giving me a rundown?"

Benjen nodded, taking a swig from his waterskin before launching into an explanation. He told me about Mance Rayder, a former brother of the Night's Watch who was slowly becoming the next King-Beyond-the-Wall, uniting more and more wildlings under his banner.

"I've been surprised at how quickly he's growing in numbers, considering that wildlings don't really trust people who come from south of the wall," Benjen admitted. "But I guess it makes sense now. Nothing brings proud people together like a common enemy."

"What about the other groups?" I pressed.

Benjen continued his explanation - Rattleshirt, the Lord of Bones; the cannibals; Alfyn Crowkiller; and even the giants. It was a colorful cast of characters, to say the least.

"You know, it might not be a bad idea to talk to Mance Rayder," I mused. "Did you know him before he deserted?"

Benjen shrugged. "Briefly. Not enough to be an accurate judge of character, at least."

I grinned. "Sometimes a familiar face is all you need for a polite conversation."

Benjen snorted at that. "You're mad if you think this journey of yours can be coupled with polite conversation."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, Benjen, you misunderstand. I'm totally fine with a little bit of violence. In fact, I'm kind of looking forward to it."

He raised one of his eyebrows at that, and I continued, "I'm pretty sure all problems in this world need at least a little bit of violence to be solved smoothly."

Benjen shook his head, a mix of amusement and concern on his face.

Seeing how tired he was, I offered to take the first watch while he slept; it's not like I needed sleep anyway.

Benjen had started a small fire and explained to me not to let it go out or, more importantly, not let it get too high as it would attract unwanted attention.

As bored as I was, I knew that all attention would be wanted.

So after making sure that he was fast asleep, I slowly started adding more and more wood into the fire.

The fire started to get pretty big, and I didn't have to wait long after that to feel like I was being watched.

But no matter how hard I looked around, I couldn't spot anything out of the ordinary.

'I'm an idiot,' I thought for a second before I stopped using my eyes to find what I was looking for.

I had quite a list to choose from based on all the animals I had studied so far, and thermal vision seemed like a good option to go for now.

Which was smart, but I was not ready for the flashbang effect that the fire in front of me created. After a few seconds of minor adjustments, I finally found my target.

It was some sort of four-legged animal, and based on the fact that I still couldn't spot anything in the exact spot with my normal vision, I knew it was something unusual.

I didn't make any actions that made it seem like I had noticed its presence, even as it slowly approached and got into position to pounce right behind me.

Even as I felt it try to clamp down on my jugular, I heard not a single sound.

I could feel its sharp teeth and jaw try to pierce my flesh and fail.

I paralyzed whatever it was and got my first look at what had attacked me.

A white tiger!

'There are tigers in Westeros? How am I just learning this now?' I thought, bewildered.

On second glance, it wasn't exactly a white tiger. It looked more like it had white stripes on black instead of the pattern I normally expected.

Wait, was this what a shadowcat was?

Some sort of tiger-like creature? I had heard of them, of course, but I hadn't really seen one before.

Huh.

It looked absolutely adorable, well, if you forgot the fact that it was bigger than me.

I picked up the giant cat and gently, I placed it down in front of me.

As I studied the magnificent creature, I couldn't help but marvel at its beauty. The contrast between its dark fur and bright white stripes was striking, even in the flickering firelight. Its muscles, though relaxed now, spoke of raw power and deadly grace.

"Well, aren't you a pretty kitty," I murmured, running a hand through its thick fur.

His eyes could still move, and I saw the panic in them, along with a hint of curiosity.

I conjured up some biomass and transformed it into a rather juicy piece of steak, placing it in front of him. I let him move his head.

He hissed at me when he realized he could move his face but not run, but also stared quite suspiciously at the piece of meat in front of him.

I just went back to playing with the fire.

It didn't take long before he devoured the piece of meat and looked at me expectantly.

But I pretended to ignore him.

He slowly changed tactics and actually fucking purred to get my attention.

That was just too much for me, so I created another piece twice as big as the last one. He ate this one slowly in silence.

Vaylara's ghostly form manifested next to me. "So this is how you go around collecting pets?"

"Well, I wouldn't really call them pets," I replied. "They're friends I can't normally talk to who often do things for me if I ask nicely enough."

"How is that not a pet?" she asked, skeptical.

"Meh, I don't know what to tell you," I shrugged.

I glanced back at the Shadowcat. It had finished the food in front of it and now had a content but alert look on its face.

"See? We're developing an understanding here," I grinned at Vaylara. "It's all about mutual respect... and maybe a bit of bribery with food."

"You know what? I have the perfect name for him," I mused. "Hobbes. Yes, Hobbes."

What kid didn't want to have a pet tiger named Hobbes?

"Onto important matters," I continued, my tone growing serious. "I can feel it already now that I am on the other side. The magic that you have taught me is going to be a challenge to cast."

“I did warn you, what about your fleshcrafting?”

“Works as fine as anywhere else as far as I can tell.”

“That is some good news I guess”

Vaylara and I discussed some other things and continued my lessons on magic.

I turned my attention back to our campsite, once I could tell that Benjen was waking up.. The fire had died down to embers, casting a soft glow over our surroundings.

"Morning, sunshine," I called out cheerfully as Benjen sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Sleep well? Oh, and don't mind our new friend here. He's just joined us for breakfast."

Benjen froze, his hand instinctively going to his sword as he spotted Hobbes, but I waved him off. "Relax, he's harmless. Well, to us at least. I think we've come to an understanding."

Hobbes, as I'd now dubbed him, looked at me with those piercing eyes, and I felt a pang of guilt about paralyzing him earlier.

Let's see if that understanding was true. I hadn't really made any changes to his body, just studied it so far and paralyzed its limbs temporarily.

Even though the 200-pound murder machine had tried to rip my throat out, I still started feeling bad for leaving him stuck like that.

So I fixed his paralysis and watched as he jumped back the moment he realized he could move again.

His eyes were completely fixed on me while he seemed to ignore Benjen, who had now fully drawn his sword.

I didn't make any sudden movements, but after what felt like a minute of eye contact, he turned tail and ran away into the darkness.

"Aww," I pouted, feeling disappointed. "Well," I said, breaking the tension, "that was interesting."

'It seems like your plan didn't play out as you wanted it to,' Vaylara teased.

I was about to respond when I noticed something interesting - Hobbes hadn't run away completely. Through my thermal vision, I could still see him nearby, watching quietly from his hiding spot.

'Aww, he's just a little tsundere,' I thought, amused.

"Mind letting me know what that was all about?" Benjen finally asked, relaxing slightly now that Hobbes wasn't visible.

"Oh, that was nothing," I waved dismissively. "We just had a little company during the night, and I got a bit bored so I started playing with it."

He looked like he had a lot to say on the matter, so I just smiled at him innocently until he finally sighed. "It won't be a problem?"

"Nope," I assured him cheerfully. "Even if it does, I promise to take care of it." No need to let him worry needlessly about the shy Shadowcat currently stalking us.

I could still sense Hobbes watching us intently from the shadows, his curiosity apparently outweighing his caution. It seemed I might have made a new friend after all, even if he wasn't ready to admit it yet.

After we finished packing up and started to set off, it became clear that Benjen wasn't going to trust me with keeping watch anymore.

About half a day into our journey, Vaylara spoke in my head. "Just so you know, you're being watched, and I'm not referring to that new pet of yours."

I groaned at that. None of my senses had alerted me to anything nearby other than some birds, and Vaylara refused to elaborate.

Even after a few minutes of searching, I wasn't able to find anything more than a few birds in our vicinity.

Wait. One of those birds was actually following us. Oh - there was a warg keeping an eye on us.

The only wargs around here would be someone working for one of the big tribes.

‘It shouldn't be much of an issue,’ I replied to Vaylara in my head. ‘I'm pretty sure it's someone I'm hoping to run into anyway.’

I couldn't help but smile to myself. Things were falling into place nicely.

------------

A/N: Hello everyone! Surprise chapter because I just got rejected from another job after getting to the final round after five fucking interviews, so now I am channeling all that rage in the only healthy way I know - by playing god on a Google doc. Expect a lot more chapters this week till that rage subsides.

***Sincerely,***

***Elfon***

# Chapter - 59

It didn't take long before we encountered our stalkers.

I sensed them up ahead lying in wait and even Benjen seemed to have noticed a few moments later.

"There's an ambush waiting ahead," he murmured, just loud enough for me to hear.

I shrugged. "I know. Let's see what they want."

We continued forward openly, making no attempt to hide our approach.

As we entered a clearing, figures emerged from the treeline. Their furs and makeshift weapons left no doubt of who they were.

A red-bearded man stepped forward. I was pretty sure I recognized him- Tormund Giantsbane.

"Quite surprising seeing a crow and some green boy round these parts," Tormund called out, his voice carrying easily across the clearing. Despite his tense posture, there was more curiosity than hostility in his tone.

"I would have come alone. It's just that I am horrible at navigating unfamiliar places, so I asked for some help," I replied casually.

"That so?" Tormund raised an eyebrow. "And what brings you here?"

"As much as I would have liked to come here just to look at the scenery, I have some serious business to attend to," I said. "We're hoping to catch ourselves a wight, maybe even a White Walker if we're lucky."

The words were followed with nothing but silence. The wildlings went dead silent, their expressions a mix of shock and disbelief before Tormund burst out laughing, his deep laugh echoing through the trees. The rest did not join in, though some were dismissive.

"Quite dangerous games you like to play, boy. I like you already!" Tormund declared, wiping tears from his eyes.

I saw an opportunity and took it. "Feel like helping us out? You guys seem like you'd know your way around these parts better than we would." I glanced apologetically at Benjen. "No offense."

"None taken," Benjen replied with a slight shrug. "I couldn't agree more."

"Ha!" Tormund said with humor and slight interest. "Quite the set of balls you have on you, lad. What do we get in return for what is essentially a mad quest?"

"Well, I don't mean to brag, but where I am from, I am quite the famous healer. And I would like to offer my services as a healer to anyone you would want me to"

"Really?" Tormund turned to Benjen in a serious tone. "Is that true, crow?"

"Yes," Benjen nodded. "If anything, he is underplaying his skills."

He seemed to think on this for a moment before nodding "Very well. If you come back with us to our current settlement, there are enough sick people to be able to prove your words, healer boy."

"Wonderful, the name's El by the way," I said with a grin. "Not that I have any problem with healer boy, I just realized that I hadn't introduced myself."

"Ha! The name's Tormund Giantsbane, healer boy!"

I noticed another familiar face in the group as I caught Ygritte staring at me.

I couldn't help but think I should have brought Jon along - watching that particular drama unfold would have at least kept me entertained.

Next time, I guess.

We set off together, with Benjen taking up position at the rear while I walked right in the midst of the wildling group, completely at ease. My casual attitude seemed to unsettle some of them - after all, any normal person in my position would be at least slightly nervous when traveling with a dozen wildlings.

Even Benjen, while alert, wasn't exactly anxious. It seems he had enough faith in my abilities to keep us both alive if things went south.

The awkward silence was starting to get to me though.

"Hey, since we've got quite a journey ahead of us, and I get bored easily, does anyone want to play a game of twenty questions?" I asked, trying to break the ice.

"What's that?" Tormund asked, curiosity evident in his voice.

"It's simple - you ask me a question, and I answer truthfully. Then I ask you one, and you do the same. We keep going until either we get bored or something more interesting happens," I explained with a grin.

“Sure, I'll start," Tormund grinned. "How'd you end up traveling with a crow?"

"Simple, really - I needed someone who knows the land, and Benjen here was kind enough to volunteer," I replied. "My turn - what made you decide to ambush us instead of just following?"

Ygritte spoke up before Tormund could answer. "Saw you coming from leagues away, you weren't really being subtle. Figured might as well see what a crow and some kneeler were doing this far north."

"I'm wounded," I placed a hand over my heart dramatically. "Do I really look like a Southerner to you?"

"You're wearing that fancy white coat," she pointed out. "No one dresses like that beyond the Wall."

"Fair point," I conceded. "Though I'd argue it's quite practical. Never gets dirty, keeps me warm, looks impressive..."

Tormund let out a booming laugh. "Aye, looks impressive right up until you need to hide from something nasty in the forests."

"Who says I need to hide?" I shot back with a grin.

"Ha! I like this one," Tormund declared to his companions. "Got more fire in him than most crows I've met."

As we walked, the tension gradually eased. The Free Folk were naturally suspicious people, but they seemed to appreciate direct honesty and a bit of humor.

"So, healer boy," Tormund continued, "I was under the impression that anyone south of the walls don’t believe in the existence of white walkers and what makes you think you can capture one?"

“Well like I said already, I am quite unique even south of the wall,” I said with a smirk. ”And leave the capturing to me. I have a couple of tricks up my sleeve.”

"Tricks won't save you from the dead," one of the other wildlings muttered darkly.

"Maybe not," I agreed. "But they've worked well enough so far. Speaking of which - how far to your settlement?"

"Not far now," Tormund answered. "Just over that ridge. Hope you're as good as the crow says because we've got some people who could use a proper healer."

I noticed Ygritte still studying me intently. "Got another question?" I asked her directly.

She narrowed her eyes. "You're different. Can't quite figure out how, but you're not like the others south of the Wall."

"Thank you," I grinned. "I try my best, and that wasn't a question."

“Where are you from?”

“I really doubt you know where I am from. I myself am not so sure but I currently live in Winterfell and have been for a couple of years now.”

-------------

As we crested a hill, an enormous encampment spread out before us. Hundreds, maybe thousands of tents dotted the landscape.

"Well damn," I muttered to Benjen. "When you said King beyond the Wall, you weren't exaggerating."

I was quite genuine in my surprise too. I hadn't expected that many people would gather so early on but I didn't give it much thought.

People bustled between the tents like ants in a colony - more humans than I'd seen gathered in one place since arriving in this world. Well, Kings Landing was a close second.

As we made our way down, curious eyes followed our progress. Most shot dark looks at Benjen's black clothing, marking him instantly as a Brother of the Night's Watch. A few did double-takes at my spotless lab coat but mostly ignored me as some oddly-dressed southerner.

Tormund led us through the maze of tents toward one larger than the rest.

"Oi Ryder!" Tormund bellowed. "Got some visitors you'll want to meet!"

After a few moments, a man emerged from the tent. Even without introduction, I knew this had to be Mance Rayder. He carried himself with the quiet confidence of a natural leader, his weathered face and sharp eyes taking in every detail of the scene before him.

His gaze lingered on Benjen's black cloak before shifting to me with open curiosity. "Now this is interesting," he said thoughtfully. "A Benjen Stark and the White Mage in my little camp?"

"Oh? I'm surprised my reputation has made it this far north," I remarked, genuinely impressed.

Mance's lips quirked in a slight smile. "I make it my business to know what happens south of the Wall. And you, my friend, have been causing quite a stir. Come on in, I am sure you have much to talk about."

Before we could enter the tent, an angry voice cut through the murmurs of the gathered crowd.

"Well, if it isn't a lost crow!"

"Alfyn," Mance warned, his voice sharp. "These are my guests."

But the scarred man - Alfyn Crowkiller - ignored Rryder's words, pushing forward with murder in his eyes. "Come to join your dead brothers?"

I felt Benjen tense beside me, his hand moving to his sword. Before things could escalate, I stepped between them, keeping my voice light despite the tension in the air.

"Actually, he's my guide," I said with an easy smile. "I'm absolute rubbish with directions, and he was kind enough to volunteer. So any problem you have with him..." I let my voice trail off meaningfully, the threat clear despite my cheerful tone.

Alfyn sneered. "And who might you be, Boy?"

I grinned, letting a hint of power leak into my voice. "Someone you really don't want to mess with. But if you insist..."

This was my opportunity to make a statement.

Almost everyone here had no idea what I was capable of.

*‘I guess I may as well enlighten them’*

Unlike last time, I had many more options for handling this situation.

The wildlings formed a circle around us, their reactions a mix of bloodthirsty excitement and wary suspicion. Some eagerly pushed forward, hoping for a show.

I kept my stance relaxed, hands loose at my sides as the infamous Crowkiller stalked toward me. The seasoned raider moved with the practiced grace of a killer, his mismatched axes glinting in the pale light. His lips curled into a sneer - clearly, he expected this to be quick.

He made it three steps before something changed.

A single drop of blood fell from his nose, landing silently in the snow. Alfyn froze mid-stride, his fierce expression melting into confusion as he reached up to touch his face. His fingers came away red.

Then the screaming started.

The sound that tore from Alfyn's throat wasn't human - a horrifying shriek of pure agony that echoed across the silent camp as he collapsed to his knees. The eager crowd that had gathered for a fight recoiled as one, their bloodlust replaced by primal fear as they realized this wasn't going to be the simple brawl they'd expected.

-------------------

Ygritte's first impression of El had been simple enough - a naive southern lordling looking for adventure away from home. An idiot who'd soon learn the hard way why you didn't venture this far north for fun.

But something about him set her teeth on edge.

When he'd announced his intention to hunt the Others, it had only reinforced her initial assessment of his stupidity. Tormund seemed to sense it too - that something wasn't quite right about this stranger.

Still, he'd been friendly enough, and they had him vastly outnumbered.

Or so she'd thought.

Ygritte had grown up beyond the Wall. She'd seen men torn apart by shadowcats, watched entire villages succumb to winter's cruel embrace, and faced death more times than she could count. Fear was an old friend, as familiar as the bow in her hands.

But this... this was different.

The screams still echoed in her ears. Alfyn Crowkiller - a man who'd earned his name in blood and violence - had practically melted before her eyes. His flesh had sloughed away like spring snow, dissolving into nothing as if he'd never existed. No blood, no bones, not even a scrap of clothing remained to mark his passing.

And El... he hadn't even moved. Hadn't raised a hand or spoken a word. Just looked at Alfyn, as if deciding his fate with a mere thought.

Now he stood there, that same friendly smile on his face, as if he hadn't just erased a man from existence mere moments ago.

"So," he said cheerfully, turning to Mance, "Where were we? Oh yes, I was hoping to get my hands on a White Walker. I could use some help tracking one down. In exchange, I'm happy to offer my healing services to anyone who needs them."

The casual shift from dealing death to offering life made Ygritte's blood run cold.

This man, this being who wore the shape of a man, could probably wipe out their entire camp as easily as brushing snow from his cloak. They weren't the ones in control.

They never had been.

---------------

# 

# 

# 

# 

# Chapter - 60

I hadn't moved a muscle, but everyone watching knew I was responsible for what had just happened. The wildlings' faces went from anticipation to a mix of fear and awe.

Good - that's exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for.

It was a neat little trick I'd recently developed to get around my limitation of needing touch to use my powers. I'd created what were essentially flesh-eating bacteria that remained tethered to me, moving around like an invisible cloud that I could control with a thought.

Their main purpose was converting organic matter into biomass and storing it for later use.

They weren't really that versatile yet, but they were ready to consume any organic material at my mental command - like a swarm of invisible piranhas. I always had this cloud of invisible biomass surrounding me, prepared to use at a moment's notice.

The discussions with Mance that followed were a bit tense, but I managed to ease things with my winning charm.

"I hope the events outside won't hinder our cooperation," I said once we were in the privacy of his tent.

He was tense but seemed to relax a bit. "No, you didn't start anything, so it wasn't your fault." He clearly had questions but kept them to himself.

That was fine with me, so we got on to important matters.

"So," Mance said, eyeing me skeptically across the tent, "You need our help capturing White Walkers?"

"I'll handle the capturing part. What I need help with is tracking, and we're talking about just one. Failing that, I'd at least like to get my hands on a wight." I flashed him my most winning smile.

He wasn't impressed. "And why exactly would we help you do something that dangerous?"

"Because winter is coming. We both know it, whether we like it or not. That's the truth. Now, I can't promise anything yet, but I might be able to do something about the larger problem somewhere down the line." I said as seriously as I could.

He contemplated my words for a few moments before nodding slowly.

"Ten men," he said.

I shook my head. "Five is plenty. Any more would just slow us down."

"Eight." Why was he negotiating for more men?

"Five," I repeated. "And I'll throw in fixing that shoulder of yours that you keep trying to hide. Don't think I haven't noticed you favoring your left arm."

He agreed easily enough after that.

Without much delay, I was back in my element - sitting on a makeshift chair around a campfire with a line of patients to fix.

I'd thought my earlier display would make people hesitant to approach, but word spread quickly after I regrew that first patient's eye. Soon there were plenty seeking help, most with basic physical injuries.

As I analyzed more and more of their physiology, I found it fascinating to see the small adaptations they'd developed - like skin noticeably thicker than those living south of the Wall. Makes sense, given the harsh climate they endured.

After what felt like hours, the steady stream of patients finally came to an end. I spotted Tormund's familiar face approaching through the dispersing crowd.

"You definitely weren't lying when you said you were a famous healer," he said with a grin.

"I don't like lying," I shrugged. "So, you're one of the men coming with me?"

"Of course!" Tormund laughed. "Like there's a chance I'm gonna miss out on this. You should see how many people are lining up wanting to come with you."

"Oh, I thought my earlier …display would have had the opposite effect."

"Ha! Not many liked Crowkiller anyway," Tormund grinned before he became more serious.

"Death, no matter how brutal, isn't exactly rare beyond the Wall," Tormund continued.

"But when you regrew Orker’s eye? Now that's something none of us had ever seen before. Made gathering volunteers very easy I barely had to do anything."

He wasn't wrong. If anything, I had to be selective, choosing only those I thought would be most useful for our hunt. There was no point in having too many people slowing us down.

"Well, I'm done here," I said, standing up and brushing off my clothes. "Shall we go meet this eager bunch of volunteers?"

Things were going according to plan so far. Hopefully, everything on the other side was going as smoothly as I'd hoped.

----------------

The last few years have been quite interesting and enlightening for Luwin.

While healing had not originally been one of his primary interests, it had now become so. All due to one person.

It all started the day that Lord Stark brought a strange boy into the castle after returning from the Greyjoy Rebellion. This boy possessed unusual abilities …magical abilities, and at first, Luwin was skeptical and worried, of course.

However, it didn't take long for him to understand that the boy was truly someone blessed by whatever gods were out there.

What awed Luwin more than the boy's ability to heal anyone with a touch was the vast amount of knowledge he had on subjects beyond just the art of healing. Every available minute was spent reading and learning from the numerous books the boy had written, filling him with a giddy excitement reminiscent of his days as an acolyte.

He often sat in on the classes at the newly opened healing institute that El had established. He had become so engrossed in the new knowledge available to him at certain moments that he had slightly slacked on some of his duties, but he had picked up his slack other than cutting off or permanently delegating some of his more tedious duties.

However, Luwin was currently annoyed and worried for another reason.

After what was supposed to be a normal execution, as morbid as it might sound, it was quite a common occurrence, the men returned looking spooked, and more concerning was that El was with them, looking worried as well.

It had all started with the noble heirs showing up in Winterfell at the same time, which required him to spend considerable time organizing all the communications regarding the situation. That was still manageable, but what truly began to weigh on him was a previous correspondence with the Citadel.

They had expressed an interest in acquiring some of El's books after he shared some of his findings with them.

So, he decided to ask El, and his response had been positive. However, he also asked for a condition: He wanted the Citadel to send a copy of an equally interesting book in exchange for the growing library at the institute.

It had seemed like a fair ask but for some reason he couldn't comprehend, he was met with a refusal from the Citadel. That marked the beginning of his problems, and now, as he held the latest letter from the Citadel, he couldn't believe what he was reading.

The letter stated that the Citadel had been attacked, and all the high-ranking Archmaesters had been killed by a swarm of locusts that had seemingly gathered for that sole purpose.

He didn't know how to process this information. He had already checked to see if the letter could be fake, but it showed no signs of being so; even if it was fake, he wondered what purpose it was supposed to serve.

What was clear from the letter was that the leadership of the Citadel had changed overnight.

Archmaester Merwyn was now the senior most Maester left at the Citadel and was handling matters. He had agreed to the previously proposed exchange of books and even stated that he would personally look for any existing copies of interesting books and have them sent.

That was one less headache for Luwin to worry about, but he couldn't ignore the growing number of questions he had: What had happened? How? Why?

He reported the matter to Lord Stark, but for some reason, Lord Stark seemed distracted. It wasn’t just him; Luwin soon noticed that the entire group of men who had gone to execute the deserter had returned looking spooked but completely unhurt.

It wasn't just him that had noticed it. Almost the entirety of Winterfell seemed to be speculating what had occurred.

When Luwin asked around, he couldn't get a single answer that made any sense. Even Lord Stark had been silent on the matter when he inquired.

-----------------

Robert stared at Jon Arryn's pale face, watching helplessly as his foster father's life ebbed away.

The room felt too small, too stifling, but the size of the room had nothing to do with it.

It was just the weight of failure crushing down on his chest, making it hard to breathe.

He took another long pull from his wine cup, hardly tasting it anymore.

Jon had always disapproved of his drinking, but what else was there to do? Watch clear-headed as the man who'd raised him, who'd kept the bloody kingdoms from falling apart while he made a mess of everything - watch him die?

"Your Grace," Pycelle droned from somewhere behind him, "perhaps we should-"

"Get out," Robert growled, not bothering to look at the old maester. "All of you, out!"

The shuffling of feet told him his command was being obeyed. Good. He couldn't stand their hovering, their fake concerned faces.

Once they were gone, he leaned forward in his chair, taking Jon's frail hand. When had the old man gotten so fragile?

"Jon," he said roughly, his voice thick. "Don't you dare die on me, you old bastard. Who's going to run the kingdoms? Not me, we both know that." he finished chuckling humorlessly.

Jon's eyes fluttered open, cloudy and unfocused. "Robert..." his voice was barely a whisper. "The seed is..."

And then nothing. His hand went limp, his chest stilled, and just like that, Jon Arryn was gone.

Robert sat there for a long time, still holding that lifeless hand, feeling more alone than he had since they'd brought Lyanna's body back from that cursed tower.

It didn't make sense—Jon had only seemed a bit under the weather these past few days. Nothing could explain this sudden, devastating decline.

He had been gone not long on a hunt and returned to find Jon in a state so completely incoherent that he didn't even understand what his last words meant. For gods' sake, there was a plot afoot, and he hated plots. He couldn't do this alone.

He needed help. He needed someone he could trust, someone who could do what needed to be done. Someone who actually cared about honor and duty and all those things Jon had tried to teach them.

He needed Ned.

Robert stood up, his chair scraping against the stone floor. Yes, he'd go North himself. Ned would refuse if he just sent a raven—his friend was stubborn that way. But face to face? Robert could convince him.

And maybe, just maybe, he could convince the Mage to come south as well.

He was fun to talk to, and he definitely had to thank him for whatever he had done to make Cerci quiet. He had experienced a lot fewer headaches without having to deal with her nagging.

Most importantly, he could tell that the smell of the city was returning, although it was still leagues better than what it used to be. He had gotten used to the city not smelling like shit.

Robert took one last look at Jon's peaceful face before striding toward the door.

He made up his mind he was going to journey north after Jon’s funeral

The Mage had probably been right—the throne was definitely cursed. Everyone who sat on it seemed to have a terrible life. But what choice did he have now? He couldn't just walk away, as much as he wanted to.