# Chapter - 61

Ned sometimes cursed his brother Brandon.

Not out of malice - gods no - but because if Brandon had used his head instead of letting his temper rule him, things might have been different. His brother's headstrong march to King's Landing, demanding justice from a mad King... Ned understood the righteous anger that drove him. How could he not?

But understanding didn't change the fact that Brandon's rash actions, however justified, had cost him his life and thrust Ned into a position he'd never been prepared to hold.

Brandon had been raised to be the Lord of Winterfell. He'd had the temperament for it too - bold, charismatic, commanding respect without effort.

Growing up alongside Robert at the Eyrie, he'd constantly heard his friend complain about the duties expected of him as heir to Storm's End. Back then, Ned had felt a quiet satisfaction knowing he'd never have to deal with such burdens as a second son. He'd never admitted that feeling to anyone, of course.

But fate, it seemed, had other plans.

Now here he was, sitting where his father used to sit, dealing with the fact that the North had somehow become the center of attention for not just the Seven Kingdoms, but even Essos. The quiet, familiar castle town he'd grown up in was barely recognizable anymore.

The amount of paperwork crossing his desk seemed to multiply at an ungodly rate. Trade agreements, diplomatic correspondence, petitions - it never ended. And some of his "guests" appeared content to simply stay indefinitely rather than return home.

Tyrion at least was making himself useful at the Clinic, keeping busy and staying out of too much trouble. His presence had actually been a blessing in disguise - the dwarf-turned-teenager had taken over managing much of the clinic and school’s administrative work, freeing up Freya to focus on healing and teaching.

The Tyrells, thankfully, had shown the courtesy of informing him of their impending departure. But before they left, Willas Tyrell had presented an intriguing proposal - a very generous trade deal in exchange for Sansa's hand in marriage.

A few years ago, he would never have imagined such a generous offer would be made to him. He could see what the Tyrells were planning. Fortunately for him, their ambitions aligned with his daughter's best interests.

The contract gave him full control over when the wedding would take place along with a lot of leeway for any changes, meaning Sansa could complete her healer's training first. Having a healer trained by the White Mage as the future Lady of Highgarden would be worth far more than anything they were offering in the current negotiations.

The Tyrells knew this too - it's why they were so eager to secure the betrothal now.

But Ned also understood their other motivation. The Tyrells had always been ambitious, and he knew they dreamed of making Margaery the future queen. The only potential obstacle to that plan was Sansa, given his close friendship with Robert. By arranging this marriage, they'd elegantly remove that complication while gaining a valuable alliance with both the North and, by extension, the White Mage's growing influence.

El’s existence seemed to have given them another option, for why else would the queen of thorns send her beloved granddaughter across the continent, but to see if they could tie the mage to their family by blood?

It was a clever play, Ned had to admit. One that worked in his favor so he didn't really have any issues with it.

Ned would never willingly send any of his children to King's Landing, least of all his kind-hearted Sansa.

That cursed city had already taken too much from his family.

Though Highgarden was further south than the capital, Ned was certain it would be a far better home for Sansa.

The Reach was not perfect, but it was safer than the viper's nest known as King's Landing.

Still, he kept these thoughts to himself - no need to show his hand to the Tyrells just yet.

When he'd countered their offer by suggesting Margaery's hand for Robb instead, Willas's response had confirmed his suspicions. The heir to Highgarden admitted he lacked the authority to negotiate such a match, which told Ned everything he needed to know about their plans.

But truthfully, Ned didn't care much about their ambitions. The deal they'd offered was beyond generous - a guaranteed supply of grain from the Reach for five decades, at mere transport costs. Such an arrangement would ensure the North's food security for the foreseeable future.

No other house could offer such a deal, and Ned was nothing if not practical.

After careful discussions with both Sansa and Catelyn, finding them both amenable to the match, he'd agreed to the betrothal. His daughter's eyes had lit up at the prospect, not with the starry-eyed dreams of her younger days, but with thoughtful consideration.

She'd spent some time with Willas during his stay, their conversations ranging far beyond the usual courtly pleasantries.

But even with this matter settled, Ned's desk remained piled high with other concerns requiring his attention.

The Martells had been visibly disappointed when they learned El had disappeared on another of his mysterious journeys in the middle of the night. Not that Ned could blame them - the Mage's tendency to vanish without warning was becoming a pattern he'd grown used to, even if it did complicate matters sometimes.

But El's absence wasn't what truly troubled Ned's thoughts. No, it was their last conversation that kept him awake at night, the disturbing implications of the deserter's words and El's reaction to them.

He'd spent hours poring over the ancient books of House Stark, and a troubling pattern had emerged. The records, cryptic as they were, all seemed to hint at the same thing - the return of the Others. The references were scattered throughout their history, carefully hidden in seemingly mundane passages, but once you knew what to look for, the message became clear.

Was this the secret knowledge passed down from Lord Stark to their heir? If so, it would explain why he'd never learned of it.

As a second son, he'd never been meant to bear this burden. The tragedy that had befallen his family - Brandon's and his father's execution - hadn't just changed the line of succession. It had broken a chain of knowledge stretching back thousands of years, leaving him oblivious and unprepared for what might be coming.

The timing couldn't have been worse. If what El suspected was true, if the Others truly were stirring beyond the Wall, then he needed to prepare. But how do you prepare for something out of legend? How do you convince others to believe in threats they consider nothing more than tales meant to scare children?

At least he had El's support in this. Whatever else the Mage might be, Ned trusted his judgment. If El thought this threat was real enough to investigate personally, then perhaps it was time for the North to start preparing, quietly, for winter's true arrival.

Before Ned could spiral further down that dark path of thought, a knock at his solar door pulled him back to the present. "Come in," he called out.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Lord Stark?" Maester Luwin's familiar voice carried a note of concern that immediately caught Ned's attention.

"No, come in, Maester. What seems to be the matter?"

"I've just received a letter from the Citadel which is... rather concerning." Luwin's usually steady hands fidgeted with the parchment.

Ned gestured for him to continue, noting the unusual display of nervousness from his normally composed Maester.

"If the letter is genuine - and I've verified its authenticity as best I can - it seems the Citadel was attacked by a swarm of locusts." Luwin's voice carried a hint of disbelief at his own words.

"Excuse me?" Ned leaned forward in his chair. "Did you say locusts?"

"Yes, my lord. I had the same reaction." Luwin's expression suggested he still couldn't quite believe what he was reporting.

"And how is the Citadel faring now after this... attack?" Ned chose his words carefully, trying to make sense of this bizarre news.

"It's functioning again, but..." Luwin paused, searching for the right words. "It seems the locusts targeted a specific group. Every single Archmaester present in the Citadel is dead, yet remarkably, no one else was harmed."

"My condolences, Maester. Did you lose anyone you were close to?"

"No, not really," Luwin replied. "I merely thought you should be informed of these developments, Lord Stark."

"That is indeed an odd occurrence," Ned acknowledged, choosing his next words.

"Forgive me if I sound crass, Maester, but I have more pressing matters than contemplating an attack on the other side of Westeros."

Luwin hesitated, and Ned could see the usually composed man wrestling with whether to speak his mind. Finally, the Maester ventured, " I understand, I hope I'm not overstepping, my lord, but... might these matters relate to the deserter?"

Ned felt a flicker of surprise before letting out a weary sigh. He should have known better than to think they could keep such news contained.

The deserter's final moments, his desperate warnings, the look in El's eyes - these things had a way of spreading.

"Sit down, Maester," Ned gestured to the chair across from his desk. "This will take some time to explain."

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I followed Tormund as he led me towards a small group of six people sitting next to a fire. I was happy to see that Benjen was with them, seemingly deep in conversation. I had no idea where he had wandered off to while I was busy healing.

As we approached, they fell silent. Not to sound too narcissistic, but I thought they might have been talking about me.

"Right then!" Tormund called out, clapping his massive hands together. "Let me introduce you to the poor bastards crazy enough to join your hunt, healer boy."

He gestured to a tall, lean woman with pale blonde hair. "This here's Val. She's the best scout you'll find north of the Wall—really mean with a spear, and she knows these lands better than most."

Val gave me a measured nod, her sharp eyes studying me with open curiosity. I could practically see her cataloging every detail, trying to figure out what I was.

"Ygritte you've already met. She's really good with a bow, even better at spotting things from leagues away" Tormund continued. The red-haired archer merely arched an annoyed brow at him. It was no surprise to see her here; her reputation as a tracker was well-earned.

"Then we've got Errok," he pointed to a grizzled man with a club on his side whose scarred face spoke of countless battles. "He's killed more wights than anyone else here, so he might actually be useful."

The last member of our group stood slightly apart from the others, his eyes distant and unfocused. "And that's Orell," Tormund finished. "He's a warg - can see through the eyes of his eagle. Might help us spot what we're looking for before it spots us."

I couldn't help but smile at the assembled group. "I shall be in your care."

I was met with silence, as it seemed I was dealing with a quiet bunch. Heh, I had enough time to annoy them into talking. If all else failed, I was quite sure Tormund would keep me entertained.

Orell's abilities particularly intrigued me—I had been wanting to study a warg up close. I hadn't scanned anyone who had awakened and was actively using their warg powers.

Mance approached as we finished our final preparations, his sharp eyes taking in every detail of our equipment. I recognized that calculating look - it was the gaze of a man who'd survived countless winters beyond the Wall by leaving nothing to chance. He wasn't just looking at our supplies; he was measuring our chances of survival.

"Any words of wisdom before we head out?" I asked, adjusting the straps on my pack. Though I had confidence in my abilities, I wasn't too proud to learn from someone with his experience.

Mance's expression grew serious. "Just one," he said, choosing his words carefully. "There's no shame in running away."

He left the rest unsaid, but his meaning was clear enough. Even the King-Beyond-the-Wall knew better than to face certain death just to prove a point.

"Ha! Wise words indeed. Don't worry about that; I know I come off as very cocky, but I have been thoroughly chastised for biting off more than I can handle. The moment things start going sideways, I will grab everyone and haul my ass south. Don't you worry," I agreed with a grin.

He let out a breath and nodded. "Thank you."

Benjen came up to me. "The horses are ready," he reported. "Though I'm not sure how well they'll fare where we're heading."

"Don't worry about the horses," I assured him. "I've made some improvements. They'll manage."

Tormund, overhearing this, looked at me curiously. "What kind of improvements?"

"The kind that'll keep them from freezing to death or getting tired too quickly," I explained.

"Nothing too fancy."

"Nothing too fancy, he says," Tormund muttered, shaking his head. "Like making horses immune to cold is a simple thing."

As we prepared to depart, I noticed movement in the treeline. Through my thermal vision, I spotted Hobbes lurking in the shadows. The Shadowcat had been following us at a distance, apparently still curious but maintaining his distance.

Looking at our assembled group—the first ranger of the night watch, a handful of wildlings, and not to forget the Shadowcat stalking us—I couldn't help but chuckle at the situation.

There was definitely a joke in there somewhere; I just couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Right then," I announced, mounting my horse. "Let's go hunt ourselves some ice zombies."

We set off north, deeper into the lands of eternal winter. The wildlings led the way, with Ygritte and Errok taking point. They moved with the confidence of people who knew where they were going.

As we rode, Tormund pulled his horse alongside mine. "You know," he said conversationally, "most men would be more concerned about heading into the heart of White Walker territory."

I shrugged. "Most men can't dissolve people with a thought."

"Fair point," he conceded. "So, do you think you can deal with a White Walker as easily as you dealt with the crow killer?"

“Well, I’m pretty sure that it will work on a Wight, but I can’t guarantee that it will work on a White Walker,” I replied.

That was precisely why I needed to catch one—to understand exactly what we were dealing with. The show's portrayal of the White Walkers might not be entirely accurate in this world, and I needed to know what we were really up against.

I was not about to leave the fate of the world in the hands of an eighteen-year-old girl and some parkour moves.

The wind picked up, carrying with it the promise of colder days ahead. Something told me this trip was going to be more interesting than I had hoped.

And not necessarily in a good way.

“So, where are we going?” I asked.

“The last place we know they were spotted was when they attacked a small tribe at the Fist of the First Men. We’re going to start looking from there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

# Chapter - 62

This wasn't what she had planned at all. That fucking Tully bitch had ruined everything.

If she had wanted to kill her husband, why did she have to pick now of all times?

She had been carefully making the Hand sicker, hoping no one would notice. The Hand of the King getting ill would definitely draw attention, especially since he was also the king's foster father.

If he had gotten sick enough, the mage would have certainly been summoned to King's Landing and then... well, she wasn't sure yet what she would do now.

Okay, first things first - she needed to make sure that no one would suspect she had any part in the death. Although that was pretty easy, as even if someone was suspicious of the old sick Hand's sudden demise, they would suspect the Hand's wife, who had fled the capital with her son and all the Arryn men without the king's leave.

While she was plotting, someone knocked on the door. She had told everyone to leave her alone, so who—

"Come in," she called out.

One of the attendants came in fearfully and bowed.

"What is it?" If she didn't have a good reason to disturb her, she would regret it.

"Your Grace, the king has decided that he shall travel north with some of the court after the funeral to see Lord Stark at Winterfell."

Oh.

That worked out just as well.

"Very well. You can leave now."

The oaf probably wanted to make Stark the next Hand, not that she cared. If the situation wasn't what it was, she would have probably been annoyed that her father hadn't been chosen for the position, but now she didn't care.

She now had a way to reach the mage without arousing much suspicion. Once she was in Winterfell she could...

Well, what was she going to do...?

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I was the only one who had an issue with the travel.

I was restless and bored. Even though we were covering distance quickly, I had never been able to survive long, tedious journeys that offered no significant change in scenery.

I had even introduced Hobbs to the rest of the group, which had been funny. As shy as Hobbs was, he had been lured by the smell of the A1 Wagyu beef I had been grilling for everyone.

The group's reactions were funny and expected; however, they had chilled out after seeing him scratch his ears as he devoured the steak.

Then he was no longer shy and was openly following us.

We crossed the forest and found no sign of the zombies.

We trekked alongside the milkwater and kept going north towards the haunted forest.

The weather was the same as usual - gloomy skies. I was starting to doubt that these people had ever seen the sun. It was slightly colder than normal but not enough to cause any problems for my guides. Much to my dismay, we hadn't come across a single living or dead being.

While I was once again contemplating whether I should have just flown around, I realized I could have found some white walkers by now.

We stopped for a bit of rest when someone said, “Found something.”

Two simple words, but they sent a jolt of excitement through me. Like a kid on Nameday morning, I perked up immediately.

Orell's eyes had gone white - he was seeing through his eagle now, soaring high above the endless expanse of snow and ice. When he came back to himself, his expression was grim.

"There's a small settlement fleeing from the dead," he reported, voice tight. "Quite a few of them too, both the living and the wights."

"Perfect!" I exclaimed, then caught myself as everyone turned to stare at me with varying degrees of worry. Right - probably not the best response to news of people in mortal danger.

"Not the people being in danger part," I clarified hastily, raising my hands. "But this is exactly what we're looking for. Did you spot any White Walkers with them?"

Orell nodded slowly. "One. Hanging back behind the main force."

I couldn't have asked for a better scenario. A White Walker, a decent-sized force of wights to test our capabilities against, and a chance to save some lives in the process. The strategic part of my brain was already running through possibilities.

"Lead the way," I said, already checking my preparations one last time. "We can help these people and accomplish our goal at the same time. Two birds, one stone, and all that."

The others gathered their weapons, and I could see the shift in their expressions from uncertainty to determination. They might think I was crazy, but at least they were crazy enough to follow me.

When we finally got close enough to see what was happening, it seemed that the wildlings running away had some sort of plan. They were heading toward a valley in the mountains where they wouldn't be overwhelmed by the number of wights.

The wildlings approached the frozen Milkwater, needing only to cross it to reach the valley.

“We can go toward the valley. It will be easy to funnel them in there,” I suggested.

I received no complaints from my party members.

Since we were on the correct side of the river, we reached it before the other wildlings. While the wildlings were confused and scared at our arrival, seeing that we hadn’t impeded their way, they ran straight past us.

Just a few curious ones slowed down at the entrance to look back and see what we were doing.

Tormund was already grinning and spinning his axe.

"So mage, as fun as it would be to break every single bone among all these wights single-handedly, I hope you have a plan."

"Of course,"

I kind of lied. As tempted as I was to just straight up unleash the curse’s flames, Vaylara’s presence, along with my earlier experiences, held me back.

I had one idea that I hadn’t tested but should work perfectly in this scenario, in theory.

I instructed them to form a sort of loose circle around me.

With the main five frontliners and me in the middle, Ygiritte was positioned at the back with her bow.

It was going to take a few moments for them to reach us. “Don’t move from where you are standing unless I tell you.”

I closed my eyes and held one hand in front of me, forming a single-handed ram sign—something that anyone from my previous world would have cringed at. It didn’t really matter; it was just a gesture that helped me clear my mind. I really needed a clear head for what I was about to do next.

I split my attention into 16 threads of parallel thoughts, assigning each individual cluster of my bacterial swarm to one of these threads.

Now I had 16 invisible arms around me, each capable of independent thought. These hands acted like invisible paintbrushes, rapidly inscribing runes on the snow beneath us with my blood.

What felt to me like a good few minutes in my mind was actually just a few seconds in the real world. Soon, everyone was standing in a giant magic circle that I had created.

When the wights were almost upon us, I invoked the ritual.

I opened my eyes and said, *“Purify.”*

At first, nothing happened, but then slowly, everyone standing in their respective spots in the circle was covered from head to toe in a soft white fire that didn't even damage a single strand of hair on anyone.

It was very similar to the fire I had created to heal Shireen's grayscale, but it was better and channeled throughout the circle.

As long as I maintained this spot and sustained the ritual, the people I was empowering would not tire.

They were stronger, they could not be harmed, they could not be killed, and more importantly, the fire burned everything unnatural.

And I didn't even have to tell them what I had done - the bloodthirsty grins on every single one of their faces said it all. Even Benjen, who usually kept his expressions carefully neutral, was smiling quite sinisterly as they examined their now flame-wreathed weapons.

"Have fun," was all the prompting they needed before charging out to meet the incoming wave of wights.

Tormund was the first to reach them, leaping impossibly high and bringing his axe down on a wight's skull. The undead creature crumpled like paper, catching fire but not spreading it to those nearby - exactly as designed.

An arrow whistled past my head, leaving a trail of white fire before landing in the middle of the approaching horde. The projectile exploded like a small bomb, scattering flaming bones in all directions. I glanced to my side as Ygritte nocked another arrow, a fierce grin on her face.

“How long is this going to last?”

“As long as I want it to.”

She seemed to shake her head in disbelief before a smile crept onto her face as she knocked another arrow into her bow, feeding it more and more fire.

It was bright enough to annoy my eyes before she let it fly, and it ended up leading to a bigger explosion than last time.

Tormund whooped with joy as he cleaved through a bunch of wights at once, his axe trailing fire like a comet. Benjen and Val moved with deadly precision, each strike calculated and efficient as flames consumed his targets. The others had spread out in a rough semicircle, creating a wall of fire between us and the endless tide of dead.

Seeing my fiery party members having fun made me feel a bit left out, but I couldn’t afford to be distracted. This was still the first time I had used this ritual, and I had yet to work out all the kinks in it that my parallel thoughts were fixing in real-time.

So I had kind of lied when I said I could keep it up as long as I wanted.

But it was long enough to get through this swarm and reach the White Walker that had been slowly advancing toward the horde. He had since stopped as he looked at my group, absolutely annihilating his hoard.

I could barely see his face beyond the glowing blue eyes, but I could bet he was at least annoyed.

I refocused my attention on the battlefield in front of me. I could see five silhouettes of white absolutely decimating the horde ahead of them and advancing without stopping.

The horde was getting smaller…

Wait, the horde should have been shrinking, especially with Ygritte seemingly having figured out rudimentary carpet bombing, as she was now firing three arrows at once.

But the horde appeared to be about the same size, if not larger.

Something didn’t make sense, and a faint sensation of unease settled over me. I looked around, trying to find its source.

Then I noticed it. The sky had gotten darker, and it had started snowing. What I had assumed to be a mountain far away was actually a blizzard getting closer.

Just as I began to understand what the feeling could mean, I heard Vaylara scream, “MOVE!”

I instinctively ducked, but before I knew it, a giant icicle spear was sticking out of my shoulder, pinning me to the ground where I stood.

“Oh.” I tried to heal myself and reached for the spear to remove it, but it was far from simple. The spear was infused with the Night King's magic, spreading frost and killing every cell it came into contact with.

If I wasn't panicking before, I definitely was now.

The spear had just missed my heart, but that wasn't going to matter for long. All my redundancies were worthless now that I'd given myself the dragon heart. If it wasn't for Vaylara's warning, I'd already be dead.

But with the way the ice was spreading, I might not last much longer anyway. For the first time since arriving in this world, I felt genuine fear for my life.

My mind raced, desperately searching for a solution. With my one good hand, I drew the emergency knife from my belt and sliced off my entire frozen shoulder along with my useless arm, hoping to stop the spread. But the frost had latched onto my magic, feeding off it and worming its way toward my heart.

Darkness crept in at the edges of my vision as the frost inched closer and closer to my heart.

The last thing I saw was Ygritte's shocked, scared face as the darkness consumed me.

# 

# Chapter - 63

Tormund was having the time of his life. He had fought wights before, but never like this. Whatever magic the mage had cast on him, he would have to ask for it again. All his life he had known cold, but now the warm fires seemed to ease aches he hadn't even known he had.

The effect on the wights was something else entirely. Brief contact with the flames was all it took for them to completely disintegrate, leaving nothing behind. But gods, he loved the way they exploded when he crushed their skulls. The mage hadn't been lying - Tormund felt like he could take on the entire horde alone and not break a sweat under the divine flames that covered him.

But then the cold air hit his face, the first sign that something was wrong. He wasn't covered in fire anymore. A quick glance around showed that it wasn't just him. He broke another wight's skull and frowned in disappointment when it didn't explode.

Looking behind him to see what the mage was doing, Tormund felt his blood freeze. The mage had a spear taller than him sticking straight through his body. Deciding that priorities had changed, Tormund started retreating toward where the rest of the group was, slowly moving back as the horde of wights surged forward with renewed ferocity.

He quickly grouped up with the others and the crow as they made their way back to the mage. Though he couldn't afford to spare attention from the fight, Tormund couldn't help looking back. What he saw shocked him even more - the mage had just cut off one of his own shoulders and a good chunk of his torso.

For a moment, Tormund thought that would be it, but it seemed the gods were not in their favor today.

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

I was in an expanse of black again.

Had I died again?

Oh… that was probably not good.

How had that even happened?

Oh right, the Night King, the spear, and whatever curse—was that how his magic worked?

It felt like a parasitic cold that ate away at magic and life, turning everything into ice.

That same ice had made its way to my heart, and considering that my heart had essentially infinite magic… I may have exploded into ice.

Ouch, I doubt that was a pleasant way to go.

Wait, why did I assume I was dead?

I could think.

That means I wasn't dead yet.

Well…

There was one other option. No, that would be absurd. I doubted the mad god who put me here was benevolent enough to give me a third chance.

Okay, I was alive—for now, somehow.

So, the ice hadn’t reached my heart yet.

How long that was going to last, I had no idea.

So, let’s get to work.

Then the darkness all around me was replaced by a scene depicting my heart, and what looked like a spear of ice that had already touched my heart. It was slowly spreading and had almost encased half of it.

My heart was still beating, but it was struggling to get to the next beat.

I dove deeper into my consciousness, searching desperately for answers. I'd pushed my parallel processing to its limits, and I could already feel the looming promise of what would be the mother of all headaches - if I lived long enough to experience it.

My mind raced through possibilities.

The immediate problem was clear enough: magic-eating ice was consuming me, and I needed to stop it.

Now, what did I actually know about this phenomenon?

Nothing.

So I stripped the problem down to basics - what did I know about regular ice?

Two fundamental ways to defeat it: heat and pressure.

The purifying flames that had worked so well against the wights were barely making a dent in this, far too slow to save me from becoming an icicle.

My consciousness fractured further as I pushed my mind to its limits, searching for a solution. Each parallel thread of thought brought new agony, but I couldn't stop. Not now.

Not when giving up meant certain death or worse.

The world around me had slowed to a crawl, giving me precious moments to think, but even this deep in my mind, I could feel the cold creeping closer.

Think, *think*!

I felt like the answer was just at the tip of my tongue, but I wasn’t getting it.

Nothing was working. My heart struggled to beat under the strain of the ice.

I needed a new plan. I had to keep my heart beating.

How does one keep a heart beating?

You shock it.

Okay.

How does one start a magical heart?

You shock it with magic.

Simple, yes, but it had to be external magic. I couldn't use my own magic; even the simplest use of my magic would accelerate the spread of ice exponentially and end any chance I had of surviving.

I felt like I was running in circles as if I needed another heart to save my own...

Oh...

I’m an idiot.

I extended my senses outward. I had a fairly decent range for sensing magic, but it wasn’t large enough to find what I was looking for.

Instead of spreading it out, I shaped it like a spear and extended it in just one direction.

Down.

What was actually a time so small I wasn’t sure there was even a word for it in my old world felt like an eternity to me until I finally felt it.

It felt so similar to my own heart, but it wasn’t just similar; it was plain better.

My finest creation.

I used my bond with it and was immediately assaulted by its feelings—the pressure and the heat.

I recoiled instantly, my mind screaming from even that brief contact. But in that moment of connection, I found my answer.

I synced our hearts. The ice helped me in that regard, allowing me to slow my heartbeat just enough to resonate with it.

My poor heart looked like it was going to shatter in a few more beats, while the heart forged under the weight of the world finally began to beat in sync with mine.

I finally connect them and each pulse of the dragon heart shocks my heart into rhythm.

One more beat, and at first nothing seemed to happen.

Then…

***I felt it.***

No, it wasn't just me; I was sure the entire world felt it.

I saw enormous blood-red reptilian eyes staring at me.

I smiled and conveyed how grateful I was for being saved, along with a small apology for waking him up so early.

He didn’t give any indication that he understood me. Instead, it looked toward my heart, which was almost free of ice, with curiosity.

Of course, it was new to the concept of cold and ice, so it was curious.

Suddenly, its eyes flashed through a kaleidoscope of colors, and at once, all the ice that had been forming in my mindscape and the little ice that remained in my heart completely disappeared.

Deep in my soul, I knew with absolute certainty that the Night King's cursed ice would never touch me again.

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

Benjen knew deep in his bones that things had been going too well.

He hated being right.

That's why he had not strayed far from the main group, so he was the first to make it back to where El was now kneeling.

But even cutting away half his own torso hadn't saved the mage from the creeping ice that spread across his remaining flesh like a crystalline plague.

Benjen's heart sank as he watched the frost claim more of El's body with each passing breath. Was this truly happening?

If the Night King claimed a mage of El's power, humanity was surely doomed.

Just as despair began to sink its cold claws into his heart, he felt it - a presence so vast it made his soul tremble.

The world itself shuddered, as if something ancient had stirred from its slumber and opened its eyes. The very air grew heavy, pressing down on them like the weight of countless frozen winters.

It wasn't just him feeling it. The wights stood frozen, their unholy animation suspended.

The falling snow hung motionless in the air.

The world held its breath as if the air itself was terrified that the slightest movement would draw the attention of whatever cosmic force had awakened.

Another heartbeat passed - or was it an eternity? - and the presence receded like some great beast rolling over in its sleep and settling back into dreams beyond mortal comprehension.

The atmosphere released its collective breath, but no one dared move first as if breaking this strange calm might invite disaster.

Then warmth began to return, emanating from the center of their group. The mage, who moments ago had been nearly consumed by ice, erupted with raw power.

Benjen turned to see El kneeling in the middle of his ruined ritual circle, half his torso gone, one arm missing, blood streaming from his nose, eyes, and ears like crimson tears.

And then El threw back his head and laughed - a sound of pure madness that echoed across the frozen wasteland as if he'd glimpsed some cosmic joke after almost dying mere moments ago.

"We're leaving!" El finally declared after he was done laughing.

He let out the breath he had been holding. Thankfully, whatever had happened to El, he was still sane enough to make that call.

All of them finally reached their original position and held the line as the spell snapped them out of their stupor. When the earth started shaking again, he gritted his teeth, hoping the dead wouldn't return, but thankfully, that didn't happen.

What happened instead was that the frozen river in front of them shattered, and from it emerged a creature so large that he knew it would give him nightmares for years to come. The ice cracked and split as something massive erupted from the frozen surface. At first, his mind couldn't process what he was seeing - it was like watching a tower rise from beneath the ice. But towers don't have mouths.

The creature's circular maw gaped open, wider than any natural thing should be. Inside its mouth were endless spear-like teeth, arranged in concentric rings that seemed to go on forever. Its dark shade completely contrasted with the winter landscape, making it abundantly clear that this thing did not belong here. Water and chunks of ice cascaded down its hide as it rose higher and higher, blocking out what little sunlight filtered through the overcast sky.

He could feel the vibrations of its movement through the ice beneath his feet, each tremor a reminder of how small they all were compared to this beast. The sound it made - a horrible grinding noise like massive sheets of ice being crushed - reverberated through his chest.

Time seemed to slow as its massive head towered above them, that endless mouth descending like the entrance to some nightmare realm.

In that moment, all he could hope was that this was one of El's pets and not something the Others had unleashed upon them.

# Chapter - 64

My first order of business was to stop everyone inside from attacking the fleshy walls, as the wildlings had apparently decided that being inside a giant worm, no matter how comfortable, warranted an immediate violent response.

"Would you stop trying to hack your way out?" I sighed, positioning myself between them and the pulsing biomechanical tissue. "First of all, it wouldn't work. Second, Paul's rather sensitive about people stabbing his insides."

"You named this beast Paul?" Ygritte asked incredulously, her hand still hovering near her knife as she eyed the gently moving walls with suspicion.

"Look, I'll be the first to admit I'm terrible at names," I said, running a hand through my hair. "But yes, Paul. You know, like Paul Atreides? The guy who..." I trailed off, remembering my audience.

"Never mind. Just... no stabbing, alright?"

After spending what felt like an eternity reassuring everyone that no, Paul wasn't going to suddenly decide to digest them, and yes, the moving walls were perfectly normal, I managed to get the group settled in the main chamber.

I'd designed it to be surprisingly cozy, all things considered - smooth surfaces, comfortable seating, and central heating.

"Right then," I announced to the still-wary faces. "Make yourselves comfortable, It shouldn’t take that long before we reach your camp. I need to check something in storage."

What that said I made my way through Paul's internal corridors, I could hear Tormund's voice echo behind me:

"Never thought I'd be sitting in the belly of a worm drinking mead. The songs they'll sing about this!"

I smiled to myself. At least someone was starting to embrace the absurdity of it all.

The smile quickly fell off my face as my mind drifted back to that encounter, analyzing it with the same clinical detachment I used for my experiments.

But this time, a tremor of something else - something primal - kept creeping in.

The Night King hadn't just been powerful. He had been *wrong* - fundamentally, impossibly wrong in a way that triggered every survival instinct I'd carefully cultivated over my time in this world.

The worst part? I hadn't even been close enough to feel his presence directly. My enhanced senses had picked up nothing until that cursed spear had nearly ended my existence.

That spear... I kept replaying the moment in my mind frame by frame. My enhanced mind and eyes could process information at speeds that would make hummingbirds look sluggish - catching subtle shifts in air pressure.

But that weapon? It had simply been there. No travel time. No arc of motion. Just point A to point B, physics be damned.

An image of a blood-red spear surfaced in my mind, memories from my past life.

Back then, watching anime, the concept had seemed awesome - a spear that reversed cause and effect, striking the heart before it was even thrown. Now?

The thought made a shiver go down my spine.

…No, I was overthinking. If the Night King had a spear that never missed, then I would be dead now.

I absently traced my fingers over my heart to just check if it was still beating.

For the first time since arriving in this world, I felt that deep, instinctive fear of death - not the intellectual awareness of danger, but the gut-wrenching terror of staring into the abyss and not knowing if you could return.

The fear of dying.

I had not felt that way in a long, long time.

And that gave way to rage.

Rage like I hadn't believed I was capable of.

I was angry—

At myself,

At this messed-up world.

A world that I now knew was far more dangerous than I had expected.

I raged at my shattered pride.

Pride in my power and my place in this world had just been challenged.

I raged at the indignity of being forced to run with my tail between my legs.

Sure, I had told Vaylara I would run if the Night King showed up.

But that was mostly said under the assumption that others around me would be in trouble and I wouldn't be able to protect them.

My own safety had never really been in question.

I had kept Paul on standby in case I needed to make a quick escape. I hadn't expected to need him so soon.

No.

I was definitely going to come back here and *raze this entire fucking continent to cinders*.

But it seemed my ***ego*** wouldn't let me just run away.

Not when I had almost been killed by something I had thought beneath me.

I wasn't going back there right now, of course.

Wounded pride or not, I wasn't stupid.

I was running on fumes.

I had regenerated my shoulder and arm, but my mind was still screaming at me to get some sleep.

The only reason my brain hadn't melted out of my ears was that I could regenerate my neurons.

But I would not leave without a parting gift for the Night King.

Whatever I was going to do needed to be done fast, as Paul was currently doing the best imitation of a submarine while booking it towards the Wall.

I finally reached the hidden part of the storage area.

You see, there was a reason I had gotten cocky.

A few months back I came to the realization that while I could end all life on the planet in my sleep by just releasing a plague, I didn't have any sort of wide-scale - how would I say this eloquently - "fuck you" spells.

While I had gotten quite good at runes and Vaylara’s particular brand of magic, the really dangerous spells were more like rituals. They took too long to prepare.

To make significant progress in this area, one needs decades of experience to improve their efficiency to a reasonable extent.

Unfortunately, I didn't have that experience, and I didn't think I would out magic the Night King anytime soon, not after what I had just seen.

However, magic wasn't the reason I was not to be trifled with in the first place.

Once I started studying my brain better, I came to the realization of just how amazing neurons are.

They were essentially really good logic gates.

Neurons are incredibly versatile, and with enough time, I believe I could create a computer using them. Although it would likely take me a couple of years of dedicated work, and even then, the computer would only be capable of very basic tasks.

The idea first struck me when Paul returned from his underground exploration bearing trace amounts of radiation damage.

I immediately backtracked through the cave system and discovered a significant deposit of uranium. After collecting enough samples for experimentation, I'd sealed off the entire section—no need for unnecessary complications.

The real challenge had been constructing biological refineries capable of converting raw uranium into a usable form, but that puzzle had only taken a week to crack. I'd unlocked the final two components of what every kid inevitably obsesses over at some point in their childhood.

Seriously, considering the number of YouTube videos I had watched about how a nuke works and how to build one, I was definitely on some watchlist.

The human body, as it turns out, is capable of synthesizing an impressive array of compounds. And with my particular brand of tinkering, that could theoretically be pushed to create... well, almost anything.

And I was now holding the culmination of months of hard work in my hand.

It looked like an arrow but that was only in shape, it was thicker than my arm and as long as the spear that had almost ended my life earlier.

The outer part was entirely made of lead, but inside…

It contained everything I needed to show the Night King a little taste of the 21st century.

I didn’t carry it with me everywhere, of course. I had created that little device about half a year ago and had been too scared to test it. Since then, it had just been locked away in my lab. Even then, it was in two pieces that I stored separately, just in case.

Honestly, I wasn’t even sure it would work.

I had picked it up on a whim and stored it inside Paul, along with some other things I thought I might need.

"What is that?" Ygritte asked, apparently not content to wait with the others.

“My parting gift to the Night King.”

“Well, if you’re going to ask me to fire that at the others, I’m going to have to disappoint you because I don’t think I’ll be able to shoot it very far.”

I snorted. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm terrified enough of what I hold in my hands that I wouldn’t trust anyone else to launch it far enough away from me."

The hand that she was about to touch the lead with stopped just before making contact, and she took a cautious step back.

"You think that is going to kill the Night King?" The question hung in the air, heavy with implications.

A bitter laugh escaped my lips as I studied the warhead in my hands.

"Well, if you had asked me that a few hours ago, I would have definitely said yes." My fingers traced the lead casing, feeling the dormant power lurking beneath.

"Now..." The words tasted like ash in my mouth. "I'm not really sure."

Then a cold smile crept across my face,

"But what I do know is that I'm about to *completely* *vaporize his entire fucking army*."

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Ygritte watched the mage with careful eyes, noting how his movements seemed to flow between calculated precision and barely contained chaos.

There was something unsettling about the way he carried himself now - like a storm barely contained in human form.

The healing he'd performed earlier had been miraculous enough, but that was nothing compared to what she'd witnessed when death had nearly claimed him.

The power that had erupted back then made her feel like crawling into a deep, dark cave and never coming out—a primal force that seemed older than winter itself.

No one had brought it up yet, and the mage himself was acting oblivious to it, not that they were expecting any answers from him.

Even now, standing in the belly of a creature that should have terrified them—a massive serpent he had casually named Paul, of all things—she found herself more wary of its master than the beast itself.

The way he manipulated flesh and spoke to his creations like old friends, it painted a picture of someone who'd long since left normal human limitations behind.

She followed him back into the chamber where the others waited, carrying the black spear. The grin on his face was infectious and terrifying all at once.

"You guys want to watch the greatest fireworks show of your lives?" he asked, eyes gleaming with that particular brand of madness that seemed to fuel his works.

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Once I felt we had gone far enough, I instructed Paul to rest for a bit and surface for a moment.

The rest of the wildings followed me as I walked toward Paul's maw. All his teeth were retracted, giving me a clear view of the night sky. I made Paul face the right direction.

Considering what I was about to do next, I let out a small giggle.

I created a completely impractical bow for anyone of my stature due to the sheer size of it to accommodate the warhead

It was made out of bone and tendons It could not be drawn by mortal means

I had a very difficult time, but I managed to attach it firmly to Paul's mouth, making it look like a makeshift crossbow.

I had to use its muscles to pull the bowstring to its absolute limit.

I made sure that everything was in place and was working at interred before placing the warhead in the position touching the bowstring

I looked at the blizzard, far away.

I could still see it, even though it was a lot smaller.

I doubted what I saw was real, but I could feel two glowing orbs of blue watching me, even from this distance.

Mocking me.

The rage that had been building up inside me reached its peak before I let out a breath and calmed myself.

I had almost died.

And now I was stronger for it.

I would not make the mistake of underestimating my opponent again.

With barely a thought, I released the firing mechanism.

The warhead - carrying a payload of 20 kilotonnes if my math was correct - disappeared into the night sky.

There was only the sound of the wind for a few moments.

"Not to be skeptical," Benjen called out, "but I think you forgot to aim it?"

I laughed, genuinely amused by his concern. "The beauty of this particular arrow is that I just need to point it in the general direction"

"Are you sure-"

His words cut off as night transformed into day with violent suddenness, the horizon erupting in a flash that turned arctic darkness into blinding radiance.

My eyes screamed in protest, Still, I forced myself to watch.

This wasn't just destruction - this was art, a testament to human spite.

The mushroom cloud rose with terrible majesty, a pillar of flame and fury that clawed its way into the heavens.

The gloomy storm clouds that had sheltered the Night King's domain parted before atomic fury, split apart by raw energy.

Nature itself seemed to bow before this display of devastation.

Then the shockwave arrived.

I watched with clinical fascination as the wall of pressurized air raced across the landscape at supersonic speeds, transforming everything to dust.

The wave rippled through reality itself, shattering everything in its path with indiscriminate fury.

Behind me, I heard the others struggle to maintain their footing as Paul's massive form shuddered under the impact. But I stood unwavering, refusing to even blink as my creation rewrote the geography of the Land of Always Winter.

As the artificial sun began to dim, leaving behind a glowing crater in its place, I allowed myself a moment of pure satisfaction.

The ionized particles still dancing through the air painted everything in eerie shades of crimson.

The Night King had shown me power beyond my comprehension, had nearly ended me with casual disregard.

I'd responded by igniting a small star in his backyard.

Next time, I'd be back with more.