

The Last Step

Chapter 6 - A Step Closer

The crackling campfire painted flickering shadows across the tree trunks, its warmth barely cutting through the cold night. Kaiser sat across from me, his relaxed posture betraying the playful glint in his eyes. He leaned forward slightly, resting his chin on his hand.

"So," he began, his tone casual but teasing, "what kind of name do you want for yourself?"

I hesitated, staring into the flames. "I... I don't know." It was the truth. Life had never given me the luxury of choosing anything for myself. Fear and despair had dictated every step of my existence for years.

Kaiser tilted his head, pretending to be shocked. "A princess without a name? That's tragic."

I blinked at him, caught off guard by his humor, and retorted without thinking, "And you're just a washed-up knight."

His grin widened, almost devilishly. "Well, I guess that's one way to see me." He laughed softly, the sound almost comforting. "Alright then, what did others call you before? Surely someone gave you a name."

The question made me pause. A faint memory stirred at the edge of my mind, tugging at emotions I wasn't sure I wanted to feel. "My friends... they used to call me Stella." I glanced at him, feeling a twinge of warmth and sadness. "They said it was because I reminded them of a star—something that shines in the darkest nights."

Kaiser snorted, his laughter bursting out before he could stop it. "Stella? That's... that's a terrible name!"

My face burned with indignation. "What's so funny about it?" I shot back, my voice rising with mock anger, though the corners of my lips betrayed a hint of a smile.

Kaiser only laughed harder, holding his stomach as if the sheer absurdity of my reaction had doubled his amusement.

I leaned closer, narrowing my eyes. "Answer me!" I demanded, my tone insistent but playful, though I couldn't stop my cheeks from heating up further.

"Nothing, really!" he said between chuckles, holding up his hands defensively. "It's just so bland. I didn't expect you to say something so ordinary."

I clenched my fists, glaring at him. "Stop laughing, you idiot!"

Kaiser held his sides, finally calming down. "Alright, alright. I'll stop. But seriously, Stella?" He smirked, as if daring me to argue more.

I crossed my arms, huffing. "Well, at least it's better than calling someone a washed-up knight."

"Touché," he said with a wink.

Kaiser leaned back, watching me curiously. His tone softened, but his eyes stayed sharp, probing. "So, Stella—do you even remember their faces? The ones who called you that?"

The question hit like a stone in my heart, unexpected and heavy. I hesitated, my breath catching as memories stirred painfully in the back of my mind. Four years. It had been four long, relentless years since I'd last seen them. Time had dulled some edges, but not all. My heart tensed, guilt and longing entwining. Did I still remember?

I forced myself to nod, even as a shadow of doubt crept into my mind. "Of course I do," I replied, though my voice wavered slightly. My fingers fidgeted with the edge of my sleeve, a nervous habit I couldn't shake.

Their faces were still there—soft smiles, warm eyes, fleeting expressions frozen in moments of love and comfort. But sometimes, the details blurred, and I hated myself for it. What if one day, I forgot entirely? What if all I had left were feelings without faces?

"Name them," he challenged, leaning forward with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Go on."

I clenched my jaw, glaring at him. What a dirty trick, I thought angrily. He knows I'm struggling, and he's testing me just to mess with me. Who even does that?

He probably thought he was so clever, setting me up to fail like this. I'll show him, I fumed.

"You want names? I'll give you names! And maybe I'll even throw in the names of those seven people who chased you through the desert while I'm at it!"

But my hesitation must have been obvious, and that smug look in his eyes only grew. "Oh really!" Kaiser leaned back with a wide grin, clearly enjoying himself.

"Let's see you name them all, then!"

Great. Just great. I walked right into his stupid little trap.

My throat went dry as I searched my memory, the weight of his challenge settling heavily on me. It had been so long... but their names were there, faint and fragile, etched in the corners of my mind. Still, when I opened my mouth to speak, the words wouldn't come. My voice caught in my throat, betraying the confidence I tried to muster.

Kaiser leaned closer, his eyes glinting with mock curiosity, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. "Don't tell me you forgot," he teased, drawing out the words. "C'mon, I'm waiting for the grand excuse. You should always have one, shouldn't you?"

"Stop that!" I snapped, but his teasing smile only grew.

My throat tightened, and I hesitated. The names were on the tip of my tongue, yet something held me back. Could I still say them after all this time? Did they even matter anymore?

But then, images flooded my mind—familiar faces, precious moments. Mira, always laughing, her energy infectious. Toby, with his endless curiosity, dragging us into mischief. Elise, who calmed us down when things went too far. Ronan, with his daring ideas that always seemed just crazy enough to work. Fiona, sharp-tongued but fiercely loyal. And Kiel, the quiet one who held us all together when it mattered most.

I thought about that day, the day we promised each other the world. Sitting under that old oak tree, dreaming of endless adventures and swearing never to leave one another behind. It had felt so real back then, like nothing could tear us apart.

But where were they now? My heart pained as doubts crept in. If they cared, why didn't they come for me? Did they forget me? Did they... hate me now? The thought stabbed at me, and I clenched my fists tightly.

No, stop! I scolded myself, shaking the dark thoughts away. They loved me. I know they did, and I love them just as much. That's all that matters.

Taking a shaky breath, I pushed through the storm of emotions.

Finally, I blurted out, "Mira, Toby, Elise, Ronan, Fiona, and Kiel." The names spilled from my lips like a secret I hadn't realized I was still keeping. I didn't even know I still remembered them, but saying them aloud made it feel like they were still with me, like I hadn't lost them completely.

Kaiser leaned back, clapping his hands in exaggerated applause.

"Bravo, Stella! Truly an astounding performance. Six names in—what, ten minutes? You've shattered the record for the world's fasted roll call."

I glared at him, confused. "I wasn't—"

"Oh, don't deny it!" he cut in with a dramatic wave of his hand. "I could've gone on a quest, slain a dragon, and made it back in time to hear the last name. That's some dedication, Stella."

Rolling my eyes, I muttered, "You're so impossible to speak to."

"Impossible, but undeniably entertaining," he shot back with a cheeky grin. His gaze lingered on me, teasing but curious.

"So, Stella, who was your favorite among them? Don't tell me you liked them all equally."

I felt my face grow warm, his casual use of "Stella" catching me off guard. It had been years since anyone had called me something so kind. For the past four years, I'd only been a monster in the eyes of others. The name stirred something in me, a pang of bittersweet nostalgia.

Snapping back, I stammered, "I... I cared for all of them. They were my best friends."

"Oh, come on!" he groaned, throwing his hands up. "I knew you'd say that. But let's be honest here. There's always one, one person who you like just a little more. Spill it, Stella."

"I... umm..." I could only stutter, my voice catching as memories swirled in my mind.

Each of them came to life in my thoughts. Mira's infectious laugh and how she'd always pulled me into her crazy ideas. Toby's endless curiosity, how he'd insisted on showing me every rock and bug he found, even if it annoyed me at the time. Elise, who would sit with me quietly when I felt upset, her presence like a soothing balm. Ronan, always the first to stand up for me when others doubted me, his daring grin lighting up any challenge. Fiona, sharp-tongued but fiercely protective, never letting anyone talk down to me without dishing out a scathing remark in return.

And then there was Kiel.

I paused, my heart tensing as a particular memory surfaced. Kiel had always been the quiet one, the one who rarely spoke unless he had something important to say. But I remembered one day vividly.

I had tripped while running through the fields, my knees scraped and tears threatening to fall. Everyone else had laughed, not in malice, but thinking I'd laugh too. But Kiel... Kiel had been the only one who knelt down beside me, offering a handkerchief to wipe away the dirt and a soft, reassuring smile.

"Don't cry, Stella," he had said, his voice steady and kind. "It's okay to fall, but it's even better to get back up. I'll help you."

That moment stayed with me, a spark of warmth I clung to through my darkest days. Even now, it filled my heart with a love that felt pure and unshakeable.

"See?" Kaiser's voice broke through my reverie. "You've gone all quiet. That means you do have a favorite!"

I snapped back, cheeks burning. "I-I didn't say that!"

"Oh, but you're thinking it!" he teased, leaning closer, his smirk growing. "C'mon, Stella. You can't hide from me."

I turned away, hoping he wouldn't see the telltale blush creeping up my cheeks. Some memories were too precious to share, even with someone like him.

I hesitated, my voice barely above a whisper. "Kiel. I cared for Kiel the most."

Kaiser's eyes widened, a mischievous glint flashing in his gaze. He leaned back, a playful smirk tugging at his lips.

"Woah, Stella! I didn't know tonight was going to include some romantic past stories! You've got me hooked now. I'll feel lonely after this ends."

I blinked at him, flustered. "It's not like that!" I protested, my face turning red.

"Oh, sure, sure," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm sure. So, why Kiel? What made him so special?"

My heart pounded, and I struggled to form a response. "You have to promise not to tell anyone."

Kaiser raised an eyebrow, his grin never faltering. "Fine, fine, I won't share your romantic tales with anyone. Cross my heart."

I shot him a glare. "It's not romantic!"

"Of course," he replied, still grinning. "Go on, then. Tell me your story."

I took a deep breath before starting. "It happened a long time ago, when we were kids. I think I was around nine, and Kiel was eleven. We were really close back then, though he was a quiet type. Whenever he spoke, everyone would listen. And that day... well, it was Toby and Ronan's idea to go adventuring into the forest."

I paused, recalling the details. "I didn't want to go. I was scared of the forest, of the monsters that might be lurking. But Kiel... he didn't want us to go either. He told us it was dangerous, but he followed anyway. He wanted to make sure we were safe. He always did that."

Kaiser's expression softened, clearly sensing the seriousness in my tone. "So, what happened?"

"We got lost," I continued. "I don't even know how it happened, but we were wandering through the trees, trying to find our way out. And then... I fell into the river." I paused, trying to gather my thoughts. "The current was strong, and before I knew it, I was being pulled toward the waterfall."

Kaiser's teasing grin faltered slightly as he leaned forward, his eyes glinting with mischief. "So the princess was blinded by her love for Kiel and fell into the river, huh? What did he do then? Just jump in after you like the perfect knight in shining armor?" He raised an eyebrow, clearly enjoying the story, but there was a hint of genuine curiosity beneath his teasing tone.

I scowled, unable to help the faint smile that tugged at my lips. "It wasn't like that!" I protested, but the weight of the memory weighed on me. "Kiel didn't hesitate. He jumped right in after me, without even thinking. He swam to me and pulled me out of the current, but... we were both dragged toward the waterfall."

Kaiser's face shifted slightly, his earlier sarcasm giving way to something more thoughtful. "He risked his life for you," he said, his voice quieter now.

I nodded, the memory still vivid. "Yeah, he did. We both fell over the waterfall. We were hurt, and it was getting dark. But Kiel... he didn't leave me. He built a small fire, kept watch over me all night, and told me everything would be okay."

Kaiser leaned in, clearly intrigued now. "What did he say?"

I swallowed hard, the memory as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. "He said... 'Stella, I care about you. You're really important to me.'"

The words had felt heavy then, more than just a simple reassurance. I could still see his face, serious and unwavering, as if those words were the most important thing he could say to me.

Back then, my hair was brown, my eyes the same soft shade, ordinary and unremarkable—or so I'd always thought. But Kiel... Kiel had black hair and deep, shadowy eyes, eyes that seemed to hold a quiet intensity. In that moment, as he looked at me, I could feel the care behind them, unspoken but undeniable. It was subtle, yet it had stayed with me all this time.

Kaiser paused, clearly intrigued by the shift in tone. "Care about you, huh? That's a bit more than just 'friends,' don't you think?"

I frowned, trying to push away the lingering warmth that spread through my chest.

"We were just kids, Kaiser. It wasn't like that." I quickly added, "I didn't understand it back then."

Kaiser chuckled, clearly not buying it. "Sure, sure. But sounds like little Kiel had it bad for you, Stella. Couldn't even keep his feelings to himself."

I rolled my eyes, but inside, I couldn't help the mix of fondness and bittersweetness that filled me.

"But you understand now," he teased. "Kiel wanted to marry you, didn't he?"

"Stop it!" I shouted, my face burning with embarrassment.

Kaiser laughed, leaning back with a grin. "Fine, fine. But I'm telling you, that guy's a failed lover for losing you."

I shook my head, exasperated, but smiling. "You're so annoying to speak to!"

After a brief pause, I continued. "Later, when we were walking back to the village, I couldn't really walk. I was still hurt, and Kiel... he carried me. On the way, he asked me how I felt about the others. I told him I cared for all of them. And Kiel... he said, 'That's what I love about you, Stella. You care for all of us. It makes me happy to see you happy with them.'"

Kaiser raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "He was a hopeless romantic too, huh? Too bad for him, though. He's a failed lover for losing you."

I rolled my eyes, trying to hide my grin. "Stop joking around."

Then, in a quieter voice, I added, "There was one more thing. Kiel once asked me if he could be my knight."

Kaiser's eyes lit up, clearly interested. "Your knight? And what did you say?"

"I didn't really know what it meant at the time," I explained. "But he looked so serious when he asked. So I smiled and said yes."

Kaiser burst out laughing. "So, Kiel indirectly proposed to you, and you accepted?"

I blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know," he said, still grinning. "People like him, the ones who want to be your knight, are just looking for a way to be closer to you. Maybe he was already thinking about marriage, huh? Knights only offer their service to one person, right?"

I still didn't understand. "I don't know what you mean."

Kaiser shook his head, laughing. "It's better if you don't know."

I pressed him, my curiosity getting the best of me. "What's so funny about it?"

Kaiser smirked, leaning back. "Personally, I think he wanted you to be his bride. Maybe he liked you so much, he wanted to marry you."

I felt my face flush again, imagining Kiel and me. The thought of it made my heart race, and a flurry of thoughts and feelings flooded my mind. Was that really what Kiel had meant? Had he cared about me that much?

Kaiser's smirk grew wider as he watched my reaction. "See? You're thinking about it now, aren't you? Don't deny it."

I couldn't speak for a moment, my thoughts a whirlwind. "... I don't know what to think..."

Kaiser chuckled, clearly enjoying my flustered reaction. "Trust me, Stella. Kiel wanted you. Too bad he never had the guts to say it straight out."

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. "Stop it, Kaiser. You're making it worse."

Kaiser laughed louder, but there was a warmth in his tone that softened the teasing. "I'm just saying, he missed out. Big time."

I shook my head, exasperated but smiling. "You're insufferable."

"Maybe. But you're smiling, so I must be doing something right," he said, his grin softening.

For a moment, I forgot the weight of the past, the darkness that loomed over me. Talking to Kaiser, even if he drove me mad, made the night a little less cold. It felt strange. Almost like the world wasn't as heavy anymore.

"Anyway," Kaiser continued, breaking my reverie, "If all of your friends used to call you Stella, then what about Lia?"

The smile and warmth I had felt were slowly disappearing, a chill creeping back in as his words hit like a cold wind. I could feel the name 'Lia' tightening in my chest, knotting up memories that I didn't want to revisit. It was the name my sister had given me. She was

everything to me, my rock, my guide. But now... now I couldn't even remember what had happened to her after we left the village. Everything was hazy, blurry, like I was trying to grasp a fog that slipped right through my fingers.

I unconsciously touched the back of my head, fingers trailing over my hair. It felt like a small gesture to comfort myself, but the ache inside me was still there, pulling at me.

I forced a smile. "Lia... was a name given to me by my sister."

Kaiser blinked, his teasing expression faltering for a moment. "Wow, I didn't know the princess had a sister even. You looked too lonely to even have one."

His words hung in the air, and I couldn't help but stare at him. Did he actually notice that I was saddened by hearing the word "Lia"? Was he trying to cheer me up with these goofy moments and jokes? I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, but I couldn't help but think... he had a kind heart, even if he hid it behind all this teasing.

I raised an eyebrow, pushing back. "Of course I have a sister. She's... she's a lot more than anyone else has ever been to me."

Kaiser tilted his head, a smirk playing at the corner of his lips. "Well, Lia sounds way more fascinating and fitting for you than a bland name like 'Stella.' What do you think?"

I hesitated, thoughts swirling. "I don't really know," I admitted. "I have a lot of memories with both names, but... Lia, it brings back more emotional ones. It's..." My voice wavered, almost like I couldn't trust myself to finish that thought.

Kaiser looked at me with narrowed eyes, his grin fading. "You like Lia more, right? You miss your sister, and you're lonely because of it."

I blinked, caught off guard by his sudden insight. "How did you know that?" I asked quietly.

Kaiser shrugged, a bit too nonchalantly. "I saw it in your eyes. Every time I called you Stella, your face brightened with happy memories, but those weren't really... genuine, you know? When I called you Lia, I saw a real smile. It wasn't forced."

I froze, processing his words. Was he really trying to test me this whole time? Watching me to see how I reacted to each name? Maybe all his teasing had a deeper purpose than just to get under my skin.

I sighed and gave him a reluctant nod. "Yeah, you're right. I... I liked Lia more. I guess that's the truth."

Kaiser clapped his hands together, a sudden burst of confidence lighting up his eyes. "Well, that settles it then!" He looked at me as though he had just won some great

victory. "We've got a base for your new name! Now we just need to make it even better!"

I stared at him, bewildered. "Wait, what? You're serious?"

He nodded, his expression full of determination. "Of course I'm serious. I'm an expert at giving names, you know?"

I couldn't hold back a laugh, shaking my head. "An expert? Seriously? You're a grand monster slayer, an expert explorer, and now a namer? What's next, are you going to add 'professional comedian' to your resume?"

Kaiser grinned, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Well, that's actually a good idea. But first, you'll see my genius at work. Watch and learn, princess."

I burst into laughter, covering my mouth with one hand, trying to hide my grin, but I was practically shaking with amusement. Kaiser's confidence was ridiculous, but somehow, it made the whole situation feel lighter.

Kaiser leaned in, his face growing serious, his eyes studying me like he was about to deliver some grand revelation.

"Okay, someone with beautiful snowy white hair, soft skin, and strikingly beautiful red eyes. I think I've got it."

Before I could ask what, he meant, he glanced up dramatically and called out to the air, "Leave some of the ladies for us too, Kiel!"

I froze, my face heating up instantly. My heart raced, and I couldn't help but fluster away from him, desperately looking anywhere but at Kaiser. Did he just...?

My hand instinctively reached up to cover my face as my breath quickened. Kaiser's grin widened, and I could feel the tension between us building.

"U-ummm," I stammered, my voice trembling with the heat of the moment. "Could you... could you give me some space? I-I'm not used to people being this close..."

But instead of stepping back, Kaiser moved even closer, and before I realized it, I found myself backed up against a tree, trapped with nowhere to go. His face was so close to mine now, and he was only getting closer.

What is he trying to do?

Wait... did he get jealous about Kiel? Is he using my weakness to take advantage of me? The thought hit me like a sudden wave, and my pulse quickened in response. Was this his way of making a move, seeing my vulnerability and deciding to act on it?

I tried to raise my hand to push him away, but before I could do anything, he grabbed my wrist in one swift motion, pinning it against the tree. I gasped in surprise, unable to move as he pushed me further into the bark, ensuring I couldn't escape. What is happening?

His eyes softened just slightly, but there was still that mischievous glint in them. "Just wait," he said, his voice calm and almost too steady. "Trust me."

In that moment, my mind was in turmoil. Was he really about to kiss me? The thought alone sent a strange feeling rushing through me. And for some reason, even though I should have felt more confused or scared, I didn't. Instead, I felt something else... almost like a strange pull toward him. I didn't feel sadness about it, nor did I feel rejected. In fact, part of me... wanted to accept it.

My heart pounded harder. No, this can't be happening. Why am I feeling this way?

I squeezed my eyes shut, my heart pounding in my ears. "F-Fine," I whispered, unsure of what was happening but feeling helpless under his gaze. My body was shaking, but I couldn't pull away. He was about to kiss me.

Chapter 7 - Betrayal

But instead of feeling his lips on mine, I felt something cool press against my forehead. My eyes snapped open in shock.

Kaiser's hand was gently resting on my forehead, his expression now serious. "You're burning up," he murmured, his voice softer than before.

I blinked, trying to process what was happening. My face flushed even more, but now I understood. He wasn't teasing or making a move—he was checking if I was sick. I let out a breath of relief, but my heart was still racing, though for a different reason now.

Kaiser pulled back, his usual grin returning. "Don't go worrying me like that," he teased, though I could see the concern in his eyes.

I let out a shaky sigh, my hands still trembling slightly. "You really like to stress me out, don't you?"

Kaiser chuckled softly, his eyes glinting with amusement. "What can I say? I'm full of surprises."

"I see," Kaiser said softly, looking down at me with a touch of amusement in his eyes. "You're suffering from a fever, that's why your face is all red often. It's not because I'm getting too close, huh?"

I blinked, utterly stunned. Was this guy for real? After all that, he was just checking if I was sick? I felt my frustration build, and without thinking, I pushed him back. He stumbled, falling onto the ground with a loud thud.

I hadn't realized how hard I'd pushed him until now. My mind was still racing from everything that had happened, and in the heat of the moment, I hadn't considered how much force I used. Kaiser had hit the ground so suddenly, and I hadn't meant to hurt him... Did I?

Panic bubbled up in my chest. What if he was actually hurt? I quickly turned to look at him, guilt and worry flooding my thoughts.

I gasped, suddenly worried. "Oh no, are you okay?"

Kaiser lay there, laughing, rubbing the back of his head where it had hit the ground. "Woah, princess! First, you push me down to the floor, then come back asking if I'm good after you push me?"

I opened my mouth to scold him, but the sight of him laughing—genuinely laughing—stopped me. My anger fizzled away, replaced with a strange warmth.

It was surreal, really. Just a few hours ago, I had been crying alone, consumed by my grief. And now, here I was, laughing, talking to someone who didn't even know the weight of my pain... but still made me smile.

Kaiser broke the silence, his voice suddenly softer. "The night sky... it's beautiful, isn't it?"

I nodded, looking up at the stars. "Yeah. It really is."

Then, as if he hadn't just fallen flat on his back a minute ago, Kaiser smiled at me. "Celestine is sure beautiful, isn't it, Lia?"

I couldn't help but smile back at him. "Yeah, it is."

He sat up, rubbing his head exaggeratedly. "I still don't know what I did to deserve being pushed to the ground like that, though. You're cruel, you know that?"

I laughed lightly, shaking my head. "You had it coming."

Kaiser leaned in again, this time with a mischievous grin. "Maybe you thought I was trying to kiss you, huh?"

My face turned crimson. "It's nothing like that!" I shouted, backing away quickly.

"Sure, sure," he teased, smirking. Then, he put a hand on my shoulder, looking me dead in the eye. "Don't worry, Lia. I'll remove you from my heart. You're really meant for Kiel."

I raised my fist this time to punch him, furious, but before I could act on it, Kaiser clasped his hands together, looking mock-serious. "Sorry if I was teasing you too much! I just like seeing you smile after all."

I stopped, my fist still raised, and for a moment, I realized he wasn't just being a goofball. He saw me, saw how sad and closed off I was... but now, he made me laugh. Made me forget for just a while.

It wasn't romantic, not in the way I'd thought. But it still felt comforting, like a step forward in a world that had been so heavy.

I shook my head, a small smile tugging at my lips despite myself. "You really know how to get under my skin."

And yet, there was a feeling of happiness spreading through me. A sense of lightness that I hadn't felt in so long.

Kaiser suddenly turned to me with a glimmer in his eyes, the kind he always had when he was about to say something that would leave me flustered. "I think I've got a really good name for you."

I blinked, stunned by his statement. "What? How?"

He smirked, leaning in as if to study my reaction. "Well," he began nonchalantly, "I needed some inspiration. So, I got closer to see your flustered face up close... and to check if you had a fever."

My face burned red. "You're so annoying!" I huffed, folding my arms tightly.

He only laughed, brushing off my annoyance. "What can I say? I'm an innovator." He puffed out his chest jokingly, then added, "But yeah, I think you'll like this one."

I raised an eyebrow, curiosity winning over my irritation. "Alright, let's hear it."

He hesitated, a rare softness overtaking his usual smirk. "You might think this is silly, but... you remind me of hope and happiness. There's something about your smile—it makes me smile too, even when I don't want to admit it. I know I sound awkward, but bear with me."

I froze, my heart skipping a beat as his words sank in.

Kaiser continued, his tone more sincere than I'd ever heard. "That's why I want to call you Celia. I kept the 'Lia' because I know you liked it, and I added the start of Celestine because... well, it suits you. I know it's not the most creative, but it's the best I've got."

I stared at him, utterly speechless.

All my life, people gave me names without asking—names that served their needs, not mine. My parents, my friends, even my sister... none of them had ever cared enough to ask if I liked the names they chose for me. They were labels, convenient ways to call me, but none of them felt like they were truly mine. Each one was a mask, a role I had to play, never something I could own. It was as if my true self was hidden behind these names, and no one ever bothered to see the person beneath.

But then, there was him.

He asked me if I liked the name. Just a simple question, but it was the first time anyone had ever cared about what I thought. The first time someone saw me—*me*, not the curse, not the mask, not the label. It was as if, for a moment, I wasn't just the girl who everyone feared. I was *Celia*

. I was someone who mattered.

I hadn't realized how much I longed to be seen until that very moment. How much I'd craved to be something more than the name others forced on me. My heart twisted painfully at the thought of how long I'd gone without this simple acknowledgment.

Looking back, I saw all the little things he had done—small gestures, quiet kindnesses—each one aimed at making me smile, at pulling me out of the darkness I had lived in for so long. Every laugh he brought me, every warm moment we shared, made me feel something I hadn't felt in years: hope. He was showing me, in every way he could, that I deserved to be happy. That I wasn't just a burden or a weapon or a curse.

And now, he had done the one thing no one else had ever done: he had given me a name, something I could truly claim for myself. A name that wasn't meant to hide me, but to bring me into the light.

Tears blurred my vision as I thought about it. For four long years, I had been hunted, alone, living a life of fear and false hope. A life where I thought I had no place, no future. A life where I was only ever a shadow, moving through the world unnoticed. But now, I felt something I hadn't dared to feel in so long: happiness. It was a fragile thing, just beginning to bloom, and I wasn't sure if I even deserved it.

But for the first time in my life, I was given something I could hold onto. A name. A piece of myself that no one had ever let me claim.

I felt seen. And it hurt, because I didn't know how to hold onto it.

Kaiser noticed my tears and leaned closer, alarmed. "Is it that bad?"

I quickly wiped my eyes, shaking my head. "No! No, it's not bad at all!" My voice cracked as I stammered through my tears. "I-I love it."

He offered me a relieved smile, extending his hand toward me with an inviting gesture.

"Alright, Celia," he said warmly, his eyes meeting mine. "How about it? Would you like to be my friend?"

I froze for a moment, staring at his outstretched hand. After everything—the fear, the loneliness, the despair—here he was, offering something I hadn't dared to hope for in so long. My heart ached, and warmth spread through me, chasing away the cold I had carried for years.

Tears prickled my eyes as I reached out, my fingers trembling slightly as they touched his. "Yes," I whispered, my voice barely steady. "I'd like that. I really would."

For a brief moment, everything felt perfect.

But it didn't last.

Out of nowhere, a fiery streak of light shot toward me. My eyes widened as the fireball closed in, too fast to dodge.

Time slowed as Kaiser screamed, "Watch out, Celia!" He threw himself in front of me, his right shoulder taking the brunt of the attack. The explosion sent smoke and heat billowing around us, and I gasped in horror as his arm burned, blackened from the flames.

"Kaiser!" I cried, but there was no time to react. More attacks rained down, forcing him to shield me with his body. Before I could stop him, a burst of wind magic slammed into him, sending him hurtling through the air.

I reached out instinctively, but the ground beneath me shifted violently. Jagged roots of earth sprang up, coiling around my legs like iron chains, trapping me in place. Panic surged through me as I struggled against them, my hands clawing at the air. My voice broke as I screamed, "Kaiser!"

Ahead, I could only watch in horror as he was flung through the air. His body twisted mid-flight, his voice echoing faintly: "Take care, Celia!"

"No!" I screamed, tears blurring my vision. My heart plummeted as he hit the ground far away with a bone-chilling crash. He didn't move. His limp form was barely visible through the dust and smoke.

Kaiser... Is he...? No, no, no. He can't be gone. He just can't. Not after everything.

Despair clawed at me, tightening around my chest like a vice. My legs trembled, but the earth held firm, refusing to let me move. I strained against the roots, my breaths coming in panicked gasps. I couldn't reach him. I couldn't help him.

"No, please!" I begged the unyielding ground, pulling at the roots with all my strength. "Let me go! I have to save him!"

But before I could muster another cry, a voice cut through the chaos—a voice I hadn't heard in years, one that sent chills down my spine.

"Well, well, Stella. I'd almost forgotten how annoying you could be."

I froze, my body stiffening at the name. My blood ran cold. Slowly, I turned toward the source, dread pooling in my stomach.

"Kiel?" His name left my lips like a whisper, barely audible over the pounding of my heart.

There he stood, his familiar form cloaked in darkness. Beside him was Ronan, his ever-loyal shadow, his eyes just as cruel. For a fleeting moment, my heart swelled with hope. He's here. He found me.

"Kiel," I said again, louder this time. Relief washed over me like a wave. My lips trembled into a shaky smile. Maybe he misunderstood what happened. Maybe he thought Kaiser was hurting me, and he's here to help. He wouldn't hurt me... right?

But the hope I clung to shattered like glass when Ronan spoke, his voice dripping with mockery.

"Now, now, witch. Don't move a muscle."

The word witch hit me like a knife. My smile faltered, confusion rushing in. "Witch?" I whispered.

Kiel's eyes locked onto mine, and my chest tightened. His expression was cold, twisted with fury, a face I didn't recognize. His hand ignited, flames curling around his fingers as he wielded magic, the fire flickering and crackling with intense energy.

His clothing seemed to react to the fire, a deep orange garment draped over his shoulders. It was almost like a blanket, but not just for warmth—it was a protective

layer, designed to shield him from the intense flames emanating from his hand. The fabric shimmered with faint magical symbols, glowing faintly in rhythm with the fire, as if it was enchanted to withstand the heat.

The garment billowed slightly as he moved, its fabric thick and sturdy, yet still light enough to allow freedom of movement. The fire's raw power licked the edges of his clothing, but the material seemed to absorb it, offering him protection even as the flames grew more intense. His eyes remained locked on me, filled with an emotion I couldn't fully understand, and my heart raced, unsure of whether to fear or trust the man before me.

"I finally found you," he said, his voice venomous. "You bitch. It's time to pay for your crimes—and die."

I couldn't breathe. My world crumbled around me.

Crimes? What crimes? My mind raced, a storm of thoughts. Why is he so angry? Why is he looking at me like this? He was supposed to care about me... wasn't he?

Tears welled up in my eyes as I stared at him, desperately searching for the Kiel I once knew. The boy who had protected me, who had laughed with me, who had been with me. But all I saw now was hatred.

"Kiel..." I choked out, my voice trembling. "Why...? Why are you saying this?"

He took a step forward, fire ball in his palm. "Don't play dumb with me, Stella," he snarled. "You know exactly why. You ruined everything, and now, you'll pay."

My knees buckled, and I gritted my teeth, trying to hold myself together. No, this has to be a mistake. Kiel wouldn't... He wouldn't.

But the fire in his eyes burned brighter, his intent clear.

"Kiel, please," I pleaded, tears streaming down my face. "It's me... Stella. Don't you remember?"

He laughed bitterly. "Oh, I remember. And I'll make sure you never forget."

I felt my heart shatter, the pieces scattering like shards of glass. In that moment, hope abandoned me.

Kaiser... Kiel... Everyone. I've lost them all.

But deep inside, a flicker of resolve sparked. My tears dried as anger and determination replaced despair. I tightened my fists, glaring back at Kiel. If I couldn't save him... if I couldn't save anyone... I wouldn't go down without a fight.

Chapter 8 - No Mercy

The chill of the night air prickled my skin as I stood frozen, the stars above casting faint silver light over the clearing. The trees around us swayed gently in the wind, their shadows moving on the ground like restless spirits. The area was quiet, too quiet, except for the faint rustle of leaves and the soft crackle of distant campfire embers.

Kiel's voice shattered the stillness.

"Well now, my dear Stella," he drawled, his tone mockingly sweet, "what brings you to the open areas of Celestine on such a dark night? And with someone else other than me?"

My breath caught. His words hit me harder than they should have. The Kiel I once knew—kind and gentle—was gone. The boy who once played in the village fields with me, who swore to protect me with a warm smile, had grown into someone unrecognizable.

At sixteen or seventeen, he now stood taller and broader, his presence overwhelming, but it wasn't his size that terrified me—it was the malice in his voice and the coldness in his gaze. The man standing before me was a stranger, his voice laced with cruelty and his smile devoid of warmth.

As Kiel reached up, he pulled off the orange garment that had protected him from the fire, and my heart skipped a beat. Beneath it, he wore dark, menacing armor that seemed designed for war. The blackened metal was sleek and terrifying, molded to fit his form with sharp angles and jagged edges. It was the kind of armor worn by someone who had been trained to fight, to kill. The cold, steel appearance of it sent a shiver down my spine. I realized, with a sickening sense of dread, that this wasn't just the boy I once knew—it was a warrior, someone capable of far more than I had ever imagined. And I was facing him now, as a stranger with no hint of the kindness I had once clung to.

The roots gripping my legs began to loosen, crumbling like dry dirt. For a moment, hope flickered in my chest. Maybe I could still escape. But my mind screamed at me to focus. Kaiser. He was hurt—no, more than hurt. He had taken the full force of that attack, his body flung from the wind magic. My heart clenched as I thought about the blood pooling beneath him, his lifeless form against the cold ground. His head had hit directly—I was sure of it.

I clenched the fabric of my dress tightly in my fists, anger bubbling in my chest. Kiel and Ronan didn't matter right now. No, what mattered was getting to Kaiser. He wasn't a part of this. He had no reason to fight or suffer for me. He only wanted to help me, to make me laugh when I felt like I couldn't.

Memories of his voice replayed in my mind.

"Time doesn't take the pain away," he had told me softly once. "It only teaches us how to live with it. How to move on and... be happy again."

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I forced them back. Kaiser's words lit something inside me. Kiel and Ronan didn't believe I could do anything. They saw me as weak, helpless. But I couldn't stay like this. I wouldn't stay like this.

I had to help him.

The wind howled around me as I ran. The clearing was surrounded by sparse trees, their dark outlines jagged against the starry sky. It wasn't far from the monster-infested forest I had carefully avoided earlier, but it was quiet here—eerily so. My feet pounded against the earth, and every breath burned in my chest as I pushed myself to go faster.

"Hey! She's running!" Ronan's voice cut through the air, sharp and irritated.

I glanced back but didn't slow down. Ronan was yelling something to Kiel, but Kiel didn't respond. My focus stayed ahead—on Kaiser. He lay crumpled in the distance, his figure so still it made my heart ache.

"Kaiser!" I screamed, my voice cracking.

I was so close now. Just a few more steps. My hand reached out instinctively, desperate to touch him, to shake him awake, to know he was still alive.

No... I have to believe he is alive. I know he'll live through this.

But before I could reach him, a shadow blurred into my path.

I barely registered Kiel moving. One moment, he was standing several feet away, and the next, his figure blurred like a shadow slipping between cracks in the light. In a blink, he was there, standing in front of me. His expression was cold, calculating, and void of the warmth I once knew. His speed was terrifying, almost inhuman, as if he'd dissolved into the darkness itself and reformed right before my eyes.

"No!" I gasped, panic rising in my chest as I tried to sidestep him. But before I could move, his hand shot out with precision, gripping my wrist like an iron shackle.

Pain flared as he threw me back, twisting my arm with a strength I couldn't match. I stumbled and fell to the ground, the rough dirt scraping against my palms.

Kiel's smirk grew as he loomed over me, his shadow swallowing the dim light around us. His stance was casual, almost mocking, as if he didn't see me as a threat at all. The faint flicker of firelight from his magic flew in his eyes, making them gleam like molten embers, cold yet searing.

"You know, Stella," he murmured, his voice dripping with venom as he crouched down to my level, his face mere inches from mine, "for someone so fragile, you sure like to act tough. It's almost adorable—pathetic, but adorable."

His words cut deeper than any blade. His posture was relaxed, almost lazy, as he tilted his head, studying me like a predator toying with its prey. Every muscle in my body screamed at me to move, but his oppressive presence rooted me in place.

He reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face with the back of his hand, the gesture cruelly intimate. "Still pretending, aren't you? You're so desperate to seem brave, yet here you are, trembling like a cornered rabbit."

Before I could move, the ground shifted under me. Stone rose and wrapped around my wrist, holding it down. I pulled, but it wouldn't move.

Kiel's smirk deepened as he glanced at the restraint he'd conjured effortlessly. "What's the matter, Stella?" he sneered. "Still think you can fight me? You couldn't even break free from this, let alone stand against me."

Then he straightened, towering over me once again, the smirk on his lips widening. "I almost pity you. Almost."

I struggled, trying to pull my wrist free, but he only leaned closer. His breath was hot against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Do you really think you're worth saving?" he taunted, his tone sharp as a blade. "Or do you just enjoy being everyone's burden? Maybe you like the attention—the way it makes you feel needed, even if it's just pity."

His words cut deep, each one sharper than the last.

The night around us felt colder, the wind biting against my skin. My heart pounded painfully as I looked up at him. For a moment, all I could hear was the rustling of leaves and the distant howl of a creature in the forest.

My thoughts raced, a whirlwind of fear and doubt pulling me under. Why am I even trying? I'm weak—useless. I can't fight him. I can't save anyone. What's the point?

Each word felt like a stone, dragging me deeper into the darkness. My arms felt heavy, my legs like they could give out any second. Just stop, a voice inside me whispered.

You'll fail anyway, like you always do. You're nothing compared to him.

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes as bitter questions tore through my mind. Why am I even here? Why did I think I could stand against him? Maybe... maybe it would be easier to just give up.

I wanted to scream, but the lump in my throat wouldn't let me. My body trembled, and I could feel myself on the verge of breaking.

Then, like a light cutting through the darkness, I remembered.

I saw his face—Kaiser's face—clear as day. His teasing grin, his calm, steady gaze, the way he could somehow make the world feel lighter even when it was crushing me.

I remembered how he made me laugh for the first time in four years. Four years of emptiness, pain, and despair—and yet, with just a few words, he made me smile.

"Don't give up," he had told me once, his voice firm but warm. "You're stronger than you think, Lia. You just have to see it."

That memory burned through the doubt like fire. He believed in me. He made me feel like I could fight back, like I wasn't alone anymore.

I took a shaky breath, clenching my fists. No. I can't stop now. I won't let those thoughts win. Not now, not ever. I'll fight. I'll keep trying, no matter what.

The wind bit at my skin as I looked up at Kiel, my heart pounding like a drum.

"No," I whispered, my voice trembling.

Kiel raised an eyebrow, his smirk faltering. "What was that?"

I glared up at him, my fear replaced by a spark of defiance. "I said, no. You don't get to decide my worth."

For a moment, there was silence, broken only by the faint crackle of his fire magic. Then Kiel laughed—a low, mocking sound that sent chills through me.

"Oh, Stella," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You've grown some courage. How amusing."

But I didn't care.

I glared at him, his words like poison in my ears, but I didn't care. My focus wasn't on Kiel or Ronan. It was on Kaiser. My friend. My only real friend in four long, lonely years. He was hurt, and I couldn't let him down.

I glanced down at the ground, the earth magic pinning my wrist like chains. My anger surged, raw and uncontrollable, burning hotter than any pain I held. Somehow, I noticed the magic loosening, cracks forming in the hardened soil. Was it because Kiel couldn't keep his focus, or was I stronger than they thought?

It didn't matter. I pressed against the hold with everything I had, straining until my hands finally tore free. The roots crumbled beneath me, and I stumbled forward, my body trembling but unbroken.

"What?!" Kiel's voice was sharp, his shock clear for a moment.

"Don't let the witch escape!" Ronan shouted, his voice laced with panic.

But I was already moving, my legs carrying me toward Kaiser as fast as they could. The cold night air stung my skin, the faint smell of burning leaves mixing with the dampness of the clearing. My heart pounded in my chest, a steady drumbeat of desperation.

"Kaiser!" I screamed, reaching out. His body was so close now, so still against the dirt. I could almost feel his hand in mine, a lifeline pulling me back from despair.

But before I could reach him, a shadow flashed before my eyes, faster than I could react. Kiel.

He was in front of me in an instant, his hand lashing out like a whip. His fingers clamped around my wrist, throwing me back. I let out a cry of pain as he twisted my arm and slammed me against the rough bark of a nearby tree. The impact knocked the breath out of me, the bark scraping my back through my thin clothes.

Kiel leaned in close, his grip like iron, his face twisted into a cruel smirk.

"So, Stella," he drawled, his tone mocking and dripping with disgust. "Is he supposed to be your hero or something? It's laughable, really. Look at him—so weak, so pitiful. Is that what you've pinned all your hopes on?"

"Shut up!" I spat, my voice trembling with anger and pain. Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. "You've changed, Kiel. You hate me now, don't you? All because of how I look."

For a moment, Kiel was silent, his smirk faltering. His eyes flickered with something unreadable—hesitation? Remorse? No, it was gone before I could be sure, replaced by his cold stare.

My voice wavered, but I pushed through the lump in my throat. "Do you remember? You once asked to be my knight. You promised you'd protect me, no matter what." My chest tightened, and a tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it. "I thought... I thought you liked me, Kiel."

He stared at me, his silence dragging on for what felt like an eternity. Then, he laughed—a harsh, menacing sound that cut through me like a blade.

"Like you?" he sneered, his voice filled with disgust. "Don't make me vomit."

I flinched at the sheer malice in his words, but he wasn't done.

"You just looked a little better than the other plain, boring girls in the village. That's all."

My heart pounded, and though I felt a rush of emotion, I refused to let him see my vulnerability. I pushed against his chest with my free hand, trying to create some space between us, but Kiel was too strong. He grabbed my other wrist and pinned it above my head, pressing me harder against the tree.

His face was inches from mine now, his breath warm against my skin. His voice dropped, soft but earnest. "You want to know the truth, Stella? I fell for you that day, at the festival. When I saw you looking up at the sky, your eyes full of wonder, I couldn't stop myself. You were so beautiful, so... pure in that moment. I remember thinking how I wanted to be the one to make you smile, to be the one to stand by you. I loved you even then, the first time I saw you, and it's never stopped."

He paused, his breath warm against my skin. "You had the wrong idea all this time, Stella. In the past, my sole purpose was to achieve my desires from you. I had just taken interest in your beauty, and oh my, look how much you've matured now. Truly capable of fulfilling every inch of satisfaction I need."

I felt sick, bile rising in my throat as his words twisted in my mind like thorns.

"I never cared about your personality," he continued, his tone dripping with disdain. "Or your opinions. Why would I? They never mattered."

I struggled against him, my body trembling with anger, fear, and disgust. "You're... you're lying," I whispered, my voice breaking. "That's not who you were. You're not this..."

He cut me off with a laugh, leaning even closer. "This is who I've always been, Stella. You just couldn't see it. I never loved you. I wanted to own you, to use you."

My vision blurred with tears, my heart breaking under the weight of his words. But even as despair clawed at me, I refused to give in.

"Kaiser would never—" I began, but Kiel's grip tightened, his smirk twisting into something darker.

"Kaiser?" he screamed. "Don't even compare me to that pathetic weakling."

The silence felt like a vice around my chest, broken only by the faint crackle of Kiel's fire magic. I couldn't move, trapped between the tree and his unyielding grip. His breath was hot and uneven, brushing against my face. My stomach churned, a mix of fear and disgust gripping me tighter than his hands ever could.

"You know, Stella," he murmured, his voice low and twisted. "I really hate you."

I flinched at his words, the disgust in his tone cutting deeper than I expected.

"But," he continued, his lips curling into a sickening smirk, "as your good old friend, I'm feeling generous. I can give you two things."

His fingers, rough and calloused, slid from my wrist to my palm. He gripped it tightly, almost intimately, like it was some mockery of tenderness. My body stiffened, every fiber of me screaming to pull away, but his strength was overwhelming.

"I'll give you a painless death," he said softly, almost like a lover making a promise. His disgusting tone made bile rise in my throat. "But before that..." Kiel leaned closer, him whispering to my ears. "I'll make sure you have a night to remember. A happy, pleasurable night before your death."

I turned my face away, trying to put even an inch of space between us, but his other hand caught my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. They were dark and empty, filled with a twisted kind of satisfaction.

"I am your knight, after all," he whispered, his words dripping with mockery. "It's my duty to look after you, isn't it? I'll make sure you don't forget tonight. Not ever."

His body slowly getting closer against mine, and I shuddered, trapped between the unyielding tree and his suffocating weight. I felt powerless, his strength drowning out every ounce of resistance I had left. My hands trembled under his grip, and I clenched my teeth, refusing to let the tears in my eyes spill.

"Kiel..." I choked out, my voice breaking. "Please... you don't do this. You're not this person."

He laughed—low and cruel, the sound of someone who had long abandoned any shred of humanity.

"This person?" He leaned in, his lips almost brushing my ear. "Oh, Stella, this is who I've always been. You were just too blind to see it."

He pulled back slightly, just enough to glance over his shoulder at Ronan. "What do you think, Ronan? Can you wait your turn? I'm planning to take my time tonight."

Ronan smirked, his eyes cold and disdainful as they landed on me. "Take all the time you want," he said, his voice casual, like they weren't talking about me as if I were an object not that their friend. "She's not going anywhere."

Kiel turned back to me, his smirk growing wider as he took in the tears streaking down my cheeks.

"Before we start our special night," he said, his voice laced with mock sweetness, "let's talk about your little knight, shall we? This... Kaiser."

I glared at him, my body trembling with a mix of fear and anger. "Don't talk about him," I said, my voice weak but defiant.

"Why not?" Kiel mocked. "Is he supposed to be your hero? Your shining knight in armor? Oh please."

My chest tensed, and I looked down, my heart aching. "He's a man," I said, my voice rising with desperation. "A real man. Someone who fights for others. Someone who—" My words caught in my throat as my disgust boiled over.

"Someone who isn't a disgusting pervert like you," I screamed, my voice trembling with both anger and revulsion.

His smirk vanished, and his eyes darkened. Without warning, his hand struck my face, the slap leaving a burning sting on my cheek.

"Bitch," he hissed, his voice sharp and cutting. "Know your place."

I turned my head, wincing as my cheek throbbed, but I refused to let him see my tears fall.

Kiel's lips curled into a sneer as he turned his gaze toward Kaiser's limp form. "Ah," he said, his voice dripping with mock realization. "Now I remember him. The little E-rank adventurer from the village. Pathetic, wasn't he?"

Ronan blinked, his eyes narrowing as he glanced from Kiel to Kaiser. "Wait, actually?" He laughed, a harsh, mocking sound that sent a shiver down my spine. "An E-rank adventurer? This is who you're putting your faith in?" He clapped his hands, the sound mocking and cruel. "How sad. How very sad."

My head snapped up, shock and disbelief freezing me in place. "What...?" I whispered, my voice barely audible.

Kiel's grin widened, his tone mocking and cruel. "Oh, you didn't know? Of course, you didn't. Your great savior, your last hope, is nothing more than an E-rank. A rank so low it's practically a joke."

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "You're lying."

I could feel my heart sinking into my stomach as Kiel's words cut through me like a knife. I couldn't believe what he was saying. It couldn't be true. I refused to believe it. But his laughter—twisted and mocking—only deepened the weight of his cruel words.

"Lying?" Kiel scoffed, his voice dripping with laughter. "I wish I was. But it's true. Among all the hunters in that village, he was the weakest of the weak. And you pinned all your hopes on him?"

I felt my breath catch, my chest tightening. My mind raced, trying to cling to any shred of doubt, to any explanation that would make sense. I had to believe in Kaiser. He wasn't weak. He couldn't be. He had fought for me; he had cared for me. But the hollow look in Kiel's eyes—those cold, mocking eyes—made everything feel like a lie.

I turned to Kaiser, my heart breaking in my chest, but before I could gather my thoughts, Kiel leaned in closer. His breath was hot, his voice low and suffocating. "You really are pathetic, Stella," he whispered, each word stabbing deeper into my soul. "Placing all your faith in someone so useless. But don't worry..."

His grip on my hands tightened, almost crushing, and I gasped, pain shooting through me. He pressed in closer, his disgusting smile widening as he lowered his voice to an almost predatory tone. "I'll make sure you forget all about him tonight."

I wanted to scream, to push him away, but my body was frozen. The words stuck in my throat, thick with sorrow and regret. How had I let this happen? How had I ended up in this nightmare?

Before I could process his words, Kiel moved back, raising his hand toward Kaiser. "Let's see if your little knight can survive this," he said with a twisted grin, his eyes gleaming with malice.

The air around him crackled with mana energy, the sharp hum of power vibrating through the tense silence. His voice rang out, steady and deliberate, as he spoke the words of a fire spell. I could only watch, frozen in place, as flames surged to life in his hands, growing brighter and hotter with every passing second. Then, with a deafening roar, a massive explosion erupted, the inferno swallowing Kaiser whole.

The force of the blast sent a wave of heat and pressure rippling through the air, making it hard to breathe. The world around me seemed to blur, the crackling fire and rising smoke consuming everything in its path. Dust and debris filled the space where Kaiser once stood, and all I could see was the billowing cloud of destruction.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. Everything slowed to an agonizing crawl. My legs felt like lead, rooted to the ground, refusing to move no matter how much I screamed at myself to do something—anything. I strained my eyes, desperate to catch a glimpse of him, but there was nothing. No figure standing tall, no defiant voice calling out in victory. Just emptiness.

My heart pounded so violently that I thought it might burst. I couldn't stop the wave of despair that crashed over me, pulling me under. He was gone. My only friend, the one

person who cared for me, who made me feel like I wasn't alone in this cruel world—gone. And I hadn't done a thing to stop it.

My chest heaved as the realization sank deeper into me, the weight of it unbearable. I had failed him. I had failed the one person who believed in me. I had failed Kaiser.

I bit down on my lip, the taste of blood sharp in my mouth, but I didn't care. My fists clenched at my sides as regret clawed at me, raw and unrelenting. Why hadn't I acted sooner? Why hadn't I tried harder? Why couldn't I save him, just once? He deserved better. He deserved someone stronger, someone braver—someone who could have saved him.

Tears burned in my eyes, blurring the inferno still raging before me. I didn't bother wiping them away. The fire in my chest—fueled by rage, sorrow, and unbearable guilt—was too strong to be extinguished. I couldn't stop the scream that ripped from my throat, echoing into the night. It was filled with every ounce of pain I carried, every regret I would never be able to let go. Kaiser was gone, and I would never forgive myself.

But I had to move. I couldn't just stand there. I couldn't let him die without a fight, without doing something, anything. With every ounce of strength I had left, I struggled against the bindings that kept me in place, but the more I tried, the weaker I became.

Just as I thought I might break free, Kiel turned to me, a twisted smile spreading across his face. "You're not going anywhere, Stella." He raised his hand, muttering incantations under his breath.

Vines shot up from the ground, coiling around my arms and legs, locking me in place. They constricted tighter with every second, but I didn't feel fear—I felt rage. Blazing, consuming rage that burned through every ounce of pain. My chest heaved, my breathing sharp and uneven, as my red eyes locked onto his with murderous intent.

"How dare you," I growled, my voice venomous. "How dare you kill him, Kiel!" My scream tore through the night as I thrashed against the vines. "I'll kill you! I'll kill both of you for what you've done!"

Kiel tilted his head, his black eyes narrowing as his smile faded. "That look in your eyes," he said softly, his tone almost amused. "It's hatred. It's the fire of someone who's lost everything." He leaned closer, his face calm yet sinister. "But you're powerless, Celia. You're nothing."

I screamed at him, my fury unrelenting. "You think this will stop me? You think this is over? You're a coward, Kiel—a coward who couldn't even face him without a trick up your sleeve!" My voice cracked with the intensity of my anger. "I'll kill you both. I swear it!"

His expression darkened, and without warning, he raised his hand and slapped me across the face. The force sent a sharp sting through my cheek, but I didn't flinch. I refused to give him the satisfaction. Instead, I turned back to him, my red eyes blazing brighter, my teeth gritted in defiance.

"You're going to regret that," I hissed, my voice low and steady. "Every single moment you breathe, you'll regret what you did to him."

Kiel's lips curled into a smirk, though there was a flicker of unease in his eyes. "You don't get it, do you?" he said, crouching in front of me. "He's gone, Stella. Dead. You can rage all you want, but it won't change a thing. You'll never see him again."

I snarled, my voice echoing through the night, raw with fury. The vines constricting me felt like chains, biting into my skin as I thrashed against them. My muscles burned, but the fire in my heart burned hotter. I wouldn't stop. I couldn't stop. Not until Kiel paid for what he had done—for Kaiser, for Lyla, for everything.

Kiel's smirk deepened, twisted with sadistic delight. "Still so defiant," he sneered, stepping closer. "You're more trouble than you're worth."

I spat at his feet, my glare searing through the darkness. "You're a coward, Kiel. Hiding behind your magic like a child. Is this all you've got?"

His expression darkened, the mocking humor in his eyes replaced by something colder, deadlier. He crouched down, his hand reaching out to tilt my chin up. I jerked my head away, but the vines tightened, holding me in place. "You talk big for someone so helpless," he said, his voice low and venomous.

Then, his fist crashed into my stomach. The impact was like a hammer, driving the air from my lungs. Pain exploded through me, sharp and unrelenting, but I refused to cry out. My body convulsed against the vines as blood surged into my mouth. I spat it at him, the crimson droplets staining his smirking face.

"You think this will stop me?" I snarled, my voice hoarse but unyielding.

Kiel's eyes flashed with anger, and he slammed his fist into my ribs. A sickening crack echoed in the air, and a scream clawed at my throat, but I swallowed it down, my teeth grinding against the agony. He grabbed a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back so I was forced to meet his cold, unfeeling gaze.

"You don't learn, do you?" he growled, his voice like ice.

Another blow landed, this time across my jaw. My head snapped to the side, blood spraying from my lips. The metallic taste filled my mouth, thick and suffocating. My vision blurred, but I forced my gaze back to him, my hatred undiminished.

"You're pathetic," he spat, standing over me like I was some broken thing. "Bleed all you want. It won't change anything. You've already lost."

I coughed, blood dripping from the corner of my mouth, staining the ground below. My entire body screamed in pain, but the fury inside me refused to waver. "You're wrong," I rasped, my voice weak but defiant. "You think this is over? I'll kill you, Kiel. I'll kill you both."

His expression hardened, and his hand lashed out again, striking me across the face. The force of the blow sent my head snapping back against the tree behind me. Stars danced in my vision, but I gritted my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of my surrender.

Blow after blow landed, each one heavier than the last. Blood ran down my face, pooling beneath me, but I kept fighting. I met his gaze with unrelenting fury, my hatred shining brighter than any pain he could inflict.

"Still glaring?" he taunted, shaking his bruised fist as he loomed over me. "You don't know when to quit, do you?"

I laughed, the sound hoarse and broken but filled with defiance. "You'll wish I had," I snarled, my voice a promise of vengeance. "Because when I get free, I'll make you regret every second of this."

Kiel's face twisted in rage, and he raised his hand again, the fire in his palm flaring to life. But even as my body gave out, even as the darkness crept in, I held onto one thought: I would make him pay.

The words felt like acid, burning through what was left of my soul. My body had given up, trembling with exhaustion as the vines coiled tighter, their sinister magic slowly draining what little energy I had left. Each pulse felt like a piece of me was being ripped away, leaving nothing but emptiness in its place.

I tried to fight it—I really did—but my strength was gone. My limbs hung limp, my head slumping forward as tears threatened to spill. The weight of failure crushed me, a burden I could no longer bear. I couldn't resist. Not anymore.

A cold chuckle broke the silence, sending a chill down my spine. "Good girl," Kiel murmured, his voice low and dripping with mockery. "Now, it's time to rest."

My chest tightened as his hand reached toward my face, fingers brushing against my cheek. The touch was deceptively gentle, but it made my skin crawl. I forced myself to look up, glaring at him through half-lidded eyes, my fury simmering beneath the surface even as my body betrayed me.

But no matter how much I wanted to scream, to fight, to lash out, my body remained still. The vines tightened their grip, and all I could do was wait, my breaths shallow and ragged, as the world around me seemed to close in.

I'm sorry... Kaiser.

The air around me felt heavy, suffocating, as Kiel's sadistic smile lingered, still so close. I couldn't move, couldn't fight back. I had resigned myself to this nightmare—until suddenly, everything changed.

I heard it before I saw it—the sound of something slicing through the air like lightning. My heart skipped a beat.

Kiel's head flicked back slowly, his eyes widening in disbelief as a blue and red aura rushed toward him at a speed he couldn't possibly comprehend. Time seemed to freeze for a heartbeat as Kiel's gaze snapped toward the approaching force, but before he could react, the air was filled with the deafening sound of metal cutting through the air with deadly intent.

The blade was so fast, so precise, that Kiel barely had time to make a move. He tried to amplify his physical strength with a burst of magic, but it was futile. He hardened his skin, creating a glass-like surface in an attempt to protect himself, but it was no use. The sword, moving faster than anything he had ever seen, sliced through it as if it were flesh under a blade. It didn't just nick his arm; it sliced it off cleanly.

Kiel's scream echoed through the night as his hand was severed in one swift motion. The vines that had held me in place shattered instantly, and I collapsed to the ground, gasping for air as the world seemed to snap back into focus.

Kiel's body fell, writhing in agony, his mouth open in a scream that would haunt me forever. "AGHHHHH!" he cried, his hands flying up in desperation as he scrambled to heal himself.

But it was too late.

At first, I couldn't tell who it was. The figure moved through the haze, blood dripping from their face, body battered and broken, yet somehow still standing tall. Their movements were blurred, like a shadow in the smoke, with a fiery glow casting an eerie light around them. The face remained a mystery, too obscured by the darkness and the blood to recognize.

Then, my eyes caught something—fragments of a shattered mirror held tightly in a severed hand, suspended in midair. In the fractured reflection, I saw it. His face. Covered in blood, yet resolute. Dark hair matted with crimson, and those unmistakable blue eyes—cold, burning with fury. It was him. Kaiser.

My breath hitched in my chest as realization slammed into me. Relief surged, a spark of hope igniting in the darkest corner of my mind. The blood, the fire in his eyes—it was all unmistakable.

The severed hand trembled slightly, its form already beginning to dissolve, as if the very magic surrounding him was already repairing the damage. It blurred, melting away into nothingness, leaving behind only the powerful presence of the one who had returned to finish this fight. The unspoken promise of vengeance, of survival, it was all there.

Kiel, still on the ground, cursing and swearing, could barely look up as Kaiser approached, his voice colder than anything I had ever heard.

"Get up, worthless trash," Kaiser said, his words laced with disgust and disdain. "I don't recall letting any pests into my camp. Care to correct me?"

Kiel's glare burned with hatred, but his body trembled as the pain racked him. He was desperately trying to heal his severed arm, his hands shaking as he attempted to use magic.

I could hardly breathe, my heart racing with an unfamiliar mixture of hope and fear. I was trembling, my body still bound by the trauma, but I felt a spark in my chest. Kaiser is alive. Kaiser is here.

"Kaiser..." I whispered, almost too afraid to believe it.

He met my eyes, a faint smile pulling at the corner of his lips despite the blood staining his face. It was a smile that was as much a reassurance as it was a challenge. "Sorry I kept you waiting, Celia."

Kiel, still recovering from the shock, scoffed, his voice dripping with bitter mockery. "Pathetic. You think this weak E-rank adventurer—this failure—is going to save you?"

Kaiser didn't flinch. He didn't even acknowledge the insult. His eyes remained steady, cold, unwavering.

"You should've stayed in your hole," Kaiser said, his voice cold and filled with rage. "You made the mistake of thinking I was weak. Now, I'm going to make you regret every second of it. I'll make you wish you were never born."

Kiel's hands trembled as he cast a healing spell, his words strained and full of desperation. "I'll fix this. I'll fix it all—"

But Kaiser stepped forward, his sword gleaming with a murderous intent that sent a chill down my spine. He was a shadow of pure resolve, his every movement fueled by nothing but vengeance and the need to end this.

I wanted to say something, to tell him to be careful, but the words caught in my throat. Kaiser was moving, his every step a testament to his will to fight, to keep pushing forward despite his injuries.

The tension between them was suffocating, a storm building up in the air as Kaiser slowly closed the distance. The final confrontation was near—everything had led up to this moment.

But just as the sword hovered, ready to strike again, the scene froze. There was no way to predict what would happen next.

And in that moment, as the world held its breath, I could only hope that Kaiser would prevail.

Chapter 9 - Shattered Trust

Kaiser's Perspective:

"Well, shit."

That was the only thought I could muster as I crouched low, gripping my sword tightly. The cold steel of the hilt pressed into my palm, grounding me, while my mind raced to assess the situation. Kiel was off to the side, clutching his hand, magical energy already swirling around him, slowly repairing the damage I'd done earlier. The faint glow of his healing magic lit up the ground beneath him, mixing with the orange glow of nearby flames.

I shifted my stance, eyes darting to the left. Elemental magic, I thought grimly, he's definitely got fire under his belt. And if I'm not mistaken... there's another one.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and instinct screamed at me to move, I heard deadly sounds of flames coming at me. I threw myself to the side just as a fiery arrow whizzed past, the heat singeing the air by my face. I felt the sharp warmth brush my cheek as the arrow embedded itself into the ground, sizzling against the dirt.

"KIEL! ARE YOU OKAY?!"

The voice came from my right, loud and desperate. I turned to see Ronan, the boy who'd fired the arrow, his fiery red hair damp with sweat. His eyes were wide, filled with panic and rage as he lowered his arm, the flames on his hand flickering angrily.

Kiel stood slowly, blood dripping steadily from his mangled hand. The dirt beneath him was dark with it, but his expression stayed cold and calculated, even as fury burned in his gaze. His jaw tightened, and the air around him seemed to grow heavier with his presence.

"Ronan," Kiel said sharply, his voice low but laced with venom. He barely glanced at his companion, gesturing with his uninjured hand. "Get over here and fight him while I heal."

There was a pause, a heartbeat of silence, as Ronan's face twisted in hesitation. "But your hand—"

"I said fight him." Kiel's voice snapped like a whip, cutting through the moment. His calm broke just enough to show the raw anger beneath. "Don't waste your time worrying about me. Kill him."

Ronan's hesitation vanished. His hands ignited, flames roaring as he ran towards me. His face was grim, but his voice carried a dangerous edge as he screamed, "You won't get another chance, Kaiser. I'll make sure you regret hurting him."

I stood back up, forcing a smirk to my face even as my muscles tensed in preparation. My voice was calm, but I let a vengeful edge creep into it.

"Well, well, well," I said, my tone dripping with mockery. "Look what we have here, Celia—your old friends reuniting with you! How touching."

Celia's voice wavered with guilt as she stepped closer, her eyes filled with concern. "I'm so sorry, Kaiser. It's my fault you're hurt. If I hadn't—"

I cut her off before she could finish, forcing a small smile despite the burning pain in my side. "It's just a scratch, Celia. Don't worry about it." I gave her a reassuring glance, hoping my words would calm her nerves. "I'm not going anywhere. Just focus on staying safe."

Before I came, though, her face had been twisted with anger, her eyes glowing with murderous intent. She looked terrifying—almost unrecognizable. I'd even heard her threatening them, her voice filled with raw hatred. But now... now she looked normal again, almost fragile. What was with her there? Was that really Celia?

Shaking the thought from my mind, I reached into my coat and pulled out a small vial of healing potion, tossing it her way. "Drink this," I told her firmly.

She caught it and immediately shook her head, her voice trembling with worry. "No, Kaiser, you're bleeding! You need this more than I do. Please, stop pretending you're fine!" Her eyes locked onto mine, a mix of fear and guilt filling them. "I can't let you get hurt because of me... not again."

I waved her off with a light laugh, forcing a grin despite the stabbing pain in my side. "It's just a scratch," I said again, trying to keep my tone light, though every breath felt like fire. "I've had worse, trust me." I met her gaze, doing my best to reassure her. "You're

the one who needs to stay strong right now, Celia. Drink it, and we'll both get out of this in one piece."

Her hands trembled slightly as she hesitated, looking at the vial, then back at me. Reluctantly, she brought it to her lips, and I let out a small sigh of relief. If she was worried about me, she wouldn't be able to focus. This way, at least one of us would be in better shape to face whatever came next.

I turned my gaze back to Kiel and Ronan, narrowing my eyes, the chill in my voice thickening.

"And as for you two..." I let the words hang in the air, cold and heavy. "You're both making a grave mistake if you think you're walking away from this alive. If you truly want to die here, I'll be happy to oblige."

The words came out cold, each one deliberate. I wanted them to feel it—a threat buried beneath my calm demeanor.

Behind me, Celia's voice trembled slightly, the fear in her words unmistakable. "Kaiser don't let Kiel heal! He's stronger than Ronan. You need to take him down first."

I could feel her anxiety, the way she flinched as she glanced at Kiel. Her hands were clenched, her whole-body tense. It was clear she was worried—not just for me, but for what Kiel could do to her.

I nodded, trying to keep my own unease buried beneath my cold exterior. "I know, Celia. I'll handle it." I turned toward Kiel, my sword gripped tightly in my hand.

She was right. I knew it. Kiel was the real danger here. If I let him recover, I wouldn't stand a chance.

"Stay back for now," I muttered to her, not turning around.

I could feel her trembling behind me, and for a moment, I softened my tone, just enough for her to hear. "It's alright, Celia. I'll keep you safe. Just trust me."

I knew she was scared—hell, I was too—but if she stayed close, I'd only be worried about protecting her. And I didn't need that right now. What I needed was to focus on getting through this, one way or another.

Without waiting, I surged forward. My sword shifted to my left hand, ready to strike as I closed the distance between me and Kiel. The ground beneath me cracked with every heavy step, dust and loose rocks scattering in every direction. The smell of burning wood and the faint metallic tang of blood hung in the air. The heat from Ronan's fire magic lingered, pressing against my skin, but I didn't let it slow me.

"Kiel!" Ronan shouted, his voice tight with warning, but I was already too close. Kiel, standing just a few paces away, was still focused on healing his hand, the magic crackling around him in an eerie glow.

I raised my sword, aiming for Kiel's side, knowing he couldn't react in time. His back was slightly turned, his focus elsewhere.

"Got you," I thought, smirking to myself.

But then, just as my blade was about to descend, something moved in my peripheral vision—a blur of speed. My instincts flared, and I twisted just in time.

Ronan.

He moved faster than I'd expected, his hand glowing with fiery energy. He threw himself between us, his fire-encased fist slamming into my sword with a deafening clang. Sparks flew from the impact, and I felt the jarring vibration shoot up my arm.

Ronan leaned in, his face twisted into a sadistic grin, and his eyes burned with rage. He stepped closer, his voice a venomous whisper that sent a shiver down my spine.

"I told you," He hissed, his gaze darkening with fury, "you won't get a second chance to hurt Kiel."

He stood tall, his fiery red hair disheveled from his sudden sprint, framing his sharp, furious expression. His orange eyes and red hair glowed with an intensity that mirrored the flames engulfing his hands, casting flickering shadows across his face. His leather armor bore scorch marks and charred edges, as though it had weathered countless battles, but it did nothing to diminish the raw power he emanated.

The heat radiating from him was overwhelming, a searing wave that forced me to step back. The flames around his fists roared hungrily, licking the air as if they sought to consume everything in their path. He must've covered the distance between us in seconds—an almost impossible speed—leaving scorched trails behind him where his boots had struck the ground.

The sheer force of his block left the air thick with heat and tension, his arrival like a storm of fire cutting through the battlefield. Ronan's fury was palpable, each flicker of his flames a promise of destruction.

His grip on my sword tightened, the heat rising as his anger flared. Every word dripped with malice, his body radiating violence.

"Judging by the way you're fighting, it seems you're willing to throw away your life for a fleeting victory," he snarled, his eyes locking onto mine with murderous intent. "But that's not how this ends. Not for you."

Before I could even think of responding, Ronan pulled back, his movements too quick to follow. With a flick of his hand, the air around him twisted, and I barely had time to react as sharp slices of wind magic came rushing at me.

I leaped back, my boots sliding against the dirt as I tried to distance myself from the attack. The wind blades howled through the air, their edges slicing the space where I had been just a second earlier. I felt a cold chill run down my spine as the sharp whooshing sound filled my ears.

I knew those blades could tear through anything—armor, flesh, bone—without breaking a sweat. One wrong move, one misstep, and I would've been shredded. I couldn't afford to stay in range. The wind magic wasn't just dangerous—it was lethal. If I'd hesitated even a moment longer, I wouldn't have had the chance to make this move.

I steadied myself, my chest rising and falling with each shaky breath. My mind raced, trying to calculate my next move, but the cold truth settled over me like a heavy weight. They're both above C-rank. Strong enough to kill me on their own. Together... this isn't a fight I can win.

I glanced over at them—Ronan, eyes burning with rage, and Kiel, still standing with that cold stare. They were stronger. Their magic and power far outmatched mine. Every instinct screamed at me to run, but I couldn't. Not with Celia here. Not after everything we'd been through.

A shuffle behind me broke my focus. I turned my head slightly, my heart sinking when I saw her—Celia, her face pale, her hands trembling like leaves in the wind. She was hiding behind me, her wide, terrified eyes flicking from Ronan to Kiel. She was scared... I could feel it, her fear bleeding into me.

I took a step back, my legs stiff as I closed the distance between us. The urge to protect her surged inside me, stronger than anything else. I was afraid. Not just for my life, but for hers too. I knew I was outclassed, knew I couldn't win, but I couldn't let them hurt her. I couldn't let them—

"Stay close," I muttered, more to myself than to her, but I felt the weight of the words. Fear was gnawing at my insides, but I had to keep it together. For her.

The fear inside me deepened as I felt her grip tighten on my shoulder. She was terrified. And so was I. But I couldn't let her see that. Not now. I couldn't let her know how close we were to losing everything.

I turned slightly to face her, forcing my voice to stay steady, though every instinct screamed at me to protect her, to shield her from what was coming. "They want to kill you," I said quietly. "Leave. I'll keep them busy. Just go."

I needed her to be safe—more than anything. But I couldn't bear the thought of her staying, of her getting hurt because of me.

Celia shook her head violently, her hands gripping the back of my coat.

"No," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the crackling flames. "I-I can't leave you alone. I won't."

Her grip tightened, and I felt the weight of her fear pressing into me.

I sighed, forcing my voice to soften. "It's okay to feel overwhelmed sometimes. Everyone does. But you need to go. I'll catch up."

She shook her head again, her hands trembling as they gripped my shoulder tighter. Her eyes were wide with fear, and I could see it in the way she held herself—she wasn't ready to lose me, not after everything.

"No!" Her voice cracked, desperate. "I'm not leaving you, Kaiser. Not again. I won't lose you too."

Her words lingered in the air, but I didn't have time to respond.

Behind Ronan, Kiel was standing now, his hand fully healed. Ronan must've used his magic to help speed up the process. Kiel flexed his fingers, testing the strength of his newly healed hand, before stepping forward. He patted Ronan on the shoulder, his cold, black eyes locking onto Celia.

"Look at you, Stella," Kiel said, his tone dripping with disdain. "Hiding behind someone again. That's all you're good for, isn't it? A helpless, useless girl who can't stand on her own two feet. Pathetic."

Celia stiffened behind me, her breathing quickening.

"And as for him..." Kiel's gaze shifted to me, his lips curling into a cruel smirk. "You cling to a boy so weak he can barely carry the weight of his own failures. How fitting. Two pitiful souls leaning on each other, hoping to make something whole."

He chuckled darkly, a cold, venomous smile stretching across his face. "Let me make this clear—neither of you matters. You're weak. You're pathetic. And I'll break you both without a second thought."

I turned my eyes to Kiel, blood dripping from a cut above my brow, the warm metallic scent filling my nose. My voice was low, filled with a quiet fury. Slowly, I began to walk away from Celia, carefully putting distance between us, making sure she was far from the fighting area. My focus split between keeping her safe and preparing for the confrontation that was about to unfold.

"I didn't want to fight you, Kiel," I said, my voice icy with restrained fury. "You were a close friend to Celia. She liked you. I saw her happy talking about you, laughing remembering those memories. She thought you were the one who could protect her, that you were her knight. And I—" I paused, my grip tightening on the hilt of my sword, "I wanted that too. I wanted to see her happy, to see her safe with you. But after seeing who you really are..."

"You're nothing more than a disgusting coward. You're not worthy of her trust; not worthy of the happiness she thought she could find in you. I won't let you get anywhere near her."

Kiel's smirk widened, his eyes glinting with mockery. "Is that so, weakest adventurer of all time?" he sneered. "You think you're going to protect that helpless girl from me?"

I took a step forward, my stance unwavering as I met his eyes. "Yes, I will," I said coldly. "And don't you ever forget it. She has a name—Celia. She's, my friend. And I will kill anyone who tries to harm her." The words left my mouth like a death sentence, as if sealing his fate with each syllable.

I tightened my grip on my sword, about to rush for an attack.

"I'll make you regret this, Kiel. You'll die in front of her, and I'll make sure you suffer for underestimating me."

Kiel smirked, his eyes dark and cold, as he channeled his magic. The air grew frigid, and with a swift motion, he removed his heavy armor, the plates clinking as they hit the ground with a dull thud. His black eyes began to glow a chilling blue, radiating a cold, unnatural light that seemed to freeze the very air around him.

A chill filled the space, and within seconds, sharp, jagged spears of ice materialized behind him, each one shimmering with a deadly edge. The temperature dropped drastically, pressing against my skin, biting through my clothes, as if the very coldness itself was mocking me.

His laughter rang out, cruel and mocking, echoing through the battlefield like a death sentence. He spun one of the spears casually in his hand, the ice glistening in the firelight, before looking directly at me with an almost amused expression.

"I don't remember the faces of every insect I crush," he said, his voice cold. "It's hard to move around without crushing the weak beneath me."

He stepped closer, magic crackling around him, and his smile grew darker.

"But you, Kaiser... I'll enjoy this. I'll tear you apart and send you straight down to hell."

Chapter 10 - Lost Purpose

Kaiser's Perspective:

The first ice spear shot past my ear, so close I felt the chill of its frozen air. I ducked and dodged, avoiding the next ones as they came at me. They smashed into the ground behind me, freezing the dirt and leaving jagged shards of ice scattered everywhere. My instincts guided me through the attack, and for a moment, I thought I'd outmaneuvered him.

But then I paused, my breath steadying as I reached up and unfastened my coat. I let it fall open just slightly, revealing the layer of armor hidden beneath. The material glinted faintly under the dim light, its icy-blue surface jagged and textured like frost crawling over glass. It was more than just protection—it was designed to withstand even the harshest ice attacks, something I'd prepared for moments like this. I caught his surprised expression as the faint shimmer of magic radiated from the armor, and I couldn't help but smirk.

Then I realized the truth.

The air turned cold, colder than it should have been. My eyes darted to Celia, and my chest tensed.

The spears weren't meant for me. They were heading straight for her.

"Celia!" I screamed, my voice raw as I sprinted toward her. My boots pounded the frost-covered earth, the ground cracking under my desperate speed. She froze for a moment, her wide, terrified eyes meeting mine before she turned and ran.

But Kiel's magic wasn't just a simple attack. The ice spears twisted in midair, curving and changing direction to chase after her as if they had minds of their own, relentlessly locking onto her every move.

He planned this. He knew I was faster, so he turned her into the target. If I dodge, she dies. If I defend her, I lose any chance to counter him. He's forcing me to fight on his terms.

She stumbled, nearly tripping on the uneven, frozen ground. "Kaiser!" she shouted, her voice trembling.

"I'm here!" I called back, closing the distance. My sword was already in motion, slicing through the air as I intercepted the first wave of spears. Shards of ice exploded on impact, a freezing mist clouding my vision.

More spears came. Too many. They pierced through my guard, stabbing into my arms and shoulders. I gritted my teeth as the cold burned into my skin, but I didn't stop. My blood splattered the ground, steaming in the cold air. Celia was still running, but her steps were slowing, her fear dragging her down.

The freezing magic from the spears seeped into me, making my body sluggish and stiff. My sword felt like it would freeze solid in my grip, the frost creeping along the blade as if trying to consume it.

"Keep moving!" I yelled, my voice sharp, trying to snap her out of her panic.

She was further away now, putting some distance between herself and Kiel. For a moment, I thought to myself that she might finally be out of danger.

Then I heard it.

Whoosh.

The sound of fire roared, alive and relentless, filling the air with its deafening fury. Ronan hovered above Celia; his silhouette framed by the searing light of his magic. His outstretched hand glowed ominously, the spell forming at his fingertips like a pulse of raw, fiery energy.

I could feel the heat even from a distance, oppressive and suffocating, as if it was trying to steal the breath from my lungs. The air around him shimmered, distorted by the sheer intensity of the flames.

With a cold, determined gaze, Ronan began to chant, his voice echoing with power. The words were sharp, commanding, and the sky above seemed to darken in response. Then, with a deliberate flick of his hand, he unleashed it—a massive ring of fire, blazing and furious, descending like a serpent striking its prey.

The flames slammed into the ground around Celia, erupting into a towering inferno that encased her in an unyielding prison of fire. The wall was impossibly tall, its edges licking at the sky, its heat warping the space around it.

From where I stood, all I could see was her silhouette inside the inferno, kneeling amidst the relentless blaze. The sight of her trapped there, the flames consuming everything around her, sent a sharp pang through my chest.

"Ronan!" I shouted, my voice drowned by the roaring flames. His gaze flicked down to me for only a moment, a smirk curling on his lips before he turned his focus back to Celia, as if daring me to intervene.

The fire trapped her in a circle, the flames climbing higher and higher. They weren't just containing her; they were closing in, inching closer with each passing second, sealing her fate. She dropped to the ground, pressing herself against the dirt with her hands over her head, but there was nowhere to go.

"KAISER! IT HURTS!" she screamed, her voice raw and frantic, filled with agony as the unbearable heat threatened to scorch her alive.

"No! Celia!" I screamed, surging forward, my heart pounding with fear. My legs moved on their own, but the unbearable heat forced me to stop, the wall of flames too intense to get through.

"Damn it!" I screamed, clenching my fists. "Ronan, stop this! She's just a girl!" My voice cracked with desperation, but he didn't even glance my way, his smirk only widening as he watched the fire consume the space around her.

"She doesn't deserve this!" I shouted again, my voice raw. "If you're angry, then fight me! Don't take it out on her! This is between us, Ronan!"

The fire's roar swallowed my words, but I didn't stop. My gaze darted toward Celia, her small figure barely visible through the blazing wall. "Celia! Hang on! I'll get you out of there!"

I tore off my coat, heat-resistant or not, and wrapped it around my arm in a desperate attempt to shield myself from the flames. "You hear me, Ronan? You call yourself strong, but all I see is a coward hiding behind his magic! Fight me if you dare!"

The words were laced with anger, but inside, my chest tightened with panic. Celia didn't move. She was still kneeling, the fire reflecting in her wide, terrified eyes.

"Celia!" I called out again, my voice shaking. "You're stronger than this! Don't let him win! You hear me? You're not alone!"

I took a hesitant step closer, the heat burning against my skin despite the coat. My teeth clenched, but I forced myself to keep going. "Ronan!" I shouted one last time, desperation cutting through my voice. "If you don't stop, I swear, I'll make you pay for this!"

My mind raced, panic gripping me as I saw her trapped within the rising inferno. I knew what rings of fire like that could do—how they could reach temperatures that could burn the bones itself. Even without the flames touching her, the heat alone would slowly scorch her skin, eating away at her bit by bit.

I clenched my teeth, every nerve in my body screaming to move faster. "I'm coming!" I yelled, desperate to reach her before it was too late.

I tried to break through the flames, but before I could, Kiel was on me. His sword clashed against mine, the impact sending vibrations down my arms. His strength was overwhelming, each swing forcing me to take a step back.

"Having fun yet?" He sneered, his voice cold and mocking. His movements were smooth, almost lazy, like he was playing with me.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. My eyes kept flicking to the fire, to Celia's trembling form as the flames inched closer. I could feel the heat crawling up my spine, suffocating.

Suddenly, her scream shattered the air, raw and desperate. "AAAAAA!" she cried out, her voice trembling with fear as the fire closed in, the pain unbearable as the heat pressed against her fragile skin.

I ducked under Kiel's next strike and swept my sword low, pulling his balance forward. With the opening, I brought my elbow up hard, slamming it into his face. The force of the blow pushed him back, his head snapping to the side, and blood dripped from his nose.

He staggered a few steps, but to my frustration, his smirk didn't falter. He wiped the blood from his lip, still looking at me like I was nothing more than a challenge to be entertained.

"Predictable," he muttered.

The ground beneath me shifted, and before I could even react, thick roots of hardened earth shot up, wrapping around my legs and locking me in place with a crushing force.

My breath caught in my throat as panic surged through me. I looked up, and the sight made my heart stop—ice spears hovered above me, their tips gleaming coldly like deadly stars in the night sky. I hadn't seen it coming. The trap was set, and I was caught, with no way to escape.

"Damn it!" I screamed, my fists slamming into the ground in frustration, the shockwave of my anger sending cracks through the earth. The roots held me tight, a mocking reminder of how easily I'd been caught off guard. I could feel my blood boiling as I looked up at the ice spears, their deadly points glinting like they were laughing at me.

Then I heard it again—Celia's scream, sharp and filled with terror. The ring of fire was closing in, inching closer to her, the heat unbearable.

Shit, shit, shit, I thought, my heart pounding in my chest. I have to save her.

Without thinking, I grabbed the dagger on my belt and threw it at Ronan. The blade flew straight at him, cutting through the air. He was mid-chant, his hands glowing with fiery runes as he held the wall of flames. The dagger hit its mark, forcing him to dodge just enough that the flames flickered for a moment. That was all I needed.

I swung my blade down, chopping at the thick, burning roots that kept me trapped. Before I could finish the cut, Kiel's grip locked around my wrist, stopping me cold.

"You think you can cut your way out?" he sneered, leaning in close, his voice sharp and mocking.

But he didn't see my free hand coming. My fist slammed into his jaw, knocking him back, just enough for me to break free. The roots snapped under my blade, and I pushed forward, the ground cracking as I sprinted toward Celia.

The air thick with the acrid scent of burning wood and molten heat. My heart hammered in my chest, but I didn't stop. I didn't think. I just sprinted toward Celia, my legs moving faster than my thoughts, the sound of my pounding footsteps drowned out by the crackling flames around me.

The fire wall vanished, but Celia was still on the ground, her body trembling as she looked up, her face pale with fear. Her clothes were torn in places, and the exposed skin on her arms and legs was tinted black from the burns, the wounds still smoldering with the remnants of heat.

She was struggling to move, her hands shaking as she reached out, but the ice spears were already falling, a deadly rain of frost descending toward her. In a desperate attempt to protect herself, she brought her hands up above her face, trying to shield herself from the sharp, incoming blades. Her trembling arms barely gave her any protection as the cold air whipped around her, the danger closing in.

She closed her eyes, her breath shallow and quick.

Then, she screamed, a raw, desperate cry as the ice spears shattered in midair. The sound of breaking ice rang through the air, followed by the sharper fragments raining down toward her, their cold edges threatening to tear through her. The broken pieces sliced through the air, the fear of what would come next rising by the second.

When she opened them, I was standing over her. The spears slammed into me, each one a jagged knife carving into my body. One massive ice spear pierced directly through my side, the cold searing through my flesh as it erupted from my back, locking me in place. Blood soaked through my clothes, pooling at my feet. My vision blurred, but I stayed standing, my arms raised to shield her.

My left hand was completely frozen, the frost creeping up my arm as if the very touch of the spear had turned my veins to ice. Despite the armor designed to resist such attacks, the freezing cold seeped deep into my bones, a biting chill that I couldn't shake. My body trembled, the icy grip of the spear and the frigid air around me overpowering even the warmth of my blood.

"Kaiser!" she cried, her voice shaking with fear as she crawled toward me. Her hands were burned, the skin raw and cracked, but she didn't hesitate to touch my shoulder. I saw the pain in her face as her fingers brushed against my skin, but she pushed it aside, her worry for me far stronger than the sting. "Are you okay? Please, just—just stay awake!"

I coughed, blood dripping from my lips, staining the dirt beneath me. "I'm fine, don't worry."

I lied, my voice weak. The words felt empty, like I was pretending to be something I wasn't. The truth was too hard to admit—too painful. I couldn't protect her. I couldn't save her.

I failed her again. The thought hit me like a punch in the gut. Her burnt hands, trembling from both the pain and the worry, rested on my shoulder, and it tore me apart to know I couldn't ease her fear. She was in so much pain, and all I could do was lie to her.

The thought echoed in my head, louder than the pain. I was supposed to protect her. That was my promise. But here I was, barely holding on, bleeding out.

Kiel's laughter sliced through my shame, bitter and mocking, and it made my blood boil.

"Pathetic," he sneered, his voice thick with disgust. He took slow, deliberate steps toward me, his boots crunching over the frost and shattered ice. The sound was like a warning. "You're not even worth the effort. I should've known better than to expect anything more from a weakling like you."

Ronan stepped up beside him, his silence speaking volumes, the smugness in his eyes more than enough to show how much he relished our suffering.

He looked down at Celia from a distance, a cold laugh escaping his lips. "You really thought you could rely on him, didn't you?" he taunted, his voice ice-cold. "Your hope... it's already lost. You're nothing but a fool for believing in someone like him." He paused, letting the words sink in before a low chuckle escaped him. "I bet you're regretting that now."

Kiel's grin twisted into something darker, filled with utter contempt. "Look at you," he sneered, eyes narrowing as he looked down at me. "Pathetic. On your knees, broken, helpless. I actually thought you'd be worth something. Thought you might give me a good fight, but instead, you're just a weakling who couldn't even protect the one person you were supposed to." His voice dripped with disappointment, each word cutting deeper than the last.

He raised a hand, and a fireball slowly began to form at his fingertips, crackling with dangerous energy. The air around it shimmered with heat as he channeled his magic, the fire swirling violently, growing larger and hotter with every second. He pointed it directly at me, his gaze cold, almost pitying. "Know your place," he said, his voice low and final. "This ends now."

I raised my head, my breath ragged. His words stung because they were true. I wasn't strong. Not like them. I couldn't protect her. I couldn't protect anyone. What kind of a man am I, if I can't even do that?

I placed my hand over my face, desperate to hide the tears that threatened to fall, to cover the despair I couldn't shake. The weight of failure crushed me, and in that moment, I was ready to give up. The anger, the guilt, the helplessness—everything swirled together inside me, and all I could feel was how small and pathetic I truly was. The sting of his words hit harder than any blow. I was a failure.

The guilt crushed me, eating away at the small amount of resolve I had left. My mind screamed at me...

How could I be so weak? How could I let her get hurt after all the shit I talked about being strong? I had failed her. The bitter weight of it crushed me, and I could only ask myself over and over, Why was I even trying?

She must be disappointed in me. She must hate me now. After all the times I told her I could protect her, that I'd be strong for her... Now I've failed. She should just leave me behind. Run away. Get away from someone like me. It would be better for her. She doesn't deserve this. She shouldn't have to die for me.

Maybe she's already thinking it... Maybe she's already lost faith in me. Maybe she'll just leave me here to die.

I'm the weak one. I'm the one who deserves to die.

And then, something unexpected happened.

Celia, despite everything, despite the burns on her skin and the shaking of her hands, moved in front of me. She stretched her burnt hands toward Kiel, her hands spread wide, her chest rising and falling with each ragged breath. She was trying to protect me.

"Kaiser is not weak!" she screamed, her voice raw with defiance. "You're the coward, hiding behind your magic. You're nothing but a loser for ganging up on him. I'll protect him, no matter what!"

Kiel's smirk twisted into a cruel sneer as he regarded Celia, his fireball flickering ominously in his hand. He wasn't about to release it just yet, but the pressure of its heat was undeniable.

"You really think you can protect him?" Kiel laughed, his voice dripping with contempt. "You don't even have the power to protect yourself. What makes you think you can protect anyone else? You're nothing but a little girl playing at being a hero."

Ronan, standing just behind Kiel, joined in with his mocking chuckle. "Yeah, just face it. You're as weak as he is. You've got nothing."

Celia's voice trembled, but her words were firm as she faced them, her fists clenched. "No. Even if I don't have the power to win... I won't fall to my knees. I'll fight for Kaiser. I will always do, I'll fight for him until the very last moment of my life."

Ronan laughed cruelly. "You? Fight?" he mocked. "You're just a joke. You can't even protect yourself, let alone him." He chuckled again, shaking his head. "How pathetic. You're weaker than him, and that's saying a lot."

Celia stood tall, her arms trembling as they clenched into fists, her nails digging into her palms. Her voice quivered but held firm, her eyes burning with an intensity that defied her pain. "Kaiser believed in me... like no one ever did. He looked at me—someone who couldn't even believe in herself—and told me I was stronger than I thought I was. For the first time... I felt like I wasn't worthless." Her fists tightened further, tears glistening but refusing to fall. "I won't let that go. I won't let him go."

"I hated myself before... wanted to die... but after meeting him, seeing how he cared for me... I won't give up on him."

Kiel's laugh turned even colder, his eyes narrowing as he taunted her. "Kaiser? That weakling? He couldn't even stand up for himself! He's not worth fighting for!"

Before he could continue, Celia's voice cut through the air, sharp and unwavering. "No... He is not weak." She stepped forward, her voice steady with a burning resolve. "I will fight by his side. He didn't need to risk his life for me, but I will."

"I'll save him," Celia said, her voice thick with emotion. "I'll make sure he has a life he never thought he deserved. A life where he can be happy... and safe... without always having to carry the weight of others."

Ronan sneered, his voice dripping with mockery. "You really think you can change anything? You're just another fool."

But Celia held her ground, her breath steady now. "I will never run away again," she said, her voice growing even stronger. "I will never run away again from people like you."

There was a long silence. The weight of her words hung in the air, thick and heavy. Then, for a moment, even Kiel and Ronan seemed caught off guard. They stood there, momentarily speechless, before the mocking laughter returned, but it felt hollow now, as if the two of them were less sure of themselves than before.

The moment was tense, but it was clear that Celia's words had cut deeper than she realized.

Without warning, Kiel threw a weaker fireball at her. It collided with her, the flames licking across her skin. Celia cried out in pain, her body trembling, but she didn't step

back, didn't move away. She stood there, hands outstretched, her eyes fixed on me as if she were willing to take the full brunt of the flames just to protect me.

Her body wracked with pain, her skin burned, but her gaze never faltered. I could feel the heat of the fire, the agony she was enduring, and it tore through me just as much as it did her.

Kiel, for the first time, looked shocked, his confidence waning. Ronan's face mirrored his, both of them at a loss for what was happening. But me? I was the most shocked. My body was frozen, unable to move, my heart pounding in my chest. The sight of her suffering, of her willing sacrifice... I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Yet, despite it all, she remained steadfast. Still protecting me, even as the flames scorched her very being.

"Why..." he started, his voice low, "why would you fight for someone like him? Someone you barely even know?"

Celia didn't hesitate. She clenched her fists tight, her voice steady but full of raw emotion. "Because Kaiser is my friend. I would've died in that forest. I should've died there, alone. But Kaiser saved me. He wanted to see me smile, to see me happy. He risked everything for me." Her voice wavered, but she steadied it again. "That's why I will fight for him. I'll do everything I can."

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Kiel and Ronan stood frozen, completely speechless. The weight of Celia's words hung in the air, the intensity in her eyes making it impossible for them to mock her anymore.

Celia's voice softened, but there was no uncertainty in it. "I know I'm weak. I know I'm hopeless... but I will give it my all. I want to be the friend Kaiser deserves. The person he believed I could be. The person he thought I was. I'm going to save him. This time, I'll fight alongside him."

Her eyes never left them, never wavered. "Because he believes in me... and I will never give up on him."

Kiel and Ronan stood there, utterly silent, struck by the force of her words. Then, with a bitter laugh, Kiel broke the silence, his voice mocking, but filled with disbelief. "So, even after being cursed, you still have the same heart as before? Wanting to help others, knowing you can't do anything for them."

He glanced down at Kaiser, who was barely holding on, and then back at Celia. His tone darkened. "He's lost. Just give up. Let me end this for him. I'll do my best to release you from your pain aswell. I know you're disappointed in him."

Celia met his eyes without a trace of fear. "Kaiser gave it his all," she said, her voice unwavering. "He fought for me. He protected me. Even if he loses, I'm proud to call him my friend."

A tear slipped down her cheek, but she didn't notice it, her focus solely on kiel and ronan in front of her.

Behind her, I didn't realize that tears had slipped down my face as well, the reality of Celia's words sinking in, the emotion that had been held back breaking free.

I had given up all hope of winning. I was defeated, broken. Yet, there she was, standing firm, fighting for me.

Why? Why would she still fight for someone like me?

I lost. I failed her. I thought she hated me for not being strong enough, for failing to protect her. I thought she would see me fall to my knees, my strength crumbling, and she would walk away, losing faith in me.

But she didn't. She stood by my side.

Why?

Why does she keep believing in me? Why after everything I've failed at, every time I've let her down, is she still here?

Why would she risk herself for someone like me? I couldn't even protect her, couldn't even protect myself.

Why? Why couldn't I just be strong for once?

Why am I so weak?

No.

I won't let it end like this. I won't let her down again.

I will fight for her now. Just watch me. I'm done letting myself fall.

Kiel's cruel grin returned, but now there was an edge of frustration to it. His patience was wearing thin. With a snap of his fingers, the fireball in his palm flared, its heat roaring to life, twisting the air around it as it grew larger and more violent. He aimed at Celia with deadly precision, the flames threatening to scorch everything in their path.

He released the fireball with one last, cold laugh. "Goodbye, old friend."

But Celia didn't move. She didn't flinch. She stood tall, her body resolute, even as the fireball surged toward her. It was coming for her, certain and unavoidable.

Without thinking, I threw myself in front of her, gripping my sword tightly as I braced for impact.

The explosion hit with a deafening roar, the force of it knocking me off my feet. Smoke and flames billowed around us, obscuring everything in a thick, choking cloud. The air was hot, burning my skin and lungs as I shielded her from the worst of it. My arms burned from the impact, and the searing pain seethed through my body, but I couldn't move. I had to stay between Celia and the fire. I had to protect her.

I could hear her gasping, coughing violently as the smoke choked her, and in that moment, I could feel her concern for me, but I couldn't bring myself to show her. Not now.

When the smoke cleared, the world came into focus. I stood there, barely able to keep my footing, blood pouring from my face and body. My right eye... I could feel it throbbing, a dull ache that spread through my skull. When I touched my face, I could feel the blood coating my skin, but there was something worse than that.

I couldn't see from my right eye anymore. It was completely dark.

Celia's voice rang out in panic, her hands reaching for me. "Kaiser! No!"

She rushed toward me, but I held my hand up weakly, stopping her before she could come closer.

"Don't... don't come any closer," I managed, my voice strained, barely a whisper. "I'm... I'm sorry."

I could feel the shame eating away at me. I had failed. I had failed her. "I gave up... I was weak... I'm sorry."

She stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide, filled with sorrow and confusion. She wanted to help, but I could see it—she didn't know what to say, what to do. She had been fighting for me, and here I was, falling apart.

Kiel and Ronan stood there, staring in stunned silence. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. How was I still standing? How was I still alive? Blood poured from my eyes and body, staining the ground beneath me, but I wasn't dead. Not yet.

Ronan broke the silence, a grimace twisting his face as he watched me struggle. "How the hell is he still alive?"

Kiel, his expression unreadable, glanced between me and Celia. Then, in a rare moment of quiet, he asked, "Why...? Why would you throw yourself in front of her?"

I could only look at him, my breath ragged, blood dripping from my eyes and staining my face. There was no strength left in me to speak. But I didn't need to say anything. It was clear.

Celia finally reached me, kneeling by my side, her trembling hands hovering over me in desperate confusion. I could feel her shaking, but I couldn't respond. I was drowning in my own weakness, unable to find the strength to even lift my head.

"I'm sorry, Celia," I whispered again, my voice barely audible, weak with self-loathing. "I failed you."

She shook her head immediately, denying everything I said, her voice tight with emotion. "No, Kaiser. Don't you dare think that. You... you don't have to protect me anymore. Just run away. Let me die here. I'm the weak one, not you."

I managed a weak, forced smile, though it sent pain shooting through my face. My muscles ached from the strain, but I couldn't let her see that. I placed my other arm around her shoulder, trying to give her some semblance of comfort, even though I was just as broken as she was.

"Don't worry anymore, Celia," I said, my words strained, but still holding on to a semblance of resolve. "Just watch. I'll win. I'll make this right."

She looked at me, her expression softening, but the doubt in her eyes was clear. She didn't believe me. I knew that. But I needed her to feel like she didn't have to carry this burden anymore. I winked at her, the motion stiff, but the effort was there.

Instead of the worry I expected, her voice rang out with new conviction. "Then show them... show them who the real strongest is."

Her words burned into me, and I felt something shift within. This time, when she looked at me, I saw the fire in her eyes. She wasn't just worried anymore—she was placing all of her trust in me again. That trust was more than just her belief in me. It was her hope, her strength.

I slowly stood up, the pain in my body unbearable, but I didn't care. She believed in me again.

I turned to face Ronan and Kiel, determination flickering behind my eyes. I couldn't afford to fail her again.

With each slow step toward them, I felt the weight of her faith pressing down on me, but it didn't break me. This time, I would show them. I would show them what it meant to truly fight.

"You're proud of your strength, aren't you, Kiel?" My voice was low, steady, but it cut through the air with lethal intent. "The strong always have the advantage. They always pick on the weak, beat them down, and laugh about it. The weak always lose—no matter how kind, forgiving, or determined they are."

I tightened my grip on my sword, the steel creaking under the pressure as my knuckles went white. The blood dripping from my wounds only fueled my resolve.

"I've lost everything. Everyone I cared about. Over and over again." My boots crunched against the frozen ground with every step forward. The blood, the pain—it was nothing. "But not today."

Kiel's smirk faltered, just a fraction of a second, as if he could feel the shift in the air.

"Today, I'll kill you." My voice was ice, each word a promise that cut deeper than any blade. "Just watch me."

I dropped my coat, the weight of it no longer needed, as it would only slow me down. My hands, trembling slightly from the pain, reached into one of the pockets of my coat and pulled out the bandages. With practiced precision, I began wrapping them tightly around my hands, the pressure easing the sting in my wounds. I could feel the coldness creeping from my left hand, still frozen from blocking the ice spear earlier, but I ignored it.

I had no healing magic; my only choice was to use the last potion I had. Flowing through the cut on my chest where the spear had stabbed deep, and with a concentrated effort, I sealed the wound, the pain dulling as the blood flow slowed.

My inner armor had automatic healing capabilities, though it wasn't fast enough to fully repair the damage. The rips in the fabric were slowly mending, but it wasn't enough. I could still feel the sting of my injuries, the reminder of just how close I had come to death.

Kiel and Ronan stood there, eyes wide with confusion, their attention fixated on my movements. They were too stunned by my actions, my words, to react. The tension in the air was thick, and for a moment, it felt as though time had frozen.

I let the coat fall to the ground, its fabric fluttering softly in the gust of wind that swept through the debris-filled environment. Rocks and fragments of stone littered the ground, remnants of the explosions that had scarred the landscape. The battlefield was a chaotic mess, the air heavy with smoke and the scent of burnt earth.

With my sword gripped tightly in my hand, I moved forward. Each step was slow, calculated, despite the agony in my body. The sword felt like an extension of my will, its weight steady in my grip as I pushed through the shattered rocks and debris. My focus was unwavering. The world around me was a blur, the only clarity I had was in my resolve.

In that instant, Kiel hurled his fireball, the flames roaring like a beast unleashed, the light blinding. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

Kiel and Ronan exchanged a quick, panicked glance. They were stunned, struggling to comprehend how I was still standing—how some low-level healing potions and simple bandages had kept me alive. It was supposed to be impossible. I shouldn't have been able to endure so much. But I was still here. Still fighting.

Fear crept into their eyes, and for the briefest moment, it looked like they were reconsidering everything. But panic set in quickly. Without another thought, they both attacked at once, not wanting to give me the chance to recover, to rise again.

This ends here.