

The Last Step

Chapter 66 - Grotesque War Part 1: Preparations

4/11/2017 – 9:15 PM

Location: Central Hall of Rinascita - 1 Day before the war.

The Heart of Rinascita stood unusually silent.

The towering circular plaza, known to all as the Forum of Blades, was absent of wandering adventurers or cheerful merchants. Tonight, it belonged solely to war preparations.

Every chair at the long wood table had been filled — Sword Saints and guild representatives gathered under the pale glow of rune-lit lanterns. Above them, carved in marble, the ancient crest of Rinascita shimmered faintly. It was a town born of riches, framed by virtue, and raised through eloquence. And now, once again, it stood on the edge of defense.

At the head of the hall, Lord Avelric of Rinascita rose — his blond hair catching the light like a banner of authority, black eyes steady and deep with the weight of what must be said. He stood with the posture of a man not simply born to lead, but molded by duty as it's noble leader.

The papered plans laid before each representative remained untouched, their content known, yet he had chosen to speak them aloud. Not from distrust — but from belief. Words carried conviction and faith.

"The grotesques will press hard, as they always do," Avelric began, his voice smooth, as if he had done it before. "They do not fear loss. They do not think as we do. But they move to kill. And we must not only hold... we must cut through and fight back."

Behind him, the grand map of the town flickered with magical ink — an upside-down V taking form in blue light, its lines glowing like veins across Rinascita's outskirts. Five guild symbols pulsed where units would be stationed.

"The Crescent Shield Formation," he named it. "Five Guilds to hold the line and strike."

"This—" he traced the top point of the formation "—is where we expect the grotesques to press hardest. They do not fear pain or loss. But they don't know our resolve either so we'll take advantage of it."

He turned, his gaze falling on two women seated.

"Lady Alina, Lady Sylvia—you and your Requiem Guild will take position along the rear southern arc," he said, pointing toward the lower left edge of the map. "Defensive support. Your job is to keep the town's heart beating. That road leads straight to our inner gate—if it falls, the Forum becomes a tomb."

Alina gave no reply. Her hair shimmered faintly under the torchlight, her expression unreadable—calm, cold, composed.

Sylvia, seated beside her, nodded with a graceful poise, fingers gently brushing the edge of her document as she smiled. "We won't let them reach the gates."

Next, Avelric turned to a tall figure leaning with one elbow propped arrogantly on the table—Aaron Kage, acting proxy for the Valhalla Guild's absent leader. His jacket was slung off one shoulder, irritation flickering in his brow.

"Aaron. You'll join them in the rear, defending the western pass," Avelric said. "That path cuts through our farms—sparse, but open. Too open. If they find it, they'll break through faster than we can respond."

Aaron gave a sharp nod, eyes narrowing, jaw clenched. "Fine. Just don't blame me when I start the slaughter before they cross the line."

Avelric allowed a tired smile to form. "We'll blame the wind."

The noble's hand shifted upward across the map, reaching the flanks of the inverted V.

"Lord Xander, Lady Navina—you'll anchor the middle layers. One on the northeast ridge, one on the west. Your role is to pinch them. If they come too close to our front, you collapse inward. Make them regret stepping onto our soil."

Rinascita's outer ring was a strange blend of wild nature and structured stone. The eastern walls shimmered with faint enchantments—echoes of the Celestial Kingdom's light-magic, while the western side had to be bolstered with mortal hands and hardened steel. These assignments weren't just tactical—they were personal.

Navina, dressed in deep crimson armor flecked with dusk-colored gems, gave a confident nod, smile soft but sharp. "Understood, Lord Avelric. We'll hit them from both sides, like a gate closing shut."

Xander gave no words—he only yawned, raising a hand half-heartedly as if that were enough. But his eyes, even half-lidded, watched the map with razor attention.

Lord Avelric's hand hovered over the map for a moment longer before he slowly lowered it, letting silence gather again. He exhaled softly—then turned his eyes to the center of the table.

"This place... this town... Rinascita," he said, his voice not loud, but firm, "is not just a cluster of stone and steel."

Some leaned forward slightly, others just listened.

"Exactly one thousand years ago," Avelric continued, "the very first Sword Saint stepped into this land. Not born here, no—but it was here they drew their sword for the first time... against something far worse than monsters. And from that moment, Rinascita stood. Not as a village, nor a town, but as a symbol—of humanity."

A hush followed. Even the wind outside seemed to still, as if the weight of old swords hung in the air.

"Tomorrow's weather will hold clear," he added after a beat, glancing toward a scroll passed by one of the town's enchanter. "No storms. No clouds. And thanks to the sensor runes placed across the hills, no surprise."

He looked forward now, eyes sharp.

"Which brings us to the point."

Avelric stepped around the table and faced two individuals seated at the very front: Levi, the Sword Saint of God-Speed, relaxed but alert, and beside him, the calm-eyed Zain, his presence almost hidden from his poise.

"You two," Avelric said, pointing toward the topmost point of the map, "will lead the front—the Celestial Apex, the sharpest peak of our defense. That's where they'll hit first. That's where we strike hardest."

Zain narrowed his eyes slightly. "Why us?"

Avelric gave a faint smile—not mocking, not uncertain, but worn.

"You ask why?" he replied. "Levi—your speed alone makes you a blade faster than death. But it's more than that. You can turn momentum into defense and offense alike. In a war where movement is survival... you are our best chance."

He glanced to the others. "Not to downplay any here, but I've seen enough blood to know: some are made into shields, others to strike. You—" he looked at Levi again—"are the tip of this spear."

Levi leaned back slightly, arms crossing behind his head with a smirk dancing on his lips. "I'll lead," he said simply. "Let every grotesque know that Rinascita's victory rides on my back."

Zain gave a nod. Quiet, accepting. There was nothing more to be said.

Avelric straightened up.

"That concludes the strategic placement," he said—but his tone shifted. Slower. Heavier.

"Now, the political truth."

The atmosphere thinned, like the warmth had been drained from the air.

"Do not expect reinforcements," Avelric said, eyes sweeping the table. "Lucifer Azraael, Demon Lord of the Northwest, has chosen neutrality. No armies, no words, no support. His silence is louder than any threat."

A few exchanged glances.

"Queen Asora Aeralurea of the Elvian Kingdom, too, remains unmoved. No gift or plea can stir her will. Even as grotesques approach her own borders, she holds firm in her refusal."

Alina's eyes narrowed slightly. Sylvia looked down, thoughtful.

"And the Celestial Kingdom... the Divine Family—they have made their choice. They will not descend from their sky-soaked halls to bleed with us."

Avelric's tone dipped lower still.

"Nor will the Asura Empire lend us a hand. We are alone."

There was a long pause. A breath shared by all.

"But," Avelric raised his voice then—not loud, but steady, like a steel flag in the wind, "we are not without hope."

He looked at each face, each name, each soul who answered the call.

"This is no longer a battle between humans and monsters. This is the Alliance of Sword Saints. This is all of us—who were not born here, but came here... with purpose to defend these lands, to defend Celestine!"

Then he stepped forward, and his voice echoed into the chamber's dome.

"When Gods remain silent as humanity suffered—it was mortals that carve fate into the world they created."

He paused.

"And tomorrow, we carve Rinascita's name into legend."

This marked the end of the strategy meeting... Will Rinascita carve it's name into legends or become history?

While being overwatched by Him.

----- PART 2

4/12/2017 – 8:25 AM - 4 Hours Before The War...

Location: Main Guild Hall 2nd Floor.

Lucas's Perspective: -

System.

Properties and Status Menu.

Status Menu:

Name: Lucas

Class: Mage

Level: 9 --> 10 (Today)

Age: 15

Attributes:

Strength: 5

Agility: 8

Endurance: 6

Perception: 7

Intelligence: 13

Mana: 8 --> 11

Divine Creation: 4

Skills:

Light-Elemental Magic

Mana Control (Lv. 4)

Divine Protection of Chaos

Divine Protection: Adaptive Venom Synthesis

HP: 450/450

MP: 650/650

I've managed to level up a bit after burning through today's quests.

「 You'd still be level 3 without me. Let's not pretend. 」

Whatever, man. I fed you data, you fed me sources you made up.

Today's the day. The swarm's coming. I could practically feel the tension in the air—like that moment right before a thunderstorm hits, but instead of rain, it's raining knives and death.

I dumped all my points into Mana. No brawn, no fancy footwork—just light and sorcery. If I was gonna play defense, I might as well go nuclear.

System, reserve all mana output until the swarm hits. Prioritize defensive buffering and elemental compression.

「 Confirmed. Try not to pass out this time, champ. 」

As I climb up the stairs, I could only feel the weight of tomorrow clawing at my back like a slow, dragging chain.

Interrogating Sophia was a must. I had to know what happened—what changed my life forever, what tore it into something so different I barely recognized myself in the mirror anymore. Even if it meant pushing her, forcing her to talk, cornering her until the truth spilled out.

...No.

I knew it was wrong. Violence wasn't the answer—not really. But sometimes, when every other door's locked, you kick one open. That was the only option I had left.

Even this jacket—the one the system made for me, lightweight, temperature-adaptive, resistant to mana corrosion or whatever tech it was packed with—felt heavy.

Not because of its material.

Because of the things I was carrying.

A broken promise to myself. Guilt. And a past that wouldn't stay buried about someone.

The hall on the second floor was less of a war room and more of a noble's library crashed into a tactical office. Warm sconces lined the sandstone walls, casting a golden hue across maps, diagrams, and weapon racks. Several guild flags fluttered from ceiling posts—each a different crest, color, and legacy. The smell of ink, steel, and subtle lavender clung in the air.

Classy.

Navina spotted me first. Her bright blue eyes perked up like they always did, shining with that same radiant sweetness. The smile she gave me wasn't just polite—it was warm, like honey in tea. Lovely.

Azrael, meanwhile, looked like he was planning twelve world wars simultaneously. He didn't even blink in my direction. Just furiously scribbled across a ten-to-fourteen-page matrix of something.

"Lucas," Navina greeted, brushing a lock of her golden hair behind her ear. It looked like she'd just come from her own guild meeting—her usually perfect hair was a little messy, like she'd been guiding her members for a while. "You made it."

"I always make it," I said casually. "Even if it's fashionably late. You good, Navina?"

Her smile faltered for just a heartbeat. "I'm... managing. There's pressure. I won't lie about that. My guild's looking to me like I have all the answers."

"And you're not supposed to?" I teased gently.

She chuckled. "Not when I don't know them myself."

I shrugged. "That's fine. No one here knows everything. We'll figure it out together. Just don't try to solo this. You're not alone, Navina."

There it was—that flicker of genuine relief in her eyes.

I jerked my chin toward Azrael, still hunched over his madness. "And what's our local poker calculator up to? Did someone see him smiling alone?"

Navina's giggle made the tension ease again. "Since this morning. I told him about Alveric's strategy from last night, and ever since... he's been doing math."

I blinked. "Math?"

"Equations. Variables. Consequence simulations. He's been at it for over two hours straight."

I leaned over Azrael's shoulder.

It was like looking into the Matrix. Except no cool green letters. Just absolute suffering in algebra.

Something like:

$(X^a * M^b) / (\Delta\Psi - \Sigma(\lambda)) = \infty$ if $T < 4h$, else collapse

...followed by about twenty lines of similar cosmic horror.

「 I have absolutely no clue what each variable represents. This isn't math—it's dark magic or conman tactics. 」

"What the hell is he even calculating?" I muttered.

Azrael didn't respond. Just wrote another line. And another. Dude was locked in.

Navina shifted slightly. Not toward him—away. Her posture was subtle, but distant. Like... cautious.

I noticed it. But didn't want to get into her personal matters.

Instead, I looked at her again. Her lipstick was that same deep red—elegant, with that regal beauty. Her dress, navy with golden trim, hugged her figure modestly but beautifully. She wasn't just striking. She was... composed. Even in pressure.

And those eyes.

Blue eyes...

Hers were like the sea on a quiet morning. That soft hue—the kind you'd see on postcards or painted skies. The kind that made you forget about war, death, and all the ugly things underneath. A tone so gentle it could put your guard down without trying.

The blue the sky was when you finally looked up after days of storm.

Navina glanced at me with a soft smile, tilting her head slightly—like she was trying to guess what I was thinking.

I looked away.

I hated that color.

I hate blue.

Because it reminds me of him.

Her eyes were light. Like the Atlantic from my old world—clear, honest, and endlessly open. There was trust in her gaze. There was kindness with a heart present.

But his?

His were nothing like hers.

Three years ago, I stared into those same-colored eyes—same hue, same world. And all I felt was dread crawling down my spine. A subtle, quiet pressure, like I had already lost the second our eyes met.

His weren't just eyes.

They were seals.

To what? I don't even know. Madness? Power? Whatever it was, it made my heart skip—not out of love or awe, but like my instincts knew something I didn't.

It's like...

When you stare long into the void, the void stares back.

That's how it felt meeting Kaiser for the first time.

And honestly? That description still doesn't do it justice.

Navina tilted her head, smiling curiously. "What are you thinking about?"

I forced a grin. "That this is a very well-lit room. Terrible for mathematics for Azrael."

She raised an eyebrow but didn't press.

Then, softly, "So... four hours left until the invasion, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "We should get ready soon."

She pulled something from her side pouch. A small, ornate wooden comb. Familiar.

"The one from your friend?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I always keep it close to me."

I watched her fix her messy hair. Every movement was quiet, purposeful. A woman preparing not just for battle—but to lead others into it and ensure they live with her to see tomorrow.

And I...

I was ready too.

Or at least, I had to be.

Because I'll save everyone.

----- PART 3

4/12/2017 – 8:43 AM

Four Hours Before the War...

Location: Main Guild Hall, 4th Floor.

Sylvia's Perspective:

I sat at my desk on the fourth floor of the central hall, the sun pouring through the tall arched windows behind me.

Lord Avelric always had a refined sense of nobility—even in the way he had this guild hall built. The structure wasn't just for strength; it was designed for people. Travelers could find rest here, scholars could find peace, and leaders like me could find clarity. Every corner had purpose. Not for grandeur, but for function.

And I suppose that's how I lived as well.

My desk in sylvaris was neat. Not overly sterile, just enough to breathe. Each folder in its place, reports stacked in the order I'd read them, a warm pot of tea set on the right corner—still half full.

Similar to how I set it here as well.

The scent of parchment, light ink, and polished wood filled the air. There was something calming about it, like a mind cleared for thought.

An hour ago, I went over the war plans with my guild members. Lord Avelric had devised a foundation but I had to explain it to our guild members and their roles.

Everyone knew their position once I was done. Alina explained the formation with her usual calmness. Even if she didn't show much in her face, I could tell she understood everything. Her mind works differently—cold, focused, simple. But that simplicity lets her grasp difficult things with little effort. That's something I admire.

I stood and stretched, letting the stiffness leave my back. My fingers brushed through my silver hair as I glanced at my reflection in the window. My eyes—silver as well—held no shine of divinity anymore.

I wasn't wearing anything extravagant today. Just a long navy-blue dress that flowed with grace but didn't stand out. A thin silver lining ran across the waist, a quiet reminder of the past, but no longer a crown. I don't wear gold or gemstones like I used to.

I stopped trying to look like someone above others.

He made me realize that.

That to understand people, you have to walk beside them—

not ahead.

Thanks to him...

I learned what it meant to be human again. To feel. To care. To lead not as someone perfect, but as someone who understands imperfection.

Just as I walked toward the corner cabinet for a glass of water, I paused.

A soft sound entered my ears.

Music.

Piano—low and slow. The kind of sound that doesn't just fill a room but fills your heart.

It was gentle... yet so full of longing.

Like someone crying without tears.

Like a voice asking to be heard, knowing it never would be.

Each note waited for the next, as if they all knew each other since the beginning of music. The silence between them felt heavy... like it was holding a pain no one could name. Then it continued with this heartfelt tone...

I don't even know why those thoughts came to me. But they did.

The moment I heard that song.

Drawn by it, I stepped out of the room. A soft breeze rolled in through the hallway window, brushing the curtains like it too was listening. The wind carried the scent of rain even though the sky was clear.

At the far end of the corridor, lit by pale sunlight, I saw her.

Alina sat by the grand piano—her violet hair almost glowing in the light. Her eyes matched, calm but alive. She was still wearing that same simple white and violet dress from earlier. It swayed slightly with the breeze, like the melody itself had taken form and wrapped around her.

She was playing that song again.

The one I've heard many times.

A song that didn't just play with notes—it played with pain. It touched something hidden deep in the chest. As if it understood sadness more than words ever could.

Alina had always been like this. She mastered the piano quickly, learning every song with ease—sometimes within a day or two. Nothing seemed hard for her when it came to technique. But there was something more in this song. A rawness. Something she couldn't replicate through skill alone.

I walked quietly and sat on the small velvet chair near the window, letting the music guide my thoughts. And as I sat there... something in me stirred.

Memories came back.

Emotions I hadn't felt in years began to rise, like voices from another life. I could remember it so clearly—three years ago, during my time at Asura Academy. A time when I wore power like crown... and kept my heart buried under layers of responsibility.

As the melody sank into a lower, softer tone, my heart started to beat faster.

And not because of the music...

but because of what it pulled out of me.

Feelings I had once buried deep.

Memories that weren't even mine, but felt like they were.

It was as if the music reached into me and said—"You remember, don't you?"

And I did.

Even if I didn't want to.

Even if I told myself those days were gone.

This vision wasn't real... but it felt real enough to hurt.

As I kept listening to the soft piano, my mind painted a scene—a memory that never happened, yet one that felt closer to the truth than anything I had lived.

I was walking alone through a snowstorm.

The wind was loud, sharp. My steps slow. My body cold and weak, and my stomach empty. There was no one beside me. Just the sound of snow crunching beneath my boots... and silence.

In that moment, I felt like a goddess again.

Not the kind praised or worshiped. No, the kind that stands too high, too far away, to ever be touched by warmth. A figure meant to lead, to stay strong, to never ask for help. Because gods don't bend. They don't fall. And they certainly don't show weakness to those beneath them... right?

But I did fall.

I collapsed into the snow—alone and tired of pretending. I closed my eyes, ready to disappear from a world that never was mine to live, only the image of who I was supposed to be.

That's when I felt it.

A hand. Warm, steady, connecting.

It wasn't heavenly. It wasn't wrapped in divinity or power. It was human... but it meant more than any god's blessing I had ever received. It pulled me back—back to the world I had turned away from.

To humanity. To the small, flawed beauty of being just a person.

He didn't say anything. Just stood beside me, holding my hand, helping me walk through that blizzard. His presence was quiet, but it told me everything.

His blue eyes didn't shine with pity or pride. Just this calm... this silent message that I wasn't alone anymore.

And for the first time, I leaned on someone else and saw them as person.

Not as a goddess, or a leader, or the perfect noblewoman I was raised to be—but as a girl. A girl who had been wandering too long in the cold.

Alina's music pulled me deeper into that vision.

The piano carried a sadness that didn't just echo—it resonated. Each note was a soft ache in my chest, something familiar, like the parts of myself I tried not to think about too often.

I placed a hand gently over my heart. I could feel it—those memories pressing in. Some were real. Some weren't. But they all hurt the same.

Maybe that was the truth of it. Maybe his eyes—the ones that held that endless blue void—took something from me. Or maybe... they gave me something I didn't know I needed.

A sense of humanity I had forgotten. A reminder that I wasn't meant to be above everyone.

I could still see us, walking side by side in that storm. And when I leaned on him, I wasn't afraid anymore.

I trusted him... with my life, my heart, my everything.

Then—just as the piano reached its most fragile, most delicate part—Alina made a mistake.

A single wrong key.

The rhythm cracked. The feeling was gone.

That song that once held my pain so gently... it lost its voice.

And just like that, it became music again. Nothing more.

She always did that—every time she played it. She would come so close to reaching the end. So close to finishing it.

But something always stopped her.

"Alina?" I asked softly.

She didn't look up, but I knew.

Even if her face was calm, even if her eyes didn't shake, I knew that silence of hers was heavy. She always made a mistake at the end—every time. And every time, I saw that same flicker... hidden behind her stillness.

"It's alright, Sylvia," she said after a moment, her voice steady, but faint. "It was just a mistake. I'll try harder next time."

"I know you will, Alina," I replied gently, standing up and walking closer. "You can take your time."

But as I reached her... I saw something I hadn't expected.

Her fingers had stopped above the keys. Her eyes were fixed downward. And for once, she wasn't hiding it.

That look on her face—it wasn't empty.

It was hurt. Quiet, deep hurt... like a wound that had never been allowed to heal.

"...Why?" she whispered to herself, clenching her fists tightly. "Why do I always fail at the end?"

"It's okay to make mistakes, Alina," I said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself..."

Her hands trembled slightly under my touch.

"It's always this song..." she said. "My first song. The only one I can't play."

Her voice carried something unfamiliar. It was pain. Pure, unguarded pain.

"Your first song?" I asked, my curiosity and concern mixing together.

She hesitated, her mouth opening slightly before closing again. She looked away, as if even saying it would break something inside her.

"This was the first song Master taught me... it was his song."

Her master...?

I remembered the few times she'd mentioned him. She always kept those details quiet, brushed them off with cold words or avoided the topic entirely. But I could tell—he mattered a lot in her life. More than she ever let on.

"Sorry..." she said, lowering her eyes again. "I didn't want to bother you with it."

"You're not bothering me, Alina." I knelt beside her, gently brushing her hair out of her face and resting my hand on her head. "You've been with me since the start. We've built everything together—you can always share something like this with me."

For all her coldness, all her control, she was still a child.

Fifteen.

A girl who carried the weight of a Sword Saint. Who led because she had to, not because she ever asked for it. And in this quiet moment, with no one watching, she wasn't heartless.

She was just tired.

"I wasn't really the type to have people to talk to..." she said quietly, eyes still on the piano. "Master was the only one who... taught me anything. Everything, really. Even this—this feeling of love for music."

"He was the only one who spoke to me even..."

There it was again. That crack in her voice. Not weakness—no. It was something more childlike. The sound of someone remembering a part of themselves they had buried long ago.

"I play music... to express how I feel. When I can't express it anyone. I just... play. This was his song. He played it for me the first time when I was hurt."

I sat down beside her, leaning slightly forward to glance at the notes. "Did he really compose this? It feels... honestly... Heartfelt."

She nodded slowly.

"This is a song about a heart too full to speak," she said, echoing the words with soft reverence. "When you let the music become your voice. That's what he told me."

For a moment, there was only the faint sound of wind brushing past the windows. And her eyes, still locked on the piano, seemed to shimmer—not with tears, but with something softer.

"What's its name?" I asked gently.

She hesitated, then whispered the answer like it was something sacred.

"...It's called A Silent Voice of Love."

"Your master was your everything, right, Alina?" I asked, my voice soft, a hint of concern edging through. I could see it in her eyes—the longing, the absence.

"Everything... I am today is because he was there for me," she replied, her gaze drifting out the window. It was as though she was looking for something, or perhaps just lost in memories. A soft sigh escaped her lips, and for a moment, I wondered if she could still feel him somehow—his presence, his influence, even though he was no longer here with us.

I understand that feeling. I thought, the thought echoing deep inside. There was someone from my past who helped me, someone who shaped me into who I am today. I, too, am in debt to them.

"How was your master like, Alina?" I asked, genuinely wanting to understand, to hear more from her.

She was quiet for a long moment, her lips pressed together in hesitation. "Do you really want to know?" she asked, her voice carefully guarded, as if she were afraid of revealing too much.

"Yes, I do," I replied softly, pulling a chair closer and sitting next to her. "If you can, tell me about him. I want to know."

Her eyes flickered, and for a split second, I saw the walls she'd built around herself crack, just a little. She exhaled slowly, collecting her thoughts, and then, unexpectedly, her voice softened.

Her true voice. The one that rarely surfaced.

"He was always there for me... when no one else was. He never treated me badly. Even when I was at my worst... when I didn't understand myself, he always spoke about me, never about himself," she started, her words coming out like a quiet confession.

"He was good at almost everything. Flawless, even. And no matter what... he was the only person I could trust with my life."

I could hear the emotions in her voice. The love, the admiration. It was raw, untouched by cold logic she used to always express. For just a moment, I saw the real Alina—the one behind the mask. She wasn't the cold, calculating person the world knew her as.

She was just a little girl, who once had someone who cared for her.

She reminds me of him now. The thought hit me with a sharp, almost painful clarity. I knew I didn't show it often, but I could feel it. These feelings were still fresh for me. It's only been three years... But still.

He may not have been a good person, someone who cared or loved others... or even knew what love was like.

I didn't know how he treated others. But I knew one thing. He helped me become who I am today.

"He may not have been... human in his methods, but I suppose my own strength was brought back to me because of him," Alina continued, her voice distant again.

I couldn't help but let my mind linger on those words. His methods weren't human, but... they worked.....

That was far too familiar to me... far too much.....

Could... it be Him?

"Alina..." I called her name, pulling myself from my thoughts. She turned toward me, her eyes curious.

"Is your master's name... Kaiser Everhart?" I let the question hang in the air, my heart beating just a little faster.

Inhuman methods.... but still remaining flawlessly and winning at the end... that was the only person I knew him as.

Her mouth parted slightly, but then she closed it, and after a beat, she answered. "I don't know who that is, unfortunately," she said, the faintest trace of confusion in her voice.

"His name wasn't Kaiser Everhart. I know I never told you his name before... His name was Aether."

As she said that, she gave me a small smile—just a little one. It was a smile I hadn't seen her give in a long time. One that came when she thought of him.

"Aether," I repeated, tasting the name on my tongue. "I see."

It wasn't him, I guess. I had been half-hoping that I might see a glimpse of Kaiser in a long time, but I couldn't deny Aether's qualities.

I guess there are other flawless beings in this world after all. But there's one thing that'll remain as the truth...

Nobody can reach his potential, not even when he's not trying. I had seen it firsthand, and I had suffered the consequences of going against him. I'd been foolish enough to think I could stand in his way, but now I knew better.

There was no one else like him. There never would be.

I exhaled sharply, pushing those thoughts aside. Enough of that. This wasn't about him anymore.

I focused back on Alina, her faint smile pulling me from my thoughts.

"Hey, Sylvia..." Alina said my name, her voice steady but carrying something more—a vulnerability, something I hadn't expected.

I turned to her, surprised by the change in her tone.

"You're like a sister to me... right?" She asked, her voice softer.

I stared at her for a long moment, and the words hung in the air, thick with meaning.

She had always been so distant, so controlled—never giving anything away, always measuring every word, every action. But here now... She was finally letting herself open to me.

A sister? It felt strange to hear it come from her, but as I looked at her—I realized just how much she had grown. She wasn't the same Alina I had met years ago.

"You are like a little sister to me," I said softly, my voice gentle. The words felt right. "I've always seen that in you."

I reached out slowly, hesitant at first, but then, instinctively, I pulled her into a hug. I felt her stiffen for just a moment, but she didn't pull away. She was letting herself be human for once.

"You're not alone, Alina," I whispered, my voice quiet but firm. "You don't have to express yourself in music anymore. We're in this together. You can always come to me if you need anything."

She didn't say anything at first, but I felt her body relax in my arms.

And as we stood there, holding each other in the quiet of the moment, I realized that this was her beginning. She had taken the first step toward healing.

Only thing that remained as a huddle was the grotesque war... that was in the next 3 hours.

Alina might've taken her first shaky step toward trusting someone outside of her master, and good for her—but I knew better. She was still far from being normal. Far from being someone who could live without wearing her coldness like protection.

That smile... that warmth... they weren't habits yet. They were flickers. And flickers die fast on the world.

I smirked to myself as I held her in that quiet embrace, the warmth not quite reaching my own chest. Because deep down, I knew the truth.

The war had already ended the moment it began.

Someone... had gotten his interest. Someone out there made Kaiser Everhart choose to move—to partake in this war. Someone special enough to make the Marionettist walk onto the stage himself to protect them.

That someone must be special. Truly special.

I've only ever seen him do that for Elfie—sweet, precious Elfina who practically had his undivided attention since the beginning of the academy. She had this deep connection with him. So I do wonder... who is it now?

So special, in fact, that he's bending the order of things again. That he's sewing the strings onto others just for them again...

It can't be a male, right? If it was just a friend, he would've helped. Maybe with a whisper, maybe with a plan—but never like this. Never with blood on his hands.

Ugh...

I won't lie. It makes me a little jealous.

Imagining him standing behind someone else. Fighting for someone. Choosing them.

What do they have that I don't? What makes them worth his time, his power, his attention?

I'm special too, dammit!

I'm not just another noble!!!

Ugh, forget about that, Sylvia. Don't spiral.

Whoever this person is... they must be something else. Not just beautiful. Not just powerful. No, to get Kaiser Everhart's attention—his willingness to act—they have to be something unreal.

Something carved from another world.

Actually no...

Getting Kaiser's heart is like trying to catch a shadow in a collapsing void.

He doesn't give it away. It's not something you earn with time or affection. You can't bribe him with beauty, or bait him with power. His heart... it isn't even made of the same material as ours. I think it doesn't even beat, and always is unreachable. You can't earn his trust or love...

But now I wonder...

Was he the one wanting her?

Or was she the one keeping him?

Only time will tell me the truth. And when it does...

I'll be watching.

Very, very closely.

Chapter 67 - Grotesque War Part 2: Hidden Past

4/12/2017 – 9:13 AM

Three Hours Before the War...

Location: Central Hall Grounds, Outer Perimeter

Aaron's Perspective: -

The sun was annoyingly bright today—too cheerful for a day built for slaughter. Clouds hung like lazy spectators in the sky, doing nothing but drifting, like most of the people standing below me.

I stood above them—literally and figuratively—on the raised stone platform just outside the main guild hall. Behind me stood the great structure, carved from dark marble and reinforced steel, a monument to power. In the distance to our right, the forest loomed—silent, dense, and uncaring.

A perfect place for weaklings to run and die. I almost laughed.

They stood there, the so-called members of Valhalla. Armor polished, weapons sharpened, expressions stiff with anticipation—or was it fear? Not like it mattered. Most of them wouldn't live long enough to regret whatever choices brought them here.

I lifted my hand slowly and pointed at all of them.

"I'll be quick," I said coldly, my voice slicing through the morning air. "You're all disposable."

Some of them flinched. Good.

"Nothing rare about you. Nothing special. Your death? That's on you. Don't blame me, don't blame luck. You were born pathetic."

I could see the cracks forming. Nervous eyes. Grit teeth. That uncomfortable silence where people start doubting if this was all a mistake.

"If you're the type to hide... to cry, beg, or run—then congratulations. You were always meant to lose. Your blood won't stain Valhalla. It'll just vanish like the nobodies you are."

I glanced toward the central hall. It stood firm behind me—unlike the people I was addressing.

"Scar... if he were here, he would've ripped each of you into shape. He wouldn't have wasted words. Just action. But Scar sent me instead."

"As his proxy, I'm the one leading this."

"I'm not Scar," I said, turning back to the crowd. "I won't ask for miracles. I won't beg you to be strong. I'll give orders, and you'll follow them."

I took a breath—more for emphasis than for calm.

"We defend the western pass near the rear. We slaughter every grotesque. No excuses. If I order you to die, then you will die. My command is law. My will is absolute. That's what Scar entrusted me with. And you better remember that."

Their silence was thick. Some looked down. Some stiffened. Fear, anger, maybe shame.

Good. Let them feel some emotions before they're dead later in the war.

"Don't expect me to save you. I'm not your hero. The only person who can question my decisions is Scar himself, and he's not here. So don't look to me for help. Only you can help yourself. That's where the fight starts."

I let my voice fall quiet.

"Fight for Valhalla. Fight for its legacy in the next 3 hours."

That was it. I turned away, my cape flicking behind me.

They were scared. I saw it. But fear sharpens the mind. They'd either die with some pride or live with enough to remember today.

Honestly, I didn't care which.

They were all beneath me.

Sword Saints... Those frauds still flaunt their titles like it means something. Once this war ends, I'll prove them wrong. One by one, I'll humiliate them. They'll learn that arrogance backed by strength is called dominance. And I am dominance.

As I walked away, the memory from yesterday's evening slithered back into my head.

The banquet.

That guy.

I stopped and raised my wrist. The red imprint from his grip was still there—burning with humiliation I couldn't erase.

He said he got that strength from chess and writing.

Bull. Shit.

I clenched my hand into a fist, the tendons straining under my glove.

He'll pay. Once Scar's mission is complete, I'll move on my own.

Let them call me arrogant. Let them talk behind my back.

Because soon... they'll all bow to the self-made Sword Saint—

I, Aaron Kage.

4/12/2017 – 9:20 AM

Three Hours Before the War...

Location: Rinascita Market Plaza, Outer Branch

Zain's Perspective:

Ugh... this was so stupid.

I can't believe that bastard actually made me give a speech to both of our guilds—his Eternal Overseers and my Celestial Apex—just because he couldn't be bothered to move his lazy ass off a chair. I mean, seriously. I had to go over strategies, roles, formations... all of it. Twice. Because Sword Saint of Mastery here decided "talking is a waste of energy."

And now I'm walking through the market district of Rinascita, beside the embodiment of procrastination himself.

Xander.

His steps were so slow and spaced out, I swear he looked more like a wandering drunk than a Sword Saint. The way his arms swung loosely, the slight slouch in his back—it was almost impressive how much effort he put into not looking like someone important. His red hair was a damn mess too, spiking in all directions like he'd just woken up from a nap in a haystack.

Did this guy even shower...? Or is he too lazy to move water?

"Zainnnnyyy....!" he suddenly whined, dragging the sound like a toddler begging for candy.

I glared sideways at him. "Told you to stop calling me that."

He ignored the tone in my voice. Not unusual.

"I'm hungry... Let's go to that restaurant and get breakfast," he said, pointing halfheartedly toward a small place across the street.

I scoffed. "Do I look like your parent? Go feed yourself. We've got a war in three hours—get serious, you lazy moron."

"Ugh... Don't be like my sister," he grumbled. "All this trying be serious... Let's just eat."

Wait—sister? That caught my attention.

"You have a sister?" I raised a brow, genuinely surprised. "Was she just made up on the spot so you could guilt-trip me into feeding you?"

"Nah, she's real. Older than me. She nags more than you though. Such a hassle dealing with her..."

"Then why isn't she here?" I asked, half-joking, half-curious.

"She said she was busy with stuff back in our town," he replied, completely straight-faced. "So I came instead. I'm strong and useful, so obviously it was the right decision."

...The biggest load of bullshit I've heard in months. I didn't say it out loud, but I sure as hell thought it.

I glanced at his yellow eyes, his bedhead red hair, the casual slouch. "Does your sister even look like you?"

Xander caught the look I was giving him and, without missing a beat, muttered, "Hey man... don't call my sister hot indirectly."

I stopped in my tracks.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! I wasn't calling her hot, I was asking if she looked like you!"

He grinned, clearly enjoying this way more than he should. "Ah, I see. Well, my sister Nyssa might be a pain... but she's a good one. Takes care of me. Unlike someone who won't buy me chicken for breakfast."

He even pouted at the end of that.

"Nyssa, huh..." I muttered, filing the name away. "Noted."

"I think—"

"Zainnnnyyyy please! Buy me chicken for breakfast! I'm craving it!"

His voice suddenly shot up in volume like a kid on the verge of tears.

Then he added—with a proud smile,—"Last time I had REAL chicken was when I cooked your rooster!"

My jaw twitched. I swear I saw red for a second.

"Excuse me? Can you shut up, or are you trying to pick a fight right here in the middle of town?"

He blinked. "...Depends. Do I get chicken if I surrender?"

I was going to punch him.

God help me—I was really going to punch him.

I took a deep breath and rubbed the bridge of my nose, already feeling a headache coming on.

"You're not gonna shut up until I buy you that damn chicken, are you?"

Xander blinked slowly. "Mmm... nope. That's energy I don't have."

Of course.

"Fine," I exhaled, voice low and threatening. "But only if you promise you'll actually try in the war today. No half-assed swings. No slacking off in the backline. No sudden naps mid-battle, got it?"

He tilted his head, like he was buffering.

"...If I say yes, do I get extra chicken?"

"Xander."

"Alright, alright," he muttered, throwing his hands down in defeat. "I already promised Nyssa I'd take this seriously anyway. Can't go back on that or she'll throw a sandal across the border."

I paused, staring at him. "...What?"

He just shrugged, arms hanging limp at his sides like even the motion was exhausting. "You don't know her. She trained with the military. Her slaps have a shockwave radius."

"...Why does that actually sound believable..."

"Because it is," he said with a deadpan look.

I sighed for what felt like the twentieth time in five minutes. "Alright. Let's get your damn chicken."

And just like that—he lit up.

Like literally lit up. His lazy half-dead eyes shimmered with life like he just unlocked happiness.

"I always knew you were my best friend!" he grinned, walking faster now.

"Don't push it. You're still buying the drinks."

"Ugh... fine. But only because water is cheaper than meat."

We walked through the cobbled path, the scent of food drifting in from stalls and restaurants as Rinascita buzzed with energy. Guild members, mercenaries, townfolk—everyone was getting ready. Some looked tense. Others were laughing in groups, pretending the looming threat wasn't hovering over them like a curse.

And yet here I was. Walking beside a slouching redhead Sword Saint going to have breakfast.

Time really moves fast.

Not long ago, I was fighting beside Levi, confident that we'd reshape the balance of power together. Then came that strange day—meeting Kaiser, a man who almost caused a big fight, and Celia, whose intensity made our members shift uncomfortably. Now I'm here... casually preparing for war against grotesques, side by side with another Sword Saint who isn't Levi.

The world really does throw surprises at you.

But deep down... I know Levi will do his best. He always does. He said he'd lead us to victory, and I believe him.

Still, something doesn't sit right with me.

A weight in my chest.

Like a warning that doesn't speak, but screams in silence.

I especially have a bad feeling about him...

Arius.

He came to the banquet yesterday uninvited, almost picked a fight with Aaron, and held him in place with ease. The man has the reflexes of a trained assassin—but he's supposedly just a D-Rank?

No way in hell.

What's his game?

What's he really hiding?

I glanced at Xander, who was now mumbling about spice levels and chicken skin texture like he was choosing between life and death.

I hope... I really hope this is just me overthinking things.

Just a bad feeling.

But if it's more than that...

Then the war won't be our only problem.

4/12/2017 – 9:42 AM

Three Hours Before the War...

Location: Market District Tavern, Outer Branch.

Sophia's Perspective:

This inn was way too extravagant for my taste. Like seriously—gold trimmings on the windows, silk tablecloths, and shiny silverware that probably cost more than my entire childhood? Yeah, no thanks. I dunno, even if I had all the money in the world, I'd still prefer one of those cozy, dusty inns with creaky wooden floors and warm stew.

Those feel... safer. Simpler. This place? This place feels like it's trying too hard to cover up how scared everyone actually is.

I glanced around the dining hall. Fancy suits, polished boots, expensive jewelry—all that nonsense. But none of it mattered now. Not with what's coming.

People were eating like they were being watched. Forks clinked against plates too nervously, eyes darting to the door like monsters were gonna barge in any second. And I guess they could. The air felt... wrong.

My heart thudded against my chest like it wanted to run away without me. I placed a trembling hand over it, trying to quiet it down. "Shhh... I'm scared too, okay? But we're not allowed to freak out anymore."

War was always a scary word. But now? It wasn't a word anymore. It was real. Like... blood-and-screaming real. I could already hear it in my head—the sound of people begging, crying, dying.

I hated that.

I hated how it reminded me of that day.

The Asura Crisis.

God, even thinking the name made my hands clam up.

I don't... I don't wanna see monsters rip through people again. I don't wanna watch someone scream as their skin gets shredded—shredded!—until it hits bone. I don't wanna hear that awful, ugly sound when they cry so hard their voice gives out.

Then... a monster finishes the suffering.

They eat them.

I hugged myself tighter, nails digging into my arms. My body was already shaking, but I couldn't stop. I didn't wanna remember, but memories are mean like that—they don't ask for permission.

Especially... especially because this time... Kaiser won't be there to save me again.

The moment that thought crept in, I felt my throat close up like I swallowed something sharp. My eyes darted to Isaac across the table. He wasn't talking. Just... staring at nothing. Deep in thought, like me.

Everyone was. Fear had this weird way of making even loud people go quiet.

Only a few hours left until it all starts. Maybe two?

I think so...

Maybe this time... I really won't make it through.

But even if I don't... I'm not gonna let fear tie me down again. Not this time.

The noise of the inn faded into static, quieting down in my mind. All I could feel was the weight in my chest, my lungs tightening, my fingers going cold. My body remembered it before my brain did.

That day... two years ago...

The monster. The one from back then...

I-I-It had...

These teeth. Sharp, crooked, soaked in blood. Like it enjoyed tearing people apart. Its mouth was huge, big enough to crush a human skull like a grape. Its skin was... gray, slimy, stretched like it was never meant to fit over a body that big. Limbs—six of them—long and thin, like razors meant to choke, slice, strangle anything alive.

It was called the Velgorath... but I just call it a monster. Because "Velgorath" sounds like something you can study. This thing? This thing eats people alive while looking into their eyes...

I still remember how my tears blurred everything as it pinned me to the ground. I was screaming, sobbing, begging. But the only answer I got was the wet, squelchy sound of its teeth biting into my right shoulder.

It was eating me.

Me.

I could feel it chew until it reached my bone.

Elfie was fighting nearby, but... she was overwhelmed. We all were. And I thought... I really thought that was it.

I thought I would die there. And the monster would just move on to the next.

I didn't even have the strength to cry anymore. My body went limp. My eyes barely stayed open. And then... its mouth opened again. This time... it aimed for my neck.

To slowly bite down and take my breath away.

Everything went dark....

I felt cold...

And I was okay with it. I really was. My life didn't have much left in it anyway. I thought that was where it all ended. Alone. Afraid. Half-eaten and forgotten.

But then—

Just as the world was slipping away like my heart...

I saw him.

Kaiser.

Right next to me.

The Velgorath—that monster—wasn't a monster anymore.

It was pieces. Sliced up until it wasn't visible anymore. Its limbs, its face, its stupid tongue—gone. Gone like they never existed.

I was too weak... too broken... to even say anything to him. My lips trembled, but they didn't move. My vision was all fuzzy—red, dark, swimming with spots—but I could still see him.

Kaiser.

My right shoulder—what was left of it—was barely hanging on. The skin had been torn open, chewed through.... I could see the bone. White, exposed, raw... like something out of a nightmare. It was still bleeding. Still hurting.

But when I looked into his eyes...

Those cold, crystal blue eyes...

My heart—ugh, why was it still beating so hard?

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Even when I thought I would die... Even when I thought he was done with me...

He still came back.

He still... saved me.

He might've used me. He might've tossed me aside after everything. After Elfie showed up—his one and only friend—and he didn't need me anymore. He threw me away like I was just a tool, a toy.

But still...

When the world turned pitch black...

When nobody wanted to see me anymore...

When I didn't even want to see myself...

He came.

Just like the first time. Just like back then. When I was drowning in my own pain, and he pulled me out.

He knelt down and moved my head gently onto his lap.

His fingers were cold.

I could still hear the screams. All around us. Students begging for someone to help them. Monsters howling like death itself. Bones snapping. Flesh tearing. It sounded like hell.

But all I could see were his eyes.

His damn blue eyes.

"P...please..." I wanted to say it. I wanted to scream it.

"P-please, K-Kaiser... s-save me... o-one... m-more time..."

But my mouth wouldn't listen. My voice was gone. All that came out was a pathetic, breathy whisper swallowed by the chaos.

He didn't ask questions. Didn't smile. Didn't even look sad. He just... moved.

Pulled out a small black knife from his belt—clean, sharp, and sliced a neat line across his own forearm.

I was too weak to move. My fingers twitched, that's it.

Then, with his other hand, he reached down and opened my mouth.

I couldn't stop him. Couldn't even look away.

A few drops of his blood fell onto my tongue.

Warm. Metallic. Deeply strange...

I swallowed it before I even realized it.

And for a second... for the tiniest, most fragile second... **I felt dying was distant...**

I wanted to ask him why. I wanted to scream "What did you just feed me?!" I had so many questions—so, so many—but my lips still wouldn't move.

Then his voice cut through the chaos. Deep. Calm. Heavy like thunder.

"You'll live, Sophia. Rest now. I'll end this."

He gently rested my head back on the ground. The warmth from his lap faded instantly, and I felt the earth underneath me again. Cold. Dirty. But...

I still felt his presence above me.

I blinked through my blurred vision—and saw him standing tall.

Two black swords crossed on his back. Their edges shimmered with elemental runes—lightning and wind. Made for blood.

At his waist... two blood-red daggers. One pulsed like a dying heart, cursed and twisted, reeking of death. The other? Frozen, still, like a whisper from the underworld.

He didn't even look back at me.

He just walked away.

Kaiser was... terrifying. The kind of terrifying that made even monsters hesitate.

Because today he was...

Serious.

And yet...

He was beautiful in that moment.

The last time I properly saw him... he was walking toward Elfie—toward the opening of the academy—where the screaming was louder, and the monsters were waiting. His coat fluttered behind him, his black cape was flowing.

Maybe... maybe if he had cared about me more... he would've stayed by my side.
Maybe... if I meant anything close to what she meant to him...

He would've looked at me like that.

But he didn't.

And that truth... hurt more than the gaping hole in my shoulder.

As I lay there on the ground, broken and bleeding...

The pain began to fade somehow. It wasn't cold anymore. It wasn't... as painful.

Somehow, for some reason I didn't understand...

It felt like, even if I died... I wouldn't be... dead?

I focused out of that memory back to my—

The present. Yeah... right. The inn. Warm fire, wooden walls, Isaac staring blankly at the wall like he had questions.

I was safe.

But even now... sitting here... surrounded by people and not monsters, I could feel my heart squeezing again.

Even in the inn with Isaac... I felt tears almost coming back just remembering that day. That mess of blood and pain. Of people screaming for help... and getting silence back.

Even if I lived...

So many didn't.

So many didn't have Kaiser.

Because he wasn't some hero.

No. He only saved those who knew about him.

...No, even that feels like a lie.

He only saved the people he... kind of cared about. A little.

And for whatever weird, twisted reason... I was one of them.

After that day... life didn't magically get better.

No.

It only got tougher. Rougher. Lonelier.

And somehow... it brought me here.

To another war.

To another town where monsters breathe and people bleed, and the scent of ash clings to your skin even after you wash it off.

Meeting Lucas... here was by pure coincidence but I guess he also wanted answers. Who wouldn't? That day itself was Hell.

And the thing is... even if I'm terrified... even if my body sometimes shakes just hearing screams in the distance—

I don't want to run anymore.

I'm past that now.

I looked down at my wrist and raised my arm slowly. My hand trembled just a bit.

It was once... chopped off.

Like—gone. Gone-gone.

Clean slice. No magic. Just snap—and then pain. A lot of pain.

My legs, too...

They were gone once.

That time was during an adventurer guild quest. I thought I could do it alone. Thought I was strong enough being an A-Ranked Adventurer.

I wasn't...

That was a year ago...

B-but... I—I still don't get it.

I saw my own limbs. I remember lying there, barely conscious, bleeding out. My left leg was tossed to the side like trash. My right hand was just... across the ground.

And yet...

When I woke up...

Everything was there.

Back. Like it never left.

No scars. No wounds. No healing potions. Nothing.

Just... my body. Whole.

It started... after I swallowed Kaiser's blood.

That day during the Asura Crisis. After my shoulder was practically bitten to the bone. After the screaming stopped and the academy went quiet, like the world had finally given up on living...

When I woke up...

They told me I had no injuries.

None.

The medics, the healers—everyone said they never used any magic on me. They just found me... lying there.

Perfectly fine.

But I wasn't fine.

Not inside.

My shoulder, my bones, the bleeding—all of it was just gone. As if it had never happened. As if that monster never touched me.

And since then...

I haven't felt pain.

Not real pain. Not the kind that makes you want to scream and cry and beg someone to hold you.

What I feel now...

It's something else.

This weird sensation... this rotting, crawling thing under my skin.

Like... my body is constantly decaying. Not dying—just... not even alive?

Like it's stuck somewhere between "alive" and "something else."

I...

I don't understand.

Kaiser... when I find you...

You're gonna tell me what the hell you did to me.

What was wrong with your blood?

What did you turn me into?

Because when I bleed—

When even a single drop of my blood touches something living—

It dies.

The grass. Bugs. Small creatures. Even a wounded monster once—

It screamed when my blood landed on it.

Like my blood wasn't mine anymore.

And this thing inside me—whatever it is—

It heals me.

It fixes broken bones and torn muscles. It brings back limbs. It makes the pain stop before it even starts.

But it doesn't feel like a gift.

It feels like something stolen. Something that wasn't supposed to be given.

And now it won't leave.

It's like my body's fighting itself... and winning. Over and over again.

I blinked, and the warm glow of the inn came back. The cold sweat on my back made my shirt cling weird, and I wiped my face without even realizing I was crying.

Arius finally walked in and flopped into the chair next to us. He looked like he just did something suspicious, but Isaac didn't even notice. He was still staring into the wall.

Me? I was just trying to breathe.

Maybe I should focus back on the present. Back on now. Back on the breakfast and Isaac's depressing energy.

Because Kaiser's not here.

And until I see him again...

I won't be getting any answers.

Not about the blood.

Not about the decay.

Not about the monster I'm becoming every time I survive something I shouldn't.

"Sophia, were you crying?" Arius's voice broke the silence, way softer than usual.

Crap. I guess I didn't hide it well. My eyes must've still been red... or puffy... or both.

I gave a quick sniff and looked away. "N-No. I just got... caught in the mood or whatever. I mean—who wouldn't be a little messed up when we're about to be thrown into a war?" I tried to laugh, but it cracked halfway.

He didn't push it, thank goodness. Just gave me this gentle pat on the shoulder—my right one. The one that was almost gone once.

"It'll be alright," he said, smiling faintly. "You'll survive."

And I froze.

Why... why did he have to say it like that?

He turned his attention to Isaac, whose silence was weirdly louder than anything else in the room.

"You seem lost in thought, Isaac," Arius said, almost teasing, but not quite. "Something serious bugging you?"

Isaac blinked, looking like he just woke up from a nightmare. He shook his head quickly. "It's nothing. We should—"

"I had a little visit to your wife, Isaac."

That stopped everything.

Arius's voice was soft. Too soft. Dangerously soft. My skin crawled.

"She's... not doing so well."

I whipped my head toward Isaac. His whole face turned pale.

Wait... Wife?

Isaac has a wife?!

Here?! In Rinascita?

Since when? How did I not know? Why didn't anyone know?!

Isaac's lips trembled. "H-How... how do you know about her?"

Arius didn't answer right away. Instead, he looked down at the table, expression unreadable, then slowly raised his head. The look in his eyes... it wasn't Arius anymore.

"I found the broken ring," he said. "In your pouch. A few days ago."

My heart dropped.

"It didn't take me long to figure it out."

Isaac didn't speak. He couldn't. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

Then, before I could even process, Arius stood up and pulled Isaac by the collar. Chairs scraped. Heads turned. My breath caught in my throat.

"What do you have to say?" Arius growled. His words were low, venomous.

"Wife beater?"

My body stiffened.

Isaac's eyes widened like he just got stabbed in the chest. He tried to pull away, but Arius didn't budge. His hand gripped tighter.

"W-What do you mean...?" I asked, barely above a whisper, voice shaky. My chest felt like it was about to crack open.

Arius didn't even look at me.

"Isaac's married," he said, like he was listing a fact.

"A year ago, his wife got pregnant. And instead of being a man, instead of being a decent human being—he started hitting her."

I gasped.

My heart? It just stopped. Or broke. Maybe both.

"He beat her," Arius continued, "when she cried, when she begged him to stop. And then... he scarred her. Her face. Just to remind her she was his."

I was... frozen.

Isaac couldn't even deny it.

He just stood there, trembling, choking on every word he couldn't say.

Arius dropped him. Just like that. Let go of his collar and Isaac collapsed onto the wooden inn floor with a loud thud that echoed in my bones.

The room had gone so silent it hurt.

I just stared. Everything in me wanted to scream, but I couldn't even blink.

I didn't know what hurt more—what I'd just heard or the fact that I believed it.

Because of how Arius said it...

Because of how Isaac didn't deny it.

Because of how broken he looked.

And because I... I thought Isaac was my friend.

But maybe... monsters don't always look like monsters. Sometimes they just sit next to you... share meals with you... talk about normal things and laugh.

And sometimes they're quiet.

"You don't know anything!" Isaac snapped, staggering to his feet, voice desperate, shaking. "Stay out of it, Arius! This isn't your damn business—my life, my past—none of it has anything to do with you!"

Arius tilted his head slightly, almost bored. "No?" he said, voice calm. Too calm. "It became my business the moment I saw her face."

Isaac clenched his jaw. His fists were trembling now.

Arius walked a slow step forward. "She didn't want to talk. I didn't push her. But... you know what finally broke her silence?"

He paused. The tension was suffocating.

"She said she didn't want anyone else to get hurt the way she did."

"Shut up..." Isaac muttered, his tone rising.

"She said she still hoped you'd become a better man." Arius's smile twisted.
"What a joke."

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Isaac roared, stepping forward, eyes wild. "You don't get to play judge! You don't know what I went through!"

Arius didn't blink. "And what exactly did she go through, Isaac?"

He stepped closer, the air felt heavier with every word.

"You had a child on the way. A wife who trusted you. And all you could do... was use your fists like a coward."

Isaac's face twisted. "Don't act like you're above me! You know nothing!"

Arius's tone dropped. Cold... "You're not a man, Isaac. You're just a scared little insect who only knows how to beat the one person who couldn't hit back."

That was it.

Isaac screamed and lunged—"SHUT UP!"—fist cocked, aiming straight at Arius's face.

But Arius...

He twisted his upper body to the side, letting the punch fly past his face with only inches to spare. His right forearm guided the momentum off-course, and in one fluid motion—

Crack!

His left fist slammed into Isaac's jaw.

Isaac staggered, dazed—but it didn't stop there.

Arius's hand latched onto his shoulder, pulling him forward, just in time for a knee to drive into Isaac's gut.

"Guh—!" Isaac wheezed, coughing spit as he stumbled back—

Then—

WHUMP!

A low, bone-vibrating kick slammed into the side of Isaac's calf. The noise wasn't a clean crack... but it was close.

I flinched, covering my mouth with both hands.

He collapsed, leg buckling under him—and Arius didn't wait.

He grabbed Isaac by the shoulder, dragged him down into the floor, then straddled him. In a blink, he pinned Isaac's arm under his knee and twisted the other one down.

Pinned. Trapped. Helpless.

I couldn't breathe.

He wasn't fighting to prove a point.

He was fighting to kill

His style... it wasn't meant for sparring.

It was meant for killing.

He almost fought just like Kaiser did.

And then...

Arius raised his arm. His fist coiled above Isaac's face, knuckles clenched tight, shadows darkening his eyes.

"Should I scar your face?" he said quietly, gaze dead cold.

"Should I bash your face in until you can't stand to look in a mirror either?"

Isaac said nothing. Not a sound. Just his chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Maybe that'll help you understand what you've done," Arius whispered. "Maybe every time someone stares at you in disgust, you'll remember how she felt. Every time a kid cries when they see your destroyed face, maybe you'll finally get it."

He didn't sound angry anymore.

He sounded empty.

"Do you want to live like her? Hiding your scars in shame? Is that the kind of life you were so desperate to create, Isaac?"

Still no answer.

Just silence.

And Isaac's eyes... weren't defiant anymore.

They were afraid.

Arius exhaled slowly. "As tempted as I am..."

He lowered his fist.

"I'll keep my promise. For now."

He climbed off Isaac and stood up like nothing happened. Reached into his overcoat. Pulled out a small glass vial glowing pale green.

He tossed it—clink—it rolled beside Isaac's trembling hand.

"Heal yourself," Arius said icily. "And get out of my sight."

Isaac didn't speak. Couldn't, maybe.

He shakily reached for the potion, popped the cork with a shaking thumb, and drank with trembling gulps. Then, barely able to stand, he limped out of the inn. No one helped him. Others in the inn were as shocked as me...

His leg dragged slightly behind him. That low kick must've nearly snapped the muscle. And the scariest part?

Arius wasn't even trying.

I know that because I've seen someone fight like that before.

But far more deadly.

Far more unforgiving.

Kaiser.

My chest tightened.

Arius turned toward me, brushing a strand of black hair behind his ear. His blue eyes—sharp, deep, colder than usual—locked with mine.

But for a second... I saw something.

The void in his eyes staring back at me

"We should get ready, Sophia," he said, voice calm again.

"The war's in two hours."

I swallowed hard and nodded.

"...Yeah. Okay."

But I couldn't look away from his eyes.

Because even after everything I'd just seen—They still reminded me of his.

A void so dark... nobody can survive it.

Chapter 68 - Heartbreak Part 1: I Wish I Lied

4/12/2017 – 10:38 AM

Two Hours Before the War...

Location: Main Guild Hall, 5th Floor.

Levi's Perspective:

Seems like everyone was called out by Zain... to strategize and prepare for it. That's good. The fifth floor looks pretty empty now. I doubt anyone's coming back anytime soon—they'll probably grab breakfast, stare at their reflections, and tell themselves they're ready for war.

War, huh?

It's funny. That word gets thrown around like it's just a game of dice. But the stakes? Oh, the stakes are blood, life, and future. Some of them are smiling right now, not realizing this might be the last morning they ever taste air.

I clenched my right hand into a fist and slammed it down on the table. The chair I was on rattled like it was as nervous as I felt.

My head hung low. Not because I was scared. No, fear's for people with something to lose.

...Okay. Maybe I do have something to lose. Just maybe.

I'm leading the frontlines this time. That means every scream, every torn limb, every member who doesn't come back... is on me. My skills decide their survival. That's what being a leader means, right?

Leaders are supposed to be stronger than everyone...

And yeah... people joke about my ego. Some call me arrogant, self-claimed. Sword Saint Levi, always laughing, always praising himself like it's a festival.

But here's the truth, plain and raw:

I am the strongest Sword Saint.

Not because I was born with it. I wasn't gifted by some magical fairy. I built this. Day in. Day out. Blood in my mouth and calluses on my soul. You don't get veins like mine unless you've broken the same bones three times and kept swinging anyway.

My fist tightened. I could feel the veins bulging along my forearm, my pulse a steady rhythm of conviction.

I was the right one to lead them to victory.

But... damn it.

I don't know how to tell her.... The bad news.

As my thoughts spiraled, the door creaked open. My head snapped up, like my instincts knew something wasn't right.

Nobody was supposed to be back yet.

And it wasn't Zain. Wasn't any of the Celestial Apex guys either.

It was... her.

Celia.

She stepped in quietly, almost like she was dying. Her eyes had dark bags under them—faint, but noticeable. The kind of tired that sleep doesn't fix.

I had heard about what happened yesterday. How the townspeople cornered her. How they spat words and accusations when I wasn't there.

And then she disappeared. Didn't come back.

I searched the whole damn town last night, asking around, threatening a few guys who looked like they knew too much—but she was gone.

Now she was here.

I sat up straight. "You've returned, Celia."

She turned her head to me and smiled.

Smiled.

"Oh Levi, it's nice to see you!" She said it like everything was fine.

"Where were you last night, Celia?"

"Me? I was just a little lost. You shouldn't worry about me, Levi. You have bigger things to take care of."

She said it gently. Sweetly....?

I narrowed my eyes. That voice. It didn't sound wrong, but it didn't sound right either.

"I see... Do you know about today?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even.

She nodded. "Yes, I do. Today's the Swarm, right...? I'll come too, don't worry."

Her tone dipped low. Dark. Almost like she was talking from a hole inside her chest.

But that smile? Still sweet.

Like honey poured over poison.

Something wasn't right.

Something really wasn't right.

My fingers twitched at my side. A Sword Saint's instinct doesn't just apply to combat—it applies to people, too.

And Celia... she was hurt behind that smile.

"But Celia, you don't look that fine... You should mayb—"

"I'm fine, Levi."

She cut me off.

Her tone dropped cold...

"I have to do this." She said looking into my eyes.

Still smiling.

That damn smile.

"I have to get him back..." Her voice didn't crack. Not even once.

She looked straight at me, right in the eyes. And those red eyes? They were intense. Not in the way they usually shimmered when she was happy, or teasing me...

No—this was something else.

And still, she smiled.

"...I see."

"I can fight, Levi. I have to. You understand, right?" Her voice cracked a little—barely. Still sweet. Still smiling.

But that smile... I didn't know what it meant anymore. Was she forcing it? Was she convincing me, or herself?

I hated that I have to tell her now...

"...About that, Celia," I said, slower than usual. Hesitation? From me? Yeah, that's rare. But this... this wasn't something you just drop like a joke.

"I have to tell you something I just found out."

"What is it, Levi? Tell me. I won't mind," she said, too cheerful. She tilted her head slightly, that same soft expression.

"It's about the people the grotesques abducted." I rubbed the back of my neck, then lowered my hand.

Her eyes didn't flicker. Just watched me, waiting.

"Lord Avelric... he got some reports. He shared them with us."

I looked down at the ground for a moment, then back at her.

"Humans the grotesques took... they found some of them."

I paused.

"They were all dead. A few bodies. Not even close to the number we lost. But... enough to figure it out."

Celia's shoulders dropped slightly. Just slightly.

"They found them not far from the hive. The ones that were dumped... they weren't just killed."

I looked away.

"They were crushed. Tortured until they passed away. Some were barely even identifiable anymore."

She was quiet.

I raised both my hands up to my chest, like surrendering to a truth I knew was coming.

"Avelric also had mages scan the hive from above. Just to make sure... to see if anyone was still alive underground."

She blinked. Once. Still no reaction.

"They got no human signals back, Celia. Not a single human life... No one made it out or is alive down there."

"...What," she said softly, eyes on the floor, "does that have to do with anything?"

That was the part I dreaded.

"I-I... asked if any of the bodies matched a specific description," I muttered. **"A man with Black hair and... Blue eyes."**

"They said they... they did."

Her head didn't move. She was just frozen.

"They found one," I said, voice barely holding.

"The bones in his arms were shattered—snapped piece by piece, bent backwards in ways that shouldn't even be possible. His legs... one was twisted under him, mangled like something had stomped on it repeatedly until it was just meat and splinters. His face..."

I hesitated.

I didn't want to say it—but I did.

"One of his eyes was... gone. Torn out. Just... gone. The socket was empty, blood dried all around it like it had been clawed out in rage. And his skull—Celia, they think he was slammed into the ground, over and over again, until the bone gave way. There were pieces of his teeth scattered near him... like he bit down while screaming. His jaw was crooked. Dislocated...."

"Like it tried to speak... your name before it broke."

Her lips trembled—but she didn't cry. She just stared.

"They said he was probably choked before that. His throat had deep marks. Like claws. Like someone didn't just want him dead—they wanted him silent."

....

"I had to go there and see it for myself... and I did. I saw the body for myself..."

"It was Kaiser."

It's over.

"They couldn't even recognize the face. But..."

I reached into my pocket. My fingers brushed against cold metal.

"I found this."

I pulled it out and opened my hand.

A small, star-shaped trinket. Silver edges almost looking newly bought and well conditioned. The kind of thing only a few people in this damn world would carry.

It had the words: "Forever Yours."

Her hands trembled.

Her eyes locked on it.

Her smile was gone now.

Completely.

She didn't say a word.

She just... stared.... Like the world she was living had collapsed.

I had heard from Zain and Emma—how Celia had been training day and night. Alone. Quietly. Every second she wasn't with us, she was probably out there trying to get strong enough to save him.

While I was in Sylvaris handling the other side of the mess, she was here... pushing herself to the edge.

For him.

And now?

She found out... He is gone forever.

And for the first time in a while...

I didn't feel like the strongest Sword Saint anymore... I couldn't even save my friend in time.

I felt like the guy who just crushed the only thing keeping someone alive.

Then her voice came again... Smiling.

Why was she smiling?!

"I see, Levi. I understand what you're saying..." She stepped closer, her words light, like this was all just a casual chat.

"I'll still join the war. I'll fight against the grotesques."

Everything around me went quiet. Like dead silent.

The kind of silence where your own thoughts get loud—too loud.

Wait. What?

"B-But Celia... Kaiser is gon—"

She cut me off.

"It's okay, Levi." Still smiling. Still walking toward me.

"I'll fight for myself. I'll save the people here. You don't have to worry about me."

That smile wasn't her usual one.

It was darker. Not fake, not real.

She stopped in front of me.

"...Can I have the trinket? Please?"

Her eyes looked so... normal.

Too normal.

That wasn't right.

I was just—I didn't know what to say. My mouth stayed shut. My hands moved on their own.

I handed her the little star trinket.

She held it in her palms, gentle. Closed her hands around it...

Then just turned around and started walking away.

Heading for one of the rooms, maybe to rest?

I had no clue.

But I couldn't stop myself from saying something.

"You're... taking it well," I muttered. "I thought you cared more about Kaiser."

Celia must've figured it out... Kaiser was killed by those monsters. Tortured until he lost his breath, yet hold onto that trinket in his last moments.

She stopped.

"Kaiser is my friend..." A pause.

"That's... it's nothing, Levi."

Nothing?

No. That wasn't nothing.

That was everything.

She kept walking. Step by step. Then—

"Oh, Levi..." she said, turning her head a little. "Zain and Xander were looking for you. You should go outside. They're waiting."

Then she turned again, and entered one of the rooms.

Click.

Door closed.

I stood there for a moment.

What the hell just happened?

She didn't cry. She didn't scream. She didn't curse at the world...?

She just... accepted it.

Celia...

She's not the same.

She changed. Grew stronger, maybe. Hardened.

She took the news of his death—the one she was training like crazy to save—and didn't even flinch.

Didn't shed a tear.

Not one.

I didn't know if I should be impressed...

...or worried.

I looked down at my own hands—scarred, dry, rough from all the training, all the fights, all the near-death experience we had gone through just to stay alive.

My palms weren't just worn out—they were tired in a way that went deeper than skin.

I guess that's what getting stronger does to people.

You lose pieces of yourself as you grow... The attachments that once held you down? You either break free from them, or let them break you.

And Celia... She didn't break.

I exhaled through my nose and turned toward the doorway. I should probably head out as well—Zain and Xander would be waiting, no doubt already bickering like an old married couple.

And me?

Well, I was supposed to be the leader today. The one who carries the weight of hundreds—maybe more. Their lives, their hopes, their trust... all on my shoulders. And I won't fail.

Not today.

.....

Hopefully Celia keeps that same strength I saw in her just now. That eerie, unshakable calm...

Was she... silently suffering?

Should.... Should have I lied that he was alive? Would that had been better?

I started walking, slow at first—each step echoing softly in the empty hallway. As I passed the open window, I stopped.

A gust of wind slipped in, brushing against my face with a strange gentleness, like the world hadn't quite realized we were all marching into hell.

I glanced outside, toward the sky.

Clear blue.

"...Kaiser." I whispered.

"If you're watching us from up there... just know—she'll be alright.

Yes, she's hurting. Yes, she has changed. But she's moving forward, even if it kills her a little inside.

And me?

Tch. I'll admit it, she's taking it better than I am."

I let out a dry chuckle and leaned my shoulder against the frame.

"You might be gone... but I haven't forgotten. Not a chance in hell. You were annoying. Sarcastic too often. Stubborn.

But you were my friend."

I stood there for another second, eyes locked with the sky as if it might answer back.

"...Take care, old friend," I murmured.

"I've got a world to save... again. This time, you'll be watching over us, right?"

I gave the wind a small smile.

Then I turned, leaving behind the silence, the grief, the memories—and walked out of the hall.

It was time.

Time to face the grotesques.

Time to start the war.

The Swarm War.

And this time, I wouldn't let a single one of them walk out alive.

Chapter 69 - Heartbreak Part 2

Celia's Perspective:

Care...? Care...

I care... I care... I-I really care...

My throat burned as I whispered to myself, like the words were scraping their way out.

The door behind me clicked shut—so loud in the empty room, I was alone again... I couldn't hold it in anymore.

My legs gave out.

I collapsed to the floor, knees smacking the cold wood. My arms hung like dead weight at my sides. My fingertips trembled. My chest did that awful shaking thing again, like it was trying to force a scream out that just wouldn't come.

"Care... care... care...?" I mumbled into nothing.

My lips were dry. My voice cracked. My thoughts weren't making sense anymore, but I couldn't stop repeating...

"Levi... Levi thinks I only care about Kaiser...?"

No. No, he doesn't get it. None of them do.

I don't care about Kaiser. I'm not that innocent.

I-I love him. I love him like... like my whole being is stitched together by the sound of his name.

My fingers curled into the floor. Nails scraped along the grain of the wood.

I love him more than I ever learned how to love myself...

Every time I close my eyes, he's there. Every dream, every blink... he shows up with that smile of his that makes everything feel okay for a second... before it all comes crashing down again.

At night, I lie awake just staring at my ceiling. Hoping. That maybe it was just a dream. That I'll hear his footsteps again. That he'll ruffle my hair and call me "adorable" in that teasing voice I used to roll my eyes at—but secretly lived for.

But morning always comes. And he doesn't.

Sometimes I don't even want to wake up. Because in my dreams... he holds me. He doesn't let go. There, I'm not alone.

"I don't want you to go," I whispered like he was still listening. "Please..."

I lifted my trembling hand and slammed it onto the ground.

"Take me with you."

Again.

"Take me."

Again.

"Take..."

The pain shot through my knuckles but I didn't care. I welcomed it. It reminded me I was still here... even if I didn't want to be.

"You..."

Another strike. Sharp. Sharp enough to draw blood.

My hand was shaking. A red stain smudged across the floor.

"You can't leave me."

My voice broke.

You love me, don't you? You promised, didn't you? You told me you'd never leave... That I was yours. Yours forever.

"So come back."

"Please."

I clutched the tiny trinket in my hand — my most cherished moment.

But it was warm.

Or maybe that was just my hand bleeding onto it.

I pressed it to my chest, curled my body around it like it was the only thing keeping my heart from leaking out.

Tears finally came.

Soft, shaking sobs that didn't sound like me.

"I didn't know we were making memories," I whispered, lips pressed against the trinket.
"I just thought... we were happy..."

Please don't destroy me, Kaiser.

Don't leave me behind in this world without your smile.

My mouth trembled as I whispered again.

"Come back..."

Louder this time.

"Come back..."

My bloodied hand left a smear across the floor as I reached toward the empty doorway.

"Please..."

"...I don't know how to live without you."

"Speak to me, Kaiser..." I whispered out loud, barely a breath, barely a voice.

The room didn't answer.

Just darkness.

Stillness.

The walls didn't echo anything back... not even my own voice.

"Why...? Why won't you say anything...?"

I stared ahead, unblinking. The shadows on the wall looked like they were closing in. It felt like I was trapped in a coffin of heartbreak, buried in memories that kept replaying no matter how many times I tried to kill them.

Tears brimmed at the corner of my eyes, hot and sharp like they were slicing their way out. I thought maybe... maybe if I cried hard enough, the pain would come out too.

But it didn't.

They fell anyway.

Softly, pathetically.

"Levi's a liar..." I mumbled, voice bitter and hollow as I opened my bloodied hand.

My palm was painted red—half dry, half smeared, the skin raw and throbbing. My nails dug into my flesh so tightly they had left crescent-shaped wounds. I didn't even feel it happen. Maybe I didn't want to.

I looked at the blood, and I couldn't even tell if it was mine or just another reminder that everything inside me was spilling out slowly.

Then I dragged my nails across the floorboards.

Hard. Desperate. I needed something to hurt. Something that wasn't just my heart.

The scraping echoed through the room like knives against bone... My fingertips were going numb, the pain riding the edge of my nerves...

"He lied... you're not gone. Y-You wouldn't leave me... right?" I asked the empty room.

"Kaiser...?" My voice cracked. No reply.

I scratched again, faster this time. Splinters dug beneath my fingernails, and warm blood slipped down my knuckles.

It hurt. But not enough.

Not enough to drown this emptiness.

"You... you told me I was yours..." My lips trembled.

But now they felt like lies.

"They're all lying, right...?" I whispered. "Only you're honest with me..."

Please, say something.

Anything.

I would trade my voice for yours. My breath for one more moment. My whole body if it meant you'd just open that damn door and hold me again...

"Please... keep your promise..."

"Tell me Levi lied. Tell me you're still alive," I choked out, my voice barely surviving behind the sobs.

But the air remained still.

He wasn't here.

He's not coming back.

No—shut up. Don't think that. Don't let that idea take root. If I believe it... I'll break. I'll really break forever.

"I thought... I thought I was a whole person..." I said under my breath, voice trembling like glass about to shatter.

"Until I saw you walking away from me..."

And then I snapped.

I slammed my bloodied hand onto the ground. Once. Twice. Again. Again.

Again.

Pain. Finally. Real, harsh pain that shot up my arm. A wet splatter of red bloomed beneath my fist. My hand was a mess now—shaking, trembling, ruined.

But it still didn't match the pain inside.

Again. Again. Again. Until the floor was painted with my love for him.

Until it looked like how I felt.

Broken.

"Why won't you answer me...?"

"Why... did you leave me?"

"I can't breathe when you're not here..."

I dropped forward, pressing my forehead to the blood-soaked wood. My tears mingled with it—red and clear, mixing together like my soul was trying to bleed out too.

"I don't care if it's selfish... just come back to me," I begged, my voice shaking, so quiet I could barely hear myself. "Even if it's just to say goodbye..."

Silence.

Only my tears answered me.

Only the pain in my chest kept speaking.

My hand trembled, smeared in blood, fingers twitching as if they were still trying to reach you.

But you're not here.

You're not anywhere.

Just this cold floor, just this empty air, just this body of mine that keeps breathing when it shouldn't.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered.

"I'm sorry I couldn't love you more..." I stared down at the mess I had made—my blood, my tears, the scratches along the floor like a trail of my desperation.

"I... I thought I gave you everything I had... but maybe it wasn't enough."

I dragged myself closer to the door...

I clutched the wall. My nails scraped against it, leaving little lines—like I was trying to etch my pain into the wood itself. Something permanent. Something that wouldn't disappear like you did.

"I'm sorry... I couldn't save you."

My shoulders shook violently.

I bit my tongue.

The metallic taste filled my mouth. I didn't care.

I deserved it.

"I'm really... really sorry..."

I wanted to be with you forever.

I dreamed of waking up beside you, of your voice being the first sound I heard every morning.

Please don't forget me...

Please... remember that I was yours. That I belonged to you even before I ever said the words.

A cruel woman like me... doesn't deserve your love. Doesn't deserve your voice. I smothered it, didn't I? I got greedy.

I wanted everything.

And now I have nothing.

"I'm begging you..." My forehead pressed against the cold wooden wall as I sank lower.

"Please... just speak to me. One last time. One last lie. One last 'I love you'... even if you don't mean it... I'll believe it. I swear I will."

"I couldn't even keep the promise we made..." I whispered.

"You said we would always be together. I said I would be there for you. But you're gone... and I'm still here."

How could I have let you die...?

How...?

I'm really a cruel woman.

Selfish.

Pathetic.

Weak.

I should be dead. I should've died with you.

If I really loved you... I wouldn't still be breathing.

Tears blurred everything—my hands, the room, even the blood felt like it was slipping away from my skin like it didn't want to be part of me anymore.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Over and over. I didn't know if I was speaking or thinking it anymore.

I curled in on myself like a crumpled piece of paper—ruined, unreadable, worthless.

The only thing that felt real was the pain.

Please forgive me... even if I never deserve it.

Please... just one last time... say my name.

Let me hear it.

Let me believe I mattered to you...

Even if it's a lie.

Even if it's only inside my head.

....

"Was... was I not enough for you...?"

My lips quivered. My voice cracked into a whisper.

"Is that why you left... Kaiser...?"

I bit my tongue. My throat trembled.

"Kai...?" I choked out his name like it was the last word I'd ever speak.

....

"Was... was I not like that... Elfie?"

The name stabbed through my heart.

My chest tightened so violently I almost gagged.

"Is that why you didn't... didn't tell me about her... that day?"

My vision blurred again. I blinked furiously, but the tears were endless.

My heart—if I could even call it that anymore—twitched like it wanted to stop.

"Did you leave me for her...?"

My nails dug into my arms again. Harder. Deeper. I needed the pain to keep speaking. I needed it to stay awake.

"Did... did I force myself onto you too much...?"

I stared at the red smears staining the wooden floor—my blood, my pain, my everything spilled and unnoticed.

"But you... you called me yours..."

My lips curled, but not into a smile.

"You said you loved me... called me your wife... that day..."

That day.

That one day.

The one moment I thought... maybe I could be alive to feel happiness.

"You'll be unhappy with anyone else..." My voice broke again, high-pitched and brittle.

"Only me... only I can make you happy... I'll do anything—anything, Kai—just tell me what to be... I'll become it..."

"Why...?"

"Why can't you see how desperate I am for you?"

My throat closed again. My lungs shook inside my ribs.

"I lied..." I gasped, clawing at my collarbone like I could rip the shame out.

"I acted... to be normal around you... so you wouldn't hate me..."

"After that day... I thought... if I forced myself more... you'd hate me... you'd disappear..."

"I shouldn't have... shouldn't have stopped myself from loving you... that's why I lost you... now..."

My words blurred. My lips were numb.

My body swayed like I was drunk on grief.

"But if I change... will you return?"

"Please..."

"Kai... please... give me another chance..."

"Just return to me..."

"You..."

My breath hitched.

My entire body froze.

My lips moved, but no sound came out.

"You... y-you..."

"You p-p-promised me... y-you..."

"You... Kai... K-Kaiser..."

"You... you c-called me... your... your heart..."

"You vowed... th-that day..."

"That you'll protect me... u-until time... time itself ends..."

My head fell forward.

Tears splashed onto the floor like rain from a broken sky.

"Did you stop..."

"Because I wasn't good enough?"

The room didn't answer.

My knees pressed into the hard floor again as I leaned forward, forehead pressing against my blood-stained hand.

"You can... use me... touch me... I won't mind..."

My cheeks were burning.

"Make me feel like I am breathing..."

From shame?

No.

From desperation.

"I'm all yours... Just... just in return, stay with me."

Even if I'm dreaming.

Even if I'm nothing but some delusional girl to you...

"As long as you're with me... or just in my mind... It's paradise."

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

But I'll smile if you tell me to.

I still love you...

I can't live without you.

"I love you so much..." I whispered, teeth clenching, voice shaking like it was wrapped in ice.

"I won't mind if you choke me..."

"Hurt me... Beat me... Tear me apart..."

"Just let me feel you one more time."

"Even if it's only through pain."

"Even if it's the last thing I ever feel."

"Because I want to be with you..."

"Even if that means not being me anymore."

"Even if that means ending everything."

"I'll come to you then..."

...

I crawled back, slowly, legs folded beneath me. My hands rose to my throat.

They were trembling—shaking like glass on the edge of shattering.

I stared at my bloodstained fingers for a second longer...

Then I wrapped them around my neck.

Tightly.

And squeezed.

Tears streamed from my eyes as I choked.

"I... love you..." I gasped.

I choked harder.

My head pounded.

My vision spun.

My chest screamed for air.

"I love you, Kaiser..."

I choked harder.

The world dimmed.

My face burned.

But I didn't let go.

Because I needed him to hear me.

"I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser."

"I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser."

"I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser."

"I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser."

"I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser."

"I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser. I love you kaiser."

The world turned silent.

My hands slowly slipped from my throat.

I feel like I stopped breathing for once... It's over.

And the last thing I remembered was falling backwards... like I was sinking into a grave made of air.

I smiled.

Because maybe this time I'll see him again.

Maybe this time... I will die and reach him...

But instead—

The Void Stared back at me...

----- **The Reason... I love you so much...** -----

The Loveliest Day of my life...

This is what had happened weeks ago; back when she was with him at Levi's home. Kaiser was still healing and Celia was taking care of him. This was a few days after their emotional moment. (Refering to 'Cursed Love' Chapter.)

She was experiencing this memory unconscious as the Void stared back at her.

----- Weeks Ago -----

10:38 AM - Levi's Home.

Celia's Perspective:

After that day with Kaiser—when he saw right through my lying smile and held me as I cried—I stopped pretending I didn't have feelings for him.

That fake smile always worked before. People would just nod and move on, never asking if I was okay. But not him. He stayed until my real smile.

He stayed, and I... I felt happy.

And yet, I can't let myself fall too far. Just because he noticed my sadness once, doesn't mean he feels the same. I can't let myself believe in something that might never be real.

I can't love him... I'm cursed and I'll only get him hurt by loving him more.

But then again... here I am, climbing the stairs in Levi's home. Just to see him. Again.

I could say it's just to check on him. That's what I told Emma when she offered to bring him breakfast earlier.

I snapped at her.

Told her he was resting and didn't need anything.

I lied.

I just didn't want anyone else touching the space I've quietly claimed for myself. I don't want her doing favors for him. That right... that role... that place—it's mine. And mine alone.

Only I should be allowed.

I pushed open the door gently, heart beating quicker than I wanted to admit. And there he was—Kaiser—standing near the window, soft light draping around his figure like some sacred painting. His wrist was bandaged, but his expression was calm, almost dreamy.

His eyes... blue like the sky just beyond the window.

No. His was prettier.

"Kaiser?" I said, pretending my voice wasn't trembling.

He turned to me, and that small, gentle smile carved into his face like it belonged there.
"Oh, Celia. Come sit with me, you gotta see this."

Without thinking, I walked over. Like gravity pulled me closer.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to sound curious, not hopelessly drawn to his voice.

He pointed outside, and I followed his gaze. The clouds—so soft, glowing in the nearing early afternoon—were slowly forming shapes, two of them coming together like they were meant to.

Bound forever.

Something about them felt... too symbolic.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Kaiser asked, still looking out.

"Yes... it's beautiful. Looks so unusual," I replied.

Of course, I meant the sky.

But then he looked at me and said, "Oh? I wasn't talking about that. Something else is more beautiful."

My throat tightened. My chest felt tight.

"Huh? What is it?" I asked, playing dumb, because I wasn't ready for what I thought he might say.

"I was talking about you."

My heart...

It almost stopped.

Did he mean it? Was this one of those harmless teases he always did? Why does he say these things like they're nothing when they mean everything to me?

"You're just messing with me again, huh?" I said, turning away slightly, trying to hide the way my ears were burning. My voice had that fake pout I always used.

He leaned back, closing his eyes as if my reaction amused him. "I was just imagining how beautiful the sky would look if you were with it. Maybe then, finally, it'd have a rival in beauty."

Why... Why does he say things like this?

I clutched the hem of my sleeve tighter. It's not fair.

He's not fair.

"Stop it, Kaiser. I know you're messing with me," I said, puffing my cheeks a little like I was annoyed—but I wasn't. Not even close.

"Alright, alright, Lia, I'll stop," he said with a grin. That nickname again. Lia. I should hate it.

But I don't. I love how it sounds in his voice.

"But it makes me wanna go outside," he added, staring out again. "See the beautiful sky in person."

"No, Kaiser. You're still sick." I shifted closer to him, voice a little more firm this time. "I can't let you go outside and get hurt again."

He turned slightly, that side smile that made my stomach flutter playing on his lips. "Then come out with me."

What...?

What did he just...?

"W-what do you mean by that?" I stammered, blinking.

"Today's a special day, Celia," he said, and for a moment his eyes grew calmer. "And I want to experience it outside. With only you."

Only me?

"Special day?" I echoed, eyes shifting to the sky again. The clouds were still forming together—closer now. More bound. Tighter.

Kaiser's eyes followed mine. "Today's the festival day for Celestine. The Eternal Match."

I froze.

The Eternal Match...

The night where soulmates were said to meet beneath the sky... under those pairing clouds...

"You mean... like the night where you meet your soulmate?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded. "Today's the special night that's celebrated all over the villages to the west. It's a beautiful night of love."

Then why... why me?

I'm not his soulmate. He can't mean that. He's just being kind again. Being sweet again. He doesn't mean it the way I do. He doesn't feel the way I do. I've always been more broken, more... replaceable.

But then he said it. Words that undid all my careful restraint:

"I want you to join me, Celia. Only you."

He reached out, palm open.

For me.

...Me?

"But Kai... you're still recovering," I tried to protest, voice weak. My heart screamed yes, but I couldn't let it show.

He smiled. Not teasing. Not amused. Just soft.

"If you're with me, the pain won't matter."

I hate you.

I hate that you say things like that.

I hate that you don't see what it does to me.

"Please, Celia? I'll be sad if I go alone." His voice was soft—lower than usual almost sounding sad.

And my heart...

No. No, no... please don't get sad.

That's the one thing I can't handle.

"But... Kaiser, I... I don't know if it's right." I looked away as I said it, voice trembling just slightly.

What I meant was—I want to go. I want to go more than anything. I want to hold your hand and be next to you like we belong together.

But...

"I am not doing that well today..." I said.

Lie.

Every part of me wanted to force myself to go if it meant being beside him. If it meant even a few hours of pretending we were something more than just... this.

"Can you please come for me?" he asked again, eyes searching mine.

That voice... damn it.

...Yes. I want to...

But the words that came out weren't those.

"No. I don't think it's right... You're still hurt and need rest," I said with a little smile, I didn't want to burden or get him hurt again.

He looked at me gently. "Please, Celia? Just for today?"

I bit my lip.

"I... I don't know what to say anymore," I whispered.

"It's just for today, Celia. I know you're still upset inside. Is it... because of me?" His voice grew even softer. Concern. That real, aching concern he always had for others.

You...? How... could you think I would be upset on you?

"I'm not upset," I said.

"I just don't know if we should go out."

"We'll enjoy it together, Celia," he said, smile warming his face. "I want to make you happier. I guess... I want to also thank you in a way. For taking care of me when I was hurt."

So that's it...?

Just a thank-you.

That's the reason why...

A cold hurt twisted in my chest, but I didn't say anything.

"So can you, just for once, agree with me? It'll just be for a few hours... we'll enjoy the festival and return, I promise."

I shouldn't.

I really shouldn't agree.

It'll only make me love him more.

And I'm already too far gone.

"...Okay. Just for today," I said.

The words came out before I could stop them. My heart beat painfully. But I smiled.

He smiled too.

And just seeing him like that... it made my chest ache and warm all at once. I felt myself smile back, small, quiet, only he could make me smile without me realizing it.

"Okay, Celia," he said, already stepping out. "Give me ten minutes to prepare, then we'll leave, okay?"

I just nodded, watching him go, feeling the silence return the moment the door closed.

And then... it was just me again.

Alone.

My eyes drifted to the window, the clouds outside still glowing in the morning light. They moved slowly, two of them drifting together. The same clouds Kaiser pointed at earlier.

The Eternal Match.

I pressed a hand to my chest.

Could I be...?

No. That's stupid.

I'm not his eternal match.

That kind of thing isn't meant for people like me.

But still...

Why did he ask me? Why did he say he wanted to experience it with me?

Why me?

It's not fair. It's really not fair when he says things like that—so soft, so sincere. It makes me feel like I could believe it.

Even if it's a lie.

Even if he's just being kind.

Even if he never sees me the way I see him.

I want to believe it.

I want to believe I'm special to him.

I want to believe—just for today—that I might be the one.

The one he chose.

My hand curled against my chest tighter.

If I could just stay in this lie a little longer... If I could keep pretending he might love me back... then maybe, maybe I won't fall apart yet.

Maybe I can still smile beside him.

I took a deep breath, turned away from the window, and headed toward my room to get changed.

I didn't want to waste a second of the lie.

----- **Only Together** -----

11:03 AM - Outside of Levi's Home, towards Levinton.

As I stepped out of the house, the air gently brushing against my skin, I tightened the soft white hood over my head. My hair, almost silver in the sunlight, peeked out beneath it. I wore a white dress—thin-strapped, flowing just past my knees, with faint, sky-colored embroidery along the edges. Simple, not extravagant... but enough. I hoped.

Then I saw him.

Kaiser stood just a few steps ahead, his back turned slightly, head tilted up toward the soft clouds as if he was searching for something that only he could see. The black coat he wore swayed lightly with the breeze—black shirt, black pants. Why did that look... so good on him? The contrast of darkness to his warmth.

His eyes met mine.

He smiled.

A small, warm smile that wasn't too bright or fake—it was the kind of smile someone gives when they feel calm, or maybe when they're happy just seeing you.

He waved his hand slightly. A gesture for me to come.

And my heart started pounding again.

I hate this. I hate how easily he does this to me.

We walked beside each other in silence. My fingers fiddled with the hem of my sleeve. I kept glancing at the trees, the path, the sky—anything that wasn't him. Anything to stop myself from looking too long at his face, at his expressions... at how easily my heart kept slipping.

Stop it. Be normal. Be casual. You've done this before, right?

"K-Kai?" I mumbled, trying not to choke on my breath.

He turned to me with a hum. "Mhm?"

"Where are we going?" I asked, trying to sound curious instead of desperate.

"Walking our future together," he teased, leaning just a little closer to my side. "What does it look like?"

My chest tightened.

"F-Future...?" I echoed dumbly.

Why would you say something like that...? Does he know what that word does to me?

Kaiser chuckled, hands casually laced behind his head. "Oh Celia, relax. You're always so intense and serious. I just wanted to see you enjoy today."

Enjoy...

I don't know how to enjoy things without you anymore.

"But... where are we going still?" I tried again, forcing the words out normally.

"Relax. Leave it to me." He smiled, eyes looking ahead. "We're heading to the Levinton Guild Casters."

"Casters?" I repeated, slightly confused.

He nodded. "Oh, you might not know—using a caster, we can teleport quickly from one place to another."

Teleport...?

He was taking me somewhere. Somewhere far? Alone, just us?

"Somewhere only we know," he added with a wink.

I quickly turned away, gripping my arm. Don't blush. Don't act stupid.

Why do you say things like that, Kaiser? Do you mean them? Or are you just kind?

"B-But Kaiser, that sounds expensive," I said, a slight worry leaking into my voice. "Shouldn't that cost a lot of gold?"

I don't want him wasting money on me. I'm not worth that. Not his effort... not his kindness... I'm just someone who—

"Yeah," he said with a calm shrug, "around twenty to thirty gold."

My breath caught.

Twenty to thirty?! That's enough to live a week. To eat every day... to buy books, potions... that's not cheap!

"No, no!" I stopped in my tracks. "I can't let you spend that much for me."

He paused too.

I looked down. I didn't want to see his expression—I didn't want to see pity, or annoyance... I didn't want to be that girl again. The one who ruins moments. The one who clings and breaks things.

He stepped closer.

I didn't move.

Then—his hand held onto mine.

I gasped lightly.

He was warm. Why did he always feel so... real?

"Kai—please stop..." I whispered.

"I'm not stopping today," he said gently. "Just come. It'll be okay."

My legs moved before my mind could. He led me forward. Still holding my hand.

Why...?

Why does this feel like everything I ever wanted?

"I know it'll make you happy," he said without turning back. "That's why I'm doing it."

My heart fell into silence.

He... knew? Did he feel it?

If he keeps doing this...

I'll fall harder. I'll fall to a point where I can't get back up again.

But I already did, didn't I?

Even if I know this will end in pain... even if I know I'll only bring him suffering... being next to him like this... being the girl he smiles at...

It makes me feel happy.

Even if it's temporary... even if I'm cursed...

Being his, even for a moment, is the only time I've felt like I wasn't sad.

And I know I shouldn't...

But I want it anyway.

We walked... and he kept holding my hand.

His fingers were warm, wrapped around mine like they belonged there. Did my hand belong to his?

...No. That's silly. Stupid, even. It's not mine to want... But even if it's a lie, even if he's just being kind, I want to believe it. Just for a while... let me believe it.

The streets of Levinton slowly became busier as we entered the main part of town. I tugged my hood a little lower and kept my gaze to the stone beneath our feet. I didn't want anyone to look at me.

I knew how they saw me...

Nobody really liked me, that's how it's been always. They all thought of me... as a disgusting monster.. someone ugly to be killed.. that should've never been born.

It's always been like that.

So I kept my head low, biting the inside of my cheek. I shouldn't ruin today. Not this time... not when I'm with him.

Then suddenly—

"That white dress looks really beautiful on you, Celia. Maybe you'll charm me today," he said, teasing, that soft smile tugging at his lips.

I blinked. My eyes flicked up to him.

Why... why are you like this, Kai?

I didn't say anything. Couldn't. My throat tightened too much.

But deep down—no, deeper than deep—I was glad. Glad he thought I was... beautiful. Not disgusting. Not ugly.

Soon we arrived at the caster office. The place was tall and square, runed stones etched into its corners, humming faintly with mana. An officer stood out front—tall, scarred, and glaring. I instinctively stepped behind Kaiser, hiding half my body behind his coat.

"Who's the girl?" the officer asked.

"Oh, her? She's my friend. I'm paying extra. Let us both go," Kaiser said casually.

Friend.

...That word stung a little more than I expected.

"I'll need to see her face before I do. Tell her to take her hood off," the man demanded.

I froze. My breath caught.

No. No no no.

He couldn't see me. If he did... if they all did...

They'd hate me.

They'd call me things again and hurt me.

And this time, maybe even Kaiser would agree.

Maybe... he'd see what they all see. And when he does, he'll leave me....

"She's a little shy. Can't we do it without that?" Kaiser asked.

"No. It's the policy. I can't change it," the officer said firmly.

I didn't breathe.

I couldn't.

Please...

Then... Kaiser stepped forward, placed his arm around the man's shoulder, and led him to a corner out of sight. I couldn't hear what he said—his voice was low, quiet, calm. I just stood there like a frozen, nails digging into my sleeves.

A few moments passed.

Then... the man returned, said nothing, and just started the teleportation spell.

He didn't ask to see my face again.

...What?

I looked up. Kaiser was already glancing at me—his eyes warm and steady—before he gave me a playful wink.

My heart jumped.

He did that. He protected me again. Without asking. Without pushing me. He spoke for me when I couldn't. He shielded me when I was about to be hurt again.

I reached out and gripped the corner of his coat tightly. Like a child, someone too scared to let go.

"Thank you, Kaiser..." I whispered, barely loud enough to hear myself.

Then the world spun.

The teleportation light engulfed us, and in an instant, we were somewhere else.

When I opened my eyes, the air was quiet and earthy, birds chirping in the distant canopy. We were in a wild forest—lush, deep green, and untouched. I didn't recognize it at all. A strange wind brushed through the trees like it knew we didn't belong.

I turned to my side—and there he was.

Kaiser.

He gestured for me to come, his usual smile tugging at his lips like he wasn't dragging my entire heart behind him without realizing.

We started walking again.

And I just... watched him. Silently.

He spoke up for me.

He made that scary man change his mind... just like that.

And he called me beautiful earlier, didn't he?

Beautiful...

No. Don't fall for it. He's just nice to everyone. It's just how he is. But still—he said it... for me.

Every time I looked at him, he felt... distant but close.

And yet here I was, walking beside him. Close enough that my sleeve brushed his every few steps.

I looked up again and found him staring back at me.

"You keep glancing at me, Celia. Planning some sort of intimate confession?" he asked with a playful grin.

"H-Huh?! No! I'm just... making sure you don't trip! I-I'm just concerned!" I shouted, flustered.

He laughed. The kind of laugh that made the whole forest feel lighter.

"You're worried I'll trip, huh? That's cute. Want to hold my hand again, then? Just in case?" he teased.

My face turned bright red.

"N-No! You already held it earlier!" I snapped, waving my arms awkwardly.

But inside?

Hold it again...? Forever? If you ask, I'll never let go.

Never.

I looked away, hiding my face.

I don't want him to know. I really don't.

Because if he knew how much I loved him... how badly I wanted to be his—just his—he might run.

And if he ran... I wouldn't survive it.

But for now... for now, I'll walk beside him. Just like this.

Because being near him... it makes the world less terrifying.

And maybe that's love.

Even if I can't say it.

----- Only You and I -----

11:48 AM - Unknown forest, going somewhere only we know.

We continued to walk for a while, my feet brushing softly against the forest floor as the sounds of leaves and rustling wind accompanied us. Kaiser looked so calm... so focused. His eyes scanned the trees like they were familiar friends guiding him forward.

Has he been here before?

The way he glanced at every bend and twist in the woods made it feel like this wasn't his first time. Every step he took was with quiet certainty—like he knew where he was going, like he was leading me somewhere only we can go.

But... something kept poking my thoughts.

Where did Kaiser get all that gold?

Thirty gold just for a teleport... that's not normal. That's a lot. And I didn't even see him earn it. Most of his stuff was lost that night—when Ronan and Kiel attacked us. He had nothing left. So then... where did it come from?

Wait. Wait! What if he borrowed it? Just to make me happy?!

No. No no no. Please no. Don't tell me he's working under someone for me... doing favors or missions just so he can treat me well... They can use him and hurt him... I don't want that.

I don't want him to exhaust himself just to make me smile.

"Hey, Kaiser...?" I asked, trying to sound casual, though my voice cracked with concern. "How much gold do you have?"

"I have around... a 100 to a 120 gold right now," Kaiser said, waving a hand as if it was no big deal.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. "Wha—?! Where did you get so much from?!"

I leaned toward him, trying to catch any lie in his eyes. But they just sparkled with mischief. He was too calm. That made me even more nervous.

"Chill out, Celia," he said with that little grin, "it's for our special day today. Don't worry—"

"Of course I'm going to worry!" I snapped, cutting him off. My voice came out sharper than I meant it to. "I don't want you to owe people money just because of me! Don't you understand?!"

"How could you be so reckless?!" I shouted, the fury boiling over in my chest. "You don't just throw yourself into something like that without telling me—without even thinking!"

"Do you even think before you do these things?!" I shouted, voice shaking. "Or do you just not care what happens to you—as long as it's for me? Because it sure feels like you don't care what it does to me! You're heartless!"

Why is he like this?! Why is he so kind to me?! I don't deserve this. I don't want him to suffer for my sake. Just thinking about it makes my chest pain.

"I—" I tried to say more, but Kaiser just stopped walking.

He turned to face me, still quiet, still watching me like he wasn't angry... like he was just waiting for me to finish.

No. No, I messed up again, didn't I?

Wait no no.. no.. I didn't mean to yell.... I look up realizing my mistake.. please kaiser don't hate me, I didn't mean to.. please..

He blinked, then softly smiled.

Why...?

Why are you smiling?

He reached out and gently placed his hand on my head, ruffling my hair and pulling my hood down.

"Calm down, Celia," he said. "I didn't borrow the gold."

His voice was so warm. So calm. Like he was trying to tell me, in his own way, that he would never hurt me... and that he'd never hate me. Not for yelling. Not for being scared. Not for being... me.

He didn't flinch at my anger. He didn't step away from me.

Why... are you so gentle with me...?

"I might've gotten it from a bit of sketchy methods," he added, scratching the back of his neck, "but it's nothing important."

"Sketchy...?" I looked at him, confused and slightly alarmed. "What do you mean?"

"Ugh, fine. I'll tell you one of them," he muttered, chuckling to himself.

We kept walking, but he leaned in a bit like he was sharing some great secret.

"This morning," he began, "I spoke with Emma."

"Emma... What did you two talk about?" I raised a brow.

"Yeah. I asked her to do me a favor and promised I'd pay her with gold, but I didn't have change for the piece I gave her."

"And...?" I tilted my head.

"So I gave her a Multilayer Coin piece that's worth fifty gold."

"...You had a fifty gold coin?!"

"Technically," he grinned, raising a finger, "it was painted gold. It was a silver piece I painted like gold last night."

I stopped walking, blinked, and stared at him.

"Wait... you... conned Emma?"

Kaiser looked too proud of himself. "It's not conning if she smiled while giving me twenty gold and said, 'you're always welcome, Kaiser.'"

I blinked again, then burst into laughter. It came out of me all at once—sharp, sudden, real.

"You're a con artist!" I said between gasps.

Kaiser grinned wide, completely unfazed. "Correction: I'm an opportunist with good painting skills and talent. Oh yeah, I did it to like 10 other people but we ignore that."

"That's even worse!"

"Come on, I painted those things real nice. You should've seen it. Even I believed it was real for a second."

I couldn't stop laughing. My stomach hurt. My cheeks were red. I had to hold onto a tree to steady myself.

You idiot... you stupid, wonderful idiot...

Why are you like this...? Why do you do these things just to make me laugh?

As I looked at him—still chuckling, still proud of himself—I felt it again.

That warm, twisted ache inside me.

You made me laugh when I was scared for you. You let me yell at you and didn't push me away. You saved me again and again. You always do.

Even if you lied and conned someone... you did it just to make me happy.

Kaiser... what do I do with you?

I looked at him again, smiling softly.

I'll follow you anywhere. Just don't leave me behind.

But... what if I hurt him?

What if, deep down, he didn't like me anymore?

Maybe he was just smiling to be polite. Maybe... maybe he was just being kind because that's the kind of person he is. Maybe I ruined it. Maybe I shouted too loud, maybe I sounded ungrateful, selfish—everything I've always been scared of being.

No, no, no...

I don't want him to hate me.

Please don't hate me.

Please.

I kept walking beside him, every step feeling like I was walking further away from the safety of his heart.

I bit my lip and asked softly, "Hey Kaiser... I'm sorry. For yelling earlier... I didn't mean to. I was just... a little concerned about you."

"It's nothing, Celia. I'm fine," he said, as if it truly meant nothing at all.

But it wasn't nothing to me. It was everything.

No... no, no, no. He is hurt. I can feel it. Why wouldn't he be?

I hurt the only person who makes me happy.

Why did I say those things? Why did I raise my voice? Why didn't I think? Why am I always like this?

"B-but Kaiser," I blurted out, my voice cracking, "I shouldn't have yelled. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say those things—those hurtful things. I-I just got scared."

Tears were forming in my eyes, my throat tightening like it was choking on regret. I didn't want to lose him. I couldn't.

He turned his head to me gently, his soft expression tugging at something deep inside my chest. "Oh, Celia... what's wrong?"

"I hurt you..." I whispered, stuttering, trembling. "W-while you were trying to make me happy... I'm such a bad person. I'm sorry. Please... forgive me..."

I wiped at my tears with the sleeves of my dress, but they just kept falling faster. "I was only worried about you... I didn't mean any of it. I was just scared you were doing too much for me again, and I didn't want you to get hurt because of me..."

My shoulders shook. My words were coming out in pieces. Like my heart was cracking with every syllable.

Then... he stepped closer and gently reached up to wipe my tears for me.

His hand was warm.

"Celia..." He gently cupped my face, his thumb brushing away a tear. "I hate seeing you like this. It hurts me more than you know. Please don't cry, not for me."

Why are you so kind to me? Why do you always say the exact thing I need to hear?

I wanted to fall into his arms and never let go.

"I'm sorry..." I muttered again, quieter this time, voice hoarse. "For getting angry... for yelling at you..."

He just smiled, wiping away the last few tears that clung to my cheeks like broken glass.

Then he held my hand again. Just like that.

No punishment. No rejection. No anger.

We kept walking, our hands locked gently, and I tried to calm my heartbeat.

Then he spoke again.

"Celia."

I looked up with my red, tear-stung eyes. His were the color of a quiet sky. Peaceful blue looking back at me.

He paused for a moment then spoke with honesty... I've never heard before.

"I would rather be hated by you every day... than be loved by someone else once," he said, unwavering.

My heart—

"Because even when you're yelling at me... it's still your voice. And in that moment hearing it, all I want is to be here with you, no matter what."

My heart...

How can you say something like that and expect me to keep breathing?

How much more... how much more can I love you?

How much more can you make me love you?

No one's ever looked at me like this. No one's ever stayed. No one's ever held my hand after I broke something in them.

Nobody... but you.

I love you so much it hurts.

And yet you smile, and the pain feels like it's worth something.

He gently pulled me closer, guiding me through the quiet trees. The sky was beginning to soften into a pale gold as the sun shifted above us.

Then he said, in that gentle, soothing voice of his—

"We're here, Celia."

He looked at me, his hand still in mine.

"To eternity, together."

----- Wife? me? -----

12:23 PM - Village of love, Eversoul.

"Kaiser, where is this place?" I asked, walking just a little closer to him as we arrived at the edge of a town I didn't recognize.

"This is the Village of Love, Eversoul." He responded, letting go of my hand with a warm smile.

The moment his fingers left mine, a small ache clung to my skin—why did he have to let go...?

I looked around, blinking a few times. The cobblestone paths shimmered with soft flower petals dancing across them, tossed playfully by the wind. Hanging lanterns gently swayed between rooftops, their colored lights casting a dreamy hue over the town. Every house had vibrant vines of pink and violet wrapped around it, and the air... it smelled like blossoms and old stories. Laughter echoed from nearby couples, and stalls lined the street, filled with candied fruits, ribbons, charms, and delicate crafts meant for two.

Today... was the festival day. The Festival of Eternal Match. Of course.

Why here? Why now?

"Hey Kai...?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. I couldn't bring myself to meet his eyes. Not when my cheeks were already burning up with heat. I held my hands behind my back, shy.

"Yeah, Lia?" he replied casually.

My heart thumped harder just hearing him call me that.

"Why did... you bring me here?"

I couldn't breathe right.

Did he want me to be his...? No—no, don't think that. That's stupid. Don't get ahead of yourself, Celia.

But still... why else would he bring me here?

Kaiser suddenly laughed, a light, teasing kind that made me flinch slightly and look up at him with wide eyes.

He was smiling at me—smirking even.

"What?" I blurted defensively.

"Oh, nothing," he said with that annoying, perfect grin. "You're just really cute when you blush."

"I'm not blushing!" I shot back too quickly. "It's—it's just really hot here! Look how bright the sun is!" I pointed vaguely upward like that would make the moment less humiliating.

He chuckled again.

"Sure, sure... blussy girl. I'll keep that in mind."

I puffed my cheeks and turned away from him, arms crossed. "Hmph."

Why is he like this? He's so stupid. Dummy.

"Aww, did I get you upset, Celia?" he said, taking a step closer.

I didn't answer. I just tilted my head further away, trying not to let him see the small smile threatening to escape from my lips. Stupid. Why does his voice make my chest feel all fuzzy?

"Hmm... now what do I have to do to win you back?" he mused aloud. "I wonder how..."

Tch.

Dummy.

He still hasn't even answered my question. Why did he bring me here? He always does this—says sweet things, teases me, smiles like I'm his only friend, then brushes over the important part.

Is it just a joke to him? Am I just someone to walk around festivals with?

...Or am I something more?

I want to ask again. I want to grab him and shake the answer out of him.

But my hands won't move. My lips won't part.

Because if I ask again and he says "as friends"... I might break. And I'd rather live in this lie a little longer than face that cold truth.

Still, the thought lingers like a splinter under skin.

Kaiser... do you want me to be yours?

Do you want me the way I want you?

I don't need you to say it. Just act like you mean it. Just look at me like I'm more than a moment.

Then... suddenly, I saw them.

A few small kids from the village ran up to him, giggling and shouting his name.

"Kaiiiseeer!"

My eyes turned sharply to him—then to them.

His expression turned neutral immediately from his smile with me from earlier as he knelt to greet them, ruffling their hair and laughing softly.

...why did he stop smiling so suddenly?

"Mmm, what do you four want today? Can't you see I'm busy with someone?" Kaiser said, glancing down at the cluster of little kids surrounding him, then flicking his gaze toward me.

I watched from the side, a few steps away, arms lightly folded. I hadn't said anything yet... but I already felt the familiar wall creeping up inside my chest. Children didn't usually like me. I didn't know why. Maybe I gave off a weird vibe with my eyes? Maybe I just didn't smile the right way. Maybe they saw something in me—something evil.

But they loved him, didn't they?

"Kaiiiserrr! Give us some gold!" one of them squeaked, a tiny boy with hay-colored hair and missing teeth. "We're asking everyone in the village for it!"

"Huh? And why should I?" Kaiser asked, his tone flat, unreadable, that usual relaxed expression not shifting in the slightest.

"Because you gave us a lot last time!" the little girl with a purple bow said, bouncing slightly on her toes.

Kaiser sighed—loudly and with exaggeration.

"Listen up, kids," he said, clearing his throat dramatically.

"I'm currently poorer than the beggars in town."

The way he said it—so sarcastic and dry—I almost stumbled backward trying to hold in my laugh.

"Huh! That can't be true!" a kid in a red shirt shouted.

"It's all true, guys. Nowadays, beggars give me their spare change because of how poor I am," he added with a shrug.

The kids collectively gasped, clearly heartbroken by the idea. One of them even covered his mouth in horror.

I watched quietly, unsure whether to laugh or cringe. What was he even doing?

"But..." Kaiser leaned closer, voice lowering like he was about to tell them a secret. "I know someone who can give you guys a lot of gold."

"Huh?? Who??"

"Yeah, who!?"

"Tell us, tell us!"

Kaiser slowly turned and pointed—at me.

"This beautiful young girl right here," he said, with the fakest sincerity I've ever heard from him, "is very wealthy. Call her an empress if you wish."

I blinked.

Once. Twice.

"Wh—"

I was dumbfounded. Fumbled. Shocked. Speechless. Confused. What the hell was he saying?! My jaw just... hung there. And then I choked on air trying to say something.

What!?

The kids' eyes lit up like I was their last hope in life.

"A donation please, miss?" the smallest boy asked, tugging on my sleeve gently. "Just a few gold...?"

"Please, Empress! Just for us! Pretty please!" the girl said, clasping her hands together in front of her chest.

I froze.

How do I... tell them I don't have any gold on me?

Why, Kaiser...? Why would you do this?

Did you want me to break their hearts?

People already look at me like I'm a monster... I've had kids run from me before—literally run. I'm not... I'm not exactly approachable. I'm not like you.

And now? Now they're smiling at me, tugging on my hand, calling me Empress like I'm someone kind and important and lovely. It's the first time someone this small has looked at me like that. And you just—just threw me to chaos.

I glanced over at him, my eyes sharpening—only to see him casually lift his palm.

"Oh my god, guys! Look at this!" Kaiser said suddenly, as five gleaming gold coins appeared in his hand like magic.

The kids all gasped in unison.

"Wooow!!"

"How'd you do that?!"

"Magic!!!" they squealed as they all turned to him with sparkles in their eyes.

He crouched and handed them each a piece, tousling their hair and patting their shoulders gently. His expression, however, didn't change. No warm smile, no playfulness in his eyes. Just calm... collected... neutral.

Still, why did he bring me up if he was going to give them the gold?

What's the point...?

"Thank you, Kaiser!" they cheered in chorus.

Kaiser paused. "Don't thank me," he said, and I could hear the quiet weight in his voice. "Thank her—Celia. She's the one who sent the gold to me. Magic, remember?"

My eyes widened.

The kids turned toward me, beaming.

"Thank you, Miss Celia!"

"You're the best Empress ever!"

"You're really pretty too!"

They hugged my legs, pulling gently at my skirt, laughing.

I didn't know what to say.

I didn't know how to react.

They just... smiled at me.

All because of him.

My gaze slipped back to Kaiser. He wasn't even looking at me—he was watching the kids with quiet care.

Why?

Why go that far for me?

I pressed a hand to my chest. It ached again, but differently.

Warmth spread through the cracks inside me.

Dummy.

Why are you so nice...?

You make it so much harder not to fall deeper.

Wait...

I don't have my hood on.

A cold prickle rushed up my spine, like fear had wrapped its fingers around my ribs. I could feel my hair—the bright white that drew stares, whispers, hatred—flowing freely in the wind. My eyes... red and obvious.

But the kids...

They were still smiling. Thanking me.

They weren't... scared?

"Are you guys... happy?" I asked softly, hesitantly, like one wrong word would shatter this moment.

"Yeah!" one boy said. "You're the nicest person ever!"

"You gave us gold and you're really cool!" another chirped.

"And you're pretty too!" the girl with the purple bow added.

My heart squeezed.

I blinked. Twice.

"And are you... not scared?" I asked, voice small, fearing the worst. I could barely look at them.

"Nope!" the little girl giggled, tugging gently on my sleeve. "You're really pretty, Miss Celia!"

Then, shyly, she tilted her head and whispered, "Can you please lean down?"

I crouched, awkward but curious—and suddenly, two tiny arms wrapped around my neck. A soft kiss landed on my cheek, just a brush, but enough to short-circuit my brain.

She hugged me.

She kissed me.

Like I was... someone that deserved love. Someone she admired.

I... didn't know what to think.

They weren't scared. Not of my eyes. Not of my hair. They didn't see me like everyone else did. No fear. No disgust.

Just... smiles.

"You have really pretty eyes, Miss. When I grow up, I wanna be as pretty and kind as you."

My breath hitched. I felt something unravel inside me. A soft knot loosening.

Kaiser... you did this.

I turned my head slowly. And there he was.

Looking right at me.

Not the kids. Not the sky. Not anywhere else.

Just... me.

And then—he smiled. That faint little curve of his lips that no one else got to see. Just me. Only me.

You changed how they saw me, didn't you? Just a little lie and some gold. You made them love me. Just to make me smile again.

A small laugh escaped my lips. A smile tugged up before I could even stop it.

You turned my bitterness into happiness like it was nothing. My pout, my earlier mood—it all melted away.

Every moment with you... makes me want you more. Desperately.

And then—

"Kaiser!" one of the boys asked, "Is she your girlfriend?"

I choked on air.

My head whipped toward them. What kind of question was that?!?

"No-No!" I sputtered, face flushed. "I'm not his girlfriend!"

Kaiser, of course, just... nodded. Calmly. Like that was that.

The kids looked at me... then at him.

And they laughed.

"Ha! Looks like Kaiser doesn't have Miss Celia!"

"Yeah! Kaiser, you're not lucky enough to have her!"

"She's just your companion!" one of them said with a sly grin.

"Only your friend!"

I blinked. Laughed nervously. But inside?

It stung.

Friend. That word again.

The one I hated most when it came to him.

Why did it hurt like this? That simple word... it felt like someone stuck a cold dagger through my heart.

Because I wasn't lucky enough to have him, was I?

I was the one desperately reaching out, always a step behind...

I didn't want to be his friend. I didn't want to be just someone he tolerated.

I wanted to be his.

Please... stop calling me that. Don't call me your friend, Kaiser... it hurts more than you know.

"Enough," Kaiser said suddenly, his voice steady.

The kids froze mid-giggle, looking up at him.

I did too.

He met all our eyes, expression still neutral—but something in his tone changed.

"You guys have misunderstood something," he said.

My heart skipped.

What... are you doing now?

"You see," he continued, hands in his pockets, "Celia may not be my girlfriend... but there's a deep reason why."

I stared.

Please...

Please don't say it's because I'm just a friend...

Please don't say I'm nothing special...

Please, Kaiser...

Then the little girl asked, so innocently, "Then who is she to you?"

Kaiser turned toward me.

And then—he smiled again, just slightly.

"She's my wife."

...

What did you just say...?

What.

The.

Hell.

My mouth hung open.

I didn't know whether to scream, faint, or drag him into an alley and interrogate him for saying something so casually earth-shattering in front of four kids and me.

But all I managed was one tiny, squeaky sound.

"Wha—"

The kids all gasped.

"WHAAAT?!"

"Miss Celia's your wife?!"

"That's so cool!"

"You married her with magic, didn't you?!"

I was still frozen. Face hot. Mind blank.

And Kaiser...?

He looked completely unbothered.

Just casually declared me his wife like it was some normal thing he says every day.

What is this man doing now...?

"Wife?!"

"Does that mean you kiss Kaiser on the lips?" one of the boys asked with wide eyes.

"I-I—" I flinched, hands flailing, eyes darting between the kids and the stupidly calm Kaiser. "N-No! I mean—I haven't—Not like—That's—"

Kaiser, standing right next to me, coolly added, "Only on Tuesdays she kisses."

I nearly tripped over my own foot.

WHAT TUESDAYS?! WHAT LIPS?! WHEN DID THAT—!?

The kids squealed in delight.

"He kisses you every week?! **Today's Tuesday!**"

"Do you sleep in the same bed?" one of the girls asked.

"I—uh—I sleep alone!" I snapped. "In my own room! All the time!"

Kaiser hummed. "She does. Though she usually comes knocking at my room after midnight."

I almost screamed.

My whole body locked up.

He's lying. He's lying. He's lying and he's doing it in that infuriatingly casual tone that makes people believe him. These kids are going to think I sneak into his bed. At night!!!!

Which is ridiculous.

...Not that I haven't thought about it.

...

Wait no STOP—

"But... do you guys love each other?" another little boy asked with a tilted head.

I opened my mouth, closed it, opened it again—

"I—I mean... I really like him—BUT I don't—"

"She's obsessed," Kaiser said plainly. "Hopelessly and Madly in love with me."

I froze in place.

He... He knows? Or is he making this up too?

The kids clapped. "Yaaaay! So romantic!!"

Romantic?!? It's not romantic, it's terrifying! I want to chain him to me! Bury anyone who touches him! Rip out every girl's eyes who dares glance at him! Make him breathe me and me alone!

...Okay maybe that does sound a little romantic.

But still!

I glanced up at him.

He was still looking at the kids... except when his gaze drifted down to me.

That smile.

That small, subtle, he only ever shows when it's me.

Kaiser...

Stop that. Stop being this perfect blend of cruel and kind, teasing and protective. You do this thing where you say something outrageous in public and then reward me in private with a smile like I'm your entire world.

My chest is going to explode.

"I bet they even have kids!" one of the boys whispered to the others.

"I want to meet them!"

"Alright, that's enough!" I shouted, face boiling with heat, heart pounding. "We're leaving! Now!"

Before Kaiser could say anything else insane, I grabbed his arm—firm, strong, unfairly calm Kaiser—and pulled him away.

The kids waved behind us, all grinning like fools.

"Bye-bye, Miss Celia!"

"Bye, Kaiserrr!"

"Byeee Kaiser and his wife!"

"Good luck on Tuesday for the kiss!"

KAISER. TUESDAY. I SWEAR—

I didn't stop dragging him until we rounded the corner, and even then, I kept my grip on his arm like he might vanish the second I let go.

I could feel my heartbeat slamming in my ears. Not from the walk. Not from embarrassment.

From the fact that...

He said I was his wife.

Even if he was teasing, even if it was a joke.

He smiled.

Only for me.

And even though I wanted to strangle him...

I also wanted to—Tie him to a chair and force him to call me his wife again.

Forever.

....

Kaiser...

You're mine.

And you can tease me all you want—

I'll just make sure you'll never tease anyone else. Ever.

Only for me.

"What is it, my wife?" Kaiser said so casually, so nonchalantly—

I choked on air for the second time in the last five minutes.

"STOP IT!!" I screeched, my entire face now red. "What's wrong with you?!"

Kaiser, completely unbothered, just shifted his gaze lazily to the sky. "Alright, alright, relax. I was just joking with them."

"It's not something you should joke about!!" I yelled, slapping his arm weakly as he acted like I wasn't having a full mental breakdown beside him. "You shouldn't have called me your wife in front of the kids!"

"Ohhh... do you want me to call you my wife in private then?" he said with a teasing tilt to his voice.

Yes. Please do that. In your bed. Every day. Forever.

Wait—NO.

"No! Don't you dare do that either!" I shouted, nearly combusting. If I opened my mouth again, I might accidentally propose to him myself.

"Okay, okay," he said, throwing his hands up slightly. "I'm sorry for calling you my wife."

"...Hmph." At least he gets it now. Finally, some peace.

"I should've called you my sweetheart," he added, deadpan.

I choked on air for the third time.

"WHAT?!"

"You're my heart, right?" he said, turning toward me.

His expression didn't change, but his eyes softened. He looked straight into mine, and my knees almost gave out.

I stumbled a step back. "Y-You say that—But I'm not your wife!"

"Do you want to be?" he asked again, the corner of his mouth twitching like he already knew the answer.

Yes.

But I screamed instead.

"No! Stop this already! Stop being so mean!" I yelled louder, balling my fists and pouting away.

"Ugh, fine... wifey," he sighed, as if the word physically pained him. "I'll stop."

I couldn't take it anymore.

That was it. That was the final straw.

I ran.

"CE—Celia?!" he called behind me.

Nope. I'm gone. I'm disappearing.

"Wife, come back!" Kaiser called again.

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!!" I screamed over my shoulder, face flaming hotter than the sun.

I zipped through the village path, past confused shopkeepers and baffled villagers.

A couple of villagers turned at the commotion, watching me sprint past like I was on fire. One of them, an old lady with a wrinkled smile, chuckled softly.

"Ahh, young love," she said, leaning on her cane.

"WE'RE NOT A COUPLE!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, waving frantically without slowing down.

"She's shy," Kaiser said as he jogged past the old lady, not even breaking a sweat. "My wife's always like this in public."

"I'M NOT YOUR WIFE EITHER!!" I yelled again, now red to my soul.

A random man sitting on a bench pointed at us with a grin. "Yo Kaiser, didn't know you had such a cute wife!"

"Hey, don't talk to my wife like that, man," Kaiser said flatly.

"I'M NOT HIS WIFE!!" I screamed running.

I ducked behind a fruit stand, panting, hiding my burning face with both hands. My heart was pounding like a drum.

That idiot.

That bold, infuriating, emotionally destructive idiot.

Why was he like this?!

Why did he say things that made my heart flutter and brain fry at the same time?!

Why does he get to call me "wife" and "sweetheart" and "my heart" like it's normal?! Like it's his right?!

...

Why do I want to hear him say it again?

Over and over?

Forever?

I peeked around the corner.

He was still walking casually like he had all the time in the world, scanning the stalls for me, lips curled ever so slightly at the corner.

"Celia~" he called gently. "Come out, I'll stop calling you my wife."

Good.

"Unless you want me to call you mine instead."

...

I almost fainted.

----- Explain? -----

2:13 PM - Village of love, river side.

An hour had passed since my heart tried to explode.

I crouched by the river, splashing cold water onto my burning cheeks like a madwoman trying to erase all evidence of earlier. Kaiser sat beside me, one leg dipped lazily into the clear water, arms leaned back like he hadn't just destroyed my sanity with one sentence.

Now he hums to himself. Why is he humming?

I turned toward him with fire in my lungs.

"NOW EXPLAIN YOURSELF!" I yelled, pointing an accusing, soaking wet finger at him.

Kaiser didn't even flinch. "Look, it was just a harmless prank! I am innocent."

"Innocent?!" I stomped into the river and splashed him with a flick of my foot. "You humiliated me in front of the whole village!"

"Humiliated?" He raised a brow. "Being my wife is like a prestigious title."

"HUH?! What's prestigious about that?!" I snapped, my face already turning red again.

Kaiser flicked his damp bangs back with an exaggerated pose. "You see, I am nice, intelligent, generous, gentlemanly, empathetic, rich—all a woman could ever want."

"Oh, and handsome too," he added with a wink.

I scoffed. "You mean stupid, crazy, bold, poor, and a con artist?"

Flat delivery. Flat expression. My heart was anything but.

Kaiser gasped dramatically and clutched his chest. "Wow, betrayal... from my own fake wife. Is this what our future looks like?"

I snorted. "That's your fault for saying all that."

Still... you were mine.

We both sat quietly for a while, feet in the water, gazing at the ripples. The silence wasn't awkward—it was peaceful. His presence always felt like that. Like he swallowed all the noise in the world just to make me feel calm.

Earlier today, I didn't know if I should even allow myself to fall for him. Loving him felt dangerous—like reaching the abyss with my heart. But somehow... the closer I got, the more I didn't care about being lost.

I want him. I want him desperately... I'm growing more obsessed now.

Every smile, every tease, every stupid nickname he throws at me just... wraps itself around my heart.

I sneak a glance at him again.

Kaiser turned slightly and said, "The main festival's not until later this evening—stall setups and lanterns are still going. So, we've got time."

"For what?"

He shrugged. "To talk. Or relax. Maybe court each other casually under a scenic waterfall, I dunno."

"You—! You're the worst."

"And yet... you're still sitting beside me, smiling and happy," he smirked.

"Because I don't trust you to be alone."

He leaned closer. "Everyone trusts me, I'm like the most innocent person there is. Unlike you."

I splashed him again.

Kaiser laughed. "Okay, okay! Fine! We'll talk. No more flirting—unless you want me to."

"I don't!"

(Lie. Lie. Lie. LIE.)

And so we talked.

About silly things at first—what we wanted to see later, which stalls would there be, and shared some personal stories.

Then deeper things—what kind of people we wanted to become, how the world used to scare us, how it still does sometimes.

We laughed, argued, teased, and sighed at the clouds.

His voice was calm. Safe.

It wasn't long before the sun started to dip, casting soft golden light over the river.

Eventually, we stood up and walked back to the village.

Side by side. Just... talking.

And somehow, every second with him made my heart beg louder:

Please... please fall in love with me too.

Chapter 70 - Heartbreak Part 3

----- Build Me back? -----

3:28 PM - Village of love, other side stalls.

As we returned to the village, something about the air felt different. The wind carried laughter, distant music fluttered like warm petals in spring, and dozens of vibrant stalls had popped up like wildflowers—each one colorful and shimmering under the mellow golden sun.

Travelers, merchants, and adventurers bustled through the street, their cloaks swaying as children tugged along their parents, cheeks flushed with festival joy.

The Eternal Match Festival.

They said that on this day, fated lovers could meet. That the winds of destiny would guide hearts together like stars drawn to collide. Stupid, right? I should've rolled my eyes. Should've scoffed and called it superstition. But instead... I looked at him.

Kaiser was walking beside me, completely unfazed by the crowd—he always walked like he belonged everywhere, even in places built on dreams.

How could anyone else call themselves lucky to find their "soulmate" today, when I was already walking next to mine?

But...

But why weren't the villagers staring at me? Why weren't they whispering things behind my back like they always do? No glares, no mutters of "monster," no mothers dragging their children away when I passed.

My eyes shifted back to Kaiser.

He caught me.

"What is it, Celia?" he asked, voice warm, gentle.

"I—I umm... n-nothing," I stuttered, turning away instantly. My voice cracked like an idiot. Why did I have to sound so suspiciously awkward?

Kaiser smirked.

He took my hand casually, leading me through the crowd, away from the lanterns and loud voices, toward a more quiet corner near the garden walls where only a few people passed.

"Now tell me," he said, his voice soft but steady, like I couldn't lie to it even if I tried.

I swallowed.

"I... I was just wondering..."

"Wondering about?"

"I was just... I don't understand why people aren't scared of me right now," I finally admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

He tilted his head, curious.

"What makes you think they'd be scared?"

"I... it's how I look. You know..." I hesitated.

He didn't speak. He just let me talk. It made it worse and better at the same time.

"My red eyes... my white hair... it's always made people hate me. They say I look cursed. Inhuman. A monster. That... that I shouldn't be alive."

I couldn't look up. The shame crawled up my throat like old vines, choking me.

"I... I just don't understand... why they aren't trying to hurt me. It feels so... different..."
My voice cracked again. My hands trembled.

"Because people in the past have always called me a disgusting monster... that I... I..."

I felt tears forming, memories crashing over me like dark waves.

"That I... should die—"

His finger touched my chin.

He lifted my face gently, forcing me to look into his eyes. And just like that—everything stopped. My heart, the breeze, the pain.

"Celia," he whispered, "you're more beautiful than you think you are. If I could, I'd stare into your eyes for the rest of eternity. Because you're the best part of my day."

My lips parted.

"Y-you... you..."

"I'd become insane if I couldn't," he smiled, thumb brushing my cheek.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't even think.

I just wanted to cry. I wanted to hug him, fall into his chest and disappear there. I wanted to disappear in him.

"Do... you mean it?" I asked, voice small, eyes wet.

"I love everything about you—your smile, your eyes, and most importantly, your heart."

My heart twisted. Not in pain. In something worse. Something far more terrifying than pain.

Hope.

"So please," he continued, brushing my cheek again, "don't let your past dictate your happiness, Celia. I don't care how they treated you before you met me; I promise, every moment with me will feel like your birthday."

I wanted to collapse.

"Dummy..." I muttered, trying to turn my head away in embarrassment. But his fingers gently moved my chin back toward him.

"Don't ever cry again," he said, leaning closer, his forehead nearly touching mine, "Until I put you back together. Those others? They're just liars, bad people. I'm the only one you'll ever need, okay?"

He pulled back slowly, still smiling.

"Because over everything—I choose you."

I stood frozen, unable to move, unable to breathe. He stepped back, giving me space, like he didn't just set my entire soul on fire.

"You don't have to say anything back," he added. "Just stay here, okay? I'll get you some water."

And then, just like that... he was gone. He walked into the crowd, weaving between laughing couples and stalls.

And I...

I stood there.

My hands clenched against my chest.

Why... why did it feel like he took something from me with him?

He's... so perfect... he makes me so happy...

It's terrifying—how much I feel when I look at him. That face... those eyes... like they were art. His smile shouldn't exist, not in a world like this, but it does. For me.

You're my first love and you'll be my only love... because nobody else can ever make me happy like you do. And I won't let them try.

I took a breath, deep and trembling, trying to slow my heart before it cracked open in front of him. Not now. I had to stay normal. Normal was safe. Normal kept him close.

Wait...

Maybe the villagers didn't mind me... because I was with Kaiser? Just like Levi and Emma back in Levinton... they trusted me because they trusted him. That's it, right? They see him, and think—if he's by her side, she must be okay.

Is that why he brought me here?

My lips parted, a small soundless gasp.

He brought me here... so I could feel this feeling. So I could believe that not everyone would hate me. That I didn't have to be a monster forever. That maybe I deserved smiles... deserved peace.

He planned this. All of it. Just to make me happy. To heal what no one ever even tried to see.

That's why he looks at me like that. That's why he doesn't let me cry.

He's been carrying my broken pieces without me even knowing...

And as I watched him coming back—calm, warm, like nothing in this cruel world could ever make him flinch—my chest ached.

I focused on his footsteps. I had to act normal again. Just normal.

But something inside me whispered louder than ever.

I was scared of how much I loved him when we left this morning. I didn't want to admit it. I was scared it would swallow me whole.

Maybe... I just wanted to be loved without having to beg for it.

Kaiser and I continued walking through the crowded festival paths, lanterns swaying overhead, the air thick with scents of grilled skewers, sweet rice cakes, and fresh flowers. Children laughed in the distance, couples held hands, and musicians played soft tunes from the temple steps. It was like the whole world had decided to become beautiful just for this one day.

But not everyone was smiling.

I noticed them—adventurers, travelers, people who weren't from here. Their stares. The way their eyes narrowed when they saw me. My hair. My eyes. I could feel the judgment crawling on my skin.

But before I could shrink away or hide, Kaiser glanced at them.

No.

He glared.

And not the kind of glare that said "stop looking." It was the kind that said, "take one more step, and you won't have a tomorrow."

They turned away, muttering. None of them dared try anything.

Just being next to him... walking at his side... I couldn't breathe right. My heart—my stupid, loud heart—was pounding so hard it felt like the whole village could hear it. And I could feel the heat blooming in my cheeks again.

What's wrong with me?! Just walking next to him and I'm acting like a complete idiot!

Ugh—Celia, stop blushing, stop! WHY CAN'T I STOP.

I abruptly stopped walking and covered my face with my hands.

What is going on with me?! Why can't I get him out of my head?! He's everywhere in my thoughts—I'm not even thinking about the festival or magic or anything else! Just him... and his hands... and his voice... and his eyes and—

God. Celia. STOP!

But the warmth in my cheeks only deepened. I felt like I was about to burst.

I heard his familiar steps approaching from behind.

"Is something wrong?" Kaiser asked, voice gentle, but lined with concern.

I peeked between my fingers, slowly lowering my hands to show my bright-red face.

"What's wrong? Why are you so red?" he asked again, genuinely puzzled.

"I... I..." My words stuck in my throat. I swallowed and tried again. "I guess... let me just say it."

I took a breath and stared down at the ground. "Whenever I'm by your side... my heart rate quickens... and my face feels warmer..."

He stared at me for a moment, tilting his head slightly, clearly trying to process it.

"It looks like a lot of blood is present in those spots for some reason," he said flatly, blinking. "That's oddly weird. You're not sick, are you?"

"N-No! I'm not sick!" I snapped, embarrassed.

He stepped closer, still concerned. "Does it hurt? Do you mind if I touch it?"

Why... why does every move he makes have to be so gentle?

"E-Eh...? O-Okay..." I muttered, eyes wide.

His hand slowly reached out and brushed against my cheek.

And the moment he did—

"Mmm..." I purred softly.

What—what did I just—?!

He chuckled. Then laughed. Loudly.

"You're so cute," Kaiser said, smiling wide. "I can't stop."

My eyes flew open in horror. What. What did I just do?! My body moved on its own—I stepped back, hands raised like I was being accused of a crime.

"T-That wasn't a purr!" I shouted. "It was—just—uh—I was clearing my throat! I had dust in my mouth! From the air! From the— the STALLS!"

Kaiser raised an eyebrow. "You cleared your throat... with a cat noise?"

"N-NO—It was... just a odd sound! Look—LOOK OVER THERE!" I pointed wildly at a nearby vendor, a small booth lit with crystal orbs and mirrors, glowing in soft pink and gold. "I wanna go to that one!"

He sighed, amused. "Alright, alright. We'll go."

As we walked, he leaned in slightly.

"But just so you know... that was the cutest purr I've ever heard."

I groaned, dragging my feet toward the stall, trying to hide my face behind my hair.

I swear... I'm going to melt soon...

We arrived at the stall I had pointed to like my life depended on it—honestly, I didn't even see what was there until now.

There were... mirrors. A lot of mirrors.

Framed in polished wood, some oval, some heart-shaped, others shimmering with faint magical glows. The stall itself was draped in soft velvet cloth, faded from years on the road. Incense burned lazily from a corner holder, giving the space a strange but cozy aroma—like lavender mixed with old scrolls.

Behind it all sat an old man with a sharply twisted mustache and a long, weathered coat. He didn't look shady, exactly—but he had that look of a man who's bartered with adventurers and sweet-talked demons. The kind of merchant who's been in the trade longer than I've been alive.

His eyes sparkled with mischief as he saw us.

**"Greetings, greetings, lovebirds!" he called out with way too much cheer.
"Welcome to the finest matching stall this side of the village!"**

"We're not a couple," Kaiser replied flatly.

"Oh, I see," the merchant said with an exaggerated nod. "Then what brings you and your lovely girlfriend here today?"

"She's not my girlfriend," Kaiser said again, with that same neutral expression he uses when threatening people.

"Ah, of course. Then what brings you and your beautiful wife here, good sir?"

"She's not my wife either," Kaiser said.

The merchant didn't even flinch. "Oh, then what brings you here with your sister—?"

"I AM NOT HIS SISTER!" I blurted out, cheeks flaring.

"She's not my sister," Kaiser added calmly, hands in his pockets.

The merchant blinked. "Then what are you two?"

"We're friends," Kaiser answered, as if stating the weather.

Friends.

I forced a smile, keeping my voice steady. I mean... he was just being honest. But hearing him say that... it hurt more than it should've than it did earlier...

"Ah, my bad, gentleman and gentlelady!" The merchant smiled as if nothing awkward just happened. "So what brings the two of you here today? I can show you some of my most valuable matches!"

"Maybe start with your name," Kaiser said, narrowing his eyes. "You look like a scammer."

The merchant looked genuinely wounded. "Excuse me?"

Of course Kaiser would know. He coned like ten people just this morning to gather enough money to fund today's festival experience—for me. He's basically a functional con artist.

"My con artist..." I mutter to myself, a little too fondly.

Kaiser turned his head. "Did you say something, Celia?"

"I-I was just wondering what he has," I deflected quickly.

The merchant clasped his hands together, then gave a small theatrical bow. "Forgive me, dear travelers! My name is Allio Crestfold. A traveling mirror merchant and soul specialist."

Soul specialist? That sounded like something made up by someone who failed magic school.

"I craft magical artifacts that can see beyond the surface—things that reflect not just your appearance, but the connections that bind your soul to others," Allio explained proudly. "For example... some of my pieces can detect if your soulmate is nearby."

My eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yes indeed! Through soulline resonance. You see, everyone in this world carries a distinct soul pattern—like a melody only the universe can hear. When two people are bound by fate, their soul frequencies echo each other like harmonizing notes. My enchanted relics—like this mirror here—can pick up on that resonance when in close proximity. If there's harmony... the mirror glows. If not... it stays quiet."

"That's... amazing," I whispered, fascinated.

It sounded like something out of a fairytale. Could it really work? Did something like that actually exist?

"Can I test it?" I asked eagerly, turning to Kaiser. "Please?"

Kaiser's brow furrowed as he looked at the merchant. "No. He still looks like a scammer."

"Scammer—?! I am deeply hurt," Allio said, placing a hand to his chest like a betrayed poet.

"Kaiser, pleaaaaase?" I leaned closer, blinking slowly, pouting just enough—not too much to seem fake, just enough to weaponize the softness. "Pretty please?"

He stared at me. I knew that look. The calculating one where he's trying to act immune to cuteness, like a cold-hearted being... but inside, he's already folding.

"...You're seriously adorable," he muttered under his breath. Then he sighed. "Fine. Do your little scam test."

"Great!" Allio clapped his hands. "Then to start off..."

"This mirror here can tell you your soulmate's resonance color. It'll tell how your love is like," the merchant said, gesturing toward a strange oval-shaped glass framed in soft glowing wood. It shimmered slightly in the sunlight.

"It'll tell me... whoever my soulmate is? And their color?" I asked, leaning a little closer, my eyes tracing the shimmer like it could already show me something—anything.

"Not exactly their names or anything," Allio replied, twirling the tip of his eccentric mustache. "It'll just give you a hint of their feelings. A color—representing the truth of their bond with you."

"That sounds so beautiful!" I said, eyes wide, lips curling with innocent delight.

Even though I smiled on the outside, my heart was whispering something else: If it shows black, or blue—if it's him—I want to know. I want to believe he's mine. Please let him be mine.

"Tch. This is such a scam," Kaiser muttered, arms folded as he side-eyed the mirror with complete disinterest.

I turn to him with a puffed cheek, glaring slightly. "Kaiser..." I grumble with a fake pout, like I was annoyed, but really...

Of course you'd say that. You don't believe in things like this. You don't believe in fate or soulmates or hearts that ache in silence. But mine does. Mine screams for you.

Allio didn't flinch. "Seems like you, sir, don't believe in connection?"

"Not really," Kaiser said, voice flat as always. "But yeah."

No... of course he doesn't. He doesn't need to. He has me. While I'm here, he doesn't need anyone else.

"I wanna test it, Kaiser!" I said, turning to him again with hopeful eyes. "Please?"

Kaiser let out a long sigh. "I'm telling you, it's a scam, Celia."

"But it's a fun scam..." I whispered under my breath, knowing that if there was even a chance it could show me something, I had to take it.

Allio straightened up. "Sir, I've been traveling and helping others find their match for years. I'm not scamming anyone."

He raised his arms peacefully, his posture calm and practiced. "In my life and experience, I've seen countless strangers connect in strange and beautiful ways."

"Oh yeah?" Kaiser said, narrowing his eyes. "Then share your best experience."

A smirk curled on Allio's lips. "My best experience, you say? Hmm... there was one. Thirteen years ago."

He lowered his voice slightly, like a performer about to deliver a secret.

"A young man looked into this mirror, and it showed two colors. Not one. Two."

"Wait, what?" I blinked.

"What do you mean two colors? Shouldn't there be just one?" I asked, voice rising with interest.

"It should be. Always has been," Allio nodded. "But that day... it was as if the world told him he was loved by two souls at once. A rare fate—two true matches in one lifetime."

"Nice made-up story," Kaiser said flatly.

...Yeah. That can't be real.

That kind of thing... that kind of love, that kind of miracle—it's impossible. People don't get more than one person who loves them unconditionally. People don't even get one.

"I think so too..." I whispered.

My voice trembled slightly, but I masked it with a smile.

Of course, you'd never have two soulmates, Kaiser. But even if there was one... even if there was only one meant for you... I want it to be me.

Allio chuckled and rubbed his forehead. "It's alright, I can't prove it. But I can show you your color, Miss...?"

"Celia. It's just Celia," I said, trying to sound bright, even though my chest felt heavier than I wanted it to.

"Okay, Miss Celia," he smiled. "Do you want to try it?"

I turned to Kaiser, my heart thumping. He looked so indifferent, so distant, but...

...Please. Just say yes. Just once, let me chase this feeling without having to beg for it.

Kaiser looked between me and Allio, then sighed.

"Ugh, fine. Don't cry to me if it shows nothing," he said.

"Thank you!!" I beamed up at him—my cheeks warm, my smile wide.

You don't even know what this means to me, do you?

Allio handed me a smaller shard of the mirror. Its edges gleamed like it had been forged with stardust.

"So, Miss Celia," he said with a mysterious tone, "Do you want to see it privately or while we are watching?"

I glanced quickly at Kaiser, my fingers tightening around the mirror.

"P-privately..." I said, voice softer now.

"All right," Allio nodded. "Then all you need to do is hold it close to your heart, and speak these words aloud:

'Let the resonance of the soul reflect what I feel. Let this mirror show the one who was always meant for me.'"

...What a beautiful line.

I turned away from them slightly, enough so that they couldn't see the mirror. My palms trembled a bit.

Please. Please let it be him.

I pressed the mirror to my chest, the coolness of it grounding me as I whispered,

"Let the resonance of the soul reflect what I feel... Let this mirror show the one who was always meant for me."

My eyes slowly opened as I tilted the mirror toward my gaze. I held my breath.

Please... just once, let me have something.

Let it be you, Kaiser.

Let it be you.

All I want is you...

...

The mirror then showed me the color...

It was light blue.

My heart—It melted.

Could it really... be you?

I held my breath and peeked sideways, just a glance—Kaiser stood there with that neutral look again, casually chatting with Allio, paying him, eyes half-lidded like none of this meant anything to him.

But it means everything to me.

Was meeting him fate? Was all of this—that day he saved me, the time he smiled at me when I couldn't even cry, the moment he brushed my hair back and told me I wasn't alone—was it all pointing to this? Was it always him?

My fingers trembled.

No—stop it. Don't show it. Hide it. Hide it like you always do.

I quickly tucked the mirror away into my dress, fingers brushing over the fabric, pretending it was nothing.

Kaiser's voice pulled me back.

"What color was it?" he asked.

I blinked, startled. He was watching me now... wanting to know.

"I-It's... It didn't show a color," I said, forcing a light laugh, waving it off with a weak smile. "Just shiny."

Lie. Lie. Lie.

Because if I tell you... and you don't feel the same... I won't be able to live again.

"I see," he murmured, tone quiet, thoughtful. "That's unfortunate. I was hoping it would be me."

My entire body stilled.

My eyes widened and my breath caught. My hearted beated so loud I couldn't hear Allio anymore. Only him. Only that voice.

Kaiser leaned in just slightly, his lips close to my ear, and whispered—

"The only thing I wanted was you."

Everything in me broke.

He. Is. Mine.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

What did you say? Say it again. Say it again louder. Say it where everyone can hear—no, no just for me. Only me. Whisper it again, just for me.

"U-Umm, what do you mean?" I said out loud, trying to sound confused, innocent.

"I meant nothing," he said, shaking his head gently. "Forget it for now."

No. Never. I will never forget those words until I die.

Kaiser turned back to Allio. "Seems like your mirror is a scam."

Allio raised his palms defensively. "Sir, sometimes if someone doesn't have a soulmate, it doesn't show any colors... It's not my fault."

"Ugh... this scam is insane. I want my five gold back," Kaiser muttered.

"Sir... I can't refund it," Allio said nervously. "But I can let you test out your resonance for free."

Please... please... do it. I need to know. I want to see it. I want to see if it's me. If it's red. If it's burning. If you're mine too.

I turned to Kaiser, eyes wide, almost pleading. He looked at me, and I didn't hide it this time. Let him see it—just a little.

"Do you really want me to try?" he asked.

I nodded.

Please, Kaiser. Don't let me be the only one in love.

He sighed softly, then turned to Allio with that calm, unreadable face.

"Fine. Test mine as well. I don't need to do it privately."

Allio smiled with relief. "Then sir, just say the following words to the mirror: 'O mirror of fate and longing soul, Reveal the hue of heart I hold. From threads unseen, let truth arise—Show the one who shares my life.'"

Kaiser nodded.

My knees weakened.

He stepped closer to the large mirror behind Allio. The glass shimmered like starlight on still water.

Please... please... please...

I stared at it so hard it hurt. My nails dug into my palms behind my back. The blue still lingered in my pocket, like a promise. But

I needed red.

Red for passion.

Red for belonging.

Red for madness.

Red for me.

Red. Red. Red.

If it shows anything but red—if I see green or yellow or gods forbid pink—I will break this mirror with my bare hands.

I'll kill whoever it says. I swear I will. I'll find her and make her vanish.

Kaiser stepped forward slowly. His eyes focused on the mirror, posture calm, voice soft but firm.

"O mirror of fate and longing soul..."

Please...

"Reveal the hue of heart I hold..."

Red... give me red... crimson, scarlet, anything...

"From threads unseen, let truth arise—"

I'll tear them apart myself if I have to. I'll burn them. Rip their hearts out.

"Show the one who shares my skies."

Show me. Show me. SHOW ME.

My eyes were wide, breath shallow, heart clawing inside my ribs.

Please.

Be red.

Be red for me.

Only me.

Only...

Me.

...

My heart dropped.

The mirror... it changed...

It showed... Red.

It shimmered first—glowed at the bottom right like it had been waiting.

Then—

Pink.

A softer glow just beside it, bleeding warmth like a lover's sigh.

And then—no—what the hell is this?

Green. Gold. Blue. Yellow. White. Purple.

What. The. Hell.

No.

No.

Red is mine. Red is me. The others... Who the hell are they. They shouldn't even exist. Who are they? Why are they showing up next to what's mine?

Who. The hell. Do they think they are?

I will find them.

I will rip each of their heart's out if necessary.

He is not theirs. He's not anyone else's. He's mine.

Allio gasped like his lungs forgot how to work. He stumbled backward and collapsed into his stall, mouth agape, eyes bulging, as if he'd just witnessed a divine anomaly.

Even I... almost lost balance. My legs gave in for a second, and I had to grab the edge of the stall to hold myself up.

Kaiser looked at the mirror with a smirk tugging the edge of his lips, hands casually in his pockets.

"Oh look, how interesting. I have seven soulmates."

His voice—so calm, so amused. Like this was funny to him. Like I wasn't dying inside.

"What does that even mean?" Kaiser asked, now stepping forward.

Allio, still shaking and pale, stuttered, "It—It means... those colors... those are the ones who love you. Not just love. But unconditionally. They're all alive... somewhere. Seven women. All of them... bound to your soul."

Unconditionally...

No. No. No. No.

They don't know him like I do. They don't understand him like I do.

They don't deserve him like I do.

Kaiser tilted his head. "And how often does something like this happen?"

"Never..." Allio croaked. "I—I've never seen it before. Maybe... once in a thousand years? But even then... it can only be three at once... not seven."

I couldn't hear anything after that.

My brain... it was just repeating one thing.

It's a mistake.

It's a mistake.

It has to be.

There's no way anyone else could love him like I do. No way anyone sees him the way I do. No one listens to his voice like I do.

They can't. They won't.

They aren't me.

I stepped forward, my voice strained, sharp with trembling disbelief. "There... there has to be a mistake."

Kaiser laughed—softly, almost teasingly behind me. "Looks like I've been too charming for my own good."

I slowly turned my head to him. My neck stiff. My jaw clenched. My eyes narrowing.

"Kaiser," I whispered coldly, "I don't believe it."

His eyes blinked. For the first time... surprised. Slightly caught off guard.

"Why does it concern you so much?" he asked, voice curious, almost careful.

I stepped closer. My hand reached for his arm, and I gripped it—tight enough to hold myself, tight enough to remind him I was with him. That I was here. That he was mine.

I forced him to look at me.

My red eyes locked onto his. I didn't blink. I couldn't.

"I'm not sharing," I said, my voice low.

He raised an eyebrow, lips parting slightly. "Sharing what?"

I leaned closer, shadows trembling over my face, a softness laced with poison.

"What's mine..." I muttered.

He stared, his expression neutral. I didn't wait for him to understand.

Then Allio's panicked voice interrupted the spiraling tension. "T-This shouldn't be possible! No one's ever had seven soulmates. Ever. This has to be wrong. Something went wrong. I swear!"

Kaiser sighed like he had heard enough. "It doesn't matter. I never believed in this scam anyway."

But I wasn't listening to them.

All I could think of was the mirror. The damn colors. The lies they told.

Red. Just red.

It should've only been red.

That pink showed up out of nowhere. Green wasn't there before. Gold means nothing. Blue was dimmer. Yellow? Lies. White? No. Purple—where did that even come from?

They weren't real.

They aren't meant for him.

Only I am.

While I spiraled, lost in my obsession, Allio suddenly straightened up with a new idea.

"Maybe... maybe we could try contacting one of them? Just to confirm the connection."

My breath hitched.

My eyes darted to him, burning with fury.

Contact?

Kaiser's gaze snapped to Allio too, unreadable.

If he even dares...

If any of them even try...

They're all going to die.

"No. Don't. You. Dare."

I said it under my breath, low enough no one heard. My fingers twitched, nails biting into my palm as Allio extended the mirror to Kaiser, proud like he'd just handed a crown to a king. Except it wasn't a crown.

It was a guillotine.

"Today's the festival day," Allio said, voice too cheery for what he was doing. "Even if one of them is looking at a similar mirror, they should be able to talk to you directly, sir."

Sir. How polite. Maybe I'll bury you politely too.

Kaiser took the mirror with a small grin, flipping it in his hand like it was just some toy and not the thing that would shatter everything. My breath caught.

And then it happened.

The mirror lit up—

Gold.

My heart dropped like it'd been stabbed.

"...Great!" Allio exclaimed, way too loud. "Seems like someone else is looking at a similar mirror, so it connected to you."

Kaiser leaned in, holding the mirror close. "Hello?"

Please... don't answer. Whoever you are... just don't answer.

But the mirror gleamed again, words curling into the glass like a scar.

"Greetings."

The lettering looked elegant, refined. The kind of handwriting that belonged to someone who was probably nobility...

"So uh..." Kaiser said, cool as ever, "I had this gold color on my mirror. What about you?"

The mirror pulsed again.

"It was blue for me."

Her handwriting even sounded graceful. Kill me.

"So may I know your name?" Kaiser asked, voice light, teasing.

We both leaned in—me and Allio—waiting, ears perked like dogs at the dinner bell.

"You first. the mirror wrote."

"No, you." Kaiser smiled faintly.

"You."

"Ladies first."

No reply.

"Listen girl," he said with a dry laugh, "if you ghost me and think I'll be sad, you're delusional. I wouldn't care if we never talked again."

God. Why did he sound so—so cool when he said things like that? So detached. So untouchable. Why did I like that?

The mirror flickered back.

"Interesting."

"Could you tell me at least what you do or are?" she asked next.

"You first, miss." Kaiser flatly said.

It paused. A few seconds passed. Then finally—

"I'm an Empress."

I felt Allio freeze beside me.

"An Empress?" I repeated, whisper sharp. Of course. Of course she was. Why not?

"Oh that's nice," Kaiser said, his grin widening. "I'm a con artist."

I almost choked.

The mirror didn't respond.

"Seriously?" it wrote finally.

"Yes," Kaiser replied with zero hesitation.

"What else...?" the mirror asked.

"I'm also an E-ranked adventurer if it soothes your heart."

He was smirking now. Why was he smirking like that?! Why was I smiling—stop smiling, you idiot!

The mirror took longer this time.

"This has to be a mistake."

"Sorry miss," Kaiser said smoothly. "You're bound to me now. Too late."

"As if. This is all a mistake. Nothing such as soulmates exist, we got connected due to something unknown." It wrote back.

"Say it all you want," he said, "but all I see is you belonging to me now."

"You think I'll believe my soulmate is a con artist and E-ranked adventurer? Even the servants have better ranks than you."

He let out a low chuckle. "Yeah, just like your made up title. Miss Empress—as if I'd believe you the slightest."

"Good. Don't believe me, sir E-Rank."

"Yes, my future wife."

"What—"

"Keep dreaming."

The mirror dimmed for a moment, as if exhaling.

And I couldn't take it anymore.

My heart had been paining the whole time but now it was just—just broken. Like the moment I saw that gold light, something inside me fractured and kept fracturing every time she wrote back.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair that he could talk to someone else.

It wasn't fair that she had that handwriting.

It wasn't fair that I wasn't enough.

I ran. I didn't even hear Kaiser's next words. Didn't wait for Allio's breathless commentary. I just ran.

The cold air outside bit my cheeks as I burst out. My legs moved faster than I could think.

It hurt. God, it hurt.

Why... why did it hurt this much?

Why am I like this...?

I never used to feel this way before. Never cared if someone liked someone else, never thought of ripping their throat out and carving my name into their heart.

I was normal.

But around him—around him, I turned into someone I didn't recognize.

Possessive. Aggressive. Obsessive.

A version of me that whispered, He's mine.

And the worst part?

I didn't want her to go away.

I wanted her to exist—just so I could win.

Because in the end, even if there were seven of us, I was the only one who'd never let go of him.

Even if it meant getting blood on my hands to have him as mine...

----- **Promise me, okay?** -----

5:12 PM - Village of love, outside near the forest.

I was sitting alone in the quiet alley behind the festival tents, my dress stiff and itchy against my knees, but I didn't care. My fingers clutched the fabric like claws, my head lowered onto my lap as if I could bury all my thoughts into the earth beneath me.

But I couldn't.

Because they wouldn't stop.

"Kill them..."

My lips moved before I could stop them.

Kill them all...

Every. Single. One.

All the colors that ever showed up... Make them disappear.

I would burn every last one of them and smile as the flames lit up the night sky.

Kaiser is mine.

Mine.

They don't get to talk to him like they're equals. They don't get to hold the same mirror. They don't get to make him smile.

Only I do.

Suddenly—

"Celia! There, I found you."

His voice snapped me from the spiral. My heart flipped, rage evaporating in an instant, replaced by panic. I tried to get up—tried to run—but his hand caught my wrist gently.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked, his voice soft. "Why are you running away from me?"

I looked away. "I... I wanted to be alone for a bit."

"Oh..."

His grip didn't tighten, didn't loosen.

"Are you upset?" he asked again.

"...About what?" I murmured.

"I guess..." he rubbed the back of his neck, "that your mirror didn't change color, and mine showed seven others?"

I turned to face him...

He looked clueless. Innocent. Like he had no idea that with every word he said, my heart kept fracturing into tinier, sharper pieces.

"...Maybe a little," I admitted.

Stay, stay, stay. Please stay.

"Oh, I see, Celia," he said with a small laugh, trying to ease the air. "But don't be upset, okay? It was probably just some scam by the merchant. You know how they are. Don't take it to heart."

"You say it so casually..."

My voice shook.

"I just wanted... someone to care for me. Or love me. Even a little."

I wanted you.

I wanted you.

He looked at me, a little startled, then gave that soft, empty smile I hated and loved all at once.

"Celia, look at me. Trust me—someone will love you a lot. They're just not aware of it yet, okay?"

"Will... they be like you?" I asked slowly.

He laughed. "They'll be even better than me! Like, the best person you can ever want."

No. I. Want. You.

I clenched my jaw.

I don't want someone "better." I don't want a perfect person. I only want you.

"What about you...?" I asked. "Do you have someone now? One of those... many options?"

Don't you dare say they're your choices. Don't you dare validate them. Say it. Say I'm the only one. Everyone else is just—

"No," he said, looking away. "I'm not really the best, Celia. Nobody would really love me."

How. Dare. You.

"I have a lot of flaws," he went on. "Mainly... I'm an E-rank. The weakest of the weak ever."

I love everything you hate about yourself.

"Don't say that, Kai..." I whispered.

I miss you as soon as I wake up. I miss you when I'm about to sleep. I miss you even when you're standing in front of me, smiling like that. And you say such things?

He suddenly leaned forward a little, brushing my hand with his fingers, gaze gentle.

"I'm fine, Celia," he said softly. "But I don't want you to look like that. You looked so happy earlier. I want to make you smile again."

My throat tightened.

He took my hand in his, warm, steady.

"Come on. I'll show you a better stall than before," he said with a grin. "Just follow me."

"...Okay," I said aloud.

But in my mind?

I'll follow you anywhere.

To the ends of the earth. To the edge of sanity. To hell itself if you asked.

Just don't let go of my hand.

Kaiser took me to a nearby stall that didn't have a lot of people. It was a little tucked into the edge of the market street, shadowed under fluttering festival cloths. A woman stood behind it — long black hair tied back with a ribbon, blue eyes...

Blue.

Wait.

Blue.

I blinked, my heart dropping like a stone.

Blue. Like the mirror. One of them.

Without even thinking, I clung tightly to Kaiser's arm. My fingers curled into his sleeve, desperate, possessive.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Don't you dare.

He looked at me, confused. Concern bloomed in his expression like he was trying to gently figure me out.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, his voice soft. Calm. Gentle.

I forced my eyes to blink. "Nothing..." I muttered, still gripping onto him like he was the only thing tethering me to earth.

The woman stepped forward with a graceful smile. Her voice, smooth and warm like honey slipping off a spoon, made me grit my teeth.

"Oh, hello there," she said, tilting her head slightly toward Kaiser. "And what brings you and your charming companion here? Are you two looking for something special... or someone special, maybe?" Her eyes sparkled too much.

Don't look at him like that. Don't flirt with him like that. I'm right here. I'm right here.

Kaiser's expression completely neutral, unfazed, always too composed. "My princess here wants something to smile for," he said, gesturing to me, "I'll get her anything she chooses."

My breath caught in my throat.

My... princess?

My heart twisted. It melted. My grip loosened, trembling fingers sliding off his arm for a second.

More. Call me that again. Make me yours.

"I'll go look for something to eat," he said, brushing a gentle hand over my shoulder. "Buy something nice, okay, Celia?"

He turned and walked off.

No, don't go. Stay here. Hold my hand.

I stood there, staring blankly until the woman turned to me with a soft smile. "What do you sell here?" I asked quietly, not looking at her eyes.

She bowed her head slightly. "My name's Aysha. I'm a traveling merchant," she said in that silky voice again, "and I sell words that always find their way home."

"...What?"

She chuckled. "I mean, my items are enchanted—little things with feelings woven into them. Messages that will always meet their end."

My brows furrowed. "I don't get it."

"Hm... let's see," she said, her finger tapping her lip. "That man who just walked away... do you know him well?"

I stared coldly at her. "He's mine. Take your eyes off."

Aysha laughed softly, holding her palms up. "Oh, sweetie. Relax. I was only asking." She turned slightly and brought out a delicate trinket from the cloth beneath her stall. A small star, soft red edges and gold points, catching the fading sunlight like it had its own glow.

"But you might like this," she said.

"What is it?"

"It's a bond-trinket," she said, placing it into my hand. "If you give this to someone you love—truly love—it'll link to their soul. If they're in danger... or they ever want to say something before it's too late, their last message will always reach you."

I stared at it. The trinket felt warm. Familiar. Soft hums of magic pulsed faintly through my fingertips.

"How does it work?"

She smiled, brushing her fingers across the star. "It resonates with celestial magic. If your heart is honest—if your love is true—it binds to them. Whenever they need you... even from a world away, even if it's the last thing they ever say... the message will travel

back to you. No blessing stronger than love afterall. No boundary between you and them."

It shimmered slightly. I felt its warmth crawl up my arm.

"...I'll take this one," I whispered.

"Wonderful," she said. "What do you want engraved on the back? Just say it aloud."

I looked at the trinket again. My lips parted slightly.

Should I say... "Mine"?

"You're mine"?

"Say you love me"?

"I stitched your name into my heart"?

"I'll kill for you"?

"You're not leaving me ever"?

Please... say you're mine...?

No. If I say that... he'll know. He'll realize I'm desperately in love with him.

"...Forever yours," I said instead, voice almost too soft to hear.

The trinket glowed gently, and as if responding to me, letters shaped themselves on the back — a soft red, like the color of my eyes and blood. Like they belonged together.

Aysha's smile turned bittersweet. "You're welcome, miss. He'll know now."

A moment later, I heard his voice again.

"Celia." I turned and saw him return, holding a few boxes of food in his arms.

But he turned toward her. He turned toward that woman and said something.

Don't.

Smile.

At.

Her.

Kaiser.

He handed over the gold coins for the trinket, and the woman dared to smile at him — a fluttery, sly thing like a laced whisper.

But he didn't smile back. Not even a twitch. His face stayed as calm and neutral as ever, like she was nothing.

Good boy.

This time, before he could offer his hand, I quickly stepped forward and wrapped both arms around his. "Where should we go and sit to eat?" I asked, tilting my head up with a warm smile.

He blinked, glancing down at me with a soft grin. "Mmm... maybe by the main festival spot? I heard they're hosting a dance there."

"Sure! Let's go, Kai. Take me there with you," I said, pulling him gently forward.

He laughed a little. "Okay, okay. We're going."

I looked back once. Just once.

That woman was still standing behind the stall, smiling slightly. But I gave her a death stare.

If he smiled back... if he ever touched your hand... you would've been the first woman I buried into the ground.

I turned back, resting my head lightly against his shoulder as we walked.

My Kaiser.

Mine.

Forever.

The ground beneath us was a little cold, but the warmth of Kaiser's presence next to me was enough to make me forget everything else. We sat on a soft sheet near the main festival grounds, the glow of paper lanterns flickering to life in the growing dusk. People were gathering nearby, some dancing, some laughing... but I didn't care about them.

He handed me one of the lunch boxes he'd brought, opening his own with a casual grace. I waited for him to sit fully—and the second he did, I scooted closer, enough that our shoulders touched.

"Hmmm? Do you need something, Celia?" Kaiser asked, glancing at me with a light smile.

"Oh, nothing," I said sweetly, curling a lock of my hair around my finger. "I just wanted to sit closer. Oh! And I got you this."

I reached into my pouch, gently pulling out the star-shaped trinket—the one etched with "Forever Yours" in soft crimson. The metal shimmered in the festival lights, and I placed it into his hand like it was something sacred.

Kaiser tilted his head. "What is this trinket for, Celia?"

"It'll protect you!" I said, a bit too quickly. "Just keep it close to you always, okay?"

He chuckled softly, that gentle, soothing tone I could never tire of. "Oh, silly you. I don't believe in such things, you didn't have to get—"

"No," I said, cutting him off. My hands reached forward, clasping his fingers around the trinket with quiet urgency. My eyes searched his—burning, unblinking.

"Promise me you'll keep it with you always, okay?"

His brows drew together. "Uh... why so serious?"

"Do it for me," I whispered. "You like me, right? You'll do it for me... right, Kaiser?"

There was a pause.

And then his sigh, quiet and resigned. "Okay... I guess I will."

He clipped the trinket onto the edge of his coat near his heart. "Thank you, I guess."

I relaxed slightly, the faintest smile curling onto my lips. "You're welcome... keep it close always, okay?"

A moment passed in silence. A breeze fluttered through the paper lanterns above.

Then Kaiser let out a soft chuckle. "It reminds me of my old friend. She also used to believe in things like this."

My body froze.

My heart felt like it dropped into my stomach.

Old friend...?

"She?"

Slowly, I turned to him. "Who? What friend? Who's 'she'?"

His expression shifted—his eyes widened just slightly at the tone of my voice.

"Uhh... Celia?"

I moved closer, wrapping my hand around his wrist, my fingers tightening. I leaned in. His scent, the sound of his breath, everything was so close.

"Who is this she, Kaiser? Tell me. Right. Now."

"C-Celia? Why are you—why are you so angry?"

I smiled. A little too wide. A little too sweet.

"Me? I'm not angry," I said. "I just want to know... Who is this friend? What did she mean to you?"

My grip on his wrist tightened further.

I felt my nails pressing into his skin.

I will know. I have to.

"Relax, Celia," he said slowly, carefully. "It's just an old friend... Her name was Elfie."

Elfie.

Elfie.

I didn't blink. I couldn't. I leaned in even closer, my voice like ice. "Please answer me, Kaiser. What kind of relationship did you have with this... Elfie?"

Then, something changed.

Kaiser looked at me—And for the first time ever... he smirked.

Not his usual kind smile, no... It was dark. Crooked. Cold. Something terrifying twisted in that smile.

I forgot to breathe.

My chest hollowed out.

It wasn't him—no, it couldn't be him.

And then I realized—what I was doing. I was clenching onto his wrist like some deranged—I dropped it instantly, scooting away.

"I-I... I'm sorry," I muttered, voice trembling. "I just... I just got over my head..."

That smirk lingered on his face just a moment longer.

And then, like nothing ever happened, he blinked—and it was gone.

Replaced by the warm, gentle smile I knew. The one that made me melt.

But I'd seen it now.

The other one.

There's something inside him too... something dark.

Just like me.

My fingers twitched on my lap.

Even if there's darkness inside him... that's fine.

Because I'll love that part too. I'll own it. I'll bury it deep inside my heart and never let it go.

He's mine.

...

Why... why was I becoming like this?

I don't understand. I want him so badly. So pathetically badly.

Before, it used to hurt—I used to suppress it. Swallow it down. Smile sweetly and act like everything was fine.

But now I'm saying things I didn't even think through. Just blurting out pieces of my heart I'd sworn to keep hidden. What's happening to me?

Why am I like this suddenly...?

And why did Kaiser smile like that... that dark smile. So subtle, yet I felt it cut through me like he knew something. Like he saw straight into me and pitied what he found.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the shaking in my chest. When I get stressed—or worse... jealous—I spiral into this obsessive state. It's like I can't breathe without him. I start imagining things. Needing him, clinging to him, like my life would collapse without his warmth.

I need to relax.

Wait...

I glanced at him. Kaiser was calm again, his face unreadable in that comforting, infuriating way. The world went quiet in that moment, just me and him again.

And I realized something... something small but sharp:

This whole day, he hadn't smiled at anyone else. Not once... Not the kids, merchants, villagers, or any woman....

Only me.

Not a single polite smirk to a passerby. Not a laugh shared with a stranger. Just... me. Why?

Why only me?

No. No, it can't be—was he forcing himself to smile just for me? Faking happiness to make me feel special?

The thought cracked something inside my chest, like glass splitting under weight.

We continued to eat. The food had no taste. My thoughts were suffocating. Loud. Drowning me.

"What's wrong, Celia?" Kaiser asked, his voice soft but piercing.

Of course... of course he caught on. He always does. Just by looking at my face. He reads me like a book I can't hide, no matter how many pages I try to tear out.

"I-it's nothing..." I said, masking it with a weak smile.

"Is it about my friend Elfie? The one you badly wanted to know about." he asked.

My stomach twisted. No. It wasn't her. Not really. Not anymore...

"No... no, it's not about her. Forget it," I replied, trying to wave it off like it wasn't eating me alive.

"If it isn't her, what got you like that?" Kaiser pressed, voice gentle but persistent.

I forced a smile. "Like what? I'm fine."

"You're faking the smile, Celia," he said, eyes narrowing slightly as they locked with mine. "Now tell me the true reason."

He's the one... the only one that can see through me like this. It's terrifying.

"It's... it's nothing important," I said, quieter now.

"Tell me now, or I won't speak to you," Kaiser said.

My heart stopped. What? No... He can't say that. He can't threaten to disappear like that, not when he's my whole world. He's my everything... and he just says that so easily?

"Okay then... I'll tell you," I whispered, barely able to breathe.

I looked up at him, eyes wavering. "Today... this whole day, did you actually enjoy the time with me?"

He blinked, confused. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"You... you only smiled at me the whole time. Not at anyone else," I said. "I was wondering if you were forcing it with me..."

Even saying it hurt. But I needed to know. Even if the answer shattered me—I needed to hear it from him.

"It'll hurt a bit... but I won't mind if you honestly told me the truth. Kai..."

"I see," he said simply, voice unreadable.

The silence stretched, and for a moment I regretted asking. Regretted speaking at all.

Then his voice broke through.

"I've never been the type to smile much," he said. "Not at anyone, really."

So he was forcing it...?

"I smiled at you specifically today because I was with you," Kaiser continued, voice slow and steady, like he knew I needed it to be. "Because you're special to me. Unlike those ordinary, normal people."

My heart pounded so loudly I could hear it in my ears. His eyes were on me, and in them, I didn't see lies. I saw only him.

"I only smile to the people I like. And the one I like, is you," he said, and he smiled again—soft, sweet, like warm sunlight after days of rain.

Oh... I love you. I love you so much. So much much much. I love you in every universe. Even the ones where I never meet you—I still do. That's how cruel this feeling is.

"Only you could make me smile, Celia," he said, and reached out, gently holding my hand.

I wanted to cry.

"Me too," I whispered. "Only you can make me smile, Kai..."

"You're mine, right?" he said, his voice softer now, almost like a secret.

Yes, I'm Yours.

Yes, I'm Ready.

Yes, I love you.

"All yours?" I asked, playing innocent even though I wanted to scream yes over and over until it broke the sky.

"See? You understand why I smile with you," he said, that charming grin tugging at his lips again. "Because I like being around you."

He winked, and I could feel my cheeks flush. Again.

"Seems like my princess is blushing," Kaiser teased.

I looked away, flustered, but my heart was melting into a puddle.

"Don't you like my love language?" he said with a playful smirk. "The one you've never heard in your life so far—because it's only meant for me to speak?"

Oh... you're trying to win my heart, huh?

It's a sad world, really. It's always been yours, Kaiser. You didn't have to try.

And maybe...

Maybe it's time I confessed.

Right?

If I do it now, he'll want me. He'll choose me. I'll have him before any other woman ever gets the chance—and I'll keep him.

Forever.

"Are you always this selfish?" I asked, tilting my head, voice light like a feather. My heart, however, felt like stone.

"With you? Yes," Kaiser said, and the way he said it—unapologetic, sure, gentle—made something inside me collapse in the most beautiful way.

Then music began to play.

Soft, slow. The kind you could get lost in. Around us, travelers and couples were dancing, laughing, spinning beneath the glow of the Festival fire grounds and starlight.

I wanted to dance, too...

And as if hearing my unspoken wish, Kaiser stood, took my hand in his warm grasp, and pulled me to my feet.

"Let's go dance, Celia," he said, smiling like I was the only person in the world.

But... I didn't know how to dance.

The moment his fingers curled around mine and gently tugged, I froze in place.

"I... I'll mess it up," I whispered. "I'll trip, and you'll... you'll look stupid because of me."

Kaiser tilted his head, that soft, almost amused smile playing at the corner of his lips. "That's fine," he said, his voice like a calm promise. "I'm enough for both of us."

I stared at him, helplessly flustered. "But... what if I fall?"

He leaned in slightly, his eyes glowing with unwavering certainty. "You won't. As long as I'm alive, nothing in this world can touch you."

"R-Really...?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Instead of answering with words, he dropped to one knee—right there under the warm, golden glow of the festival lights. My breath caught. It looked like... a proposal.

He lifted my hand, cradling it gently in his.

"From this day forward," he began, his voice solemn yet tender, "and in every tomorrow that follows... I vow to protect you, Celia."

His blue eyes held my red ones like a binding pact, unwavering and absolute.

"I'll protect you wherever you are, no matter who stands in the way. I'll be there—for you. Always."

My heart... it didn't just melt. It shattered, reformed, and then melted all over again. How could someone like him exist? How did he even love someone like me?

"I... I accept," I whispered, barely able to speak through the tears welling up in my eyes.

He rose, still holding my hand, his grip warm and sure.

"There," he said gently. "Never fear when I'm with you."

"Yes..." I breathed, "I won't ever be scared again... I promise too."

What did I ever do to deserve him?

The love of my life... no, the only one who made life feel like more than just pain and passing days.

"I feel... safe with you," I whispered as he gently pulled me closer, his warmth wrapping around me like the night itself.

"That's my girl," he murmured, the words sinking deep into my heart.

Around us, villagers laughed and danced. The children from earlier pointed at us, giggling and cheering. I should have felt embarrassed. I didn't. This was our moment — it belonged to us, and no one else.

Even if I couldn't dance, even if I stumbled every step of the way... I would still dance.

For him.

Because I'm his.

All his... forever.

He's my happiness.

And if anyone — anyone — dares to take him from me...

...I'll burn them and the world.

He raised my hand to his lips, kissed it softly, then pulled me into the rhythm of the music. His palm pressed against my waist, the other entwined with my trembling fingers.

And just like that... we moved.

I tripped. Almost instantly.

My foot caught on my own dress and I stumbled forward, nearly collapsing.

But before I could even brace myself, he caught me — strong hands around my waist, spinning me in one swift movement, turning what should've been my humiliation into a smooth turn.

The crowd clapped louder.

He... he saved it. No — he made it better. Like it was part of the dance all along.

How can someone do that?

He moved again, guiding me, one hand in mine, one at my back. His steps were effortless. He led like he knew me — every misstep I was about to make, he turned it into something else. Every time I panicked, he turned me, dipped me, laughed softly into my ear like this was all planned.

The kids from earlier ran to the edge of the circle and started cheering.

"Go, Kaiser!"

"Look at them! His wife is so pretty!"

...His wife.

They called me that again.

Kaiser chuckled, leaning closer, "Did you hear that, wife?"

My heart stopped.

"Y-you—" I started, glaring up at him, but I couldn't keep the act.

He was teasing me again.

And I wanted to die from how happy it made me.

"...Just for the moment," I mumbled.

"Oh?" he tilted his head, his smile deepening. "Only for the moment?"

I looked away. "Yes... for the moment... I'll be your wife."

He pulled me closer.

We danced again. His grip on me was firm but kind, always adjusting for me. I wasn't the best, but with him, it didn't matter. He made it look like I belonged there. Like I was the star of the night.

The music picked up, and we twirled under the soft silver light of the moon. Lanterns swayed gently overhead. The fire cast golden shadows along the ground, and the cheers of villagers rose around us, clapping, calling our names. It should've felt overwhelming.

But I didn't hear them.

Not really.

All I could hear was his breath close to mine. All I could see were those blue eyes watching me like I was the only person left in the world.

I glanced up again.

He was smiling.

That soft, real smile.

And something cracked in me — gently, like glass touched by light.

This... this was the happiest I've ever been.

Because he was here.

The music continued—flowing like wind around the bonfire—and so did he. Kaiser took a step back, twirling me gently with one hand as his other guided my waist. My dress caught the wind, brushing against his coat. I barely had time to catch my balance before he pulled me back in, close, our feet moving in perfect rhythm.

He dipped me.

I let out a quiet gasp as his hand caught the small of my back.

The crowd erupted with another round of cheers.

"K-Kaiser," I breathed, slightly winded, "are you really this good at dancing?"

He raised an eyebrow, a boyish grin on his face. "Me? Not really. I'm rather average."

I blinked at him. "Then how are you making all my mistakes into... moves like that?"

Right on cue, I misstepped—again—and he spun me under his arm so fluidly it looked rehearsed.

"That," he said, smiling down at me, "was coincidence."

"Coincidence?" I muttered, almost insulted.

He leaned closer, lowering his voice as he pulled me into another slow twirl. "It's just easier to dance when it's with someone I like."

He winked.

My stomach twisted into a knot so tight I could barely keep my feet moving.

I looked away quickly, my voice low. "...Dummy."

He chuckled, clearly hearing me.

Then, without warning, he spun me again, this time lifting my hand high before looping it behind his neck, pulling me close.

"Careful, wife," he teased, smirking as he brought his forehead close to mine, "you're falling for me."

I should've slapped him. Or at least scolded him. Something.

But I couldn't.

"...Then," I whispered, barely audible over the music, "for the moment... I guess you can be my husband."

He froze for a second. Just a beat.

Then he laughed—softly, warmly—and his smile returned, brighter than before. "Gladly," he said.

My face blushed so badly... I could feel it.

But I didn't look away.

We danced again. This time slower, smoother. Every motion he made curved around mine, guiding, correcting, without ever making me feel wrong. I was moving like I knew what I was doing—and I didn't. Not even close. He made me feel flawless.

"Look at them," someone said in the crowd.

"They're the best dancing couple we've ever seen!"

"So in sync—like they were made for each other!"

I tried not to let it show on my face.

But my heart—

It was pounding.

I looked up at him again.

His blue eyes were still on me. Always on me. Soft and sure and steady.

I wanted to fall into them.

No—I wanted to dissolve. To become something that lived only inside those eyes. I wanted to burn quietly in the warmth of his attention until nothing of me remained but the part he held.

My red eyes locked with his.

And in that second, I swear... I felt like they were trying to merge. As if some unseen thread was pulling our souls closer than even our hands.

I would never tell him. Not out loud.

But in my mind, I was already his.

Forever.

And then—

A loud, sharp crack split the air like lightning.

The music stopped.

Gasps echoed through the square. The villagers looked up.

Kaiser immediately stepped in front of me, shielding me with his body.

My heart, which had just been soaring, now thudded against my ribs with dread.

What... what was that?

----- I'm His -----

7:42 PM - Village of love, hunter's raid.

As I opened my eyes, I realized I wasn't standing anymore.

My cheek was pressed against something warm—Kaiser's chest. His arm had wrapped around me like a shield. Strong. Protective.

And right in front of my face, frozen midair, was a fire arrow, glowing red-hot, its flames hissing from the compression of the surrounding air. But it wasn't moving anymore.

Because he caught it.

He caught it with his bare hands.

I stared at the arrow inches from me, blinking slowly.

My heart was pounding... so much—thud, thud, thud—like it wanted to burst out of me and scream.

But it wasn't just the fire arrow.

There was another one.

As I looked up at his shoulder, I felt something... break.

A normal arrow had sunk deep into his flesh around his shoulder, right where my head had been.

It was meant for me.

He didn't even flinch.

Dummy.

Why...? Why would you do that...?

His face—calm. His brows weren't even furrowed. His lips weren't twitching from the pain. Nothing. As if the arrow hadn't just buried itself into his body.

"K-Kai...?" I asked, my voice small.

He smiled at me like none of this mattered. Like the only thing that did was me.

"Are you okay, Celia?" he asked.

This dummy...! Stop smiling! Don't act like I'm the one that matters right now!

"Your shoulder—!" I leaned forward to reach for him, to stop the bleeding, to do anything, but—

Boom!

A violent explosion of smoke erupted behind us. White and thick. Blinding.

I choked.

Then—someone grabbed my wrist.

Hard.

"Let go!" I screamed.

I thrashed, tried to pull back, but the hand was too big, too strong. Rough like rusted chains. I couldn't see anything. My heart clawed at my ribs. I tried again to pull free, to scream louder.

Please, don't take me away. Don't ruin this. Not tonight. I only wanted one night. Just one—

The smoke thinned.

And I saw him.

The man holding my wrist.

He was huge. Scarred across the mouth like someone had tried to sew his face closed and failed. Greasy brown hair slicked back, sunburnt skin, eyes like rotted meat. He licked his lips as he grinned at me.

"Got some fire in ya, girl," he said with a gravelly chuckle. "That's good. Makes it more fun."

Disgusting.

I pulled again.

"Let me go!"

He laughed. "Nah. You're worth too much gold to drop. Witch bounty like yours'll feed me for a year. Maybe two."

Behind him—six more.

I could barely make out their faces in the smoke, but they were all armed. Ragged armor, mismatched weapons. Sellswords. Thugs. All of them grinning like murderers.

Then—my breath caught.

The smoke behind me parted more.

Kaiser.

He was standing exactly where I'd been ripped away from. The arrow still in his shoulder. Chest rising, slow, unbothered.

But at his throat—was a knife.

A man stood behind him, taller than the rest, with a sharp angular jaw and golden piercings all across his brow. Eyes cold.

"Move, and I slit your pretty boy's neck," the man sneered, his knife pressed gently against Kaiser's skin. "Got a nice clean bounty on your monster girl there. Can't have you messing it up with all that knightly protectiveness."

Kaiser didn't speak. Not yet.

I stared at the blade against him. My legs shook. I forgot the pain in my wrist. I forgot my own fear.

I was only afraid for him.

"Let me go!" I screamed again.

The brute holding me pulled me closer like a doll. "Feisty little freak, ain't ya?"

And then the leader spoke.

"Funny," he said. "The rat witch had the guts to dress up and dance like she's human. Laughing. Smiling. Flirting with that trash."

His words cut deeper than the wrist.

"Disgusting," one of them snickered.

"She'll cry real good when we chain her up, I bet," another one grunted.

My hands were trembling. I wanted to cry.

But I didn't.

I looked at Kaiser.

He wasn't looking at the knife. Or the man.

He was looking at me.

Still calm.

Why aren't you saying anything?

Why aren't you fighting back?

Will you protect me?

Please—say something.

Please... move.

Please... don't let them take me away from you.

"Well well..." the leader said with a smirk, pressing the knife tighter against Kaiser's throat. "You're awful calm for someone with a blade at his neck."

Kaiser didn't even blink.

"What do you want?" he asked, voice cool and even, like he was asking for the time of day.

The leader's grin widened.

"Simple," he said. "I'll be taking your pretty little friend here—" he jerked his chin toward me "—and selling her for that sweet bounty the Kingdom's offering. Witch blood's worth a lot these days."

The others chuckled behind him, like hyenas sniffing rot.

"Y'hear that, witch?" one of the thugs called. "They'll hang you soon enough. Maybe burn you. Or maybe they'll keep you around for a while first. For fun."

Another leaned in, laughing. "Bet she was trying to seduce you, little lover boy. Look at that dress. Acting all innocent. You fall for that act, huh?"

Their words hit like stones.

I gritted my teeth, but my hands were trembling. I wanted to disappear....

But the worst was the laughter. The laughter that didn't stop. Mocking. Cruel. Like I wasn't even human.

"Even worse," one of them barked, pointing at Kaiser, "this freak's an E-rank. The weakest one on the registration list, at the bottom. Can't even use elemental magic! What are you, a farmer who forgot what a shovel looks like?"

They all howled.

The man gripping my wrist leaned close again. His breath stank like old mead and rot. "I like the white ones. They scream prettier."

I winced, my skin crawling. I pulled harder. Nothing. His grip just got tighter.

The leader chuckled, pulling me closer by the waist now, right in front of Kaiser.

I froze.

"Too bad," he said, grinning at Kaiser, "that your little friend's mine now. Weakest adventurer of celestine, can't even save his little girl."

He smirked.

"So if you ain't got any dying words, I'll just be taking her now—"

"I wonder..." Kaiser said.

The world went still.

The tone of his voice wasn't neutral anymore.

It was cold.

I looked up—something about him had shifted. His posture hadn't changed. His face was still relaxed. But it was... empty.

No warmth. No emotion. Just a quiet void.

The man holding me went still too.

Kaiser's eyes were locked on the leader now.

"Should I be mad that you dared touch my heart..." he asked, voice low and slow, "or that you thought seven people would be enough to fight me?"

The laughter exploded again.

Louder this time.

The one gripping me laughed so hard he leaned back.

"Whaaat'd he say?" one of the men snorted. "This freak thinks he's scary now? Oh no! The E-rank speaks!"

The man's blade pressed tighter against Kaiser's throat. "You're real mouthy for a dead man—"

It happened in less than a blink.

Kaiser didn't even turn his head.

His hand shot up and clamped around the wrist holding the blade, twisting it backward until it snapped. Bone pierced skin.

The man screamed out of his lungs.

Kaiser turned just enough to jam his elbow into the man's stomach, making him lurch forward—and then drove his knee up.

Hard.

Into the man's jaw.

The bone cracking was loud.

He dropped like a corpse, twitching.

Silence.

Everyone froze.

Kaiser slowly stepped over the man's broken body, reaching for his shoulder. His fingers curled around the shaft of the arrow embedded there.

He pulled.

Blood trickled down his chest.

The arrow snapped in his palm with a sharp, splintering sound.

He looked at the rest of them.

Expression unchanged.

"I don't threaten people often," he said, crushing the arrow under his foot, "but when I do... it's mostly because their time living has ended."

My lips parted.

I couldn't breathe.

"Oh?" the leader said, voice dragging like a boot through spit. "Seems the E-rank's got a little fight in him after all."

He chuckled, wiping a speck of blood from his cheek. "Guess that's one less loser on the payroll."

The man gripping my wrist shifted, his fingers tightening like a vice. I winced. His nails dug into my skin. Closer now, I could smell him—oil, steel, and something sour. His face was long and pockmarked, with half-rotted teeth yellowed to the gumline. A lecherous glint burned in his eyes, the kind of look that made your stomach churn.

"Let go of her, now." Kaiser said. His voice was still calm.

The man didn't budge.

"We can't do that, buddy," the leader said. He cracked his neck and stepped forward, rolling his shoulders. "This is where your little act ends."

He smiled—no, smirked.

"The name's Varn," he said, spreading his arms like some grand announcement. "Leader of the Black Maw. You've probably heard of us if you've ever stepped on the party list. And the guy you just dropped? Not one of mine. Lower D-rank mercenary that joined us this morning for a few coins."

He moved his chin toward the twitching body behind Kaiser.

"So don't get cocky, E-rank. That was just the appetizer."

My knees were trembling now. My fingers dug into the man's arm holding me, but he didn't even flinch.

He leaned in, breath foul and hot against my neck. "What's wrong pretty girl?" he said, dragging it out slow. "Just a bit longer until we enjoy together."

I turned my face away, trying to squirm, but he clamped tighter.

"Let me go..." I gasped.

He only smiled.

"Rauk there, also not officially part of Black Maw either," Varn continued, smiling darkly. "But he's a High-Tier C-Rank merc. Earned his reputation back in the West—ruthless, efficient, and more importantly—" he smirked, looking directly at me, "—we made a promise to him."

The rest of the group started to chuckle again.

Varn grinned, his teeth like broken ivory.

"That he'd get to spend the night with the witch. And in the morning? Well... we'll pick up what's left of her and cash her in."

My chest tightened. My throat locked.

No. No. Please.

Rauk dragged me closer by the waist. His filthy hands slid up my side and grabbed at my shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" I shrieked, struggling harder, but he held fast.

"You're soft," he muttered, his voice low and awful. "Been a few weeks since I've had one. Hope you last longer than the last girl. She passed out too fast. Barely worth the noise."

He licked his lips and touched lower—fingers tracing the curve of my back.

"No—please—stop!" I begged, the words tumbling from my mouth. "Don't—don't touch me! Please stop, please—!"

"Oh, you'll beg louder soon," Rauk sneered, laughing. "That's the best part. Seeing the light go out while they're still making those little sobbing noises."

The others snickered.

"Careful, Rauk," one of them said. "Don't break her yet. We gotta get paid tomorrow."

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't scream.

My chest was shaking. My nails scraped against his hand, trying to tear it off.

My eyes darted around—Kaiser stood still.

Expression unchanged.

But his eyes—

His eyes were staring into Varn like they'd already killed him a thousand times.

Varn didn't care.

"So, Mister E-rank..." he said with a grin, "you've got no hope. You're alone. You're weak. And you're about to die—"

Suddenly—

Silence.

The wind stopped.

The trees stopped swaying.

....

I felt it before I saw it.

Something terrifying.

Suffocating.

The abyss itself had opened its eyes.

"Hey Rauk," came a voice—low, slow, like a chill slithering down my spine. "You wouldn't touch my friend Celia... right?"

That voice—

My breath hitched.

He was behind me.

My wrist suddenly loosened, the unbearable pressure vanishing immediately. I blinked once—just once—and Rauk's hand wasn't there anymore. Neither was he.

Everyone turned. Slowly. Like their necks had turned to rust.

Rauk's body stood there for half a second longer than it should've... before slumping to the ground with a thud.

Limp. Headless.

Kaiser was holding it.

Rauk's head.

Dangling from his right hand.

Blood dripped from the torn neck like syrup pooling onto the soil. But Kaiser didn't even flinch. He lifted the head to eye level, gaze boring into it as if Rauk could still feel shame in death.

"Don't tell me you're scared to speak now," he said, voice like steel drawn slow.

His body... it twitched—Gods, it twitched—and I felt my stomach churn. Blood bubbled from the ragged hole of Rauk's neck.

"I think your body could use a little more decapitation, Rauk," Kaiser murmured, colder than before. "Want me to do the honors?"

No one spoke.

Not even me.

Even my fear felt frozen—locked in a box, shivering.

Then he dropped it.

Rauk's head hit the dirt with a wet thud. And then—

Crunch.

Kaiser crushed it under his boot.

Bone cracked. Something wet splattered against my legs.

He smiled.

Hands back in his pockets. As if this was just a normal thing for him.

"That's what you get..." he said quietly, "...for touching what's mine."

...What's his?

My heart twisted.

He turned slightly and pulled me gently behind him, positioning his body between me and the rest of the monsters who dared call themselves human. His back was wide, steady.

Safe.

The remaining five spread out, forming a loose half-circle around us. Their weapons were out now. But they were shaking.

"What the hell did you just do!?" one of them snapped, voice sharp with fear.

"I got rid of the trash," Kaiser said. "It was annoying me."

"Bastard—! We didn't even see you move!"

"You're just an E-rank!"

Kaiser exhaled once, amused.

"Once you touch what's mine," he said, stepping forward, slow and steady, "rank stops mattering. Because I'll make sure... whoever lays a hand on her... begs for death to take them."

Their faces twisted in fear.

One of them pointed, eyes locked on Kaiser's belt. "He did all that—with just a knife?! That wasn't even there before—!"

Tension burst through them. All of them drew closer together, tighter now.

Behind him, my fingers curled tightly into the fabric of his coat. My hands were trembling, but I held on.

I didn't say it aloud. I couldn't. My lips barely moved.

...but thank you. Thank you for protecting me again.

His coat was warm. Even now.

So much warmth for someone so terrifying.

"Take care of yourself," I whispered, barely a breath against his back.

He smiled. I felt it, even though he didn't turn.

"I'll do that," he said softly.

And in that moment... I didn't care how much blood was on his hands.

I just wanted them to stay wrapped around me forever.

Five against one.

Daggers drawn. A bowstring tightening. Two of them murmuring incantations under their breath—fire and water flickering to life like twin fangs ready to strike.

And yet... Kaiser didn't even flinch.

He stepped forward, calm. One hand pulling his knife free—not even a real fighting weapon.

But somehow... it felt like death itself.

The first one lunged with a jagged dagger. I don't remember seeing Kaiser move—just that the man was suddenly bent over, gagging, blood spurting from his mouth.

A crunch echoed. Kaiser had struck him in the ribs—no, through them with a punch. The man flew back before he could scream, but Kaiser caught him midair with a spin, his knee slamming into his jaw. Bone cracked. Teeth spilled out.

He spun again and dislocated both the man's arms in a blur of motion, snapping them at the elbow in opposite directions with a sickening, unnatural crunch.

Then Kaiser whispered something I didn't catch—before plunging the knife into his heart.

"One down."

A second rushed in behind with a broadsword—bigger than Kaiser, trying to overpower him. He swung.

Kaiser leaned sideways, just a tilt of his neck.

The blade missed.

The man swung again—wild, furious.

Kaiser's hand caught his wrist. One flick, and the sword dropped. Another twist using his other hand, and the man's shoulder exploded inward—dislocated, broken.

Kaiser didn't stop.

He delivered five body blows in less than two seconds—one to the throat, two to the ribs, one to the stomach, and the last to the head. The man collapsed, choking.

Kaiser straddled him, took the man's own sword, and drove it straight down through his stomach, pinning him to the dirt like a writhing insect.

He didn't scream. He just... wheezed.

Another gone.

Celia, you're okay. You're okay. You're with him....

The third one—with a dagger and long red hair—tried a sneak attack from the side. He was fast.

But Kaiser was faster.

He ducked under his blade, grabbed him by the wrist and shoulder, and spun him into the air, slamming his body to the ground with the weight of his own momentum.

I heard the snap before he hit the ground.

Her leg bent wrong. Her scream choked halfway.

Kaiser's fist came down—once, twice, three times—until his face was mush, nose broken, jaw shattered.

He stood up, face splattered in their blood... calmly.

He stabbed him through the chest. Just once. Coldly. Done.

I couldn't breathe.

I hated him. I hated them all.

But... how can someone kill this easily?

The fourth came from the back—he fired an arrow.

Kaiser turned without looking.

Caught it.

He actually caught the arrow.

He snapped it in half with his fingers and threw the broken piece into the man's thigh. He screamed, dropped the bow.

Kaiser closed the distance in a few steps, ducked under the man's swing, and landed a roundhouse to his knee that shattered it sideways.

The man fell. Kaiser caught his neck before he hit the ground and snapped it, twisting it almost all the way around like it was made of soft bread.

I felt sick. And yet...

I couldn't stop staring.

My heart was pounding. It wasn't fear. Not entirely.

It was something worse.

Something deeper.

Then the last one remained.

Varn.

His cloak was torn, his eyes wide with rage and disbelief. Flames burst from his palms as he screamed and hurled a stream of fire toward Kaiser.

Kaiser vanished.

No... he was still there. Just moving like wind.

He ducked under the fire, slid across the dirt, and swept Varn's legs out from under him. Varn rolled and summoned a geyser of water to push himself back, dousing the area.

"Get away from me—!"

Kaiser walked through the water as if it wasn't there.

Varn's next spell lit up his arm, and he sent out a wave of molten heat—but Kaiser had already circled behind him.

He gripped Varn's arm mid-cast and drove his elbow into the back of it—breaking one bone.

Varn's scream tore through the air.

Then came the next series—Kaiser spun him around and sent a knee kick to the stomach, lifted him off the ground with a palm uppercut to the jaw, then caught him mid-fall and slammed his head into his knee.

Blood flew. Teeth scattered.

"Please...!" Varn croaked. "STOP—!"

Kaiser didn't.

He drove a fist into Varn's throat, silencing him, and grabbed his leg—breaking it across his own shoulder with a sound that made my spine ache.

Varn dropped to his knees, trembling.

"You're not E-rank... are you?" he sobbed. "You're a false-ranking liar...!"

Kaiser smiled.

A low, sharp grin that made even me flinch.

"I do that," he whispered, stepping closer, "to lure prey like you into my den..."

His eyes—Gods, his eyes—they flickered.

Blue to black.

Pure void.

"...Just to cut you into pieces."

Then back to blue. He smiled wider.

Varn screamed.

Kaiser stabbed him in the heart, slowly, to make sure he suffered it till the end. His hand didn't even shake.

Then... silence.

The wind rustled. The trees whispered.

I stood there, breathless behind him.

Seven bodies.

All of them dead.

And Kaiser, perfectly clean. Not a scratch apart from the arrow early in his shoulder. Only blood on his hands and his knife.

I looked at him from behind.

Even now... I wanted to reach for him. I wanted to be near him.

But how... how could he kill like that? As if he had done it for a lifetime before...

Was I the only one he would never hurt...?

Would I always be?

He turned to me.

His smile softened.

"You alright, Celia?"

I nodded.

But inside—I wasn't sure what I felt anymore. Relief. Fear. Love. All wrapped into one burning thing inside my chest.

And still... I wanted him to hold me.

Kaiser slowly walked toward me, blood still dripping from the knife in his hand. His coat hung loose on one shoulder—torn, stained with red. His left arm dangled slightly, just a little lower than usual.

He was hurt.

"Kaiser—"

He raised a brow. "Mmh?"

"Your shoulder," I said, stepping closer, reaching out before he could pretend otherwise. "You're bleeding. You got hit when you shielded me, didn't you?"

He glanced down lazily. "Oh. That?" He rolled it once, and I nearly slapped him right then and there. "It's fine. Flesh wound. Just adds to the aesthetic."

I slapped his arm—not hard, but enough to make him jolt.

"Hey—ow!"

"Don't shrug it off!" I snapped. "I don't care how aesthetic you think bleeding is—I'm going to take care of it."

He gave me that look—the smug little half-smile that always felt like he knew exactly how much I cared and exactly how much it terrified me. "Celia, are you always this cute when you're bossy?"

"Sit."

"Yes, my nurse."

He sat on a nearby log, and I knelt beside him, tugging the ruined coat off his shoulder. The cut was deep—clean but ugly. The arrow hit him really badly. Blood soaked the fabric, sticking to his skin.

I hissed through my teeth.

"You don't even flinch," I murmured, cleaning it gently with water from my pouch. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"The second your hand touched me..." he said, voice dropping low, "it stopped hurting."

I slapped his shoulder again.

"OW—! Woman, I'm wounded!"

"Then stop flirting and focus," I muttered, biting down the heat on my cheeks as I reached for bandages. "Gods, you're impossible."

He chuckled softly. "You're the one touching me."

"Only because I have to."

"Still counts."

I sighed. "You're not charming, you know that?"

He grinned. "I know. But it's working."

I tried not to smile.

I really did.

But when he looked at me like that, bloodied and bruised and still teasing me like nothing in the world could shake him—I couldn't help it.

Once I finished applying some cursed healing magic to his shoulder, I sat beside him in the grass. The festival spot had gone quiet, save for the wind brushing through the trees. The scent of blood still hung thick in the air, but he was here.

And all because he fought for me.

Again.

I stared at my hands.

"I don't get it," I whispered.

Kaiser tilted his head. "Get what?"

"Why you always protect me like this."

He was quiet.

"I mean... I know I'm not strong. I can't fight like you. I couldn't even scream when they grabbed me." My voice broke, but I swallowed it down. "You always end up bleeding because of me."

I looked away from him, gripping the grass beside me. "You could've gotten killed."

He didn't speak.

I didn't want him to.

"I hate this," I whispered. "Watching you bleed. Knowing it's because I'm weak."

Silence stretched. I couldn't look at him. I didn't want to see his expression.

But then—

"I don't protect you because you're weak."

His voice was low. Quiet.

"I protect you because you're mine to protect. I made you a promise, a vow, and I'll follow through with it."

I turned to him slowly. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't teasing.

His eyes—blue as the sky, and right now, just as open.

"You think I bleed because of you," he said. "But I'd bleed a thousand more times if it means you'd stay close to me."

I felt my throat close up.

"But if it hurts you... I'll stop."

"No," I whispered.

He glanced up.

"Don't stop."

I reached for his hand, hesitated, then held it anyway.

"I just... want to be strong enough someday to stand beside you."

His fingers closed around mine.

"You already are," he said.

...

"Kaiser... can you answer something for me honestly?" I asked, almost afraid.

"Mhm?" Kaiser replied, his voice smooth and soft.

"What if you actually get hurt... trying to protect me?"

The words slipped out before I could bury them like I always did. My voice was quiet, honestly scared. Because I hated this—watching him bleed just to keep me safe.

I glanced up, afraid to meet his eyes but needing to, needing to see how he would answer.

Then he spoke.

"If death were to take my hand away from you," he said gently, and his grip on my hand tightened as if to prove a point, "I will hold you with the other and promise to find you in every lifetime."

My heart exploded.

Ugh... KAISER!!!

Why does he say things like that with such a straight face?! Like it's nothing. Like I'm not dying every time he opens that perfect, perfect mouth.

Every time you speak, I fall in love with you again!

STOP!! My heart can't take it anymore! You did it the whole day!

I love you so so much!! I want you so badly!

I squeezed his hand tighter—I couldn't help it. My fingers laced through his, desperate to hold more of him, to never let go.

He tilted his head slightly, dazed. "Celia... I might be a bit drugged..."

"Wait, what—?"

Suddenly, his body leaned forward—his head collapsing against me.

Me.

Right onto my chest.

My eyes widened.

He... passed out?

His breath was soft and steady. No sign of pain or tension. He wasn't dying. He was just...

Out.

Did fighting tire him out... or... was it the arrow?

I looked toward the torn shoulder where I'd bandaged him. That arrow... It could've had something on it. In the past, it wasn't rare. Adventurers sometimes used sleep powder on their blades or arrowheads, especially against monsters.

But now...

He was on my lap.

Kaiser—on my lap.

I stared at his face. His cheeks, his lips, his long lashes that rested gently against his skin. The rise and fall of his chest, the weight of his body so close to mine, and I just—

Something... snapped.

The romantic haze in my chest coiled, twisted into something hotter. Deeper.

My fingers trembled as I raised them to his hair, brushing them through the soft strands like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"You're so pretty like this..." I whispered, my voice slow, lower than usual. "Kaiser... asleep on my lap... like you belong here..."

My fingers moved through his hair again. Slower. Deeper. I tilted my head.

I could feel my pupils dilating. My breath was light, but fast.

Why do you always look so peaceful? Even after bleeding for me. Even after saving me again and again and again.

I leaned over him, my hand brushing gently across his cheek.

"I want to keep you like this," I murmured aloud. "All mine."

My voice cracked a little. But not from sadness.

From something deeper. Needier.

"Say... when do you plan to make me your wife, Kaiser?" I asked softly, lips brushing close to his ear. "You've protected me, held me, fought for me... isn't that what a husband does?"

My red eyes flickered darker. He was asleep—he couldn't hear me. But gods, I wanted him to. I wanted him to wake up and pull me close and tell me I was his and only his and—

I reached out and stroked his lower lip with my thumb.

So warm...

So perfect.

So mine.

My tongue slowly licked across my lips as I smiled sweetly. Lovingly.

"Only mine," I whispered.