

"Normal speech"

'Thought'

(Silent magic)

[Normal magic]

{Change of location, time or POV}

Hi dear readers, this has been one of the hardest chapters I have ever written and not because of the writing itself since I was ready to publish it a couple days ago.

The only problem? This was the pivotal chapter for a character, a character I was really indecisive about. They could die or stay alive and I could not decide which was best for the story. That is why I decided to take a couple days more to really think about it.

And I made a decision, of course I am not gonna tell which decision I took. But for once, my lateness was not due to the chapter not being ready but my own indecisiveness.

And with that, I wish you all a pleasant read!

Chapter 87: All Love has Wrought

Kelart slumped into the soft sofa, defeated beyond comprehension.

This was unconceivable, unbelievable. How did it all go so wrong? How were they outmaneuvered and fooled at every turn? Since when did Re-Estize, a country of lazy and pompous dullards, possess such strategic minds?

Ambassa had fallen, she had forced it to hold as much as it could... even more than that. Any sane person would have surrendered after the first two days of bombardment, or when all her remaining ships were sunk, or when the angels had failed at even reaching the enemy.

Instead, she doubled down on her decision, a piece of her heart being torn with each building blown to bits and with every scream silenced abruptly.

Her only hope was to one day wake up and see her sister's banners on the horizon. But that never came to be, she had been forced to flee once Re-Estize decided they grew tired of magic and instead deployed their men on the ground, flooding the streets with their dogs.

Her men fought valiantly, but there could be no victory against the likes of the Warrior Captain and his elites, not without the Paladin Order.

She fled with the smoking city behind her, she had held as much as she could, waiting till the invaders reached the mayor's mansion and were battering down the gates, forcing her to use the sewers to flee the city.

They retreated back with all haste across the Holy Kingdom, reaching Kalinsha, the greatest fortress city said to shame E-Rantel, and on par with Silksuntecks, the Slane Theocracy's capital.

It was chaos, the demi-humans rampaging through the kingdom, the invading force advancing from the north, deserters being discovered everyday, people who just lost hope and wanted to go home and check on their loved ones.

This was insane, she wanted to curl up and cry like a little girl and disappear.

She felt two smooth and gentle hands caress her cheeks and hair, soothing her shattered mind.

“Calca...”

The High Priestess whispered warmly the name of the woman and friend she adored.

“I am sorry.”

Kelart admitted shamefully, of all her failings in her life, of which she could recall few, this was the one which hurt her the most, not only for the repercussions on the country, but most of all, for the final nail on the coffin of her queen’s rule.

“I know you have done all you could.”

Calca whispered softly as she sat next to the High Priestess, shoulder to shoulder.

“I should have done more... if I had not been so careless, this might have not come to be in the first place.”

The brown-haired woman lamented her initial shortsightedness. If she had no been so careless and dismissive of the Re-Estize’s temples, judging them as just a declining power and not the unstable scroll that was about to go off they were.

In hindsight it all was clear... and the right decision was so simple.

She should have let the temples to their own designs, letting them sign their own death sentence, or even send a missive to the King of Re-Estize, letting him know in advance and, in exchange,

having the privilege of appointing the next cardinals once the old ones were dealt with.

But her mind was too distracted with keeping at bay her political adversaries to focus on what was happening in another country. And that simple mistake costed her everything.

Even if they miraculously managed to turn the war around, all their influence and power would be gone by the end of it, leaving the southern nobles free to do as they wished.

Her beloved queen will bear the responsibility of this disastrous war and the consequential demi-human invasion. Calca's rule would come to an end, one way or another.

The last ten years amounted to a big fat nothing. No, even worse than nothing, the loss of life and suffering will be always put on the shoulders of the first female ruler in the Holy Kingdom's history. This will only reinforce the gender discrepancies that plagued their kingdom for centuries.

"Maybe it is time for me to resign myself and end this, we cannot continue like this... all this suffering... all this misery and death."

Her queen sounded exhausted, disheartened, and drained like Kelart never heard her sound before, not even in their most difficult moments.

The High Priestess pondered what their surrender would mean. The violence would stop, of course, her head would end up on a spike, certainly, and her queen would have to abdicate, not counting the countless demands of Re-Estize they would have to appease, but that was a problem for the next king, and she couldn't care much to be honest.

Just a month ago, this would have sounded outrageous, the fact this notion did not seem too bad of an ending for this disaster attested to their current desperation.

Kelart felt a gentle hand squeeze her shoulder. She turned to face the sad smiling face of the beautiful blonde queen.

“You and Remedios can sneak out tonight, run away to somewhere you won’t be found and live on, I will offer my surrender, I am sure I could come out alive, even if without my crown, I guess I will have no short amount of marriage proposals even without my title.”

Kelart’s mouth fell open, she felt the air in her lungs leave her making her unable to breath or speak for what seemed to be an eternity disguised as few seconds.

“My, I can’t remember the last time I caused such a reaction in you, usually it is you coming up with these subversive ideas... you must have rubbed on me over the years.”

The attempt at making light of her previous words caused Kelart to regain her ability to speak.

“Absolutely not! We can’t abandon you Calca! Not to face the result of my own errors! How am I even supposed to live with this on my mind! With the knowledge you are suffering the consequences of my actions?!”

Kelart couldn’t remember the last time she almost yelled at her friend like that, certainly that did not happen since she became queen, and she couldn’t recall if it ever happened before that.

Kelart’s head snapped right. Strange... she did not move an inch... so why? Why did her cheek hurt?

It took her a second to realize, the still raised hand of Calca helping her along.

“Just listen to me for once in your life! You have always been the one I could rely on! The logical one! The one who knew what was best most of the time! So, don’t start saying such idiotic things all of a sudden! That is not the Kelart I know!”

Kelart could hear the gentle voice breaking but still remaining strong, like the perfect queen she was in her eyes.

“But... even if I ran, what would that accomplish?”

She asked in a whisper, trying to not meet Calca’s gaze.

“You would be alive... and that would mean everything to me.”

Those words broke her inside, and yet filled her with a warmth unlike anything she felt before at the same time.

That was the reason... that was exactly why... ever since she had been a girl in her teens... that kindness always stirred those deep and secret feelings from the bottom of her heart.

The same feelings she used as fuel every time life got hard, or the world seemed overwhelming.

Without think, or caring for any decorum, the brown-haired woman fiercely hugged her blonde friend, who reciprocated the gesture a second later.

They hugged in silence, there was no need for words in that moment, an entire conversation happened between the two all the same.

“So, now that you have regained your senses... and you still do not wish to run, I guess you have come up with another of your plans.”

The fact the voice of her queen did not contain any hint of sarcasm or condescension was a testament to the infinite trust Calca had in her, even after her numerous failings. Kelart just nodded against her friend's shoulder.

“Yes, it will be costly, but doable... we will secede from the south... with two independent nations they will be free to have their king, while we will have our queen.”

She felt strength return to her with every word, the close contact with her friend reinvigorating her depleted morale.

“Will the south not be against it? Won't they try to reclaim the land by force if needed?”

She could understand where her queen was coming from, and that was a valid doubt if it wasn't for the fact Kelart had Remedios' account of what happened down there.

“While I healed Remedios of her scars I had her relay all she learnt of the demi-human host to me... if what she say is accurate, which I do not doubt since she has a good eye for martial matters, the demi-humans are a force to be reckoned with, her scars and wounds attested to such... with the Paladin Order and Nine Colors right here in Kalinsha, I very much doubt the south will have the strength of doing anything apart from holding its borders once they are done dealing with the demi-humans.”

She knew Calca did not approve of the great loss of lives, nor of leveraging it for their own ends, she could sense it in the air. But she also knew Calca would also understand that desperate times called for desperate measures.

“And what of Re-Estize?”

Yes, that was the major wrench in the gears of her plan since the southern situation will most likely resolve itself alone.

“We had an agreement with Prince Zanac, while the negotiation failed, we can still count on his and Marquis Raeven’s cooperation... all we need to do is take care of the king and the first prince... without them their army would fall in shambles and, most importantly, the crown would pass to Prince Zanac, allowing him to open negotiations.”

She could already anticipate the following question. It was only natural after all to ask how they would accomplish such a thing.

“Kalinsha is a fortress city unlike any other on the continent, while it can serve as an impregnable fortress, it can also easily become a deathtrap if used in the right way... and I very much doubt the king would risk himself or his son in the front line, so it would be only natural for them to remain back... once we spring our trap and isolate them from most of their host, the paladin order will charge their rear line along with myself, some of the best priests we have, and Nine Colors.”

She could feel her friend shift in her embrace.

“Isn’t that overkill?”

The question almost brought out a sardonic smile from the High Priestess. While her friend was extremely charismatic and adept at politics, martial matters were not among her expertise.

“This is our last chance at avoiding total capitulation, we cannot risk it on the assumption the Warrior Captain will be among the front lines and isolated inside the city... also, we must consider the presence of the 6th tier magic caster, who might as well

teleport him right back if needed... we must strike as hard and swiftly as we can.”

She felt her friend tense at the mention of the greatest torn in their side.

“If that come to pass and we are face d with both the caster and Gazef Stronoff, me and Remedios will deal with the latter, while Nine Colors try to delay the caster as much as they can... once we finish of the Warrior Captain we will lend aid to what remains of Nine Colors and finish the caster too, from there the battle would be over, with the king and prince in our grasp we would have basically won... though the history books will probably consider it a draw or even a loss on our side... but far better from the alternative.”

That was their only chance of actually achieving a somehow pyrrhic victory. She had no idea how the man survived or healed from the wound inflicted by that blade. The only possible explanation she could come up with was that he had some incredibly powerful magical item capable of nullifying wounds, which was a pretty broad speculation in itself, and honestly, she was far more scared of fighting him than the Warrior Captain, hence why she did want to bring down the less troublesome opponent first.

“I should be there with you two too.”

Her muscles tensed as she heard those whispered words from her friend.

“No, we could never risk you... you are our queen, we need you to rally the troops and maintain the morale of the soldiers inside the city.”

That was not completely true, Calca was herself a caster of no small power, but Kelart would sooner offer her head to the enemy than see the friend she loved be put in such danger against such men.

“I might have had a large family... but you two are the sisters I chose, regardless of blood... so, just promise me, come back alive, no matter what.”

Kelart felt a raging fire burn inside her as the grip of her friend tightened around her.

Should she... go for it? Right now? Here? She was possibly about to die in a few days... so, she should at least try, right?

Her heart ponded in her chest as she was about to push the blonde down on the sofa with her ontop when the door suddenly slammed open, prompting the two of them to jump away from one another in fright, and embarrassment on Kelart's side.

Remedios strolled into the room uncaring, or more probably oblivious, of what she just interrupted. Kelart swore under her breath as she tried to recompose.

“Was this a bad time?”

She heard her older sister ask uncertainly.

“No, we were just finalizing our final strategy.”

Kelart immediately answered, maybe a little too quickly to sound natural, but Remedios was not one to notice such details.

“Well, I finished organizing the defenses, unfortunately it seems that other than the quarter of our army we lost while pushing the demi-humans south... we lost a few more men to desertion, so

our total losses amount more toward one third of the army... damn those cowardly deserters to the pits of hell.”

Her older sister relayed spitting that last part with venomous fury flashing in her eyes.

“Peace sister... this war has taken a toll on us all... and while I do not condone desertion, I understand why soldiers would lose their spirit and no longer see a point in fighting if what they wished to protect was gone.”

Kelart tried to be the mediator, like many other times in the past, between her sister and what reality was.

“The kingdom is what they should wish to protect.”

The Grandmaster Paladin rebutted eliciting a sigh from the High Priestess. For all she loved her sisters, Remedios’ stubbornness in refusing to see the world from another point of view not her own often brought Kelart to exasperation in the past, and this was no exception.

“But to them, protecting the kingdom means protecting their loved ones, and if said loved ones are gone, so is their willingness to fight... if not for revenge, that is.... how would you feel if both I and Calca were gone? Would you still carry on fighting for the kingdom, or would you no longer see meaning in your actions?”

Those words seemed to shut down any other protest from her older sister who lowered her gaze contemplatively.

“Do not fret Remedios, we shall come out of this one way or another, trust in your sister and trust in me.”

Calca interjected, prompting Remedios to come out of her thoughtful state visibly more at ease than before.

“Always, Your Majesty!”

The strongest paladin gave a slight bow.

“Well, now that your doubts have been acquitted, it is about time we discuss your role in the battle to come, and prepare the paladins for our final stand.”

The High Priestess stood up marching toward her older sister with calm and composure, sparing only one last glance to the queen she was leaving behind.

There would be another time for her to reveal her feelings.

Yes, they would have years to spend together after this whole ordeal was resolved.

And, who knew? Maybe this conviction was what will finally break through that final barrier of close friendship and make their relationship blossom to the next level.

A woman could always dream, couldn't she?

{Pabel's P.O.V.}

The city of Kalinsha was on the verge of an assault. The air felt thick with an unspoken dread as the horizon seemed to pulse with an imminent threat. The distant clouds above were darkened by the ominous threat of an incoming army from the Re-Estize kingdom, as if the sky itself was aware of what was about to pass, yet for all the preparation and anticipation, it was not the enemy's approach that gripped the hearts of the defenders in that area at the moment. That dreadful sensation could only be attributed to the presence of Pabel Baraja, the Black.

Standing on the highest tower of the city walls, Pabel gazed out with a look of unblinking intensity. His sandy blonde hair

fluttered in the unrelenting wind, but it was his eyes... his hauntingly sharp eyes, that held the attention of anyone who dared to glance his way. They were not simply eyes, but windows into a soul tormented by fury and grief.

His reputation as the deadliest archer in the kingdom was well-earned, and his mere presence was enough to instill a primal fear in anyone near him. His eyes were cold, calculating, and impossibly sharp, capable of picking out the smallest of movements and locking onto a target with the precision of a predator.

But, in that moment, they were also a reflection of his heart, broken, twisted, and consumed by a primal rage the likes he had never felt before.

Pabel's mind was a battlefield of its own. Thoughts of his wife, who had fallen at the hands of the demi-humans, and his beloved daughter, who probably had received a similar fate, tormented him endlessly. The memory of that fateful day, when he received the news of his wife's passing, Mirella and him had not been on good terms as of late, the harsh treatment and tough love she usually reserved for their daughter at the core of every argument. And yet, the news of her death shattered his world all the same.

That was only amplified when he received the news of his daughter's disappearance once her unit was sent to repel some of the demi-humans who breached the Great Walls. Pabel might have struck down the vice-commander there and then if it wasn't for the fact the man had come personally to relay the news to him and the fact his face was marred by a pain mirroring, even if in minimal part Pabel's own.

That was the moment his mind broke under the weight of it all.

The thought of his precious child, likely devoured by the monsters she had been sent to defend against, churned in his gut like acid. He could think of nothing else ever since he had learnt of it, his gloved fingers gently caressing the wooden doll he always brought on his person.

Still, he fought on, even if his reasons for doing so were no longer entirely clear. The city needed him, and in the absence of any other purpose... no, that was wrong, he still had one goal... one goal he would complete even if it costed him his life.

As he stood on the walls of Kalinsha, his gaze unwavering, he felt a presence behind him. The air shifted ever so slightly, and he knew without turning that it was Orlando, the Yellow, the only one brave, or foolish, enough to speak to him in his current state. Orlando was a figure known for his swiftness and agility, a fighter whose golden armor gleamed in the sun like a flash of lightning. He was not afraid of Pabel's presence, though he knew better than most that the Black's wrath was a force that should not be lightly tested, as their last exchange was still fresh in the man's mind.

"You're brooding again."

Orlando's voice broke the silence, calm but with an edge of concern.

"You can't keep this up, Pabel. The soldiers are starting to whisper. They're afraid of you."

Pabel didn't respond. He didn't need to. Orlando knew him well enough to understand that words would not change his current mindset in the slightest. The Black's silence was as much a part of him as the deadly accuracy of his bow.

"The enemy will arrive soon, we need to be ready."

Orlando continued, his voice taking on a more grave tone.

“I am always ready.”

Pabel muttered, his voice low and rasping. He didn’t even look at Orlando as he spoke. His eyes remained fixed on the horizon, as though the army he anticipated could be seen in the shadows of the distant hills.

Orlando took a step closer, his golden armor glinting in the sunlight.

“I am not worried about the battle, Pabel, or at least, not as much as I am worried about you. You can’t keep going like this. How many days passed since the last time you slept?... That pain, that rage... it’s destroying you from the inside.”

Pabel’s jaw tightened at Orlando’s words. He could feel it, gnawing at him, like a constant hunger. That rage and spite was what made him go on, it latched to his otherwise dying body and mind. It had become a part of him, he couldn’t escape it, nor did he want to.

He just had to achieve it, that last goal of his, and then he could let himself rot away, let himself be consumed by his grief, body and mind alike. But till that moment, he had to let his rage guide his hand, just for a little while more.

“I will avenge them.”

Pabel growled out, his voice low but fierce.

“Mirella and Neia. I will make that accursed magic caster pay for what he has done.”

Orlando’s expression softened with a hint of sorrow.

“You don’t even know if it was him, you don’t have proof. It’s just-”

Orlando stopped in his track and stepped back when Pabel finally turned toward him, piercing him with his hatred-filled gaze.

“Proof doesn’t matter.”

Pabel snapped, his eyes flashing with inextinguishable fury.

“The moment that bastard appeared in the kingdom, everything went to shit. Mirella died because of him. My little girl was probably eaten alive because of him. He’s the reason all of this happened. I will make him suffer.”

His fury was not an explosive one, he did not shout, nor did he give in to his violent instincts. That was not who he was, the Black was a dreadful existence, a silent shadow. That did not mean he wouldn’t carry out every word he spoke.

Orlando sighed, running a hand through his golden hair.

“Pabel... You’re becoming obsessed. I get it, believe me. You’ve lost so much. But vengeance like this, it won’t bring them back. It won’t heal you. It will only destroy you.”

Pabel’s fingers twitched, and for a moment, it seemed as though he might turn on his fellow Color and unleash his fury on Orlando, the only person who dared speak to him in such a way. But instead, his lips turned up in a mirthless smile that made even the seasoned soldier take a step back in fright.

“And who said I need to be healed? All I need is to kill that bastard... that is all I need...”

‘And then, once he is down... I will bury my dagger in that bitch’s heart... she thinks she can just send my daughter, a sweet child,

to die against those monsters without repercussion?... oh I will show them... I will show them all...' he felt the wrathful inferno inside him burn with even more intensity.

If the world wanted to take everything from him, fine, let it do so! But he will not lay down and die so easily.

The world shall soon know why he is known as the Mad-Eyed Archer.

His fingers caressed the wooden doll under his cloak once more.

'Soon... soon, my moon and stars, you will be avenged... that I swear upon everything I am and will ever be' he swore.

He turned back toward the horizon, returning to his watch, waiting for the first enemy to break across it so he may shoot a arrow through their skull.

{Neia's P.O.V.}

To say the young squire was baffled was an understatement, she was completely lost by now. She could just not make sense of what her life had been these last few days.

Maybe, her mind was just in complete shambles after what she experience under Buser and she was going slowly insane.

For how else would she have ended up like that.

"Sister, the crazy eyed girl is glaring at you again."

The red twin teased with that monotone tone of hers.

"Sister, even the crazy eyed one can recognize this one's great bum."

Neia blushed profusely at the open accusation of the blue one.

“Look, look, she is blushing now that she has been discovered.”

The red one continued.

“I am not looking!”

She couldn't help but protest the accusation, and that was her undoing. She should have learned by now, nothing good would come by entertaining the two's teasing.

“Ah, sister, she is in denial about her attraction to mine gorgeous self.”

The blue one kept going with the slightest smirk darting through her face for a second, something Neia might have imagined as it was gone by the time she blinked.

“Sister, this one is envious of you.”

Red monotone voice did not give credence to any envy she might have felt.

“You two have the same build!”

Neia could not restrain herself from biting back, only to realize she had once more fallen for their trap.

“Ah, so you were looking... at my sister too... I must say, I feel betrayed, I thought we had something special between us.”

The blue one brought a hand to her heart in mortification, even though her tone didn't indicate anything of the sort.

Neia could not help but wonder if these two were truly assassins or just bad actors.

“Do not fret sister, we can share her, if we rearrange her hair she can look like a cute boy.”

The red one intervened once more, making Neia blush to the root of her hair at the image those words conjured into her mind.

“Enough chitchat you three, we are close.”

The three of them immediately snapped at attention as that dark voice reached their ears. Neia had no idea why, but she felt compelled to obey every time that man spoke. It was completely unnatural and scary, she was not his subordinate, hell, they were supposed to be enemies, and yet she could not stop standing at attention every time he spoke.

No one she previously met in her life came even close to that level of perceived authority in her mind. Not her parents, nor her superiors, not even the Grandmaster that one time she had the honor of serving as her squire for a day. And the fact he did that so effortlessly, as if it was only natural to obey him no matter who you were, made it infinitely scarier in her mind.

““Yes Master!””

For all the two's tone was still monotone as always, Neia could not help but feel like something shifted in the air, and they were acting infinitely more serious than when teasing her.

“You two set up the tents, squire Baraja will cook.”

That had been the status quo since she became... a prisoner? That still baffled her. She was technically a prisoner even if none of them ever referred to her as one, they even allowed her to cook her food... a task no sane person would have left to a captive... the fact the twins were absolutely incapable of cooking anything edible was a mute point and non-argument.

Without wasting time, all three of them got to work while the masked caster conjured a chair for himself and produced a book out of nowhere.

Neia could not help but steal glances at the so imposing and yet so baffling figure reading a few meters from her while she was organizing wood and leaves to start a fire.

“Something on your mind squire Baraja?”

The unexpected question froze the blood in her veins. On hindsight, it had been arrogant of her to think that she could steal glances upon such a renown character known for his cunning and power and hope he wouldn't notice.

Since she was caught, she reasoned that she might as well give him an answer or risk being even ruder by keeping silent.

“I-it is n-nothing, Your Lordship.”

She stuttered out much to her shame. This was not the first time they exchanged words, he made sure to interrogate her relentlessly on the goings on of the war and the Holy Kingdom. Though he had never shown any malicious intent or violent tendencies, he simply asked a question and she felt compelled to answer. It almost seemed like magic to her, though she never heard of such a spell and she doubted it actually existed, that was probably the result of his aura, which was telling in itself.

“Well, it doesn't look like nothing to me... you know, those two haven't be very talkative before you arrived, I must say, I almost don't recognize them these days, you must have something special for them to engage you so eagerly.”

Neia blushed slightly at the words, no one told her she was special before. Well... her father doted on her and certainly called her his

special little girl many a time, but that was just his fatherly side talking. Outside of that, she had always been a quite unremarkable and unapproachable individual.

A small smile blossomed on her face. It was so weird that someone who should be her enemy was capable of making her feel this way.

“I-I was wondering...”

The words left her mouth before she could think them through. She cursed herself inside her head but gritted her teeth and decided to push it.

“I heard m-many things about this war... m-many were not kind on Y-your Lordship... I was wondering i-if I could ask about some of it.”

Neia wanted to slap herself silly and then bury herself under a mountain of dirt. That was absolutely the worst way of asking for information, and it was a new low, even for her.

“Umu, I am quite curious now... What rumors circulate around me? I know war propaganda can be quite ruthless on its enemies.”

Much to her shock, the man before her seemingly did not take any offense from her poorly chosen words, sounding even... amused at the thought?

In her entire, admittedly short, life Neia never met anyone who was eager to learn about harmful rumors circulating around them. But now she had no choice but to keep going, she could not back down anymore without being extremely rude.

“I-is it true that you are the leader of a r-ruthless criminal organization?”

Neia asked the first thing that came to her mind when thinking about the rumors circulating around him.

“Ah, well that could actually be true... depending on how you look at it.”

The dark robed man answered nonchalantly, as if he wasn't discussing something that would normally get him executed, noble title or not.

“Eight Fingers was a criminal syndicate dealing with all the most vile practices humankind ever came up with... sexual exploitation, slavery, drug production, murder... anything that could get them richer was in the book... I just, sanitized them, we could say... slavery, exploitation, and drugs are such useless and even detrimental practices... you could get a quick profit out of it in the short run, but you would get yourself screwed in the long run... what those things produce are just hatred and resentment that will fester and drown you sooner or later.”

The caster explained while closing his book.

“I took them over, burned their structure to the ground and rebuilt it back up to become something aimed to offer a service to the people around them rather than misery and terror... we could ship goods and letters far quicker than anyone else, if you wanted some company, the brothels were clean and the mistresses well cared for, if you wanted a job and housing to no longer live on the streets stealing and risking your life everyday, we could give you a job.”

Neia knew that what he said could simply be his own favorable view of his own organization, but hearing him talk about it with such certainty in his voice did not allow any doubt to slip into the young squire's mind.

“Of course, we had our problems, as you might imagine, hardly anyone was a saint in that organization, we had to root out the bad... with drastic methods sometimes, but we had no short amount of applicants to replace them... people are rather simple creatures, as long as you can ensure fair compensation for their jobs, and a place to live for their family, there is little they wouldn't be willing to do.”

Neia didn't even notice nodding along to every word of his, only realizing the fact when he stopped talking.

“But I digress, I doubt you would be interested in this matters, also I am curious to know what else they say... tell me about something cruel they say about me.”

Neia shuddered involuntarily. Buser had asked her that same question sometimes, out of his own amusement and cruelty to outdo even the most outlandish things they said about him. But that was where the difference stood, for the magic caster held no cruelty or amusement in his tone, only curiosity to hear the rumors.

Neia gulped, she wondered if she should speak such things, if they would not infuriate the seemingly unflappable man before her. For they sounded extremely cruel to her even before Neia met the man. And, while it was not wise, she didn't want to lie to his face, or mask, directly.

“T-they say... t-that you killed your own betrothed, framing the temples and Holy Kingdom out of your own lust for power.”

Neia did not dare to look at him while speaking such vile words, preferring to return her gaze to the ground and the half finished bonfire she had constructed.

Silence persisted for what seemed like an eternity to Neia before a curt hum of contemplation shattered the tension.

“Well, I can tell you that is definitely false.”

Neia blinked, did she perhaps mishear him? Or did her mind just imagine that answer? For it made no sense for him to not being bothered in the slightest by such words, answering with the same calm tone he always used, as if they were just discussing the weather.

Neia raised her head to check she was not hallucinating this entire conversation, only to notice the Marquis hadn't even moved from his seated position.

“It would make no sense for me to do so on multiple levels... first and foremost, I would throw away my ticket into joining the royal line. Secondly, I wouldn't gain anything from the Holy Kingdom, most of the territory is too far away from mine to be of any use. Thirdly, the princess was a valuable administrator for my magical item production... there are some more minor reasons, and if I really wanted to initiate something in this foolish fashion, I would have targeted the first princess whom I have no relationship nor business with.”

The explanation was not what Neia expected, it was... completely logical, too logical, too cold... that answer very much unsettled her more than if he admitted he had indeed planned it.

“Did you not love her in the slightest?”

Neia immediately slapped both hands on her mouth as soon as she realized what she had asked. She felt her lips ring painfully, but she couldn't care less right now after she insulted one of the most powerful magic casters in the world to his face.

“Love you say, no, I did not love the girl, she was a girl who might have one day done something significant for the future of the kingdom or even the continent, who knows, but that is it.”

The explanation sounded lacking in Neia’s mind. It was true arranged marriages did not form on the base of love, but yet, to dismiss even the slightest affection... sounded wrong. Or that might be only her romantic side making an appearance.

“But... wasn’t she said to be a great beauty?”

She asked sounding naïve even to herself. The masked man just chuckled at her words.

“Beauty? Really squire Baraja?... No, forgive me, you are just young, and I sometimes forget that... but to answer your question beauty has no place next to love.”

That confused her. She had always been told that husbands loved their wives’ beauty, stories were built on the concept of princesses making nobles and commoners fall for them at mere sight. Every girl she knew had sought perfection one way or another in their appearance. She herself did follow that trend before resigning herself to what her face looked like no matter what she did to it.

“You mistake lust for love squire.”

The caster took a pause.

“Of course, with that, I do not imply you should find your partner unattractive, but base beauty is just useful if lust is concerned... love, that feeling many speak of, comes from only one source... companionship.”

Neia blinked.

“Companionship?”

She repeated as she did not expect that word to come out of the lonely man's mouth.

“Indeed, love is what companionship is about, you cannot love someone who is not your companion in life, and someone cannot be your companion without you loving them... the sharing of the most important thing we have in this world, time, is what love is truly about... there is no greater love than to lie down for your companion... why do you think people who are in love are willing to protect one another with their lives? They are basically saying that they would give up all the time in their life if it could spare the one of those they love.”

In that moment something clicked in her mind, something that was so clearly there and yet she could not see.

Indeed, it all made sense now, even her fear that she mistook for cowardice. It all made sense now!

And to think the one who opened her eyes to this reality of the world was the one she heard so much evil about, and who should have been considered her enemy.

She bowed her head, for the first time in her life truly displaying respect and not just a gesture imposed by hierarchy.

“Thank you for your wisdom, Your Lordship.”

She meant every syllable, coating each of it with her deepest gratitude.

“Satoru is fine, titles are too much of a mouthful.”

The masked man said, reopening his book, seemingly having lost interest in the conversation.

Neia kept her head low still, for all it might have sounded dismissive to most, she could now understand. He had dedicated time to answering her questions and that was already a show of respect in itself, she just didn't earn enough of it to have him give her more time... and a part of her wished she would, only so she may bask in more of his wisdom.

But for now, she might as well dedicate her own time to cooking a meal as she was asked to.

And for all, as a squire, she should not have wished to... she hoped their time would not come to an end too soon.

A.N.

Well, that was something, kind of an assessment chapter before reaching the climax but I think there is a lot of stuff here too. Gotta say, I respect Satoru's own vision of love and find myself agreeing, though, poor Neia might have taken it in a bit of a distorted way, but that is just who she is at her core.

Socially awkward, I can relate.

But enough ramblings! I want to hear your opinions now!

So, make sure to leave a comment / review!

Stay safe! Till next time!